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FROM MASK TO MIRROR: SELF AS OBJECT IN CHINESE POPULAR PSYCHOLOGY

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for my father

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Abstract

This dissertation describes young adults in China who pursue self-definition through self-help psychology, focusing especially on people studying public speaking and social skills. The dissertation engages with academic theories of autonomy and identity by showing how young adults in China discuss, practice, and promote self-definition. It also contributes to a growing social science literature on the therapeutic, cultural, and political effects of the psychological disciplines as they spread worldwide. Anthropologists have demonstrated that a range of psychological interventions aim to create autonomous, self-managing subjects; they have critiqued these interventions as depoliticizing and economically exploitative. However, autonomy is not only a political logic or a cultural ideal, but also a condition of life in mobile mass societies. This dissertation demonstrates that young college graduates in China draw on self-help psychology as a set of resources for adapting to the possibilities, dangers, and psychosocial demands of life outside of interpersonal networks. It shows that self-help psychology is teaching people in China ways to define who they are in relation to two elements of a liberal society: among strangers, and before an impersonal law. Young adults studying social skills are learning to derive a social identity by being humorous and confident, and also by asserting individual interests and ideals. However, while young adults in China are studying self-presentation skills, the dissertation argues the way in which they bind themselves to their visible personality is deeply shaped by Chinese historical, cultural, and social logics.

The dissertation draws on a year and half of participation in personal growth groups in Beijing; interviews with psychotherapists and psychology writers; collaborations with cultural activists; and a survey of self-help texts. By shifting between the perspectives of professional and self-help psychology, the chapters show how the concepts of autonomy and identity are translated between Western psychological expertise and Chinese social discourse. As young adults learn to construct an identity through voluntary association, on stage before a distant audience, and in relation to the image of a perfected self, they develop a liberal sense of being individuals in tension with a reified society. In China, psychologists who are promoting autonomy are continuing a long tradition of modernist reforms that aim to create a civil society of responsible individuals; these efforts now gain strength from experiences of mobility and fragmentation that make stranger relations normal and personal projects vital. But while social changes are teaching young people in China the power of actively crafting an identity, even exposure to Western technologies of self-definition does not make for a Western subjectivity.

Drawing on critical strands of Western and comparative philosophy, the dissertation suggests that the autonomous individual is defined by antagonism, and is subject to a temporality that stakes identity on an eternal moment. Since young adults in China are now worrying about job interviews and dates, they are anxious about fleeting social interactions; they are working to acquire confident self-presentation skills that may help them to secure a social identity. But the self is most tightly bound to its social image not by the eyes of strangers but by the gaze of a transcendent judge, by a trial that finds one either guilty or

righteous. Under this gaze, which has been comparatively less central to Chinese people's psychic economy, the individual becomes a self-justifying political actor. The psychological doctrines now entering China imply a distant law. Self-help concepts including communication, will power, positivity, intimacy, and self-esteem all invoke legalistic and confessional understandings of discourse, and a heroic, antagonistic view of personal efficacy. These terms change their meaning as they are translated into Chinese contexts.

The first chapter of the dissertation describes Toastmasters public speaking clubs, which have expanded rapidly in Chinese cities. Since their members are mostly recent college graduates, these clubs are excellent sites in which to study processes of identity formation among young adults. In Toastmasters clubs, young urban professionals are learning strategies of self-presentation that, they hope, will help them to establish their careers. However, club members are worried not only about job interviews, but also about dates. The chapter analyzes Toastmasters clubs as therapeutic sites in which young adults struggle with a disordered sociality, a condition located in the anxious interplay between their embodied and encultured psychosocial capacities and the demanding possibilities of urban life. Facing their fears on stage, club members learn to feel themselves as objects under the gaze of a distant audience, and to define themselves under this gaze. However, club members construct a sense of identity not only by performing as individuals, but also by integrating into the social life and shared ethos of the club. Young adults who practice public speaking collectively articulate a cultural politics of autonomy, sharing a sense that they have been injured by Chinese society, by families and schools.

The second chapter shows how young adults interpret their social frustrations as embodied indictments of Chinese institutions, especially schools. Looking towards Western universities and international careers, young college graduates interpret themselves as the flawed products of an educational system that they blame for failing to promote confidence and creativity. In China, educational reform is a key site in which students, parents, psychologists, and social activists connect self-presentation to cultural critique. Social entrepreneurs are drawing on self-help psychology in order to teach young Chinese people to craft an identity based on clearly visible passions and convictions, on creativity and civic engagement. By exploring how young adults and social activists discuss confident self-creation, the chapter demonstrates that in China individual and national assertion are closely intertwined. The chapter argues that young activists, returned from abroad, use the individualistic language of civil society to articulate a historical project of building a modern China, a project that is supported by the Chinese government and social elites. Their program of reform reinforces the central values of educational attainment and material success, the very standards that young adults say they are trying to escape.

The third chapter turns from young adults to Chinese psychotherapists and self-help authors, showing how they try to create interpersonal boundaries to separate autonomous individuals. As they teach Chinese people to become assertive and independent, therapists see themselves as working to reform a culture of personal passivity and civic indifference. Through pedagogies of child care and intimacy, they are teaching that interdependence is oppression, that care leads to lazy solipsism while struggle brings self-determination.

Psychologists work against the logics of interpersonal networks, against favors, compromise, and the ties of kinship, striving to create distinct individuals who are equally bound by the contracts of a civil society, who confess their feelings and state their interests. In contemporary China, these psychological efforts to encourage direct expression address concerns about corruption and self-denial, and find wide support among young adults who are anxious to claim their autonomy. However, there are telling discrepancies between the projects of psychological experts and the views of young adults in self-help groups. While young people in China are claiming a right to assert their will in the context of major life decisions, they are not seeking to sign social contracts that invite guilt, antagonism, and interpersonal distance into their valued relationships.

The fourth chapter places psychological discourses of self-definition in the context of contemporary Chinese popular culture. Rather than focusing on the liberatory or consumerist aspects self-definition, the chapter analyzes emerging configurations of identity, desire, and image in a mediated mass society. Drawing on materials from self-help psychology, youth culture, and social activism, the chapter demonstrates the novelty of discourses about becoming different and interesting, about becoming oneself. The chapter argues that in order to define themselves, young adults are learning to visualize personal goals: interests and ideals, pleasures and achievements. It suggests that lifestyle choices can make people into self-justifying political actors, set against society, against parents and peers. By analyzing a conference about marketing to youth, the chapter shows how consumer choice relates to civic engagement. The chapter also introduces a young cultural

activist who is teaching his peers that they need to clearly articulate what they want and what they believe. As young people learn to use the power of confident self-definition in order to derive social attention and integration, interests and ideals can turn into identities.

The most revolutionary aspect of the psychological disciplines that are proliferating in China is the way in which they reinforce emerging connections between personal identity, public image, and social performance. In contemporary China, self-definition can bring social and psychological rewards; however, self-definition requires unevenly distributed psychological, cultural, institutional, financial, and political capacities. For young adults in urban China, self-help psychology offers a set of techniques for defining oneself among strangers, for acquiring confidence and establishing an identity. However, psychological technologies of the self travel more easily than the cultural and historical formations of the self from which they have emerged. The way that young adults in China adapt Western self-help psychology reveals that they seek a sense of identity not only in resistance, but also through integration. Nevertheless, as young adults in China learn to define who they are by their interests and ideals, they are beginning to develop a transcendent sense of identity, binding the self to the object in the eyes of strangers. The mask of social performance becomes a mirror, in which people hope to find themselves.

Masks and Mirrors

When I was little, I was not confident with my face. So I kept asking my mom, 'Hey mom, why am I so ugly. You and dad are both good looking. Am I not your son?' And she told me, 'Quantum, what a good question. You know what, although every part of your face is not that good, but when they combine all together, it's very harmonious as a whole. So look into the mirror.' So since then, looking into the mirror has become my favorite hobby. Because the more I looked into it, the more I agreed with my mom.

So begins a speech by Quantum, a member of one of the dozens of Toastmasters public speaking clubs in Beijing. Like the other club members in his audience, Quantum usually gives his speeches in English. The slender, animated man who goes by the English name Quantum is around thirty years old; he has been a finalist in several national public speaking competitions, and is a captivating performer. This evening, he is reflecting on his years of studying English and practicing public speaking. When he first decided to improve his English, Quantum recounts, every evening he would rush from work to Houhai, a touristed lake in central Beijing, to find foreigners to speak with. But, he tells us, he was "so shy". He recalls how after three days of hailing foreigners with a meek "excuse me", a man finally responded. Quantum mimics the foreigner's broken Chinese: "Hey buddy, DVD, *wo bu xuyao*" (I don't need any DVDs). When Quantum realized that people on the promenade saw him as a tout, he says, "I was so sad. I lowered my hat. Wow. All of a sudden I found the lake was such a big mirror in which my face was stretched back and forth." But then, he tells us, he decided that after all, "The skin of my face can be thicker."

Quantum narrates this reflection on his face as a turning point in his life story. He says, "From that day on, I changed." He tells us not only that he gained a thicker skin, but also that he learned to consider himself from the perspective of strangers. Quantum thought about what topics would interest foreigners: Chinese food, Beijing real estate and traffic, Chinese classical literature and contemporary television shows. And, he says, "You know what? from that day on my business in Houhai became better and better." Soon afterwards, Quantum recalls, he happily found this Toastmasters club, a place full of enthusiastic people practicing their spoken English. Yet he remembers that his words were not yet fluent, that his skin was still too thin. During his first visit to the club, Quantum tells us, he jumped at the chance to give an improvised speech. The club's designated speech evaluator praised his animated delivery, but kindly told him: "The problem is that... I don't know what you're talking about. Your accent is really... special." Quantum continues:

So after the meeting that night, on the subway back home, I was so sad. I felt that I was a big loser. But wait a minute: I found that right in front of me the subway's glass window was such a big mirror... Yes, I lost my face that day.

But if I didn't lose it for right now, for sure I will lose it far more times facing the larger number of the people in the future. So I told myself, no big deal.

For your face, just lose it.

In Quantum's account, this loss of face inspired him to study English even more; he recounts how he began loudly reciting English texts in a public park, terrorizing the local retirees. Eventually, through the Toastmasters club, he joined an English language

humorous speech contest. He found himself performing with his “donkey voice” and “monkey gestures” at a Toastmasters district conference, standing before an audience from all around China and abroad. When he didn’t win, Quantum tells us, he received another severe blow to his sense of self: “That night, I thought, I was nothing. Nothing.” But the next day at the conference, the people he met all praised his performance. He was even invited to visit a Toastmasters club in Malaysia. Quantum jokes that the Malaysians liked him so much that they offered to pay for his plane ticket. Although he wasn’t actually offered any such material rewards, he explains, “I found another bigger achievement out there. Because at that moment, do you know what I found on their faces? Mirrors. Not only one. Tremendous of them. All of their eyes as most sparkling encouraging emotional mirrors I have ever met... I knew I was something.”

Quantum narrates his journey of personal growth through public speaking as a series of encounters, each a mirror that showed him who he was in the eyes of others, each glimpse of himself a lesson. He wanted to meet foreigners, but they thought he was selling pirated movies. He learned how to think about what these strangers might want to talk about. An evaluator praised Quantum’s enthusiasm, but told him to improve his language skills. So he began shouting aloud in English, working on his enunciation and developing a bold manner. Quantum lost his confidence before the judges at the public speaking contest, but found it again in the eyes of individuals who loved his speech. He learned that recognition was more valuable than a material reward: it gave him a sense that he is not “nothing” but “something”. Quantum suggests that his skin became thicker, but we can see

that as it grew thicker, it also became a larger part of his being. We usually think of a thick skin as the ability to deflect the penetrating gaze of other people; this hardening gives Quantum the ability to get up on stage. But while performing, he is subjected to an intense gaze. He sees himself through the eyes of an audience, in a tremendous array of mirrors. In urban China, many young adults like Quantum are using self-help psychology to learn public speaking and a particular set of social skills. As they spend their evenings and weekends with these “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988a), are they learning that the person they see in the mirror, the person on stage, is who they really are?

By focusing on public speaking and social skills training in China, this study shows how Chinese young adults are learning to define and assert their identity in public, among strangers. In a fluid, mediated new world, visibility can bring a variety of psychological, social, and financial rewards. Quantum’s mirror metaphor is particularly apt for picturing the reasons why so many young people want to perform for others, and for thinking about how this changes their relation to themselves. As they practice public speaking and other social skills, Chinese young adults learn how to see themselves in the eyes of an Other. This Other is the law or the market or society itself, a distant totality that determines their own value. This liberal vision is also inhabited by individual Others, as the gaze of society passes through the eyes of distant, tempting, and enigmatic strangers. This study sees how far it can follow this proposition: as foreign psychological systems of knowledge and practice enter into China, the key lesson that people are learning from them is less about the emotional interior of the self than about its visible surface, and is less about the self than it

is about society. Or, rather, in China what is especially novel about psychological perspectives on the self is that they pass through the eyes of strangers, sustaining an image reflected back from an audience, a market, a crowd. For young adults in China, what is most exciting about social skills training programs and other forms of self-help psychology is that they provide a set of psychosocial, linguistic, cultural, and institutional resources for relating to the strangers who inhabit their changing world.

But many young adults, like Quantum, find it difficult to speak up. Like most veteran members of public speaking clubs in China, Quantum describes a journey from being shy to having confidence and self-esteem. It is not incidental that Quantum's story of personal growth begins with a humiliating encounter with foreigners. Chinese young adults who are studying social skills want to talk themselves into an imagined cosmopolitan modernity. Historically, these efforts were initiated by China's encounters with colonial powers, encounters that continue to shape Chinese people's consciousness of their place in the world.¹ As people on stage in public speaking clubs struggle to control their shaking hands, they do so as members of a nation that aspires to assert itself on a global stage. They don't want to be brushed aside as purveyors of cheap pirated DVDs; they want to confidently meet the foreigner's gaze. But these nationalistic aspirations for modernity and for self-assertion also involve intense national self-criticism. As young

¹ Regardless of the fact that China as a whole was never a colony, encounters with imperialist powers, the so-called century of humiliation, continue to profoundly affect Chinese subjectivity, and the activities of Chinese intellectuals, including psychologists.

college graduates struggle to confidently perform an identity, their experiences of stage fright fuel bitter critiques of Chinese schools, families, and culture, of institutions that, they say, have not given them opportunities for self-definition, have not prepared them for a world that rewards difference and visibility.

Quantum is an accomplished rhetorician, and his talk plays with a subtle critical language. When he jokes that his facial features are “harmonious”, he is invoking a classical Chinese ideal for governing interpersonal relations, and a key term in contemporary government propaganda. Chinese reformist intellectuals have long maligned ‘harmony’, depicting it as the guiding principle of a society that, they say, doesn’t value the individual’s voice.² And when Quantum suggests that losing one’s “face” is a good thing, he wields a term with a sharp critical edge: Chinese social reformers have long linked concern for ‘face’ with a supposed Chinese superficiality that values social appearances above individual truths. Young people in Quantum’s audience have told me that their parents made them take piano lessons because they love face, that they pressured their sons and daughters to study because they love face. In Chinese social discourse, rampant materialism, predatory corruption, and poisonous food are all depicted as the products of a society of superficial face, in which a carefully composed spectacle of harmony ensures that reality does not appear on stage, but remains hidden behind closed doors. In the liberal society addressed in public speaking clubs, young adults in China can define themselves

² In online forums, the word ‘harmony’, taken from official propaganda, has been turned into a euphemism for political repression.

against the harmonies of the family, or of society. Thus, Quantum's repeated destruction of his face represents a call to escape from the hold of cultural values, to smash the public mask, to possess it as a mirror for the self.

Social Skills Training

The practice of public speaking has been central to the social visions of liberal democracy, and it has been central to self-help. Dale Carnegie's seminal *How to Win Friends and Influence People* grew out of his public speaking classes.³ In the history of self-help psychology, anxieties about self-presentation have been a constant counterpoint to the dominant theme of self-making.⁴ Nor have these anxieties only influenced popular psychology. Albert Ellis, whose work led to cognitive behavioral therapy, today the most prevalent form of psychotherapy, developed his therapeutic approach in part while working to overcome crippling anxieties about speaking in public and speaking to women.⁵

³ Carnegie, Dale. [1936] 1981. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. New York: Simon and Shuster.

⁴ The history of self-help psychology, and of humanistic psychology, has been motivated directly by awkwardness, inferiority, and fear. Dale Carnegie describes a constant anxiety about his social status, which motivated his desire to learn public speaking (1948). In addition to his more famous book, he also wrote *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*. Norman Vincent Peale, author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, 1952 co-founder of the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, and Donald Trump's admired childhood pastor, was also the author of *Overcoming Anxiety and Fear* (1967). [Blair, Gwenda. October 6, 2015. "How Norman Vincent Peale Taught Donald Trump to Worship Himself: The magnate's biographer explains the spiritual guide behind his relentless self-confidence". Politico.]

⁵ Ellis forced himself to talk to one strange woman a day for one hundred days: this was the origin of the kind of exposure therapy that has become central to contemporary clinical psychology (Ellis: 10). [Ellis, Albert. 1998. *How to Control Anxiety Before it Controls You*. New York: Citadel.]

Today, public speaking courses are a lively sector in a broad self-help universe sparkling with confident communication. Not incidentally, public speaking is the lifeblood of many self-help gurus. But young adults in China are already hungry for the microphone, seeking opportunities to speak in public not only through self-help groups, but also in rapidly expanding debate leagues, burgeoning comedy clubs, and ubiquitous English classes.

Historian Warren Susman found that early self-help literature revolved around the theme of performance; in the texts he examined, “The social role demanded of all in the new culture of personality was that of a performer. Every American was to become a performing self” ([1973] 2003: 281). For Susman, this emphasis on personality replaced a culture of moral character, which was oriented to long-term relationships, and in which reserved styles of self-presentation often signaled good breeding ([1973] 2003). Sociologist David Riesman’s theories trace a parallel shift, in which people’s sense of self became oriented away from internal moral principles and towards outward social performance (1950). In Riesman’s analysis, the “inner-directed” person is guided by a “gyroscope”, an internal moral compass; the “other-directed” person has a “radar”, constantly scanning those immediately around him, seeking their approval. Given the direction of cultural development suggested by these theorists, one might suppose that social skills training programs in China are creating “other-directed” people. But we will see a rather different emphasis in Chinese popular psychology.

Through social skills training, Chinese people are learning new ways of becoming sensitive to others, and of positioning themselves in their eyes: but one of the key points

that they learn is that internal principles are a great way to define oneself among strangers, or before an audience. We will see that as members of self-help groups study how to define an autonomous identity, they begin to display their gyroscopes in order to press their claims against others, and to gain recognition. The value of autonomy is itself a gyroscope, an ideal that forms individual interests and passions into orienting moral claims. We will see that in China, the styles of direct self-assertion promoted in social skills training are themselves understood as principled moral interventions, and that they are translated into a history of modernist cultural politics. Direct, sincere self-expression appears as a counter to an interpersonal style that many people view as oppressive and corrupt, in which everyone is so aware that they are on the radars of others that their true self flies in stealth, or never takes off.

You and I, a Western corporate trainer in Beijing tells me, making firm eye contact, we speak directly. But because of their education, he explains, they don't get to the point. In China, psychological techniques of communication and self-presentation participate in a long project of enlightenment. The idea that Chinese people are evasive and indirect is an old trope.⁶ Arthur Smith, a missionary who wrote the influential 1894 account *Chinese*

⁶ "Self-assertion is totally alien to every inborn idea of what is correct among Chinese people", writes Eden Collingsworth (2014: 172). She is the author of *The Tao of Improving Your Likeability*, used by Peking University's MBA program. Collingsworth is an etiquette coach who was also asked by the Ministry of Education to write a book on Western manners for Chinese public schools (2014: 246-7). Collingsworth certainly simplifies the matter, but her reception in China demonstrates that many people are eager for her lessons. She says that she went to China prompted by the idea that with so much schoolwork, and no self-expression, Chinese people need help improving their EQ (2014: 3).

Characteristics (Smith 1894), was flustered by the indirect styles of expression he encountered in China. Nevertheless, Smith was forced to acknowledge that such communication is a talent, and a skillful social strategy (Jullien 2000: 18). Psychological researchers have depicted interdependent Asians who are more sensitive to other people than their independent Western counterparts (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Western CEOs read the *Art of War*, while American books about emotional intelligence sound nationalistic warnings about the subtle interpersonal skills of Chinese people.⁷ But in China, people want to become more brash. Young adults I spoke with would often remark on how Chinese people lack social skills. When pressed, they would recognize that they meant a particular set of social skills: not the Chinese ones. And so styles of self-presentation are tied into a politics of representation.

Cultural and individual differences in self-presentation intersect with categories of gender and ethnicity. These categories have defined a conversation about what, from another angle, appears as a politics of temperament. In the United States, Susan Cain entered the spotlight several years ago by championing the “power of introverts” (2012),⁸

[Collingsworth, Eden. 2014. *I Stand Corrected: How Teaching Western Manners in China Became Its Own Unforgettable Lesson*. New York: Anchor.]

⁷ See Bradbury, Travis, and Greaves, pages 242-4. The authors suggest that “Chinese execs are living the qualities that Americans *permit* HR to put into the company competency model” (2009: 244).

[Bradberry, Travis, and Jean Greaves. 2009. *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*. San Diego: TalentSmart.]

⁸ Cain, Susan. 2012. *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. New York: Crown Publishing Group.

hoping to teach the public, and to educate employers, to appreciate temperamental diversity. Rather than challenging social standards, many women around the world are studying how to better play the extrovert game, to *Lean In*.⁹ And many Asian Americans are working on *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling* (Hyun 2006),¹⁰ trying to overcome habits of self-presentation that, they say, make them easy to overlook for promotion,¹¹ or make it hard to pick up a stranger at a bar.¹² Some educators are concerned that East Asian students in American schools have trouble getting good grades for participation (Kim and Markus 2002). In this low-key social movement, concerns about sexism and racism intertwine with people's worries about shortcomings that are inscribed in their personality, and have been shaped by culture. Indeed, shy or diffident styles of self presentation have been valued in China (Xu et al. 2008; Chen, Rubin, and Li 1995; Chen et al. 1999). While social evaluations are shifting to encourage extroversion (Yan 2003: 77; Chen et al. 2005), I found that most Chinese young adults regard low-key styles of interaction favorably. And even as people in

⁹ Sandburg, Sheryl. 2013. *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. New York: Knopf.

¹⁰ Hyun, Jane. 2006. *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians*. New York: HarperBusiness.

¹¹ As in China, these supposed traits include risk aversion, obedience, inability to assert oneself, and a lack of creativity (Yang 2011).

[Yang, Wesley. May 8, 2011. "Paper Tigers: What happens to all the Asian-American overachievers when the test-taking ends?" nymag.com]

¹² Wesley Yang describes a company that helps Asian American men learn how to pick up women: "Tran's company, ABCs of Attraction, offers a remedial education that consists of three four-hour seminars, followed by a supervised night out 'in the field,' in which J. T., his assistant Gareth Jones, and a tall blonde wing-girl named Sarah force them to approach women. Tuition costs \$1,450" (Yang 2011).

China are claiming space for their own desires, they often do not want to harm relationships by stating exactly what they want, like many psychologists say they should.

This dissertation tells the story of a generation of young adults in China who are learning to craft an explicit identity by asserting individual interests and ideals, and it asks to what degree people identify this personality as their true self. It analyzes self-help psychology as a set of resources that young adults use as they work to craft an identity under the reflected gaze of the twin Others of liberal society: among strangers, and before a transcendent, impersonal element, which will be referred to as the 'law', but could also be universal rationality of Western epistemological, political, and soteriological traditions. The dissertation shows that as people in self-help groups study techniques for self-presentation, they are learning to orient themselves using transcendent images of personal fulfillment and social progress. It argues that people come to identify explicitly stated preferences and principles as their true self only when they can achieve social integration by committing to particular lifestyle choices and political positions; at other times, these individual commitments can actually threaten people's sources of identity. In contemporary China, people drawn to self-help psychology are learning to develop preferences and principles, interests and ideals, and being told that they should assert them. This message of self-definition appeals to young adults in urban China. And as they justify the legitimacy of their choices, young adults commit to their social performance, making it a test of social potency and ethical authenticity. They draw into a closer, if fraught, relationship to their visible image, to the object appearing in the social mirror. However, the dissertation shows

that this mode of antagonistic, willful self-definition is only one way in which young adults in China produce an identity. While young adults are excited by the possibility of self-creation among strangers, they consciously use self-definition as a way to establish social networks; and while they position themselves as political actors, they are rarely addressing a liberal civil society, promoting individual causes. Rather, young adults engage in shared cultural critiques, joining their strivings for self-confidence to a historical project of creating a modern nation.

This dissertation draws on a year and half of research, which was conducted primarily in Beijing. In order to better understand why so many young adults in China are studying social skills, I participated in personal growth groups, interviewed psychotherapists and psychology writers, collaborated with young cultural activists, and undertook an extensive survey of popular self-help texts that are circulating in China. The chapters of this dissertation draw on these lines of research in order to illustrate how young adults in China are learning to define themselves among strangers, by developing interests and ideals. The first chapter focuses on Toastmasters public speaking clubs, showing how young adults use them as therapeutic resources. We watch them learn to become confident, to develop an appealing personality, and to use the stage as a rhetorical platform. Rather than addressing a public as members of an imagined civil society, young adults in Toastmasters clubs collectively articulate an anti-traditional cultural politics. Their experiences of stage fright and social awkwardness fuel condemnations of Chinese institutions; club members say they haven't had chances to speak, or to be themselves. In

the second chapter, we see how young adults blame Chinese schools for their social frustrations; we also meet entrepreneurial social activists who are teaching young adults to confidently create an identity, and to sell themselves. The third chapter examines how Chinese psychotherapists and self-help authors position themselves as social critics, working to liberate individuals from interpersonal networks. These experts promote an ideology of direct expression in which people are supposed to clearly state their feelings and desires. Psychologists promote a contractually limited autonomy in which people negotiate individual interests within relationships; the chapter shows how this can conflict with Chinese ethical sensibilities and modes of identity formation, which are based on mutual exchange within long term relationships. The fourth chapter turns to popular culture, showing how young adults in China are seeking to distinguish themselves by their interests and ideals, to craft a remarkable identity in an impersonal urban world. They are learning to imagine how they might want to appear in the eyes of distant strangers.

Strangers

Stella, a young blogger who has lived abroad, a woman deep in the heart of many personal growth circles in Beijing, explains that “In China we don’t talk to strangers. If, say at a Starbucks or a Costa [Coffee] I walked by a foreigner and said ‘hi’ it would be fine. But in China people would think something was wrong with me” (*wo you maobing* – 我有毛病). In his work *From the Soil*, anthropologist Fei Xiaotong famously characterized the traditional Chinese lifeworld as “a society without strangers” ([1947] 1984: 6). When people did enter into relationships with strangers, these relationships were configured in terms of

fictive kinship.¹³ It is perhaps telling that Stella sets her encounter with a stranger in a coffee shop, a setting that has figured prominently in social science histories of public life and liberal politics, as a place where people could set aside their social identities in order to discuss topics of general import (Sennett 1974; Habermas 1989). Like coffee shops, the very notion of ‘society’, is a foreign import in China (Liu 1995; Lee 2014: 7). For early twentieth century intellectuals in the colonial port cities, the concept of ‘society’ allowed for critical reflection on China as a totality, enabling both nationalist and social reform movements. ‘Society’ was the image of China in a mirror,¹⁴ an objectification of China from the outside; but it also created “an imaginary space ‘outside’ the Chinese feudal order” (Anagnost 1997b: 22), a space for autonomy in which the ties of kinship and interpersonal networks were replaced by relationships between strangers.

After Qing Empire fell in 1911, reformers worked to dissolve what were maligned as ‘feudal’ social networks, tangled webs “that interfered with the Chinese state’s attempts to

¹³ In Chinese literature, stories that took place outside of social networks were set not in society but in a world of ‘rivers and lakes’ (*jianghu* – 江湖); these stories revolve around the theme of brotherhood and personal loyalty (*yiqi* – 义气): strangers are incorporated into one’s own community of fate.

¹⁴ Sun Yat-sen, architect of modern China, saw his compatriots as a “sheet of loose sand”, and sought to harden them into an anti-imperialist nationalism (The Three Principles of the People). And Lu Xun, who established Chinese modernist literature, adopted the gaze of a Western Other, in order to produce trenchant critiques of the “Chinese character Lu Xun was himself influenced by the writings of missionary Arthur Smith), depicting a callous world of people who consume each other (Liu 1995). Lu sought to adopt the gaze of another in a process of moral self-realization: “What Lu Xun is calling for is collective self-awareness, or the ability to return or even to adopt the Other’s gaze. The technology of the self that he sees as best suited for this purpose is none other than the endlessly proliferating discourse on national character” (Lee 2010: 231).

establish direct relationships with individual citizens” (Fong 2007: 94; see also Fei 1980).

After the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, the communist regime continued this process of disembedding people from ties of hierarchy and kinship, but it placed people into new forms of collective life. Well into the period of economic reform, through the 1980s and beyond, most urban lives unfolded largely within work units (*danwei* – 单位), comprehensive ‘urban villages’ with little anonymity, and little necessity for interacting with strangers (Lu 2006: 68; Kipnis 1997: 151).¹⁵ In the past two decades, however, historical attempts to create disembedded citizens of a nation state have gained impetus from the increasing social significance of strangers. The young professionals drawn to self-help psychology find themselves in mobile labor markets, and interacting with strangers in person and online.

Through her blog, Stella hopes to inspire a brave autonomy, to help her peers to “do what they want to do” in the face of social pressure to conform. Social skills are central to this self-making: Stella tells me that her most popular, widely circulated article was about networking skills. But it would be a mistake to think that networking is only about professional self-creation. For Stella, this is also about creating a more civil society, and about self-definition under the gaze of foreigners. Stella mentions a European man who once complained to her that Chinese women cluster together at corporate events: with

¹⁵ In fact, “an urbanite in Maoist China was constantly among people who knew him or her well.” (Lu 2006: 68). In Weber’s definition of a city, Chinese cities appear as not quite cities at all: no distinction from country, and no political association ([1921] 1956).

questionable disinterest, he suggested that “They should meet some new people”. For Stella, learning to talk to others is a moral intervention, a step towards caring about strangers who are partners in a social contract. She goes on to relate, “What I learned abroad is to be nice to people, and to assume that people are nice. You know, in China we are all used to being cheated.” In contemporary China, public discourse is roiled by high-profile incidents of public indifference and corruption, by moral panics, a storm of disquiet the picks up circulating anecdotes about Western civility. For over one hundred years Chinese writers and thinkers have remarked on the pernicious moral effects of tight interpersonal networks, portraying a corrupt world in which people care only for kin and not at all for strangers.¹⁶

In this study, my interest is less in the ethical challenge of relating to strangers than in the challenge of determining one’s own identity in their eyes. We will address concerns about civility, but they will be linked to people’s images of themselves as reflected from an imagined Western modernity. The strangers that we will discuss are not those described by Georg Simmel, close by but distant, foreigners that unsettle an existing community ([1903] 1950). The strangers that young adults are learning to talk to are challenges, but also temptations; some may be foreigners, but many are peers. They are not necessarily very different from oneself, not at all, but just unknown, and young people hope to meet them.

¹⁶ Literary scholar Haiyan Lee, author of *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, suggests that “The Chinese moral landscape seems starkly demarcated into the cozy oases of kinship sociality and the barren deserts of stranger sociality” (Lee 2014: 5)

Thus, strangers are tests of self-definition, and icons of possibility. The stranger is a point at which anxieties and aspirations connect, as people test who they are among others who are not bound to them by ties of kinship or institution, or sometimes even nationality. We will read social skills, public speaking, and communications training as a response to these challenges and possibilities. Within the anthropology of China, this dissertation contributes to two literatures: one about the rise of psychology, and the other about the emergence of the individual.

Psychology

Over the past two decades, psychological disciplines have expanded so rapidly in China that observers have described a “psy fever” (*xinli re* – 心理热) (Zhang 2016) or “psycho-boom” (Kleinman et. al. 2011: 29). Because psychological disciplines claim authority to tell us who we really are, social scientists have determined that they powerfully shape how people understand and manage themselves, and how they manage others. In particular, recent work has suggested that, by promoting productive positivity and self-management, psychology furthers the goals of a neoliberal political order, and of a corresponding ideology in which everyone is expected to care for themselves rather than burden the state. Anthropologists have closely scrutinized the role of the psychological knowledge in depoliticizing and normalizing the conditions of brutal markets,¹⁷ teaching

¹⁷ Chinese psychologists are depoliticizing social problems in their own way: an fMRI study at the Chinese Academy of Sciences examined the brains of corrupt officials. [Xinhua. July 7, 2014. “中国科学家寻找贪官大脑共性称或能吃药反腐.” news.qq.com]

people to assume responsibility for conjuring a viable life for themselves, encouraging them to be “enterprising” (Rose 1998) in a fluid and risky environment.

Self-help psychology in particular has been regarded as the paradigmatic neoliberal technology of subjectification (Bröckling 2005; Giddens 1991; Rose 1998). But as scholars have pointed out (Kipnis 2012; Yan 2010b), in order to understand the psychological shocks rippling through contemporary China, it is important to remember that logics social scientists often gloss as late modern or neoliberal are folded into processes of “industrialization, urbanization, and nation-building” (Kipnis 2012: 5) that unfolded much earlier in the West. In different sociohistorical contexts, the psychological technologies of the self “can have radically different meanings and effects” (Raikhel and Bemme 2016: 164). In talking about how social skills training programs teach people relate to an Other, whether society as a totality or its instantiation in individual strangers, we place psychology in relation to liberalism. Research on psychology in Russia and Eastern Europe has begun to explore psychology in post-socialist states as a means of promoting liberal developments including civil society (Junghans 2001), civic morality (Matza 2009), and egalitarian relationships (Cohen 2013, 2015a).

In the past several years, anthropologists have produced a body of research on psychotherapy in contemporary China. Li Zhang has been concerned with the “indigenization” of psychology as it is shaped by Chinese spiritual traditions and attitudes towards expertise (2014), and with the use of psychological profiles in governance (2016). Combining these themes, Zhang Yanhua has explored how psychological power intersects

with Chinese notions of governance (2014). Anders Hansen has shown the uses of popular psychology in managing the unemployed (2012), as has Yang Jie (2013). Both Yang and Sonya Pritzker have shown how psychologists construct an internal reflexivity by teaching people to label and manage their emotions (Yang 2015; Pritzker 2016). In these depictions, psychology appears as a technology through which people understand themselves, and are subjected to social control. The current study builds on insights from these studies of psychology, in China and elsewhere, but it takes a distinct approach. It is not about how psychology is being used to govern people, nor is it centrally concerned with how psychology, as a system of expert knowledge, teaches people to construct their experience and identity around emotions, pathology, or neurochemicals. Focusing on social skills training, this study approaches self-help psychology as a set of resources that people use to identify themselves in relation to others, as they adapt to broader social changes.

Liberal elements are woven deeply into psychological theories of the subject. In Erik Erikson's influential account of identity formation, for example, the free and autonomous subject can only develop within a clear and consistent structure of rights and obligations (Erikson [1950] 1993: 254, 310).¹⁸ Western theorists have been working to show how the bounded individual of liberal social imaginaries is a fiction; but in China writers, reformers,

¹⁸ Erikson's account expresses a concise, classic vision of the liberal social contract: psychological autonomy "depends on consistent definition of privilege and obligation in the nursery" (Erikson [1950] 1993: 310). Erikson extends this vision into adulthood, positing that adults require a structure of rights and obligations to provide a scaffold for healthy development ([1950] 1993: 254).

and intellectuals, including psychologists and psychiatrists, have long been trying to set up interpersonal boundaries.¹⁹ In recent studies, Teresa Kuan and Orna Naftali have shown how psychologists promoting autonomy and self-esteem are reshaping family life; however, they suggest that the value of self-actualization conflicts with other forms of care, especially a perceived need to care for children's futures by pushing them to achieve academically (Kuan 2014, 2015; Naftali 2009, 2010a, 2010b). Thus, these scholars have demonstrated that even as psychologists advocate for autonomy, their reach of their claims is limited by local social pressures and moral frameworks. This dissertation examines these contested claims for autonomy from another perspective, through the eyes of young adults, recent college graduates who seek to secure an identity, and who aspire for self-definition.

While Chinese cities have many options for nightlife, for many people an evening out involves dinner and karaoke; it is a chance to see friends rather than to meet strangers. With hesitant curiosity, a number of young adults in Beijing asked me why foreigners go to bars and parties. A member of a Toastmasters public speaking club wondered, "Is it true that Americans go to parties to get sex?²⁰" The ability to participate in a world of new possibilities depends on economic ability, but also on psychosocial skills, embodied and

¹⁹ As discussed by Zhiying Ma (2012, 2014). Ma writes that "psychiatry seeks to produce an ideal modern self that is bounded in the healthy body and guided by the rational mind, disembedded from social and cosmic ties, and hyper-reflexive regarding its inner state" (2012: 222). My emphasis here will be not on rationality and self-mastery, but on self-definition in opposition to others; we will see the self bounded by primarily by interpersonal reflexivity rather than by intrapsychic control.

²⁰ One humorous way that young adults say 'party' is *pai* (爬体), literally meaning to 'crawl on a body.'

socioculturally formed. Social skills training programs have been fruitfully analyzed in relation to emotional labor, as tools for stamping smiles onto the faces of service workers (Hochschild 1983; Cohen 2015a), and also as ways to teach styles of interaction that help corporations operate smoothly (Kunda 1992; Illouz 2008; Cohen 2015b). Certainly, people in China are applying social skills training for these purposes (Yang 2015; Chang 2008: 68; see also Yan 2011: 38). But in counterpoint to analyses that emphasize the links between communications training and the demands of the workplace, I would suggest that many people seek to speak not under corporate coercion, but due to a variety of social frustrations. In her analysis of communications pedagogies, linguist Deborah Cameron emphasizes that much of the curriculum is very basic, covering aspects of interaction that never used to be considered problematic; many trainees find these programs useless (2002: 79), and many have jobs that do not require them to talk with customers (2002: 73). Cameron suggests that, arguably, in teaching communication skills “the new capitalism has followed rather than led” (2002: 74), adapting psychological and communications techniques that first found purchase in popular self-help, as therapies.

Individualization

Psychological programs promoting self-assertion and self-definition participate in and respond to larger social changes taking place in China and elsewhere. Social theorists of have described a global process of individualization, in which people are being disembedded from existing social networks, and are left as ‘individuals’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). However, this process unfolds differently in each setting. Very few

ethnographic studies have described individualization among youth or young adults in urban China (Farrer 2002; Moore 2005; Huang Shan 2014; Wang 2013; Yan 2009b).

Anthropologist Yan Yunxiang, the most prominent scholar of individualization in China, has depicted “the incomplete and uncivil individual” (Yan 2010a: 27), a person who claims resources and asserts their desires in relation to authorities, parents or the state, but who does not embody the “true autonomy” of civil society, which includes both rights and responsibilities (2010b: 29). In 2009, based on his studies of primarily rural youth, Yan argued that in China individualism was primarily about the politics of life chances, not about a search for one’s self (2009b: 288). Building on Anthony Giddens (1991) argument that in the West individualization involves active self-definition at the level of daily life, in families and through lifestyle choices, Yan claimed that what rural Chinese youth call individualism mostly refers to an attempt to claim resources for themselves (Yan 2009b: 287-8), and does not involve this search for the self. In a later article, Yan does briefly suggest the rising importance of lifestyle politics, as the “standard biography” that guided people’s lives is no longer standard (Yan 2010b: 502). We will see that urban Chinese youth are now certainly working towards self-definition in daily life, and are also becoming aware that being different in the right way brings access to social resources. Following Yan’s lead, when we see people presenting themselves to an audience, we will ask to what degree they appear as liberal individuals, individuals with distinct interests that are rights rather than claims negotiated with authorities, and individuals who take ethical positions within a civil society. However, while Yan is interested in fostering a sense of civic responsibility, when

we see something like an ethical stance appear on stage, we will ask to what degree we are presented with a tactic for deriving recognition and securing an identity in a rapidly shifting world. And throughout, we will be aware that “a person potentially includes individual and dividual aspects of the self” that appear as they decide “when to take on different roles or masks and within a range of possible moral and social frameworks”; therefore, we will look to see how people answer “what am I?”, but also pay attention to the question of “when am I?” (Bialecki and Daswani 2015: 273).

Young people’s “structure of feeling” (Williams [1976] 2014) already stretches for the social rewards brought into reach by constructing and projecting a remarkable identity. We will approach a chosen identity as an effect produced within an ecology of institutions for voluntary affiliation. However, the social infrastructure that scaffolds self-definition is only beginning to develop in China, and most young graduates have a very limited set of institutions and identifications that can help them find social connection after they leave school. Adolescents in contemporary China locate themselves within a large array of social categories and products. Many young adults are aware of different lifestyle subcultures, especially in the central cities. However, most university students have been socialized in schools structured around classes, or *banji* (班级), that stay together for several years. In college, students primarily befriend members of their immediate communities of fate, their dorms and majors, rather than connecting with others through chosen identifications

(Wang 2013). Only elite universities have many student organizations.²¹ And Chinese psychologists worry that after graduation, many young adults have difficulty finding social support as they shuttle from work to home. Chinese society offers relatively few of the “re-embedment” mechanisms that the West has in the form of clubs, religious institutions, and volunteer organizations (Yan 2016: 252). Even as people in public speaking clubs learn to present themselves to an imagined public of peers, the very existence of these clubs as sites for voluntary association is in itself part of an important change in the ecology of identity formation.²²

People don’t work on their stage presence until they think about being on stage. An experienced corporate trainer tells me that in top high schools, students are already interested in learning self-presentation skills. He explains that this is because these schools give students “platforms” (*pingtai* - 平台), opportunities to join clubs or volunteer organizations. Psychological theories of adolescent identity formation describe a process of

²¹ The notion of identity as a choice not only obscures issues of class, power, and capability, but also contributes to a sense of self that is linked to certain forms of social suffering. Margaret Mead attributed the turbulence of American adolescence in part to the “appalling” array of people advocating different practices and ideas (Mead [1928] 2001: 140). Psychologists have normalized this turbulence, locating its supposed origins in adjustments of the prefrontal cortex (Casey, Jones, and Hare 2008): this may have some developmental validity, but there are many political, social, and psychological reasons that predispose American psychologists to discover a period of crisis and heroic rebirth.

²² “My parents don’t have friends”, a Chinese friend tells me; her mother only meets socially with family members, and her father joins collective dances in the park. I was surprised when a graduate student in Beijing told me that she was going out to meet some friends, who she knew because they were from her home province. Geographical origin has been central to Chinese logics of affiliation (Fei [1947] 1984).

explicit choices and commitments (Erikson [1950] 1993; Marcia 1980; Côté 2002). Erikson, who coined the term “identity crisis”, saw it as a developmental stage; in fact, like other psychologists and philosophers, he desired this crisis. While he saw its dangers, he also depicted it as a rite of passage, a chance for self-definition through post-conventional, individual values.²³ Erikson’s theories trace a normative and culturally patterned mode of identity formation.²⁴ In societies and in groups where people have not been so disconnected from external anchors for their identity, people have not felt the possibility or need for this active mode of self-definition. Even within particular social groups, not everyone knows that they are supposed to define themselves, to invest in “identity capital” (Côté 2002); psychologists who study identity formation suggest that this can lead to social and economic disadvantages.

In anthropologist Jonathan Friedman’s formula, modernity is characterized by “individuation: fragmentation: objectification: autonomization” (1994: 148). Theorists have argued that in these conditions, people define themselves largely through their personal projects (Friedman 1994; Rose 1998; Giddens 1991; Bröckling 2014). As we noted, social

²³ Prominent psychologist James E. Marcia, who builds on Erik Erikson’s work, has set out a highly influential typology of identity formation in adolescence (1980: 111); he and researchers who have followed him seem wary of people who are what they call “foreclosures”, people who accept and identify with the values they grow up with. Marcia and other theorists want an identity crisis, a privileged period of “moratorium”, seeing this crisis of faith as the conditions for discovering authentic individual values.

²⁴ Historian Jacob Burckhardt has famously argued that in the Middle Ages, “Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation - only through some general category” ([1860] 1990). While this is perhaps overstated, most people certainly didn’t have much space in which to claim their own chosen identity.

scientists often critique this mode of self-creation as a form of social abandonment and economic exploitation. But the desire to succeed in one's chosen life projects is inextricably intertwined with a fundamental anxiety about existing socially. Sociologist Ulrich Bröckling suggests that when "People are addressed as entrepreneurs of their own selves... they are susceptible to this interpellation because orienting themselves on its field of force leads to basic social recognition" (2014: viii). This insight is important for thinking about social skills training not as form of economic exploitation, but as a mode of securing an identity. Using the metaphor of the mirror, I want to suggest that as people construct a sense of self around chosen projects, they are learning to view themselves as images, as social objects in the mirror of the Other. In what follows, we will trace two stories about the possible emergence of the individual as a being tightly bound to its public image: one is a social story about the power of the image in a fluid world, and the other is a contingent cultural history that has shaped the relationship between public display and personal identity in liberal thought. I suggest that scholars of individualization and of cultural globalization should take care to separate out these two intertwined threads. We might gloss these two conditions of individualization as 'strangers' and 'the law', the twin Others of liberal society: will see that people studying self-presentation skills learn to address both of these Others, and that they often collapse into each other.

Marcel Mauss famously traced the origin of the Western person to the persona, or mask ([1938] 1985). In his essay, Mauss suggests that the concept of a persona, which used to be an inherited position in a social ritual or masquerade, gradually took on the meaning

of a legal right to take this role in the social drama. Eventually, Mauss writes, the idea of the person was removed from its social context, and became the substance of the self before a divine judge. Other thinkers have followed this analysis, depicting how the concrete actor that appeared in particular instances of social life was hardened into the core of the self.²⁵ Always under a divine gaze, this kind of private person remains essentially public, called to justify himself in the court. Because the individual is a political entity, it is in a specular relationship to logic and law, to the eternal, transcendent, and distant. And before the crowd or the guillotine, every word and every moment is eternal. One must learn to understand one's public image, oneself as seen from the perspective of the Other, and to master this image. Now, in changing societies worldwide, many people have a bit of space to define their own roles; often, their fates are bound up with their public image. In these places, the mask becomes a mirror.

Principles

Research on public speaking and social skills training can contribute not only to these discussions of psychology and the individual in China, but also to thinking about the culturally contingent relationship between the self and self-presentation. In analyzing how and when the mask becomes the mirror, it is useful to consider Richard Sennett's analysis of the relationship between the self and performance, and of how this relationship has

²⁵ Foucault, Dumont, and others have traced how the ethical actor was gradually removed from the aristocratic arenas of public life, and became the moral substance of the self before God (Foucault 2005; Dumont 1986).

changed since the eighteenth century. What Sennett calls *The Fall of Public Man* does not mean that people no longer speak in public, but that their performances are understood as expressions of their personality, and of their unique, subjective ideals, rather than as enactments that draw on the shared symbolic language of a political community; Sennett describes the shift as one “from presentation to representation” (Sennett 1974: 42).²⁶ He is concerned that emotional displays of sincere conviction have come to matter more than the proposed actions;²⁷ it’s not that people were once more rational, so much as that with a shared language and social vision, the political implications of a public performance were more immediately apparent. Sennett’s analysis suggests, first, that public performance can become a mirror for the self due to the individualizing social changes described above, but also that the personality becomes the individual insofar as the individual is a political actor, trying to change society.²⁸ We will see that social activists in China self-consciously serve as models for authentic self-definition. As they work to reform society, they also remake

²⁶ Other scholars have also indicated the connection between the idea of authentic self-expression and the collapse of shared lifeworlds (Taylor 1991).

²⁷ In trying to defend, or construct, a legacy of civic life, Sennett proposes a shift in political discourse in which the lives and characteristics of public figures, and above all their personalities, came to eclipse their ability to address social issues; what mattered above all was their sincerity, which was proved by their emotional displays on stage.

²⁸ Lionel Trilling’s discussion of sincerity immediately arrives at its connection with the teleology and anti-traditionalism of modern politics: “the idea of society includes the assumption that a given society can be changed if the judgement passed upon it is adverse. In the framing of such judgements the ideal of sincerity is of substantial importance” (Trilling 1971: 26-7).

themselves as subjects whose autonomy depends on discursively articulated principles, and whose identity depends on asserting these ideals against the social order.

In the Greek rhetorical tradition, the two tools for convincing people of one's cause are emotions, *pathos*, and reasons, *logos*. For our purposes, these can also map onto the two foundational Others of liberal society: distant strangers and impersonal laws. In social skills training programs, we will see that self-presentation as a 'personality' depends on two primary skill sets. The first relates to controlling one's appearance, studying humor and charm, becoming pleasing to strangers; the other, closely related, consists of learning to win sympathy from an audience. In order to win the approval of an audience of strangers, or even to control this audience, people learn to become "merchants of morality" (Goffman 1959: 251), committing to their principles on stage. We will see that the pedagogy of public speaking in Toastmasters clubs moves from self-introductions to controlling a crowd. By the tenth speech assignment, the manual casts its readers as revolutionaries: "You motivate and challenge listeners to adopt higher, nobler attitudes, feelings, values, hopes, desires, behaviors, and goals and elaborate on the advantages changes will bring to listeners."²⁹

In Western social thought, public speaking has appeared as a practice of civic participation and personal freedom. And at the roots of Western culture, Socrates and the prophets use reason or revelation reason to oppose prevailing norms (Taylor 1989: 37). And so public speaking appears in the antagonistic genres of democratic debate and

²⁹ Toastmasters International. 2013. *Competent Communication: A Practical Guide for Becoming a Better Speaker*. Page 51.

revolutionary appeal. While rhetorical arts were highly elaborated in China, the conversations of power remained private (Jullien 2000: 167).³⁰ In contemporary China, political speeches are carefully composed and coded messages from the authorities, not representations of individual conviction. However, public speaking of a particular kind was important in producing modern Chinese subjects, oriented towards to future, set against foreign domination. Beginning in the 1950s, the Communist Party organized 'struggle sessions' (*pidou* – 批斗) in which people were made to publicly confess their political crimes, to criticize themselves in order to become better communist subjects. In the fever of the Cultural Revolution, many people were regularly called upon to publicly examine their conscience and prove their sincerity.³¹ This was individualizing, but only insofar as the individual is a form of bare life, living and dying alone. And while Confucianism advocates ethical self-reflection, these technologies of fateful confession were new in China.

In China, the self as a political actor, conscious of being dominated, expounding principles, is part of a teleology of social change that had appeared in revolutionary

³⁰ The emperor doesn't need to engage in debate, and why would he: "As soon as I speak to the other, I submit to the law of giving reason(s), I share a virtually universalizable medium, I divide my authority" (Derrida 2005: 101). Universal laws and morals are weapons of the weak. In ancient China, the philosophical school championing equality and universal love, Mohism, emerged from the lower classes.

³¹ See Susan Blum's discussion of revolutionary communication: "Disregard face. Be frank. Everyone is equal" (2007: 107). However, all truth was meant to reflect the one truth of Marxism. By the 1960s, most people in urban China had been placed into study groups (*xiaozu* - 小组), in which people were talked together with strangers for ideological education. However, "People had to be taught to overcome their aversion to speaking publicly" (Blum 2007: 111).

moments in a long history, but which only became widespread quite recently. In Chinese modernist movements, people were taught how to narrate themselves as objects acted upon by an unjust society, and to orient themselves towards a vision of the future (Anagnost 1997b).³² The perception that Chinese people needed to be enlightened in this way was itself arrived at through the gaze of a dominant Other.³³ Foreign critics of China have and continue to depict China as morally empty: the self is merely an actor, moral restraint is purely external (Ames 1994b; Jullien 2000), people know shame but not guilt. For foreign and domestic critics, to use Riesman's terms, Chinese people have no gyroscope. And so Chinese reformers set up the following dichotomy: tradition/superficiality/insincerity, vs. modernity/authenticity/consistency.

What Richard Shweder calls "imperial liberalism" (2009) is built on these ideals of rational autonomous control, and is set on using principles to overturn traditions. Shweder

³² The 1919 May Fourth Movement in China marked an intellectual shift towards a teleological view of history (Liu 1995: 81); and the broader New Culture Movement fused together individualism, repudiation of the past, and a future oriented anti-colonial nationalism.

³³ China's greatest modernist writer, Lu Xun, was himself influenced by the writings of missionary Arthur Smith (Liu 1995). Lu sought to adopt the gaze of another in a process of moral self-realization: "What Lu Xun is calling for is collective self-awareness, or the ability to return or even to adopt the Other's gaze. The technology of the self that he sees as best suited for this purpose is none other than the endlessly proliferating discourse on national character" (Lee 2010: 231). Thus, Lu Xun's critiques of Chinese people and society are mediated by this Other; also, under this gaze, personal and national failings are inextricably linked, inscribed on a Chinese character that psychologists are working to reform.

provides examples from twentieth century social theory and psychology³⁴ that illustrate how a range of thinkers portrayed tradition as enslavement, always favoring a reflexive morality that understood “impartial and objective standards of freedom, justice, and equality” (Shweder: 2017: 321). In thinking about how liberal ideals enter into a particularly Chinese politics of social presentation, Weber’s analysis of Confucianism offers a suggestive way to gesture towards different ways of linking public performance and moral selfhood: “The Confucian’s word was a beautiful and polite gesture and an end in itself; the Puritan’s word was an impersonal and businesslike communication, short and absolutely reliable” ([1951] 1968: 245). Following Weber’s discussion, for a Confucian gentleman social grace is a moral ideal, immanent and in itself ethically important.³⁵ Ritualized public life is neither the truth of the self nor an intolerable mask, but a socially oriented moral achievement. In an age of mass spectacle, at a time in which visions of a rational political dialogue are crumbling, perhaps Chinese philosophy can teach us about the importance of regulating public rituals.

But Chinese social reformers have invested themselves in liberal visions of principled self-determination. The story of *Mr. Close-enough* (差不多先生), by early

³⁴ Shweder takes Hobhouse, Piaget and Kohlberg as paradigmatic examples of a Western view that believes in a moral *telos* that develops towards the principles of liberal democracy.

³⁵ Weber doesn’t like this very much, reducing Chinese morality a “Pious conformism” ([1951] 1968: 228). Like Chinese modernizers, he portrays the pursuit of social propriety as ethically empty, writing, “This self-control was of an aesthetic and essentially negative nature”, no more than deportment, unlike the Puritan search for self-control and “definitely qualified conduct” ([1951] 1968: 244).

twentieth century intellectual Hu Shih, a student of John Dewey,³⁶ vividly expresses their modernist cultural politics. In this satire, the titular character's lazy and flexible adjustment to the world receives universal praise as selflessness. He never made trouble for himself, or for anyone else, and "Because he never made a fuss about things being exactly right, he was considered a model of morality and virtue. Upon his death, Mr. Chabuduo [Close-enough] was regarded as a saint and became known to all by a Buddhist title naming him the 'Great Master of Flexibility' (*yuantong dashi* - 圓通大師)." ³⁷ Mr. Close-enough had fallen ill, but he was neither principled enough nor self-assertive enough to insist on seeing a doctor rather than a veterinarian. Flexibility, opaqueness, personalism, lack of rules; these are what missionaries and foreign businesses in China are still complaining about. And so for some social critics within China, sincerity, directness, and transparency appear as a social style appropriate to a society regulated by law, populated by people who are brave, principled, and oriented towards the future.

Domination

"They don't even have to struggle to be born," Teacher Bai tells me about young people in China, referring to the country's world record rates of Caesarian section. Teacher Bai, a Beijing psychotherapist in her late forties, and a mother, goes on to explain that children are born naturally active, curious to explore their world, but that repressive

³⁶ Dewey's individualistic and democratic ideas were influential in early 20th century Chinese educational reform (Anagnost 1997a: 204). During his two years of giving lectures in China, Dewey was labeled 'Mr. Democracy' and 'Mr. Science'.

³⁷ Trans. R.S. Bond.

Chinese parenting destroys this instinct. In contemporary China, these critiques, grounded in humanistic psychology, gather strength from widespread concerns about the social deficits inflicted on a generation of single children by too many adults and too much educational pressure. Teacher Bai's words suggest that young Chinese people are unprepared to meet the world as fully formed subjects because they have not fought against it. Western origin myths of the subject are narratives of domination and struggle. In the foundational accounts of psychology, we find ourselves in conflict with the father, the mother, biting the breast, asserting our will even in the cradle. So too in seminal expressions of Western philosophy, where in Hegel's account the subject comes into being through mortal combat ([1807] 1977). The individual is defined by negating the very grounds of existence, "it comes forward in antithesis to the universal substance, disowns this fluent continuity with it and asserts that it is not dissolved in this universal element" (Hegel [1807] 1977: 107). The subject must object. We will see that in social skills training, people are taught to be political actors not only on stage, but also by negotiating their individual desires within the family, against what psychologists frame as intimate oppression.

While some thinkers see subjectivity as defined in relation to oppressive or punitive power, others view domination as even more fundamental to the self, as that which induces reflexive self-awareness in the first place. In these theories, domination creates consciousness of self and Other. In Hegel's fable of the master and the slave, the subject has to be thoroughly penetrated by terror in order to shatter its solipsism, it must be objectified in the gaze of a dominant alterity ([1807] 1977: 117). Deeply impressed by its identity with

this externalized, alienated object, the transcendent subject³⁸ can then work to master its being in the world, thereby becoming autonomous. While attacks on this dualism are legion, dualistic ontologies remain deeply embedded in social science theories of the subject. While more recent theories than Hegel's focus on the social nature of the subject, they always emphasize a fundamental tension, an agent never quite in tune with the world. Dissonance. On the stage of Western culture, the subject "disowns" the father, the pharaoh, the master signifier, the social category, the grounds of its existence, or it seeks to do so. Certainly, the ways in which we are dominated, in which we find ourselves to be small (Erikson [1950] 1993), leave a deep imprint on our orientation to the world: as people in China learn public speaking, we can see the traces of national humiliations and personal frustrations. However, Hegel's theory of subjectification focuses on the extremes of domination and liberation, subject and object, and not on the textured substance of daily life. People are not always set against their environment, in part because they are in fact constituted by it.

Teacher Bai is telling me about Chinese parenting while discussing the deeper meaning of her work teaching communication skills at companies. She sees herself as reforming a Chinese psyche that has been twisted by a paternalistic state. Bai explains, "we didn't have interviews, our jobs were assigned... in interviews, there is an other" (*taren* - 他人). When she suggests that Chinese people have no "other," this is at once a cognitive and

³⁸ This ultimate subject is, for Hegel, a rational consciousness seeking total mastery (Pippin 2011: 89): it is not an embodied existence.

a social critique. For Bai and other therapists that I spoke with, the Communist state is only one of a series of networks of interdependence, centered on the family, whose pernicious psychological and moral effects deprive people of the ability to recognize the Other. In these psychological accounts, people are too comfortably ensconced in networks of kinship and distribution to become self-aware subjects. And because they cannot see Others, they also cannot see themselves.

There were of course always strangers and outsiders in China, others as unknown, or not-yet known. But on numerous levels, Chinese models of the Other did not make it a radical alterity, and the Great Wall notwithstanding, they did not set up absolute boundaries between self and Other. Ideologically, for instance, China was considered 'all under heaven' (*tianxia* – 天下), and foreign political entities were viewed not as sovereign equals but as vassal states.³⁹ Following Louis Dumont, who famously contrasted ideologies of equality and hierarchy, we can say that in traditional China, Others such as foreign

³⁹ Haiyan Lee calls this vision "Confucian universalism" (2014: 244). Cosmologically, China was an unbounded empire, ultimately figured as a family. Politically, entities surrounding China were viewed as vassals of the imperial state, and trade relations were cast as tribute and patronage rather than exchange between sovereign equals. Within the country, Lee suggests that "Rhetorical inclusion and practical exclusion have therefore had the combined effect of depoliticizing ethnic difference and preventing minority groups from becoming the other within at the level of representation and to a lesser extent that of day-to-day experience" (2014: 15). Lee argues that the divide between urban and rural, now so stark, was historically experienced as a continuum, with cities serving as the locus for a landed gentry (2014), who were rooted in the rural lifeworld and ruled from within it. The imperial government appeared only occasionally to collect taxes, and was distant from most people's daily life (Fei 1980).

polities, or distinct genders,⁴⁰ derived their identity from their position within an integrated, multidimensional whole, rather than as formally equal members of the totality that binds separate individuals together under a “modern ideology” (1986). This flattening of differences, necessary for the calculations of equality, can make distinctions more stark and absolute: in Dumont’s example, the right hand becomes the opposite and absolute superior of the left hand, rather than just serving a different function in relation to the whole body, and different functions in particular contexts (1986: 248).⁴¹ In this sense, equality places domination where once there was interdependent subordination. In China, where hierarchies have bound people into a larger whole, the radical Other does not appear in medical theory,⁴² logic,⁴³ and cosmology. But this way of thinking is not abstract. It is a

⁴⁰ David Hall and Roger Ames have argued that in China, women were neither the equals nor the inferior opposites of men; the sexes existed on a continuum (1998: 96).

⁴¹ Dumont gives the example of the left and right hands: in a modern mode, these are formally equal, and in fact one is superior. Against this, there is a hierarchical mode, in which left and right are not equal, but neither is one superior in all aspects; they both derive their identity by being integrated into a larger body, a multidimensional whole in which they play different roles in different contexts (1986: 248). In a footnote, Dumont states that philosophical discourse has ignored the structural modes of determining an identity. Dumont also discusses a related distinction that Erikson made in relation to identity formation. In Erikson’s discussion, identification by a category rather than through an organic whole is a matter of making definitions based on the boundaries of exclusion. Erikson links this to totalitarianism (1964: 93).

⁴² Continuing to think through the body, while Greek physicians debated whether the heart or the brain ruled the body, the Chinese somatic imagination did not seek to set one sovereign against the rest of the body, an alterity to be mastered; they body was rather an interconnected community (Kuriyama 2002).

⁴³ Hall and Ames suggest that in Chinese philosophy, debate generally involves not contradiction, but distinction: argument “does not use the contradictories ‘x’ and ‘not-x,’ but the contrast of some particular ‘x’ and everything else as ‘non-x’” (Hall and Ames 1998: 133). Thought was social, with immediate implications. One did not have what Robert C.

very concrete social principle. The self is not set against others, against traditions or the sovereign, but gains power through them. If you killed the father, you would lose your own source of identity and social standing.

Based on his fieldwork in the early 1940s, anthropologist Francis K. Hsu made these remarks about paternal authority: “although it is intense and inclusive, it is far from being a one-sided command-submission pattern. In fact, the obligations between father and son are so mutual and the power so counterbalanced that the father-son relationship is best described by the term identification” (Hsu 1967: 262). Chinese culture and society have elaborated non-conflictual and extra-legal ways of regulating interpersonal relationships; following comparative philosophers David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, we might state this as a focus on rites rather than rights (1998). Socially, there has certainly been space for private interests in China, but these are ideally both pursued within and constrained by social networks.⁴⁴ In Chinese philosophy, the will has not been elaborated as a faculty of

Solomon has called the “transcendental pretense” (1993, in Hall and Ames 1995), a retreat to a realm of pure logic. Thinking was consequential and social (Hall and Ames 1998: 133). Logical debate did not proceed in as it did in Western traditions; Chinese debate did not separate propositions and essences from an analogical and contextual view of the correlation between language and truth (Hall and Ames 1998: 131-3).

⁴⁴ Based on an ethnographic study of Chinese intellectuals, Erika E.S. Evasdottir proposes a notion of “‘obedient autonomy’: a self-directed control over change that takes effect only through the concerted effort to achieve and maintain a discourse of order and immutability” (2004: x). For Evasdottir, in a moral order in which the ultimate judge is not god but other people, people seek their confidence through a particular form of moral illusion. She proposes that by believing that all Chinese people have the same standards and values, what she calls the “doctrine of similarity” (2004: 16), people are able to act and defend their reputations in vital interpersonal networks. We might see this as a Chinese version of the Puritan drive to be sure that one is among the elect. Evasdottir associates this

volition, intention, and choice (Hall and Ames 1998: 37-9), nor has heroic struggle served as a model for personal efficacy. Daoist thought has suggested powerful ways of achieving one's goals by working with and not against the environment: not will power, but cultivated sensitivity and capability. This orientation is eminently practical; however, it works within a system, not by challenging its parameters (Jullien 2004: 197; Farquhar and Zhang 2005: 323).⁴⁵ Accounts of ethical work in Japanese personal growth groups (Dunn 2016; Kondo 1987) describe participants working not to assert control over the self as an object, or to impose the self on society, but rather to align the inner and outer in practice, exerting themselves in order to adjust to the external world; strength is achieved through social integration. We will see that many young Chinese adults come to self-help groups explicitly in order to join a community.

Law and rights and logic are weapons of the weak, levers for overturning political power. But these weapons also twist into the self. As Nietzsche suggests, repudiation of an intolerable social order is the genesis of a world-denying "slave morality", ideologies of equality, and also the self-lacerations that transform fear and shame into internalized guilt ([1887] 1967). In what Nietzsche called *ressentiment*, people learn that those who have power are evil. He writes that by questioning existing social values, people acquire moral depth,

moral order with "pragmatic fluidity and abstract immutability" (2004: x), and contracts it with a Western search for correct, orthodox principles.

⁴⁵ Farquhar and Zhang, simultaneously describing the practice of tai-chi and tactics by which Beijing residents establish a good life within tight political boundaries, write that "position is all, and a flexible disposition of one's forces in an always preformed and constraining space" (2005: 22).

but that they also, dangerously, can become obsessed with finding someone to blame for their suffering: the powerful, their own kin, or even themselves ([1887] 1967: 127-8). Self-help psychology is part of a series of cultural waves that have taught people in China to set themselves against Chinese society, and against themselves, as people who have been made weak by this society, who must struggle to transcend it. In the liberal tradition, if the self is to be a sovereign bearer of rights then social restraint is intolerable, and must be justified by appeals to God, to reason, to social contracts. These transcendent logics and laws give people moral leverage against established authority, and against each other, and are therefore highly productive of social forms.

Dumont explains that while a hierarchical society is not static, it is oriented towards a single vision of the whole; he associates Hegelian dialectics with modern egalitarian aspirations, which work against existing orders of value to synthesize a new totality (1981: 243). In other words, liberal ideology favors an imperfect harmony, a discord that shifts towards ever new social forms. As Dumont points out, a will based on individual reason becomes detached from natural and social contexts, and so leads to a tense split between what is and what should be (1986: 244-62); this idealism is at the heart of liberal thought.⁴⁶ It places individuals into an ethical relationship with the ideal, the unrealized. The subject recognizes itself as the will, an agent standing its ground against itself, and against the

⁴⁶ Rousseau “was resolutely against the world as it actually exists, and passionately in favor of the pursuit of the world as it ought to be” (Lindholm 2013: 382). This slogan is also the heart of self-help psychology.

social and natural environment. Comparative philosophers David Hall and Roger Ames suggest that to be willful, "... to own intention, one must be in tension in some significant manner" (1998: 9). While liberal theories posit inviolable personal spheres of action and value, the telos of will power is resisting the universe, putting a dent in it. But in Weber's assessment, the goal of Confucianism is precisely to reduce tension with the world ([1951] 1968: 227). To the degree that this insight captures something about Chinese people, it marks a cultural obstacle to the willful striving of self-help psychology.

Comparative philosopher François Jullien writes against the violence of a Western self that imposes itself on the world through confrontation, by instrumentally applying models and principles.⁴⁷ But he also suggests that Chinese modes of action, working within a given environment, preclude redefining that environment. For him, this destroys both "the infinite possibilities of subjectivity" and "... above all relating to 'others' who are really others (and who are there to be discovered, not simply 'others' defined as our polar partners/adversaries)" (2004: 197). They are not "really others", because they are part of the self, and because a powerful social ideology seeks to incorporate them into a single shared game. Chinese social critics suggest that China has no society, no neutral space in which to

⁴⁷ Jullien argues that Western notions of efficacy involve positing models, and then applying them in practice: "To impose is to superimpose," and he suggests that we seek to apply this dualism of theory and practice in many different domains (2004: 4). Chinese forms of efficacy and selfhood are perhaps best understood by looking at Chinese medical practices, involving openness, sensitivity, and adjustment. Writing about *yangsheng* health cultivation, Farquhar and Zhang write that "The deliberateness of *yangsheng* is not an intellectual or moralistic imperative, imposed from above or outside on the passive terrain of the body and the material world by an act of will" (2012: 237).

have a disinterested encounter with an Other: there is only interdependence or indifference.

We can see how cultural, moral, civic, cognitive, intrafamilial, and interpersonal problems in Chinese psychology converge on this problem of relating to the Other.

Jullien writes, “It is a well-known fact – and one that becomes even more obvious when seen from China – that European thought can be interpreted as a history of the progressive buildup – to its modern extreme – of the autoconsistency of the subject” (Jullien 2004: 185). This autoconsistency has been formed through a long and contingent historical process. However, academic theories of subjectification have assumed that the subject is always seeking its autonomy as an object, one that must be owned as the self, either through mastery or through culpability, by principles or against domination.⁴⁸ Althusser’s influential account of ideology demonstrates how a principled consistency under the gaze of the impersonal law is central to Western theories of the subject. In this account, ideology has a purchase in the subject because people feel that they must act according to their proclaimed beliefs or else be “either ‘inconsistent’ (‘no one is willingly evil’) or cynical, or perverse” (1972). Althusser’s subject is constructed in dialog with an “Absolute Subject” (1972), a specular realm of ultimate values. In China, this realm has been epiphenomenal, a celestial image of the immanent demands of social order, and especially of the immediate

⁴⁸ Cheryl Mattingly has usefully summarized two key sources of the moral self in social theory: the punitive scene described by Nietzsche, and the mode of ethical self-reflection that appears in Foucault’s later work (Mattingly 2013). In our analysis, we might see the subject formed by external authorities, and by internalized laws. Mattingly also suggests a third scene, the laboratory, and shows how people constantly negotiate competing ethical demands within the social assemblages of their lives.

family. The law has historically been administered by local magistrates, with an eye to mediating conflict (Hall and Ames 1998; Fei [1947] 1984).⁴⁹ The parties involved know each other, and maybe their grandparents did as well; but Althusser's subject is hailed, known, and owned in the same instant.⁵⁰ The self is transparent and unitary, entirely subject to interpellation. Lacan's theorized mirror stage operates similarly, ending when one realizes oneself as a being in a social scene, a being who is jealous, resentful, guilty, and self-policing (1949). These theories express a distinct temporality of the self, and a peculiar relationship to the gaze of the Other. Why would one believe that so much of oneself can be revealed in an instant?

Identity

In analyzing social skills training as resource for deriving an identity, need to consider what an identity is, and how identity connects with closely related analytical terms. Following literary theorist Paul Smith's usage, 'subjectification' will refer to how a person's consciousness and habitus is structured by social relations of power and by ideologies, producing a particular 'subjectivity', which is "the object of determinant forces" (Smith 1988: xxxiv). For instance, Chinese intellectuals have reacted against domination by colonial powers; in a Hegelian fashion, their subjectivity has been shaped by this encounter.

⁴⁹ Especially for politically sensitive disputes, this is still largely the case. See Yang Dali 2016.

⁵⁰ Stuart Hall has noted that for Lacan, the Oedipal conflict, law, sexual identity, language, the unconscious, and ideology all emerge together in a single instant (2000: 21). Hall is critical of this mythological alignment, and wants to remind us that various aspects of the self emerge through extended processes and not in a single crisis.

We will see how the subjectivity of many young Chinese adults is influenced by the ideologies of self-help psychology, which interpellate them as subjects that need to improve themselves. The word 'subject' refers to the imagined conscious unity that institutions, ideologies, and texts address; few theorists would now suppose that this unified subject exists. Rather, they have suggested that people inhabit many "subject-positions" as they move through the social world (Smith 1988: xxxv).⁵¹ The 'self', as I use it, is a larger concept, the vessel of human experience. Its shape and structure are formed not only by historical configurations of power, but also by culturally varying constructions of emotion, cognition, attention, affiliation, value, action, epistemology, and ontology. Subjectivity and the self are closely linked, but 'self' refers to patterns of being that are constituted within and by a sociocultural context, rather than by disciplinary and ideological apparatuses in an immediate sense.

The notion of 'identity' is related to determined social categories and culturally patterned structures of experience, but it emphasizes the ways in which people use these in order to orient themselves in the social world. Erik Erikson brought to consciousness that a "psychosocial identity" ([1968] 1994: 167) is a psychic necessity, and that it depends on a system of cultural meanings as well as concrete paths for integrating into the productive life of society ([1968] 1994: 156). An identity is thus the result of symbolic and practical

⁵¹ Like Paul Smith, I am interested in pointing out that that personal experience, collective history, and competing frameworks provide the context for any particular interpellation (Smith 1988).

integration into society. Like the subject, an identity is not a unitary object. Stuart Hall writes of identity as an effect, a temporary “‘chaining’ of the subject into the flow of discourse”, connecting subjects to positions that are never fully satisfactory, and which people identify with, or “invest in”, to different degrees (2000: 19). My understanding of identity builds on Hall’s approach in that I see identity as an effect that arises in moments of connection between the self and the social environment. However, I emphasize that identity exceeds discursively articulated subject positions, and that identity does not depend on an act of ‘identification’ by an agent that will ‘invest’ itself in these positions, for obscure reasons.⁵² George Herbert Mead’s account of the self usefully highlights how a sense of identity is built up through processes of social participation and practice, processes that are proprioceptive as much as cognitive, ritual as much as reflexive ([1934] 1967). In Mead’s theory, identity is a sense of one’s position in an interpersonal game, within an environment that is more than linguistic. One has to know one’s role, and one is supposed to catch the ball. Synthesizing these approaches, in my conception identity is the effect of moments in which the self is integrated into a symbolic system in a way that enables social action, but the syntax of that action is structured by various points of persistence, including the embodied and encultured self.

⁵² Hall wonders why people would “chain” themselves to these subject positions. Following Judith Butler, he suggests that Freudian psychology might help us to understand why we become attached to certain identifications (2000). I don’t think we need any particular depth psychology to understand this.

As young people orient themselves within China's diverse social institutions, and within Chinese history, calls to be autonomous and modern are promises of integration into specific sites of social production, and particular shared conversations. But not everyone is adept at chatting around the water cooler, or the hot pot. If we keep in mind that identity is a practical issue of social and symbolic integration, of exclusion or belonging, then we can see that interpellation by ideological systems, like self-help psychology, shapes personal identity at specific nodes in an ecology of identity formation. The meanings of various ideologies, and of people's psychosocial dispositions, are formed in interaction with each other, and in relation to the practical matter of locating oneself in a variety of social games. Many academic theorists have been busy thinking about how to liberate the subject from socially constructed categories of identity. But in Chinese personal growth groups, we see young adults seeking the power of being identified. By learning to objectify oneself in the mirror of a distant Other, one can work to dialectically alter this position, or even to orient oneself to a new social game. Social skills training presents itself as ideological and technical system that applies directly to the practical daily business of deriving an identity among strangers, in the impersonal outside spaces of a changing society.

By reading psychology as an adaptation to social change, I am not suggesting a functionalist view that it fills a preexisting need. The desire to engage in an imagined society of freely mixing and self-defining individuals is elaborately constructed, within psychological interventions and by the social institutions that surround them. In what follows, we will think critically about the uses of psychology in China, and in our analysis;

but we will listen for what young adults and psychotherapists are using psychological languages to say about their lives, and about their country. In a history of self-help that takes in both psychotherapy and social skills training, Eva Illouz suggests that psychoanalysis appealed to Americans “because it offered recipes, plans of action, metaphors, and narrative templates that helped modern men and women cope with the increasing complexity and normative uncertainty of modern lives, most noticeably in the workplace and in the family (2008: 241). Psychology makes sense to people in China as they face challenges that extend beyond psychology: in particular, young urban adults apply social skills training to the problem of establishing social connection and identity. Therefore, I will approach self-help psychology as a set of tools and resources, taking an existential and pragmatic view of culture.

While building on a pragmatist view, which sees the meaning of propositions in their application to experience (Pierce 1905; Dewey 1916), I also wish to modify its vision; pragmatist philosophies suggest that people experiment with the world in a search of efficacious models. Human beings are not only motivated to find adequate understandings with which to guide their actions: they are also motivated to find a satisfactory resolution, even if it bears little connection to reality. Psychological expertise can be a form of “mastery play”, a way of scaling down the complexity of chaotic lives in order to create some sense of

control (Jackson 2005: 16).⁵³ Self-help psychology in particular not only suggests itself as a system of technical knowledge, but explicitly aims to create the feeling of control, elevating confidence itself to an article of unquestionable faith.⁵⁴ People are especially motivated to find symbolic closure when this resolution is a source of moral certainty and political security.⁵⁵ For in order to act, we want to be certain not only of our knowledge, but also of our social standing.⁵⁶

And so humans are not only pragmatically oriented to action in the world, but also to the psychological and social effects of the truth-feeling itself. We come, then, to two meanings of the word confidence. It is a sense of security, and a way to trick others, or even ourselves. If you are confident, perhaps, you can fake it till you make it. Most young adults in Chinese self-help groups are more interested in winning friends than in influencing people. But in a fluid society, as people learn that self-definition can create new realities,

⁵³ For anthropologist Michael Jackson, such “mastery play” can enable human agency, or lead people into a Faustian illusion of control (2005: 16). In self-help psychology, this magic is often reduced to its barest element: visualize the outcome you desire and it will appear.

⁵⁴ In a self-focused and perhaps demonic mode, Chinese self-help materials can fall into bizarre spirals of self affirmation, each repetition undermining itself. For instance, an article about “Small Ways to Raise Confidence”, from a psychology media platform, repeatedly refutes the idea that readers of this particular article might lack confidence: this is unthinkable and unacceptable.

[“提高自信的小方法.” 2013. 实用心理学.]

⁵⁵ Paul Smith associates both closure and moral certainty with the very notion of a subject (1988: 98).

⁵⁶ Following Evasdottir’s discussion, I suggest that in Western legal and religious systems, as well as in democratic or revolutionary politics, the need for certainty has been settled by means of “orthodoxy” in principles; in China, this need has been met using the “orthopraxy” of ritual and precedent (2004: 14-15).

they may fall from a collective social fiction, one embodied in history and institutions, into a fragile tale, all the more restrictive because they themselves are the authors. By observing how young adults in China practice defining their identity for the Other, we can study how people learn to carve off and defend their own subjective worlds. We can feel for the bare roots of a post reality-based world.

Mental Health

This is not a study of mental illness, but it explores aspects of identity and the self that have implications for mental health issues. We will meet young adults who, for a variety of psychosocial reasons, have particular difficulty establishing social connection. In a society of delicate precarity, people with such difficulties can easily spiral into lonely desolation (Fein 2015). In Beijing and many other cities worldwide, not only these uniquely vulnerable groups are having trouble finding social support and integration. Erikson suggested that when people cannot develop a mature identity organically, within a structure of traditions and institutions, they will fall back on one-dimensional identifications with race or nation (1964: 93). Many theorists have suggested a dialectic in which the lack of an identity motivates people to seek certainty through extremist or totalitarian movements (Fromm 1941; Honneth 1996; Taylor 1991; Dumont 1986). Clear self-definition can usefully lead to social or symbolic integration, can make one legible to others and to oneself. However, an identity that is too clearly defined appears as a dangerous symptom of social fragmentation.

Social theorists have moved to pathologize a rigid self-consistency. Paul Smith, for example, sees the unified subject, both as a psychic formation and as a figure of humanist thought, as an illusion driven by paranoia (1988). Drawing on psychologist Melanie Klein, Smith assumes that people need to see themselves as completely good, and are driven to discursively justify themselves.⁵⁷ I suggest that this dynamic is a symptom of the cultural history that we have traced above, a rationalist, Faustian complex that is perhaps worth defining as a culture bound syndrome.⁵⁸ The assumption that people should or could define

⁵⁷ Despite my wariness of depth psychology, and especially of object relations theory, I must recommend this evocative attempt to think about the bound self as a psychic artifact. Drawing on Melanie Klein, Smith suggests that people must see themselves as good by projecting anything threatening into the world. Thus, the subject inhabits a world of continual fantasies about threats from the world outside, coupled with constant self-justification. Smith writes:

What seems to me important about these paranoid symptoms here is that in their projective mechanism they both defend and alienate the ego. Projection defends the ego insofar as it demarcates it, gives it an impregnable border with a vigilant border patrol; it also alienates it insofar as it cuts it off from its own production (that is, its fictional world), so that the ego can refuse to acknowledge the factitious nature of the world it has created. (1988: 96)

In my view, what Klein takes as a normative stage of development, what Smith and so many other critics have been busy tearing down, is a kind of culture bound syndrome, widely but not universally distributed. It is quite dangerous in its sincerity. Both realist knowledge and paranoia create a juridical subject “who will in a sense endorse or stand behind the fictions as their guarantor” (1998: 98). In Smith’s account, we see a terrifying hint of *thanatos*; the subject, he suggests, seeks to end the story before the narrative escapes its grasp.

⁵⁸ In a comparative critique of Western and Chinese culture, Carl Jung warned against the Western pretention of rational control, writing “Our true religion is a monotheism of consciousness, a possession by it, coupled with a fanatical denial that there are parts of the psyche which are autonomous” (Jung 1962: 111). He said “As I see it, the psyche is a world in which the ego is contained. Perhaps there are also fishes who believe that they contain the sea” (Jung 1962: 130). Jung felt that rationality itself has become an irrational endeavor, warning that the banished psychic forces would return as fear, Faust, and fascism.

a self that is entirely consistent is not a cultural universal; rather, the appearance of inconsistency “is an illusion created by the ideology of modern individualism and an overreliance on abstract mental state concepts to produce a non-relational reflective characterization of one’s self” (Shweder 2016: 11-12). There are arguably degrees of narrative unity and rational justification that all humans seek; but the self does not need to be a consistent object for itself, persisting across varied contexts. The self can find its identity and coherence through practical and symbolic integration into worlds that are always filled with tensions, a coherence that is more stable because it is dynamic, and is more than discursive.

Rigid self-consistency is associated with a particular temporality that links the self with its public appearance at any given moment: we can analyze this temporality using the twin Others of liberal society. The need to perform an identity is linked to social affiliation among strangers, to making good first impressions. In China, members of public speaking clubs give speeches about failed romantic encounters and botched job interviews, moments in which they failed to establish connection by mastering their appearance. A society of strangers relies on the impersonal law, the second Other of liberal society, to mediate social and economic relationships. People can internalize the law to varying degrees, and there is evidence that this juridical gaze has a powerful influence on mental health.⁵⁹ One is pinned

⁵⁹ There is evidence that this affects the voices that people hears in psychosis. Tanya Luhrmann et al. report that American schizophrenics hear voices that are more harshly judgmental than those in other sites they studied, including communities in West Africa and in India (2015).

to the moment by the felt threat of social death or execution, by one's own personality and principles from within, by the laws of competition and domination from without. But this orientation that locates the self in the fateful present is also oriented towards the future. Just as social reformers objectified China in order to change it, now people are learning that self-objectification is a step towards self-creation. If the future depends on mastering the social object, the future collapses into the present, the self into the visible and audible surface.

This temporality is apparent in Western philosophy's most influential treatise on anxiety. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard writes that the self and the future are at stake in every moment: "The present is the eternal, or rather, the eternal is the present" ([1844] 1981: 86). Kierkegaard is always writing under the eye of a transcendent judge, but he was also acutely aware of his public image: he was attacked in print, and drawn into a protracted battle for his reputation.⁶⁰ Kierkegaard's philosophy also demonstrates that public speaking can take on the psychological importance of confession. For Kierkegaard, public verbal expression is mandatory, so that one can be judged by a just law; to not speak is evil, and "Mephistopheles is essentially mime" ([1844] 1981: 131). Under the eye of a Protestant God, many people interpret anxiety as a signal of guilt, and confidence as

⁶⁰ The celebrated existential insight of this volume is that anxiety signals an awareness of the possibility of human freedom, the gulf we stand before at every moment. But Kierkegaard's freedom consists of exerting the will against temptation ([1844] 1981: 49, 107, 158). This deeply frustrated bachelor gave us existentialism. To touch or not to touch, that is his question.

salvation.⁶¹ The “extrovert ideal” (Cain 2012), then, seems to express both the importance of personality in a fluid world, and a need for expiation before an internalized law.

My previous research has suggested that this temporal relation to strangers and to the law deeply shapes experiences of social anxiety. Chinese students that I interviewed in Chicago reported anxiety during specific contexts: during encounters with authority figures, or when on stage. Their American classmates viewed themselves as social commodities easily discarded, so they really wanted a gregarious personality, and they felt the judging gaze of strangers everywhere, even when standing in line at a store. The most influential proposition about social anxiety in different cultures is that while Americans typically interpret their anxiety as indicating a personal embarrassment or shortcoming, in Japan socially anxious people express a great deal of concern about causing offense to others (Dinnel, Kleinknecht, and Tanaka-Matsumi 2002; Kleinknecht et al. 1997).⁶² Reinterpreting this research, we might say that in Japan people seem to be concerned about their social performance, rather than about themselves as performers.

⁶¹ Weber writes that for Calvinists, “lack of self-confidence is the result of insufficient faith, hence of imperfect grace” ([1930] 2001: 66-7). Nietzsche writes that “Christianity has done its utmost to close the circle and declared even doubt to be sin” (Nietzsche [1881] 1997: 89). Particularly in Evangelical Christianity, fear itself is sometimes viewed as a mark of sin and the work of the devil.

⁶² Research on these differences has been influential enough that *taijin kyofusho* (対人恐怖症), anxiety about offending others, is recognized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disease (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Robert Lemelson’s work on obsessive compulsions in Bali is also suggestive, indicating a relational mode of anxious cognition, in which people worry for example about not knowing someone’s name (2003).

In talking about mirrors for the self, we must address narcissism at least in passing, burdened as the concept is with a history of application to social critique. I will not join in moralistic debates about self-love; I'm not against people trying to be healthy, happy, even sexy and sparkly. Nor am I against anyone feeling good about themselves, unless they are reacting against feelings of inferiority, violently defending the size of their hands. The problems of excessive self-focus, the psychological vulnerability and defensive idealism it creates, have already been suggested both here and elsewhere. What most interests me about the problem of narcissism is that it appears so differently in the critical discourse of Chinese psychologists than it has appeared in Western social thought. The problem for Chinese psychologists is not that people are transfixed by themselves, but that they can't see themselves at all because they don't step outside of the interpersonal systems that constitute them. Freud's distinction between primary and secondary narcissism is helpful here: in the more familiar secondary narcissism, the self is hypnotized by its ego ideals.⁶³ Primary narcissism means a lack of differentiation between self and world, and is closer to what Chinese psychologists tend to see in their compatriots. And so, many of these psychologists are trying to move Chinese people from mystical participation to magical thinking, from 'fatalism' to 'omnipotent' self-creation.

⁶³ In a 1990 addendum to his famous 1979 book *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch writes that he had come to realize the psychological importance of primary solipsism. He writes, "Narcissus drowns in his own reflection, never understanding that it is a reflection. The point of the story is not that Narcissus falls in love with himself but, since he fails to recognize his own reflection, that he lacks any conception of the difference between himself and his surroundings" (1979: 241).

My concerns with the techniques of self-help psychology, and with the ideology of autonomy they express, are not limited to their ready use for economic exploitation and political control. Yan Yunxiang suggests that in contemporary China “political liberalism, classical individualism, and even neoliberalism all play a progressive role” in limiting state power (2010b: 508), and it seems to me there is some truth to this. But then, even scholars who attack neoliberal ideologies of autonomy most directly still wish to rescue some image of progress, to further some mode of agential self-determination. Within this complex critical terrain, I am seeking to construct a politics of awareness and capability, which takes account of the multiple, contradictory relationships between self-definition and psychological freedom. Phenomenologically, I trace a delicate landscape of opening and closing, as people who feel shut down by anxiety work to engage with the world, and as people who don’t have lines to read learn to write their own scripts. I want to ask what it means to be shy or simply uncertain in an age in which assertions can create reality. But this is not a call for recognizing introverts, nor for empowering them to speak up. The shy have often found their voice in history when something needed to be said. It is, rather, an attempt to get at the origins of a self that wants to see itself when it looks in the mirror, to take the measure of the promises and dangers contained in this kind of person, and to test the limits of its global spread. The challenges of identity formation in a fragmented world, and the changing relation between self and image in this context, present some of the most important problems for contemporary social science.

Methods

Much of my research was conducted in Toastmasters public speaking clubs in Beijing: there are now over sixty such clubs in the city. These clubs are set up by local participants with the support of Toastmasters International, a global organization that promotes what it calls “leadership and communications skills”.⁶⁴ We will discuss these clubs in depth in the first chapter. I was a member one club from September of 2013 to August of 2014; I also regularly visited multiple clubs in Beijing, and attended regional events and two district conferences. In addition, I conducted interviews with many Toastmasters club members, both singly and in small groups; these were person-centered interviews (Levy and Hollan 2014) that focused on their life history and personal experience. Most members of Chinese Toastmasters clubs are college educated, and between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. Early adulthood is a critical period for studying the formation of subjectivity, and the reciprocal interactions between subjectivity and cultural change (Erikson [1950] 1993; LeVine 2011). Because people in this particular age group and class are working to establish themselves socially and economically, they can help us to understand processes of identity formation. Most Toastmasters club members are neither the wealthy progeny of officials and executives, nor the children of farmers and migrant workers. They are part of a large group of young college graduates who are struggling to stay afloat in China’s central cities,⁶⁵ where economic and educational

⁶⁴ “Who we are.” www.toastmasters.org

⁶⁵ Pressures are particularly intense in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, or ‘Bei-Shang-Guang’.

opportunities are densely concentrated. In Beijing, they are among strangers: few club members are locals. Since so many young adults in the capital are outsiders, their condition even has a name, *Beipiao* (北漂), meaning ‘Beijing floating’. They have a modest disposable income, but face high rents. They expect to change jobs, seeking opportunities in an expanding economy, but for now most are working in entry level positions in the private sector. In addition to my research in Toastmasters clubs, I also studied social skills training by interviewing half a dozen corporate trainers, and by attending weekly meetings organized by a group of graduates from a Dale Carnegie Training course, who gathered to discuss their lives and their frustrations.

In order to understand how Toastmasters and other social skills training programs fit within the broader context of China’s psycho-boom, from early 2013 through August of 2014 I conducted extensive research on psychotherapy and popular psychology in China. I met regularly with the authors of two influential self-help blogs, as well as with the founder and editors of China’s largest psychology and spirituality magazine group.⁶⁶ I participated in a variety of personal growth activities, including lectures on psychology, emotional intelligence salons, self-help reading clubs, and group therapy sessions; I also interviewed students and teachers who I met through these events. Some of my interlocutors were interested not only in self-help and relationship psychology, but also in spirituality (*lingxiu* – 灵修), yoga, and tarot, and a number were involved in an intense form of self-work

⁶⁶ Beijing Age of Aquarius Publishing Group 北京水瓶时代文化传播有限公司

known as neurolinguistic programming.⁶⁷ I was able to get a broad view of the landscape of personal growth in Beijing by monitoring the events advertised on the social media site Douban (豆瓣), popular with educated urban youth. On a given weekend in Beijing, Douban's events page lists dozens of workshops on personal growth, psychology, and relationships: this constitutes a significant part of the listings for all cultural activities. In 2013, I began analyzing the best-seller lists on China's popular online retailer Dangdang (当当网); over the past several years approximately thirty to thirty-five percent of the top selling books have been related to personal growth and career self-help.⁶⁸ I read about a dozen of the best-selling self-help books on the Chinese market, by both Western and Chinese authors. I focused on the top sellers, as well as texts about social skills. In addition, I tapped into circulating self-help discourses by scanning psychology magazines, and

⁶⁷ An intense form of self-work that originated in California in the 1970s. More than any other technique of self-mastery that I encountered, neurolinguistics programming, of NLP, led some people to grotesque applications of the will against the self. An NLP instructor that I met, a Westerner, was constantly, visibly adjusting his own image and emotions, leading to a social style that involved constant self-justifying meta-commentary, and facial muscles that yanked about like the strings of a marionette.

⁶⁸ In contrast, only a few such titles appear in the top fifty best-selling books on Amazon; there are usually about half a dozen, or ten to fifteen percent. In reaching this figure, I did not include inspirational and confessional narratives, although the line between books about self-help and about the self is blurry. Many books that I did not count are inspirational bildungsroman and confessionals, or narratives of personal growth through travel and hardships and relationships. Not everyone is welcoming this trend. In Chinese slang, self-help is known pejoratively as 'success arts' (成功学); the term 'Chicken Soup for the Soul' (心灵鸡汤) can sound as dismissive in Chinese as it often does in English. And in 2010, professors at the South China University of Technology protested against a culture of superficial materialism by burning a pile of paperbacks, including many self-help books (Hendriks 2016: 4).

especially by using WeChat (微信), China's ubiquitous mobile messaging and microblogging application. By saving items posted by my contacts, I amassed a database of over two hundred articles about psychology and personal growth. I analyzed some articles closely, especially ones that were forwarded by multiple people, and used keyword searches in the database to ascertain how themes linked up with each other throughout this literature.

An additional line of research focused on Chinese professional psychology. I interviewed about twenty psychotherapists, school counselors, and academic psychologists, and met regularly with half a dozen of these professionals: very quickly, I realized that psychologists in China generally see themselves as social reformers, and view many psychological problems as the symptoms of national cultural flaws. In studying psychologists, I heeded Dominic Boyer's advice to approach experts not as stores of knowledge, but as people who make sense of systems of thought in the context of their own lives (2008). Thus, I engaged psychologists as entrepreneurs, as parents, and especially as intellectuals and critical social observers. In addition to interviewing psychotherapists, I visited several university counseling centers; I spent many hours in one of them, talking to the therapists as well as with students who had trained to serve as peer counselors. I also attended a number of campus events promoting mental health awareness and emotional intelligence. This research on professional psychology greatly enriched my study of self-help. Therapists provided a considered perspective on my ongoing studies, grounded in their clinical experience and their extensive reflection on the lives of young adults in China.

As my research on self-help and social change progressed, I sought to initiate dialogs with young adults. I helped to organize a conference about popular psychology and spirituality among Chinese youth, and I spoke at the 706 Youth Space, an influential center that runs intellectual salons for students. At these events and others, I met writers, artists, and activists who are applying psychological concepts in a variety of social interventions. Most importantly, I got to know a number of young cultural activists with whom I formed fruitful research collaborations; in particular, I became involved with ASK,⁶⁹ an organization dedicated to stimulating self-reflection and autonomy in young Chinese people. In the winter and spring of 2014, I spent many days in conversations and collaborations with these various writers, artists, and activists. These engagements allowed me to understand how themes from self-help articulate with broader currents of social activism and cultural politics. Some of these activists and entrepreneurs come from more privileged backgrounds than their peers in Toastmasters clubs, and many have studied in the United States. They are playing an important role in suggesting the value of self-definition to their peers; not only by explicitly promoting autonomy but, even more importantly, by modeling how a public stance can become a personal identity.

During the period of my research I lived in Beijing's Gulou, or Drum Tower, neighborhood, a tangle of narrow lanes built around a six-hundred-year-old drum tower that used to beat the rhythms of life in the capital. In the alleyways of Gulou, the chatter of

⁶⁹ pseudonym

Beijing street life is now joined by the buzz of cafes, bars, and music venues. On the neighborhood's main drag one sees tattoos, dreadlocks, and hipster sunglasses, studied performances of various subcultures from the West. Some other cities, particularly in southwest China, have similar enclaves, but Gulou is by far the country's largest pocket of alternative youth culture. Living in this international and willfully odd area placed me in an environment that is not typical for Chinese youth, but that represents a hub of cultural production and perhaps a glimpse of things to come. Regardless of the neighborhood's broader cultural impact, life in Gulou helped me to understand how thoughtful and creative young adults in China are appropriating the power of lifestyle and image. In innumerable conversations, they taught me how they think about the changes taking place around them, and through them. Many of my neighbors and friends were artists, designers, marketers, and entrepreneurs in their twenties and thirties; they embody a creative self-definition to which many of their peers aspire. The young professionals, psychotherapists, social activists, and members of self-help groups that I worked with in Beijing are my partners in a conversation about social change. They are my interlocutors. Motivated by a world that won't stay still, they reflect critically about China every day, representing and interpreting themselves.

People and ideas flowed between these various texts and research sites. Because these lines of research shed light on each other, materials from all of them are juxtaposed within each chapter. However, the following four chapters roughly follow a trajectory from

Toastmasters clubs, to self-help, psychotherapy, and social activism, and finally out into a broader cultural politics.

Chapters

In the following four chapters we will see how Chinese young adults are learning to constitute an Other, and how this project is a central element of the cultural and social effect that psychological technologies of the self are having in China. As people develop a sense of self mediated by an Other, we will examine how and where public appearance and personal identity are drawing closer together. The process of constructing an Other unfolds through a series of encounters with mirrors for the self. Some of these encounters are with specific people: strangers, foreigners, experts, social activists. Other encounters are more abstract: with audiences, publics, lifestyles, and possibilities. In the first two chapters, we meet people who are grappling with their personal and collective history, with a past that has formed their psychosocial capacity to get on stage, to pass an interview, or to get a date. In the second two chapters, we watch people testing what it means to inhabit an identity that is defined by individual interests, one that is self-assertive, different, and perhaps unharmonious.

The first chapter takes us into Toastmasters clubs, where we will watch club members progress from giving self-introductions to delivering motivational speeches. Club members are learning to see themselves through the eyes of an audience, and to please strangers using energy and humor. They are defining individual identities based on hobbies, experiences, and ideals. On the other hand, these claims for self-definition also

signify struggles with stubbornly embodied psychosocial limitations. This chapter analyzes the practice of public speaking as a therapeutic intervention, one that creates individuals on stage; but it also shows how public speaking clubs are sites that articulate new forms of social affiliation and collective identity. In their speeches, club members generate a collective consciousness of injury: their embodied experiences of stage fright give urgency to vocal condemnations of a society that, they say, has not allowed them to speak. As we hear club members give inspirational speeches, we will begin to think about the individual as a political actor. Finally, we will see how club members interpret calls for self-esteem as critiques of 'face', revealing a cultural politics that pushes people to take possession of their social mask.

The second chapter takes us beyond Toastmasters clubs and into their immediate social and historical context. Whereas within the clubs we saw young adults learning to position themselves spatially, before an audience, now we see how they position themselves temporally, between the schools they have just left and the jobs to which they aspire. While young college graduates in Beijing feel drawn towards a new world of entrepreneurship, technology, and innovation, most of them perceive themselves as poorly prepared to take advantage of its possibilities. They bitterly blame their frustrations on Chinese educational institutions; echoing widespread social critiques, they depict these schools, and Chinese culture, as stifling creativity. Therefore, in working to become confident and passionate, young adults in self-help groups express overlapping personal and national aspirations for modernity. Due to intense concern about the faults of Chinese

schools, educational reform is an important field of social activism in contemporary China. We will meet several young social entrepreneurs who are trying to fix the faults of Chinese education, and see how their interventions aim to promote the psychosocial capacity for self-definition, especially under the gaze of a foreign Other. At the same time, these entrepreneurs themselves demonstrate the close connections between social skills, cultural politics, and personal identity in a globalizing China.

The third chapter moves from the institutions of school and work to more intimate settings, to the family and to romantic relationships. This chapter shifts from the perspective of young participants in self-help groups to the points of view expressed by professional psychotherapists and popular advice books; this shift clarifies how psychologists position themselves as social critics, and reveals where their interventions conflict with the sensibilities of young adults in China. The psychological professions in China are shaped by a history of Chinese self-objectification in relation to Western modernity. Contemporary psychotherapists channel this intellectual current, translating tropes about a dependent and callous Chinese character into the technical language of psychology. In response to a set of therapeutic challenges and perceived moral crises, these experts are trying to lay the psychological foundations for a liberal social contract: a moral imperative to assert one's desires, and a civic ethic that creates interpersonal boundaries. These values of personal autonomy and civic morality appeal to many people; however, by looking at social skills training, we will see that practices of antagonistic self-assertion can

often seem unskillful, and that self-help books written by lay Chinese people present very different advice about handling interpersonal relationships.

The fourth chapter turns to contemporary youth culture in China, showing how young adults are now freshly discerning, and actively debating, the links between interests, ideals, and personal identity. Drawing on materials from Toastmasters, popular culture, marketing, and activism, the chapter examines how people are learning the power of differentiating themselves in a mass society, and are learning to position themselves in its mirror. Young adults are eagerly discussing hobbies, travel, and interests, and the importance of being interesting. Their relation to a world of new possibilities is mediated by a transcendent Other: both their own interests, which appear as the hedonistic goals of instrumental action, and by ethical positions that, activists and marketing campaigns suggest, can bring social recognition. People are learning not only to claim individual passions and ethical ideals, but also that there are social rewards for doing so. We will trace emerging concerns about authentic lifestyles, as well as pervasive suspicion of social activists, outlining how young adults in China are negotiating conflicting claims about the meaning of interests and ideals. As they pursue physical pleasures and moral satisfactions, self, desire, and public image become bound together more tightly.

These four chapters shift gradually from concern with personality as a set of psychosocial capacities that enable self-presentation, to concern about the personality as a unique individuality. In a Hegelian mode, the focus moves from becoming a social object to shaping this object; ultimately, however, these processes are inseparable. The chapters form

a progression of interlocked interlocutors for the self: a psychosomatic object before an audience of peers, one's own past and future, Chinese culture and Western modernity, and the values suggested by social and economic markets. The chapters also move out from Toastmasters clubs, into their immediate social environment, into the critical discourse of a national polity, and finally into flights of imagination and desire. Finally, the chapters move through a set of psychosocial capacities that are elaborated in social skills training, and that articulate cultural critiques: confidence, creativity, independence, and authenticity.

Throughout the text I will refer to 'social skills' and 'communication' without the parentheses, which would grow cumbersome: however, I am referring to these skills as they are defined in psychological self-help. I will also use the term 'disordered sociality': by this, I am referring to the difficulties that people in China, particularly young adults, encounter as they try to establish interpersonal connections in a changing society, and to the feelings of fragmentation, loneliness, uncertainty, and anxiety that ensue. I conceive of this disordered sociality as an ecological phenomenon, a dis-ease that emerges at particular intersections of economic structures, social institutions, physical environments, practices, ideologies, and individual psychophysical dispositions. In order to refer to a self that is experienced as closely tied to a discursive proposition, I will use the term 'bound self.'⁷⁰

⁷⁰ I am hoping to associate this with Clifford Geertz's "bounded" self (1973). However, I want to suggest the legalistic and logical binding of the self to contracts, propositions, and moments. In a Buddhist sense, the 'bound self' refers to what David Loy has called "awareness bound" (2009), an attention most stubbornly trapped by the "psychological/social/linguistic construct" of the self (2009: 2).

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own and all names are pseudonyms.

Another note on names: most young people in China have an English name. Some people never use them, while others use them extensively, even with other Chinese speakers. In the following, I will use English pseudonyms for people who went by their English names in the contexts in which I knew them; in English speaking Toastmasters clubs, most but not all club members use their English names.

We have identified two dynamics that bind personal identity and public object: the first animated by the power of the image in a mediated fluid world, and the second by the fields of social domination, contested under the gaze of a transcendent judge. We have also outlined two modes of constructing an identity, through integration and through antagonism. These gloss onto the familiar dichotomies of interdependent and independent, collectivist and individualist, dividual and individual. I would like to add one more: wave or particle. The wave offers possibilities for action within the structure, and encourages identification with these established paths of power. The particle collides with others, seeking to reshape the structure.⁷¹ The wave does not need explicit models for action, because it moves within human structures and patterns. The particle needs its own: hence the will, hence principles, both as models for action and as justifications. Hence the

⁷¹ In Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, the protagonist constructs an elaborate test for himself, in which he repeatedly visits the public promenade in order to try to not swerve out of the path of another man, larger than himself and his social superior. Everywhere, authority is to be resisted. This book was itself a parody of those who seek their superiority in arid principles, and the protagonist explicitly sets himself against an enlightened, rational utilitarian vision of the world.

sacredness of faith, as one moves to realize what now exists only as potential. None of this is to imply a contrast between activity and passivity, which has so often been used to caricature East and West; it is seeking a language for describing the culturally and psychologically variable role of transcendence. At its heart, self-help psychology is about overcoming reality, a prospect that should give us pause even as it appeals to our hopes for a better future. Through social skills training, young adults come to know themselves through the mirror of society, through the strangers that inhabit it; at times, they appear to themselves as an image in the eyes of these distant Others. This image, they are learning, can create new realities in their lives.

After stopping foreigners by the lake, after shouting in the park, after joining Toastmasters, Quantum has become an accomplished public speaker, and also a corporate trainer. He is now finishing up his speech about this journey of personal growth. Having studied communication, Quantum knows to conclude with a clear, emotionally powerful take-home message:

It is the most important thing in your life, the mirror. Find your own mirror.

Dig out your real you. After digging out, you can stand on it. The world is a mirror. The mirror is a belief that can give us power and confidence, and the mirror is a prediction which can move us forward or along. The mirror is an inquiry which can bring us hope, respect and guts.

Finishing up with a softly spoken punch line, Quantum says that his “favorite hobby” is now “looking into the mirror”, because “every time in front of that mirror, I keep telling myself, ‘Oh yeah, what a harmonious face I have.’”

Personality and Principles

And above all, it is he, he himself, who regards himself as a mouse; no one asks him to; and that is an important point.

Notes from Underground – Dostoevsky¹

“We all know the first impression is very important. A good beginning is half a success. Especially for a job interview or a blind date”, says June. In halting, sincere English, this slender woman in her mid-twenties tells the audience that “Personal appearance is very important.” It is Tuesday evening, and about forty young adults have gathered for this meeting of a Toastmasters public speaking club in Beijing. June shares the story of a woman who didn’t pass a job interview: “The interviewer told her did not see her appearance matches her wonderful resume. So she was refused. She was so confused about this. In fact, the good appearance helps you to seize the opportunity.” June tells us that because this young woman didn’t look good enough, she “lost her chance.” Rather than being upset by the interviewer’s discrimination or superficiality, June tells the audience that “One should not only count inner beauty, but also outer beauty.” She explains that good looks are not only essential “For some jobs such as movie star or model”, but that they are also important on a blind date: if you don’t have a “good appearance”, then “the first date may become the last one.” A few subdued laughs come from the audience.

¹ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. [1864] 1993. *Notes from Underground*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonksy. New York: Vintage.

But June suggests that paying attention to one's appearances is more than a way to get a job or a second date. She explains that "Improving one's appearance is part of the self discovery." June shares her "surprise" that fashion models are so "different." With help from an "image design expert", she tells us, everyone can find their "suitable style in clothes, color, hair, and so on. It is magic and amazing trip to find themselves. To know themselves better." While most cultural analyses of psychology and self-help emphasize that they teach people to look within themselves, June is focused on how she looks. This chapter will show how young adults in Toastmasters clubs become more aware of how they present themselves to an audience, and how club members engage in an ethical project of mastering this image, working to possess it as their own personality. June has suggested that "we all know": that first impressions matter. But she is telling her peers in the audience that this appearance should express their individuality.

June explains that paying attention to one's appearance doesn't mean adopting prevailing social standards. She says that it's not about being as slim as possible, or flying to Korea to get plastic surgery; it doesn't mean becoming a "superstar", but treating yourself well. Paying attention to one's appearance doesn't mean purchasing expensive luxury brand clothing, she says, but "It means that you will dress differently according to the situation." While June advocates paying attention to personal appearances, and expressing one's personality, her speech also critiques superficial and materialistic social standards, represented by Korean plastic surgery and luxury brands. In conclusion, June tells her peers in the audience that "One's appearance conveys her confidence and her attitude towards

the life. So it is not difficult to understand the reasons why good appearances can get much more respect.” The speech trails off and comes to a halt, as the audience members applaud.

“I think we can all agree that June today is so fantastic in her appearance, right?” the master of ceremonies says with the polish of a practiced host. People raise their hands, eager to ask June questions: “Do you judge a man based on his appearance?” asks one, and another wonders, “Do you have any schedule to improve your appearance in the future?” The people having this earnest conversation are students and recent college graduates, educated young adults who are able to participate in an English language Toastmasters club meeting. They have spent a lot of time with their schoolbooks, in which they have read again and again that inner beauty is what really matters; after leaving school, many of them feel poorly prepared to thrive in a world where appearances do in fact matter. June’s message of self-discovery would be too obvious for some audiences in China. But we will see that many if not most young adults in China are discussing the importance of having personality, of being interesting, of becoming oneself. They are reassuring each other that autonomous self-definition is valuable and legitimate; they are teaching each other to look in the mirror, to imagine who they could be and identify with this image.

But most members of Toastmasters clubs say that they are shy, introverted, or socially anxious; many are not adept at knowing who they are in the eyes of strangers, or at telling other people who they are. As young adults in Toastmasters clubs work to overcome their social anxieties, their fear of public speaking, they practice defining themselves before an audience of strangers. We will see that many young adults in China use these clubs to

address a range of anxieties. Club members struggle with a disordered sociality, a condition that emerges among rapidly changing social environments, shared ambitions for self-definition, and the limitations of people's psychosocial capacities. Anthropological studies of self-help psychology have only lightly touched on their uses as therapy. However, paying attention to the fears and frustrations of Toastmasters club members can help us to think about the cultural effects of social skills training programs as they spread worldwide, and to examine how the cultural politics of autonomy are embodied in everyday life. This chapter demonstrates that young adults use Toastmasters clubs as institutional, cultural, and therapeutic resources for establishing social connection, and that this is one of the most important reasons for their appeal in China. By analyzing Toastmasters clubs as therapeutic resources, we can also reveal how they support two overlapping processes of identity formation: one through opposition, and one through integration.

After introducing Toastmasters clubs, we will let some club members introduce themselves. In examining how club members present themselves, we will use two lenses, which map onto the twin Others of liberal society: strangers and an impersonal law. Young adults in the clubs are learning to be humorous, interesting, and energetic in order to find favor with strangers. And like June, who advocates for appearances, club members are also practicing displaying ethical stances. Young adults come to win friends, but when they climb on stage they end up trying to influence people. The first training manual that Toastmasters club members work through begins with a self-introduction, and concludes with exercises in political rhetoric. However, in the clubs, politics, performance, and

identity are connected in particularly Chinese ways. Young adults rarely address the democratic discourse of a civil society. Rather, they articulate a collective cultural politics of autonomy, based on a shared sense of injury and regret. They interpret their stage fright as the result of a society that has kept them from speaking. And while club members want to present a good appearance to the world, the friendly audience inside a public speaking club can become more important to them than the strangers outside.

Toastmasters in China

Toastmasters International is an American nonprofit organization that seeks to promote what it calls “communication and leadership skills”.² Toastmasters clubs have counted influential self-help authors and politicians among their members,³ and they are now perhaps the world’s most popular venues for studying public speaking. Each Toastmasters club has a banner, which hangs at front of the room during meetings; in more venerable Chinese Toastmasters clubs, the banner has a map of the Atlantic world, but in clubs established after 2011, this has been replaced by a featureless globe. Since Toastmasters International was founded in California in 1924,⁴ it has grown into an

² “Who We Are.” www.toastmasters.org/about/who-we-are

³ The authors of two influential self-help books were in Toastmasters: Napoleon Hill, who wrote *Think and Grow Rich* (1937), and Harvey Mackay, best-selling author of *Swim with the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive* (1988). Many American politicians have been club members.

“Famous Toastmasters.” www.toastmasters.org

⁴ The organization’s founder, Ralph Smedley, explained that “Many of the men with whom which I was associated at work, needed help in talking and in meeting other people. They had ideas but they did not know how to express them” (“Smedley Speaks”). Smedley first began organizing speaking clubs for men at a YMCA in Bloomington, Illinois, in 1905

extensive network of franchised clubs in which people practice giving prepared and improvised speeches.⁵ Globally, Toastmasters is expanding most rapidly in South and East Asia;⁶ the organization held its first annual conference outside of North America in 2014, in Kuala Lumpur. The first club in China was founded in Shanghai in 1999, and as of 2017 there are over four hundred in the country, representing approximately eight thousand active members. When I began my fieldwork in the fall of 2013, there were forty clubs in Beijing: at the time of writing, in early 2017, there are sixty-two Beijing clubs listed on the Toastmasters International website.⁷ In Beijing, Toastmasters club members have a noticeable presence in the worlds of entrepreneurship and social enterprise, and many are involved in the emerging profession of corporate communications training.

Club members are mostly between their late teens and mid-thirties, with a modal age in the early to mid-twenties: this is far younger than the membership of American and

("History"). This was just a few years before Dale Carnegie began teaching his public speaking courses at a YMCA in New York City, in 1911; these courses evolved into the iconic self-help book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

["Smedley Speaks." 2014. *Toastmasters Magazine*.

"History." www.toastmasters.org]

⁵ With over 300,000 members in one hundred and thirty-five countries.

⁶ 'Region 13' maintained an average annual growth of over seventeen percent between 2004 and 2013; over this decade clubs in Asia went from representing less than one percent of the global total to nearly twelve percent.

["Region 13: The Fastest Growing Region in Toastmasters International." r13tm.org]

⁷ Some clubs are located within technology companies. Management consultants, many of whom are themselves Toastmasters, often advise companies to set up clubs as a cheap way to improve employees' communication skills. A few other clubs are affiliated with universities, but the majority are independent.

European clubs.⁸ Men and women join in equal numbers. There are not many foreigners in the clubs, but it is not unusual to see one at a meeting; I encountered several dozen North Americans involved in Toastmasters in China, a very few Europeans, and a number of South Asians.⁹ Most Chinese clubs conduct their meetings in English, and language study is an important part of their appeal. Members' facility with the language varies considerably, although all can and do give speeches in English. Because Toastmasters clubs provide chances to practice English, they are positioned not only as a form of psychological self-help but also within a general rush to acquire educational capital.¹⁰ In a society where education and aspiration are particularly interlocked, oral English classes are instrumental in generating an urgent sense of the psychosocial demands of an imagined modernity.

Typically, Toastmasters club members in Beijing first arrived in the city for their undergraduate studies and are now a few years out of college, trying to launch their

⁸ In the United States, many Toastmasters club members are retired. Some urban clubs in the United States have a younger membership, although average ages are still in the thirties. Most younger American club members are immigrants or minorities, ambitious people who feel pressure to adapt to dominant styles of self-presentation. If Toastmasters clubs don't appeal to privileged young Americans, they nevertheless receive a similar education: I am thinking of the efforts of American universities to teach self-presentation skills, efforts that have increased substantially in the past several years.

⁹ My club had a member from Bangladesh and one from India. I attended two district conferences and a large event in Beijing celebrating Toastmasters 90th anniversary, and all the events featured keynote speakers of Indian origin. India, like China, is part of Toastmasters International's 'Region 13.'

¹⁰ See Kipnis 2011 for a discussion of this rush. Young adults in China give English speeches in public speaking clubs like Toastmasters, and on college campuses people gather for popular 'English corners'.

careers.¹¹ Many of them work in Beijing's booming technology sector, in which there are significant opportunities for social mobility. People drawn to the clubs are often ambitious in the entrepreneurial sense noted by both critics and proponents of popular psychology, but their concerns are far from narrowly economic. While most members say that they hope polished self-presentation skills will advance their careers, even veteran members can rarely articulate how they use such skills professionally. And when June and other club members discuss anxious market interactions, the "job interview" is almost always paired with the "date."

As research sites, Toastmasters clubs have a number of appealing features. First, they instantiate an interest in public speaking that is now widespread among young adults in China. In addition, unlike other personal growth groups that are organized around psychological experts, Toastmasters clubs have no professional teachers: while some members are corporate trainers, and others have a degree of charismatic authority, everyone studies speaking together as formal equals and officer positions rotate through elections. This democratic organization leaves substantial room for members to use the clubs as spaces for articulating and interpreting their collective experience. Low membership fees contribute to an egalitarian ethos,¹² making the clubs accessible not only to

¹¹ They are therefore what are known as *waidiren* (外地人), people from outside the city; under China's *hukou* household registration system, they cannot access many social services and privileges in Beijing.

¹² Participation in Toastmasters costs less than \$100 USD for half a year of membership; there are also some insubstantial initial fees for registration and training manuals. Toastmasters International receives some of the money, while clubs use the rest to rent

a student anthropologist but to almost any young person with some facility in oral English. The young membership of Chinese Toastmasters clubs also makes them appealing research sites for studying processes of identity formation in urban China. While in Beijing I frequented meetings hosted by seven Toastmasters clubs, and attended regional events as well as district conferences held in Nanjing and Hong Kong.¹³

My home club was located in Beijing's Haidian District, near many universities and technology companies: it draws members from both of these sources. I was a member of this club for a full year, during which I performed various functional roles in the meetings, delivered speeches, and met with a mentor to work on my public speaking skills. I also represented my club in competition as part of our debate team, and regularly participated in social events organized by club members. Members of Chinese Toastmasters clubs turn their clubs into comprehensive social resources. There are many more clubs in the United States than in China, but they have less frequent meetings and organize far fewer activities than their Chinese counterparts.¹⁴ In China, Toastmasters becomes a major presence in the

meeting rooms and purchase the minimal items needed to run meetings: office supplies, gifts for invited guests, and sometimes snacks.

¹³ As the number of clubs in China grew, Toastmasters International has split the country into two, and recently three districts: one for the north of the country, one the east, and the other the south and west.

¹⁴ Toastmasters is firmly planted in its home soil. There are now, for example, one hundred and fifty-nine listed clubs in Chicago. However, compared to clubs in China, clubs in the United States are generally less active, and less well attended. Many meet every other week or only once a month. Clubs often meet for only one hour, instead of two as in China, and they do not organize as many activities. American Toastmasters Clubs are, however, thriving in some particular niches. The clubs are popular in Silicon Valley, and among some scientists, who hope to better communicate their findings to the public (Trageser 2013).

lives of many club members. Aside from spending time preparing speeches and attending weekly meetings, members visit numerous clubs, act as officers, attend additional training sessions, and enjoy frequent social outings. While Toastmasters club members study how to present themselves to strangers, on stage, they also find social integration and connection through the Toastmasters organization. They find resources that help them to establish a sense of identity, both through explicit self-definition and by making friends.

Meetings

In Hegel's account, the autonomous subject first feels its existence as an object, and then works to assert control over this externalized, dominated self. This narrative provides a useful framework for understanding the dialectical process of subjectification that plays out in Toastmasters clubs; at the same time, practices of personal growth in the clubs also reveal a more processual, less adversarial way of defining an identity. In form and in content, Toastmasters clubs are designed to first give members a sense of their existence in social space, and then to help them gain a measure of reflexive control over their staged

There are also Toastmasters clubs in prisons across the country, supported by volunteers from local clubs; sites include the infamous Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as Angola, and at least fifteen prisons in Massachusetts and Rhode Island (Jailstojobs 2013). In a documentary about prison clubs, one judge exclaims: "You can rob a bank, but you can't give a table topics? [an improvised speech] What's up with that?" (Galichia and Weidling 2008).

[Trageser, Claire. 2013. "From Lab To Lectern, Scientists Learn To Turn On the Charm." www.npr.org

Jailstojobs. 2013. "Prison Toastmasters clubs teach skills useful for job search." jailstojobs.org.

Galichia, Paul and Brian Weidling. 2008. *Speakeasy: the Movie*.]

persona. Contact with the Toastmasters organization immediately initiates a process of self-objectification in relation to the Others of liberal society: to strangers, and to the law. As a first-time guest at a Toastmasters club, you will be given about twenty seconds to introduce yourself; if you go over this limit, as people frequently do, the host abruptly cuts you off. This strict allocation of time makes social attention appear as a scarce and valuable resource. This is also suggested by the agenda in your hands, in which every segment of the meeting is planned down to the minute.

Chinese Toastmasters clubs typically meet every week, on a weeknight or weekend. Our club gathers after work, at seven, in a brightly lit classroom rented from an English language training center. There are about twenty-five members and anywhere from five to fifteen guests in attendance: they are students, teachers, scientists, computer programmers, aspiring entrepreneurs and corporate trainers. After the guests introduce themselves, briefly, the evening's master of ceremonies, or 'Toastmaster', comes to the front of the room to formally begin the meeting. The role of 'Toastmaster' circulates between the more senior members of the club. This host is responsible for conducting the meeting; this includes preparing a short introductory monologue, an anecdote or reflection on the meeting's theme.¹⁵ After this monologue, four members of an evaluation team come on stage, one at a

¹⁵ In my club the themes over the past two and a half years fall roughly into the following categories, with the number of instances noted in parentheses: thinking positively, setting goals, overcoming failure, or being persistent (33); hobbies, romance, and living more fully (14); reminiscence (9); holidays, including Western holidays (6); and topics of general social or popular interest (18).

time, and explain their roles. They are the General Evaluator, who assesses the meeting as a whole, and everyone who has spoken in it; the Timer, who signals to speakers when their time is running out; the Ah Counter, who takes note of what the Toastmasters manual refers to as “crutch” words,¹⁶ like ‘like’ or ‘um’; and the Wordsmith or Grammarian, who introduces an English vocabulary word,¹⁷ and monitors phrasing and diction. Everyone who speaks during the meeting, however briefly, will receive feedback from this team. Club members who deliver prepared speeches will also receive feedback from assigned evaluators. Every week, in every meeting, the evaluation team takes about ten minutes to explain their functions, and the rules that govern the meeting. Toastmasters clubs follow a simple but rigid etiquette: for example, anyone getting on or off of the stage must shake hands. This rule reinforces an item of Western social etiquette, but it seems primarily intended minimize the uncertainty of social interaction within the club. However, it actually generates some very awkward moments. For instance, people who forget to shake hands after speaking will sometimes run halfway back across the room to do so. Another, rule, explained at the beginning of every meeting, is even more foreign.

Before any speakers take the stage, the ‘Toastmaster’ tells everyone in attendance not to discuss race, politics, sex, or religion; our host gestures to where she has written these

¹⁶ *Competent Communication: A Practical Guide to Becoming a Better Speaker*. 2013. Mission Viejo, CA: Toastmasters International, 75.

¹⁷ These are English words that most people present do not know, or would not be comfortable using conversationally. Example I came across include: adventure, narrative, grit, resonance, tremendous, aggressive, and chillax. People are encouraged to use the ‘Word of the Day’ throughout the meeting.

four words on the whiteboard. Members call these words “taboos”, and they forbid mentioning potentially divisive elements of personal identity.¹⁸ These four words simultaneously conjure an individual disembedded from her social background, a therapeutic safe space, and a civil public space. The people assembled in this classroom not only practice public speaking, but also constitute a tenuous public. Michael Warner suggests that a “public” is called forth when people address an audience that is imagined to include strangers and bystanders, among whom texts circulate, and who join in a discourse that is in principle self-organized rather than oriented to external institutional ends (Warner 2002). Toastmasters club members actually do address strangers, since every meeting includes guests, and because people move between clubs in a regional, national, and international network. On occasion, texts do circulate within this network: particularly resonant speeches from one club are cited in others ones, and videos of speeches are often posted online.¹⁹ Club members receive a monthly newsletter from Toastmasters International, to which they can also contribute content. These channels of circulation do not quite sustain a consistent intertextual discourse, but they support a sense of an indefinite audience that centers on the club but extends beyond it. More importantly, when

¹⁸ Richard Sennett argues that in 18th century Europe, this bracketing of social background was crucial to building spaces for public discourse (1974: 81), such as coffeehouses. He writes that “Coffeehouse speech is the extreme case of an expression with a sign system of meaning divorced from – indeed, in defiance of – symbols of meaning like rank, origins, taste, all visibly at hand” (1974: 82).

¹⁹ Our club has a particularly large online presence, including an account with about 1500 followers on the Chinese social media and messaging app WeChat.

they give speeches in the clubs, members imagine themselves as addressing a broader public of their peers, of young urban Chinese professionals. While they have a select number of messages for this audience, their discourse is not defined by the goals of the Toastmasters organization. They can speak about anything, almost.

After the rules are explained, it's time for Table Topics, which is often the most fun part of the meeting. In this segment, members of the audience have a chance to give impromptu speeches, responding to prompts prepared by the meeting's Table Topics Master. Members and guests raise their hands to participate: those chosen are given a prompt, or choose a slip of paper with a prompt written on it. They have about twenty seconds to think through their response, and then two-minutes to speak. Topics range from philosophical questions to imaginative scenarios: "What would you do if your parents opposed your relationship?" or "What would you do if you were an alien?" The unscripted responses can be awkward, earnest, or more typically, quite funny. Usually, between five and eight people get to participate in Table Topics. At this point, our club takes a brief rest, ten minutes for stretching and conversation. On the agenda, this break is labeled "Connecting People."

After the break, we hear between two and four prepared speeches. Toastmasters club members work through a curriculum, beginning with the ten speeches in the *Competent Communication* manual.²⁰ Each assignment highlights an element of public

²⁰ *Competent Communication: A Practical Guide to Becoming a Better Speaker*. 2013. Mission Viejo, CA: Toastmasters International.

speaking, and includes several pages of explanation and tips. The manual begins with assignments on technical aspects of public speaking, such as speech organization and body language, and culminates with speeches that involve rhetorical goals such as persuading and inspiring the audience. A person who completes these ten “CC” speeches is recognized a ‘Competent Communicator’ by Toastmasters International, and is encouraged to progress through advanced manuals that focus on specific genres of professional and social public speaking.²¹ Speeches are usually between five and seven minutes long, although some advanced assignments are longer, or shorter; for example, a toast at a wedding is only supposed to be a few minutes long. Club members work through their speech assignments with the help of a mentor, a more experienced member of the club.

After all of the evening’s prepared speeches are delivered, individual evaluators assess each of them. Feedback in Chinese Toastmasters clubs is almost exclusively technical, suggesting that club members become aware of aspects of self-presentation such as body language and use of the stage. The number one recommendation to speakers in Chinese clubs is to have “more energy”: evaluators encourage volume and vigor. After the speech evaluations, the Timer, Ah Counter, and Wordsmith give their reports: at first, I was shocked by how many times I can say “um” during a two-minute Table Topics speech.

²¹ Manuals include “Technical Presentations”, “Storytelling”, and “Humorously Speaking”. Club members progress through the manuals at their own pace, but are encouraged to give about a speech a month. People who complete several series of speeches, and who serve in leadership positions in the organization, are recognized as Distinguished Toastmasters, or DTMs.

Then the General Evaluator provides comments to everyone who has spoken at the meeting, including other evaluators, and on the meeting as a whole. Following this scheme, in each two-hour Toastmasters meeting only about half an hour to forty minutes are actually spent on the improvised and prepared speeches. The rest of the time is spent on explaining the rules, on giving feedback, and on the rituals that open and close the meeting. At the end of the meeting, members vote by ballot for the best evaluator, Table Topics speech, and prepared speech. The meeting concludes with a brief awards ceremony, and announcements about upcoming events in the club and in the regional network of Toastmasters clubs. After the meeting, some club members go for a late dinner at a nearby noodle restaurant: many of them had rushed to the meeting directly from work. Others head for the subway.

The first speech assignment is a self-introduction called “The Ice Breaker.” While people are often called upon to introduce themselves in daily life, in the context of a Toastmasters meeting it is hard to know what aspects of oneself to present. By giving speeches, and through regular workshops using endless acronyms to teach presentation skills, club members learn to repeat clear messages: KISS, Keep It Short and Simple.²² Similarly, one must squeeze oneself into a package that can be easily conveyed to a distant audience. Writing a self-introduction was agonizing for me. Not only did I have to present myself in a five-minute speech, but my mentor wanted it to be humorous, and to be

²² Or: PREP, point, reason, example, point; AREM, answer, reason, example, message; ABC, attention grabbing opening, body, conclusion; and WIIFY, what’s in it for you.

structured around anecdotes.²³ The self-introduction is much easier to do in what club members disparage as “the Chinese way”, talking about your hometown, education, and department at work. Unlike their American counterparts, Chinese club members do not tend to define themselves by claiming positive personal characteristics; their self-introductions are more likely to focus on their desire to improve their personality. In her self introduction, one woman labels herself as “awkward”; a man talks about a trip abroad on which he become painfully aware of his strongly accented English. Members’ first speeches often touch on their experiences of childhood and school, or on their hobbies. Club members do sometimes narrate themselves as psychological subjects; some, usually women, share occasional stories about being distant from their parents, or close to them. But speakers rarely present themselves as personalities in Sennett’s sense, bearers of a unique subjectivity that they struggle to represent to others (1974).²⁴ Club members present stories about high school, about personal frustrations, and even to a large degree about their own flaws, as articulations of a collective experience.

²³ The result was unfocused; after I finished, as the mandatory applause died down, I felt let down. Writing subsequent speeches was also difficult: I found myself slipping into a didactic mode. I had to suppress my academic instincts, and search for spiritual messages that I could deliver without hypocrisy. Despite this reluctance, my second speech went much better, and I began to enjoy giving speeches. The stage can be thrilling, even addicting.

²⁴ In a fairly typical self-introduction in an American club, a woman describes a trip to the desert with her sister, and tries to convey the deep meaning that she took away from this highly personal experience.

Most speeches in Beijing Toastmasters clubs address an audience of young urban Chinese, who are imagined as struggling to establish careers and as struggling to define themselves. Self-help themes such as motivation and positivity appear frequently. However, speeches on these inspirational themes are outnumbered by those about hobbies, travel, sports, romance, and social topics of general interest. In the case of talks about fitness, beauty, and diets, self-help inspiration and lifestyle content overlap. In general, economic self-making is subsumed by concerns about other modes of self-definition. In some self-introductions, and in many subsequent speeches, club members anchor an identity, and offer value, by talking about cooking, travel, or sports, subjects defined by practice rather than core psychological traits. These frequent presentations about holidays and photography are more than consumer daydreams: in seemingly anodyne speeches about their hobbies, people position themselves within an imagined space of lifestyle choice. Warner argues that “from the beginning” of properly public discourse, publics and markets have been intertwined (2005: 101); he gives the example of an early British magazine that discussed fashion and other commodities. By talking to an audience about their hobbies, club members create identities based on their chosen interests. They also aim to contribute something of interest to the group: one club member, an amateur rapper, explained to the audience, “Share what you are good at... that can give the audience value.”

Talks about more commonly shared interests, such as photography and travel, also blend into a particular genre of social speech that seems quite local: practical life tips. On

occasion, speeches in Toastmasters clubs address matters such as how to compose a photograph, how to negotiate rent, or the ideal temperature at which to set an air conditioner. One club member gives a presentation on how to choose a good after-school English program for your child. These talks evoke the kind of sociality that Judith Farquhar and Zhang Qicheng describe in their research on middle-aged and elderly people who gather in Beijing's public parks, trading advice about health and other topics (2005). For Farquhar and Zhang, this suggests a kind of agency based not on overt political action, but on individual self-cultivation within a collective that is engaged in crafting the good life. While specialized knowledge can lead to a social role everywhere, the connection between personal hobbies and social integration seems more obvious, or more remarkable, to young adults in China than to their American counterparts.

A Chinese graduate student once told me that "people should have interests", and, surprisingly, that online experts are "really cool." She gave the example of people who know a lot about photography, and spend time online advising people who are in the market for cameras. The student moves immediately from the hobby, to the way in which it offers a path to integration and recognition in a community. This is not only a matter of reflexive self-definition as a photographer, but of practical integration.²⁵ However, when

²⁵ Tocqueville suggests that in an individualistic society, since each person becomes weaker without the support of a collective, people learn the art of voluntary association in order not to lose their freedom ([1840] 2004: 595). Anthropologist Francis Hsu felt that Americans love voluntary associations not so much for the political reasons that Tocqueville described, but because without the support of kin, people are lonely need to find a peer group (1981: 110, 396).

they talk about hobbies, Toastmasters club members are also expressing some new anxieties. They agree that “people should have interests”. Like many young adults in China, they talk about their desire to acquire what they call *gexing* (个性), or ‘individual nature’: a reified personality. They are becoming aware that hobbies are more than personal interests, but also ways of connecting to specific communities, of becoming socially visible. After introducing themselves, Toastmasters club members work through seven assignments focused on technical aspects of public speaking: structure, clarity, body language, use of references and visual materials. By giving these speeches, and receiving feedback on them, they learn to see themselves as images reflected in the mirror of the audience.

One evening a prominent member of our club announces, “I want to look and behave like a lady”, telling us, “You can all be my evaluators.” As we saw in June’s speech about the importance of “outer beauty”, Toastmasters club members discuss attending to their appearance as a mode of self-discovery, as well as an ethical work of self-care. In an ascetic mode, some members talk about diet books, and there are regular speeches about marathon running. Men and women in the clubs speak about exercise, appearance, and attractiveness.²⁶ In speeches and in conversation, Toastmasters club members often cite the idea that ninety-three percent of communication is conveyed by appearance, while content

²⁶ An amiable member of our club gave a speech about running in high school gym class, describing himself as a “ponderous” 200 pound “pile of meat” going around the track. But he wanted to get the girl: “anything for you, honey... mwah!

only counts for seven percent.²⁷ Scholars have described how psychological training guides people to reflect on their inner life in new ways, folding novel spaces into the self (Rose 1998; Pritzker 2016; Wilce and Fenigsen 2016). Yet in public speaking and social skills training courses, personal growth appears to be less about discovering one's psychological depths than about feeling one's surface. By receiving feedback on their stage presence, and by positioning themselves before their peers, Toastmasters club members learn to see themselves as social objects. As frameworks for shared life collapse, self-objectification assumes a more important role in producing social identity: a hobby can lead to a community, or a fashion sense to a job. But this process of self-objectification draws on highly variable psychosocial dispositions. Not everyone is ready to get on stage.

Therapy

A few Toastmasters club members enjoy public speaking, but most find the stage terrifying. Some are struggling with generalized and severe social anxieties. Edgar, a very shy man in his mid-twenties, tells us that because of his introversion, his life had not been colorful. The future was gray and empty, he explains, showing us a hazy, colorless PowerPoint slide. This manager and aspiring corporate trainer shares his pain, and his triumph: he had tried various techniques to overcome his shyness, including a kind of

²⁷ This idea, prevalent in seminars on communication, comes from a persistent misunderstanding of research conducted by psychologist Albert Mehrabian, and reported in his 1971 book *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes* (Boston: Wadsworth). The experiments, which suggested the relative unimportance of semantic content, had people convey emotions using single words.

therapy in which he visualized himself in a ball of energy. At first, he says, he could not move; he didn't want to look "weird". It seems that only when he was able to take ownership of his personal bubble, to free himself from the gaze of others, was the curse lifted and his body free to sway, to dance. His message to our club is that we all have this inner power to be ourselves. For many people, public performance involves tension followed by release: this may be one phenomenological reason why performance comes to be interpreted as the expression of a truer self, even if the persona is so elaborately staged. Speeches in Chinese Toastmasters clubs sometimes center on the metaphor of life as a play, the world a stage: the message, always, is to step up and play your part. While social scientists have primarily been concerned with unpacking the ideological content of self-help psychology, it should go without saying that many people turn to self-help due to psychological distress. Specifically, many young adults in China are turning to social skills training due to an identity crisis, and in order to help manage what I have called a disordered sociality, which emerges at the intersections of individual psychosocial disposition and shared social environment.

Emily, a tall, quiet graduate student, tells me that she used to be introverted, but that Toastmasters has made her more "cheerful" (*kailang* – 开朗) and "at ease", or "non-grasping" (*fangdekai* – 放得开). Both of these terms use the character *kai* (开), meaning 'open'. She is now "happy" (*kaixin* – 开心), a word composed of the characters for open and heart. Emily explain to me that being happy is precisely that, a matter of "opening" (*dakai* – 打开) your heart. In English, the word 'anxiety' comes from a root signifying constriction. In

conversation, Chinese club members told me about being ‘anxious’, or *jiaolv* (焦虑), a word that is composed of two characters: the first represents a bird roasting over a fire, and the second character signifies worry. Some also talk about being nervous, or *jinzhang* (紧张): the character *jin* means ‘tight’, while *zhang* represents a drawn bowstring. We see a vivid image of situation that is unstable and threatening, tense and ‘high-strung’. Many young adults in Toastmasters clubs suffer from social anxiety,²⁸ and they also face an array of related problems in living. Sometimes, Toastmasters club meetings seize up with awkwardness, as people shake hands for too long, or try too hard to be energetic, or check that everyone is smiling for the camera a few too many times. Social anxiety can be caused by a range of social or physical problems.²⁹ In turn, anxiety can lead to states of derealization or disassociation, and it can be comorbid with autism-like symptoms (Lundström et. al. 2011); these conditions are all associated with behavioral, affective, and attentional disconnection from the environment, and may have some etiological connections. Many Toastmasters club members work in information technology,³⁰ and they often talked about how people in

²⁸ Shyness is a behavioral style, involving introversion, social reticence, and often difficulty making small talk. It is not necessarily accompanied by anxiety (Carducci and Golant 1999).

²⁹ Problems such as stutters and visible physical abnormalities by no means typify Toastmasters club members, but rates in the clubs seem proportionally higher than in the general population.

³⁰ One member of our club, Lydia, is a software engineer in her mid-thirties who worries that she inadvertently offends other people. Her “Ice Breaker” speech consists of a litany of personal flaws, which she interprets in light of an article she had read about “Personal Charm”. She tells the group that she is passive and dependent, that she is shy and fears failure. She can’t find a boyfriend, and thinks it may be because she is anxious: because of her anxiety, she can’t “put her heart for others, can’t fall in love.” Some weeks later, Lydia and I meet to discuss her speech. She tells me that her mentor had advised her that it is not

IT have bad social skills; however these skills are defined, they may statistically be right.³¹

For many young adults Chinese Toastmasters clubs, public speaking is a therapeutic technique for developing the psychosocial capacity to connect with others, and with the world. Some club members, like Emily, discuss overcoming stage fright as a process of prying apart a constricting anxiety, a mystical labor of opening one's heart to the world.³²

customary to give such a negative self-introduction. But she explains to me that for her, this speech was a more creative alternative to discussing her hometown, school, and work. When I tell Lydia that many people share her concerns about being personable, she jumps in to tell me that everyone wants to "get attention." She says that at her new workplace, she didn't receive the recognition she wanted, and she began to doubt her communication abilities. In truth, I do find our interactions frustrating. Our conversation often halts, and she constantly oversteps some cross-culturally valid social boundaries: when I call to arrange a meeting, she asks me to help her buy furniture.

³¹ Psychological research suggests that the ability to understand social cues is distributed unevenly. Researchers have used measures developed for diagnosing autism spectrum disorders to study the general population; this work has found a normal distribution of autistic traits throughout the population (Constantino and Todd 2003), with higher rates among scientists and mathematicians (Baron-Cohen et al. 2001). I would not wish to diagnose anyone as autistic, or to imply that this word indexes any one phenomenon, much less to suggest that many people in Toastmasters fit this description. This was not my impression. However, people in the natural sciences and programming are well represented in Toastmasters, and the social consequences of their particular aptitudes and vocations may contribute to their sense of a need to learn social skills. Recent work suggests that even low levels of autistic-like traits are strongly associated with other problems including anxiety and depression (Lundström et al. 2011).

³² In Chinese, people who are inadvertently offensive are said to 'lack a heart-eye' (*que xinyan* - 缺心眼). In Chinese medicine, problems connecting with others are associated with disorders of the heart spirit, a term that should not be taken as mystical and abstract, or overdetermined by a Chinese ethnophysiology, (Hinton and Good 2009: 62) but as indexing an embodied experience. Chinese medicine divides the spirit, *shen*, into five parts. One of these is also called the *shen*, but refers specifically to the heart spirit (*xinshen* - 心神). According to practitioner of Chinese medicine and Harvard professor Ted Kaptchuck:

This spirit makes sure that the inner 'timeless' aspect of a person does not lose the ability to connect to the actual ongoing world of real people in real places. This Spirit is the most visible of Spirits. It has to do with connecting

On a cool evening in early spring, I am walking down one of Beijing's broad boulevards, talking with a young woman who wants to improve her social graces. We have just left a Toastmasters club meeting, and are heading towards a subway station in the central business district. This late, there is little traffic. Unprompted, she asks me if I know anything about psychology. Upon hearing that I do study the subject, she asks me expectantly "So can you read people?" When I mentioned that I am interested in psychology, young adults in China often brought up the American television show *Lie to Me*, about a detective who can read people's minds.³³ The show is very popular in China, as are books about techniques for mind reading, or, in Chinese, 'the art of reading heart-minds' (*duxinshu* - 读心术). In the following two chapters, we will meet psychologists and activists who are teaching people to read others in the name of respecting their autonomy, and as a project of constructing a civil society. But the need to read others is not new, in China or elsewhere. In China in particular, ancient tactical manuals discuss how to read

with people, saying the right words, calculations of appropriateness, looking a person in the eyes, and responding to a question with an answer that makes sense. The Heart Spirit has to do with communication and being able to 'click' with people and situations. (2000: 64).

The heart spirit governs the ability to act in the moment with propriety, ritual, and face. Disorders of the heart spirit cause anxiety, awkwardness, shyness, inability to meet the gaze of another, and even disorientation. Drawing on the ancient foundational medical text the *Huangdi Neijing*, Ted Kaptchuk explains that the heart connects to the tongue, and that "The ability the choose words precisely, to convey meaning well, and to connect in dialogue belongs to the Heart Spirit's relation with the tongue" (2000: 89).

³³ *Lie to Me*. 2009. Fox.

other people,³⁴ and the need to read other people is very much a part of daily life. Ironically, for young adults in China, a large part of the appeal of social skills training is that by learning to talk to strangers, one can escape the interpersonal politics that make it so important to attend to others.³⁵

My companion is concerned that she inadvertently offends other people, because she can't pick up on social cues. I suggest that "we can get to know people over time, and it becomes easier to understand them." "But what about strangers?" she asks. When I wonder where she talks to strangers, she replies "At bars, for instance." Whatever social shortcomings this young woman may have, they have become a problem in relation to the imagined possibilities of urban life, to the promise and the challenge of talking to strangers. Many Toastmasters club members are anxious about dating. And many club members, especially women, talk about their desire to engage with other exciting social possibilities. In her speech, a young woman named Dorothy talks about being "hardworking and diligent." She is so studious, in fact, that a classmate once suggested to her: "You should be an academic!" But Dorothy tells us that she replied, "No! I want to have a colorful and practical social life. I haven't experienced that, and I really want to have a taste."

³⁴ There is a long Chinese tradition on the arts of reading other people. For instance, an ancient, Warring States era (475-221 BC) text on power, *The Master of Demon Valley* (鬼谷子), is devoted to techniques of verbal manipulation (Cleary 2001).

³⁵ In his polemic *The Ugly Chinaman*, cultural critic Boyang complains that in China: "Rarely does a day go by when it isn't necessary to decipher what's going on in someone's mind" (1992: 16). Along these lines, a Chinese psychiatrist once suggested to me that Chinese people like Freudian psychotherapy because it is about family relationships, and about deciphering hidden meanings.

Dorothy tells us that a job interviewer once asked her “What’s your personality?” She says that, in retrospect, “introverted” was a bad answer. Initially, it seems, she didn’t think this was such a bad thing to say. Companies selling social skills training are trying to cast shyness as a weakness;³⁶ there is a lot of money to be made in playing on people’s fears. Many young adults in China already feel frustrated and even inferior when their introversion causes them to miss professional or romantic opportunities. As Toastmasters club members narrate their transformations from reticence to confidence, as some talk about how they used to be “loser”s, they make shy people in the audience feel like losers for being shy. However, club members also help each other to become less anxious about their temperament.

After Dorothy joined Toastmasters, she tells us, her mentor told her that she should educate job interviewers about the power of introverts. Club members sometimes give speeches about, as one speaker put it, “How to be a better introvert”, and I heard several speakers draw on American author Susan Cain’s book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can’t Stop Talking*.³⁷ Dorothy says that in Toastmasters, she has learned not to define herself as an introvert, but to focus on other aspects of herself, to regard herself as “hardworking and diligent” but also “easygoing”. Dorothy also engages in some

³⁶ Take this ad from Dale Carnegie Training in Beijing: “Speaking ability is an atomic bomb! Just open your lips, and your influence will spread into the 21st century like an atomic bomb! Speaking ability is a professional need, and someone who cannot speak is doubtlessly a loser!”

³⁷ 2012. New York: Crown Publishing Group.

therapeutic cognitive reframing; she explains, “I should firstly get rid of the old idea of myself, which is ‘I’m afraid of people’” and then find self-understandings that promote “happy relationships”. Her message to the audience is that when people ask about your personality, “You should not be stereotyped. Understanding ourselves is as complicated as understanding this world.”

Edgar, who danced to overcome his crippling anxiety, gave a speech about a frustrating experience dating a young woman; but he tells us that the woman in question actually liked his low-key temperament. While they are studying how to be self-assertive, young adults in China rarely view shy or reticent styles of self-presentation as problems in themselves. When I asked Beijing college students who they think is cool, and who is popular on campus, many offered a negative characterization: they don’t like arrogant people. No one I asked felt that there was anything shameful about being *zhai* (宅), meaning domestic, a term that is applied to people who spend most of their time at home, and typically online.³⁸ Many people apply this term to themselves, or remark that their *zhai* peers are comfortable to be around. Members of Chinese Toastmasters clubs are not pursuing self-assertion as good in itself, as an escape from shameful passivity and submissiveness, but rather as a way to overcome obstacles to having what Dorothy called a “a colorful and practical social life.” Most club members describe struggles with frustrating but circumscribed limitations, anxieties that emerge in specific life stages, against particular

³⁸ The concept corresponds to the Japanese *otaku*.

assemblages of desire (to get a girl, to get a job), and in specific psychosocial ecologies. Confidence is tool for finding social connection and integration, for producing an identity. Extroversion is becoming more valued in China, but it is by no means necessary: in fact, people tend to prefer more low-key styles of self-presentation, and evaluate them more favorably.³⁹

Edgar is tortured by a fear of social judgment that keeps him from dancing, but he does not then make assertive self-expression mandatory, into a test of his moral character and his strength. Hegel's image of a slave pinned in place by the gaze of a dominant Other captures a peculiar cultural configuration of the self, a self whose future depends on a fateful moment of social judgment, and whose dignity depends on its ability to exert itself on the world. Two polarized elements of a Western liberal subject hang in this balance: while God and the law give social substance to the sacred sovereign individual, sin and guilt and excrement⁴⁰ keep it in its place. Anxiety signals a fateful moral or physical

³⁹ See also Shweder 2003 on the quality of *lajya*, an interpersonal sensitivity valued by Brahmans in Orissa, India, which Shweder's interlocutor translates as "shy": but "Among Oriya Brahmans, *lajya* elicits a quite different set of associations: unpretentious, unobtrusive, reserved, self-restrained, humble, proper, civilized, self-effacing, not brazen, decent, elegant, delicate, undefiled, unsullied, powerful, virtuous, good. *Lajya* is not a characteristic of someone who lacks a strong sense of self. Quite the contrary. The ego of a person with *lajya* is thought to have become enhanced and elevated precisely because of his or her highly cultivated or civilized sense of propriety, knowledge of the roles and rules of society, desire to uphold the social order, and sensitive ability to avoid offending the honor of others" (Shweder 2003: 1125).

⁴⁰ Edgar had diarrhea on a club outing, and was gently mocked. A fellow club member then sent out slides of the trip, including one of this incident. In the United States, talking about one's bowels is still not accepted in most circles, and shy young adults would be unlikely to tease in a way that, in China, was gentle. Erik Erikson suggested that intestines were the

weakness, as one is trembling before the powerful Other. Chinese Toastmasters clubs provide settings in which people objectify, alter, and reevaluate the self, but these inner spaces of Western autonomy remain quite foreign.

For my master's research project, I interviewed European American and Chinese students at the University of Chicago who identified as shy or socially anxious. Through these interviews, I learned something that I have later heard confirmed many times: Chinese students in the United States generally perceive that Americans try to be cool and funny all the time. One student who arrived in California for high school felt that his classmates expected every utterance to be enthusiastic and "lively". In Chicago, he still sees that:

When people get together they always try to say funny things. Sometimes it's not humorous [huh] it's more kind of you know, hidden rules... I feel people are not according to their nature. They're all try to be funny, and I don't think it's necessary.

opposite of autonomy (Erikson [1950] 1963: 409). The body is messy, difficult to control, and does not support the illusion of rational mastery. Nietzsche writes that "The abdomen is the reason why man does not easily take himself for a god" ([1886] 1966: 89). Milan Kundera talks of "the incompatibility of God and shit" ([1984] 2009: 245); he defines kitsch as a denial that shit exists ([1984] 2009: 248); for him this is the aesthetic of totalitarian utopias. Luther was obsessed with excrement (Brown [1959] 1985; Erikson [1958] 1993), and Kierkegaard is oddly anal, writing about enema exorcisms ([1844] 1981: 121). I do not mean to suggest that being anality represents some kind of personality type, but rather to point out that these thinkers recoil from their own bodies. For Daoists, the dao, the way, is in the shit.

The American students I spoke with had deeply internalized these social rules. Shy American students reported intense pressure to be original in daily interactions, wanting to say something cooler than “hello” when they met people in the hallway. Five out of six of the American students I spoke with told me that even situations that do not involve explicit social demands, such as standing in line at a store, cause them anxiety: none of the Chinese students reported anxiety in such scenarios. The American students always felt the gaze of others, and the need to be gregarious in order to appear normal.

Edgar and many other young adults in China told me that they suffer from feelings of anxiety, and try to overcome these feeling on stage: however, unlike their American peers, they do not feel that they are always on stage. Like their counterparts in Japanese public speaking classes (Dunn 2016: 126), anxious individuals in Chinese Toastmasters do not sense that difficulty speaking signals a deep character flaw; it is, rather, a contextually bounded limitation. Being frightened on stage, or having difficulty passing a job interview, might make club members feel like losers sometimes. But for them, becoming extroverted is not a good in itself. It is a way of pursuing practical, immanent goals: getting a job, or a date. Young adults in Toastmasters clubs are almost all having trouble with the new stresses of economic and social markets, and so too are many of their peers. Club members may be shy, but they are not ashamed to talk in public about awkward first kisses, or about having trouble finding a date. Romance is a shared aspiration in clubs, and members do not talk about relationships cautiously, skirting them as private fields of shame or glory. People new to the club are often asked quite loudly if they are “SAA”, or “single and available”.

In their brief self-introductions, many guests will say that they have come to Toastmasters clubs to socialize, stating simply, "I'm here for friends", or "I just want to be a part of this activity." It strikes me that such a declaration would rarely be voiced in America. Because it might betray loneliness and desperation, the desire for friends would be shameful in itself and suspected of indexing deep flaws. In Chinese Toastmasters clubs, young adults find social support that many of their peers lack, and they appreciate it; this seems to me more valuable than the public speaking skills that they rarely use outside of the clubs. Toastmasters clubs function as what linguist James Paul Gee calls "affinity spaces" (2005). Within them, people are connected by "common interests or endeavors, rather than individual characteristics" (Fein 2015: 97), by shared activities that help to reduce the pressures of entirely unstructured social interaction.⁴¹ From this angle, public speaking also appears as an accessory that enables a more basic therapeutic process to unfold. Judging from the changes that I saw Toastmasters members undergoing, the most important therapeutic element in Toastmasters is access to positive social contact, something that happens in the interstices of the organization, almost imperceptibly.

Public speaking is the privileged model of communication and ritual of initiation in Toastmasters, and the practice of public speaking allows people to directly address their concerns about developing confidence and an identity. However, a close look at the

⁴¹ In her research on young adults with Asperger's, Elizabeth Fein found that in settings like sci-fi conventions, "... extrinsic motivation for interaction provided them with a sense of social safety" (Fein 2015: 98).

therapeutic apparatus of these clubs shows that they also address a subject who is not on stage. Clubs create rigidly controlled, supportive environments in which people can practice public speaking. The therapeutic approach appears to be a form of graduated exposure therapy for social anxieties, as clubs create a supportive environment in which people can slowly become comfortable speaking before other people. As they study public speaking, people learn to take control of their appearance, to perform their individual personalities before the audience. However, club members also slowly take on social roles within a community. A new member often first serves as a Timer, reading a simple, brief script explaining his function; eventually, he may serve as the 'Toastmaster' who hosts a meeting, become an officer in the club, or even serve in the Toastmasters organization. If, as Goffman writes in a passage on "Staging and the Self", the self is a "dramatic effect" of "collective manufacture" (1959: 253), then it takes many people to assemble a Toastmasters club member. Each meeting depends on numerous officers, at least seven experienced members to serve as evaluators, and a ready supply of speakers. Every week, at least twenty people have a role to play, even if is just to greet the strangers who come as guests.

And so, the therapeutic apparatus of Toastmasters clubs supports both modes of identity formation that we have described: one that is objectifying, discursive, and oppositional, and another that involves social integration through embodied practice. As in other therapeutic modalities, through public speaking the personality is integrated by an interlocutor, in this case an audience of peers. In Hegel's theory of subjectification, focused on dialectical extremes of domination and liberation, precipitating into a social object is a

terrifying experience, in which one is under the control of a powerful alterity, and is incited to assert one's will against this other. Under this gaze, one feels weak or guilty, awkward or ashamed. This encounter with oneself as an inadequate social object can initiate a kind of autonomy defined by self-assertion and self-justification. But one can explain how self objectification produces the effect of identity in less oppositional terms. On stage in Toastmasters, or even while serving in a minor functional role in the meeting, people can experience what George Herbert Mead calls "The fusion of the 'I' and the 'Me' in social activities" ([1934] 1967: 273), a state in which one is familiar enough with one's role in the social process that performance seems smooth and natural.⁴² It is a feeling of fleeting integration; sometimes, when a speech goes well, it can seem like mastery achieved. These experiences do gradually alleviate many people's anxieties, even if, at times, they reinforce the very standards for self-assessment that contribute to these anxieties. I heard many moving testimonials in the clubs, and rooted for some very shy people as I watched them slowly, joyfully, find their voice. After giving a number of speeches, Edgar is visibly more comfortable on stage. Over dinner, he tells me that he now wants to become a corporate trainer, to find meaningful work teaching other people the social skills that he has found so liberating. Edgar's new girlfriend is sitting beside him, and he has a big, quiet smile.

⁴² These two modes of identity formation is paralleled by two theories of moral development. Richard Shweder, using Confucian moral thinking to overturn the assumptions of the Socratic traditions, asks "When it comes to participation in the way of life of one's own cultural community, to what extent is the course of development from the deliberate to the automatic, or from the self-conscious to the fluent, or from the explicated to the tacitly understood?" (Shweder 2015).

Chances

After two months of regular attendance at Toastmasters meetings, I had internalized a sense that even the briefest of moments on stage are important opportunities. I first realized this on Halloween, when I was a first-time guest at a club. As I prepared for my twenty second introduction, I found myself thinking about how to entertain, how to say something clever, how to share some of my good mood. Club members encourage each other to be funny even when performing brief functional roles in a meeting, such as explaining the rules.⁴³ My mentor, a North American corporate trainer with a booming voice, told me that when giving speeches, one should make a joke every thirty-seven seconds: "This is religion." In Toastmasters International, humor is the highest standard for evaluating self-presentation: every year tens of thousands of members compete in Humorous Speech Contests at local, regional, and international levels. At the international level of competition, the qualifier 'humorous' is dropped: speakers can talk about anything,

⁴³ One of Beijing's leading Toastmasters clubs takes additional measures to institutionalize humor. I frequented its meetings in Beijing's wealthy Chaoyang district, meetings filled with young entrepreneurs and business people. This club had a particular cachet; when its president visited our club, the announcement of his presence elicited hushed excitement. The club has produced some champions of Toastmasters humorous speech contests. During the period of my fieldwork, members of this club added an observational humor segment to their meetings; each week one member, to the best of their ability, recounts the meeting humorously. They also introduced the role of "positivity meeting reporter", who writes up meeting minutes; or, they say with a positive spin, the reporter is lucky because she gets to practice her English writing. The club encourages a nervous silliness: a Halloween theme elicited several zombie walks to the front of the stage.

but they produce uniformly polished, inspirational performances with a few set jokes.⁴⁴ The winner is crowned “World Champion of Public Speaking.”⁴⁵ At every level of competition, there are also contests for impromptu speeches and for giving evaluations, but the prepared speech competitions are the most prestigious.⁴⁶ These contests knit Toastmasters clubs together, while providing a path to win recognition through public speaking.

There are some really funny characters in Toastmasters. At the local level speeches are less polished, the inspirational genre less rigidly defined, and the audience less remote: in my view at least, these speeches are funnier than ones delivered on the global stage.

⁴⁴ Many contestants from the United States are immigrants; they, along with educated professionals from around the world, are competing to be funny in English. The language politics of the Toastmasters organization are not lost on its members, some of whom see the organization as a tool for helping subaltern groups. Articles in the magazine *Toastmaster*, sent to members worldwide, frequently discuss cultural differences in self presentation. Vikas Jhingran, the 2007 World Champion of Public Speaking and author of a book about public speaking (Jhingran 2014), hopes his work will help immigrants. Like other minorities and immigrants, Toastmasters pursue a dual strategy, both learning to market themselves in standard English and trying to educate others about the diversity of self-presentation. However, they often slip easily into an anti-traditional politics, blaming their non-Western upbringing for their experiences of anxiety on stage.

⁴⁵ The first World Championship of Public Speaking was crowned in 1938 (“World Championships”). The first of few women to win the title did so in 1977, a few years after women were first admitted to the clubs (“History”), and during the mid-90s the names of minorities and immigrants begin to appear among the champions: in 2013 the victor was a Bulgarian immigrant living in Chicago. In 2014 a human resource and corporate trainer from Sri Lanka became the first winner from a non-Anglophone country. The 2015 winner was Saudi who grew up with a stutter, who had attended school in the United States and “dabbled” in standup (Feloni 2015).

[“History.” and “World Championships.” www.toastmasters.org
Feloni, Richard. 2015. “7 presentation tips from the 2015 world champion of public speaking.” www.businessinsider.com]

⁴⁶ Within China, there are both English and Mandarin Humorous Speech Contests.

Perhaps my favorite line comes from the winner of the Mandarin language humorous speech contest at a regional conference, a man from Shandong province.⁴⁷ His speech consistently mocked his heavy accent, to hilarious effect. Speaking about how his wife feared that his timidity (*danxiao* - 胆小)⁴⁸ would affect their daughter, he says with apparent surprise, “Even though I’m timid, my daughter was born anyway.” He tells the audience that he was in Toastmasters so that his daughter won’t end up as shy as he is. People in China are studying how to be funny not only in Toastmasters clubs, but also through self-help literature and in the amateur standup comedy scenes that have recently appeared in Beijing and Shanghai.⁴⁹ Humor draws on a psychological capacity to relate to Others, to be sensitive to other people. In the form of a monologue, humor also depends on the ability to construct a distant Other, to be public: one needs to reach for common topics, concerns, sensibilities, and especially shared anxieties. Romantic failures appear frequently in the speeches of Toastmasters club members. One member, in a Mandarin language speech

⁴⁷ Humor is also a matter of regional identity; people from Northeast China in particular are known for being funny, and many famous comedians are from the region. Clubs from there seem to do disproportionately well in contests.

⁴⁸ *Danxiao*, literally meaning a ‘small gall bladder.’ This common expression is connected with Chinese medical theory, and someone described as *danxiao* is ‘lacking in gall.’

⁴⁹ Western style stand-up comedy is establishing a presence in China, with a host of comedy nights springing up around Beijing and amateur performances almost every night. The Western origins of this form are evident from its name: *tuokouxiu* (脱口秀), a phonetic transcription of ‘talk show’, but literally meaning ‘escaping from the mouth show.’ The scene is primarily English language and foreign, but there are also some Chinese language performances, both by foreigners and by Chinese people. The most famous Chinese speaking Westerner, Canadian Dashan (Mark Henry Roswell) trained in a Chinese comedy style known as crosstalk, and is now an “evangelist” for stand-up comedy (Fish 2016).

about how to give a humorous speech, explains that “The best topic is love. Share your sadness with others to make them happy.”

Through humor and enthusiasm, the individual personality not only solicits recognition, but also contributes to the high-energy atmosphere that leads club members to say that a meeting is “good”. Many people say that they attend club meetings for entertainment; tongue in cheek, they explain that they come to “inject chicken blood” (*dajixie* – 打鸡血), a phrase referring to a quack remedy. A few club members oppose this characterization, feeling that it makes light of the steady, deep work of personal transformation. The burden of making a meeting ‘good’ falls especially on the ‘Toastmaster’, or host. At a training session in which new members are instructed on how to fulfill functional roles in club meetings, a veteran club member criticizes the previous week’s host: she could have had “More energy”. Few club members are temperamentally inclined or able to channel this energy. I met only one who could easily inhabit the role of cheerleader, and he was from North America. While serving as a general evaluator on evening, he told the host that people were tired from work, that he should “Try to have a little bit more energy”, and “Push the audience to, ‘Hey good job!’”, demonstrating how to clap encouragement. The host, a placidly composed computer programmer, seems to subtly resist this enthusiasm. When he gets back on stage, he notes in a resigned tone, “We should be energetic, right.” Scholars have analyzed the relentless positivity of self-help as a way to keep workers motivated (Ehrenreich 2010), and as a form of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), in which people are instructed to act happy in order to please customers or

husbands. In Toastmasters meetings, positivity appears as a labor of providing hospitality and inspiration, or “energy”. The *Competent Communication* manual advises the ‘Toastmaster’ to “Preside with sincerity, energy, and decisiveness” (Toastmasters 2013: 73). High energy is a key ingredient in charismatic power,⁵⁰ signaling that one is powerful and secure within a group, able to take initiative. To please others, perhaps, but also to influence them.

One evening a Toastmasters club member and corporate trainer gave our club a seminar on job interviews. This man in his early twenties, who had spent some years in North America, told us that if you talk about your dog, “make sure your dog is the most spectacular and fantastic or else don’t mention it.” The idea that everything must always be awesome evokes common perceptions of American styles of self-presentation, as well as with historical representations of nervous, high-energy Americans (Kotchemidova 2005: 10).⁵¹ Cross-cultural psychologist Jeanne Tsai has shown that whether they are children’s cartoons or just cartoonish politicians, American faces have bigger smiles than Chinese ones (Tsai et al. 2016; Tsai et al. 2007). Tsai argues that whereas Chinese people are more socialized to adjust to others, Americans prize high energy emotional states because they help people to influence others (2007). These observed differences may not reflect that

⁵⁰ Eva Illouz, citing Randall Collins, sees high energy states as a form of social power, and as a consequence of interactions in which one has a higher status than the other party (2008: 215).

⁵¹ Missionary Arthur Smith devoted a chapter of his account of *Chinese Characteristics* to “The Absence of Nerves” (1894). This was not long after George Miller Beard published his account *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (1881).

people are socialized to influence or adjust to others across social contexts, but rather that they have different views of what kinds of relationships are consequential, and about how to exert influence. In close interpersonal relationships, displays of energy are not in themselves effective ways to be persuasive. Young adults in Chinese Toastmasters Clubs are usually very happy to be at the meetings, but their enthusiasm is rarely expressed through cheerleading or hyperbole. And in these clubs, despite the unwritten but clear rule that speakers should be uplifting, energetic and ideally funny, many speeches are nostalgic evocations of childhood, or laments for choices foreclosed.

For example, a member of my Toastmasters club, single and in his mid-30s, gave a speech about living without regrets, saying that he and his brother had both passed up marrying their sweethearts due to family pressures. In the many speeches advocating self-definition, autonomy appears both as an ideal and as a haunting lack, an inescapable reminder of shared social and psychological suffering. For many young adults in China, trembling hands and thumping hearts are embodied indictments of their culture, of their parents and schools. They were never given choices, they never had platforms. Arguably, Chinese Toastmasters club members are reproducing a Chinese genre of public speech known as 'speaking bitterness', or *suku* (诉苦). Anthropologist Ann Anagnost has shown how Chinese modernist writers, and then communist cadres, taught people to verbalize their embodied suffering in order to become the characters of revolutionary dramas, to identify the material reality of social injustice (1997). *Suku* has thus involved self-objectification in relation to transcendent ideologies, to social reform movements. Anagnost

suggests that revolutionaries who encouraged people to speak their bitterness may have been drawing on an older Chinese genre of public speaking in which a person, usually a woman, would publicly air their grievances (2004: 31). One might see this as a form of political performance that involves appealing for a caring intervention by members of a collective, as opposed to a performance appeals for legal protection, or that advocates for a progressive vision of social change. By discussing the injuries inflicted on them by Chinese society, members of Toastmasters clubs solidify a sense of a shared identity, in which they are oppressed by tradition, and by what many call “traditional” parents. The regrets and fears that young adults share in the clubs draw them closer together, while also crystallizing a collective consciousness derived from a broader cultural politics of autonomy. Insofar as club members present themselves as political actors seeking social change, it is primarily as advocates of individuality.

One evening, during the improvised speech segment of our club meeting, a young guest receives the following prompt: “If you were a mother, what would you teach your child?” Immediately, she responds, “First, please have popular.” After a pause for reflection, she begins again:

If you were my child, please fall in love in your college. And maybe even aggressive, please have popular in your high school and your middle school. Because I come from a very strict family. My parents be very strict on me. They forbid me to contact with boys, so... I’m single now! And second, I think I help them to choose their career and majors as they like, not for how

much you can earn after graduate. Because I did wrong thing. I choose major I don't like. And I had a very bad experience when looking for a job. This kind of experience reminds me if I were a mother, I must be very patient to listen to my children. To understand what she wants, what he wants, and to support them to get his real life.

This young woman attributes her social and professional frustrations to a lack of personal autonomy; in explaining how she would listen to her child, she demonstrates the affinity between therapeutic styles of communication and liberal political ideals (Cohen 2015: 330). In this social vision, the deeply felt sanctity of self-definition weaves sacred circles around and between each bounded dominion. Our guest clearly articulates the psychosocial foundations of this new social order: if only we listened to our hearts, and if only our parents knew how to listen. As a first-time guest at a Toastmasters club, she is already narrating her suffering in terms that are familiar to members of the audience, using the forum to express a sense of injury that echoes in the space of the club. To her audience, the story of strict parents and materialistic standards frames her personal frustration as a collective, and particularly Chinese, problem.⁵²

In a masterful literary history of romantic love in modern China, Haiyan Lee analyzes a shy, nervous character in Yu Dafu's 1921 story "Sinking" (沉沦). The character is

⁵² The theme of self-denial due to interpersonal duty is common in Chinese literature; often, these are stories of unrequited love. While this speaker challenges the moral legitimacy of self-abnegation, she reproduces the use of self-denial as a form of ethical appeal.

a Chinese student studying in Japan, who blames his inept anxiety around Japanese girls on his nationality. Perhaps, Lee suggests, the character is a “timid introvert”; but in the story, “again and again, ‘China’ fills in to bear the brunt of failed sociability” (Lee 2010: 251). Lee reminds us that cultural critiques can serve as instruments of both national reform and personal consolation (2010: 252). When young adults in China blame their frustrations on being Chinese, this is in part a useful rationalization of their personal limitations. Because of our concern with the connection between performance and the self in a society of strangers, it is interesting to note the student’s sincerity, his self-objectification, and the importance he places on a passing interaction. When a Japanese waitress asks the student where he’s from, he freezes in what Lee calls

a relentless self-inquest and an embarrassing loss of expressiveness. Instead of seeking recourse to the art of tarrying, he surrenders himself to the guillotine of authenticity. When he places the whole weight of his selfhood on what is by nature a transient form of sociability – the encounter between a bar girl and her patron – sociability is crushed, and so is his self. (2010: 253)

Lee focuses our attention on the student’s obstinate sincerity and his humorless, confessional urge to objectify himself in racial terms; Lee suggests that “colonial racism... has thoroughly deprived him of the art of play-acting, of mask-wearing” (2010: 253). In attempting to take ownership of himself as an object in this social scene, the student solidifies social categories of identity, and he makes what should be a minor frustration into a test of his courage. The moment becomes heavy because of his shameful self-

objectification, and also because of his desire for the waitress. Many speeches in Toastmasters clubs are stories about the importance of fleeting romantic possibilities, the promises of pretty strangers.

At a Toastmasters conference the district governor, a man in his forties, is addressing an audience of about five hundred people. He tells us that he refused to learn how to swim because he didn't want to get a tan; but when a girl invited him swimming, he was unable to join her. His speech returns again and again to the line "seize the moment and make it shine", a phrase he borrowed from a Whitney Houston song.⁵³ Self-help psychology texts and teachers often suggests that every moment must be forced to its crisis.⁵⁴ When Susan Cain, champion of introverts, attends a session by self-help star Tony Robbins, she writes that his teaching "... suggests that salesmanship governs even the most neutral interactions. It implies that every encounter is a high-stakes game in which we win or lose the other person's favor" (2012: 38). And in his study of a psychology radio show in Moscow, Tomas Matza describes a young man who calls in to the show and discusses how "communication" (*obshchenie*) can happen even when in line at a store; this might happen, for instance, with a woman (2009: 504). In Beijing, coaches of the 'pick-up arts' are taking young men to stalk Beijing shopping malls, and videos teach them how to hit on women in

⁵³ "One Moment in Time"

⁵⁴ The dilemma of the titular character in T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*:
"Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?"

the elevator.⁵⁵ In a world of strangers, desire spreads across everyday life. Men in Toastmasters clubs often share stories of missed chances. Women in Toastmasters clubs are also anxious for romance, but in a different temporality. At a Toastmasters club meeting in the middle of October, the Table Topics theme is what to do with the remaining eleven weeks of the year. "I've never been chased by a boy..." suggests one young woman. Another has a more direct approach, saying that her goal is to find a man by the end of the year. Regardless of whether a person is sincere, or puts on a show of humor, energy, enthusiasm, and personality, the desire to influence strangers makes social performance into a test of the true self.

Judgments

Once it is less terrifying, public speaking can produce an intoxicating sense of power. A European man who is active in Toastmasters in Beijing, told me that that he used

⁵⁵ One such coach is Ruan Qi, who graduated from Peking University with a degree in psychology: most of his clients are in their late twenties and in the IT industry (Ash 2013). The Chinese microblogging platform Weibo has a group with nearly 40,000 members who "... hold events in cities across China, from talks to a fortnightly outing to MIX club in Beijing (450 yuan for expert wingmen)" (Ash 2013). There is also a genre of books, videos, and articles called 'secret texts on talking to strangers' (搭讪秘籍). Over a dozen episodes, the online video series "Aliens' Guide for Getting a Mate" (外星人搞对象指南) demonstrates unlikely techniques for talking to girls on subway trains or in elevators. The single episode geared towards women is about how to get a rich guy at a cocktail party. And interestingly, the only time in the whole series in which the flirtation becomes explicitly erotic is in an episode about picking up a foreign exchange student: "Foreigners, you know. You can step up directly." [Ash, Alec. 2013. "How to Be a Male God: An afternoon with a Chinese Pick Up Artist." The Anthill. theanthill.org/PUA Yang Guang. 2009. "Picking up girls makes failed businessman success." China Daily.]

to be extremely shy. One evening, I hear his comrades in arms congratulate him on his progress, reminding him of a time when he could barely speak, couldn't look at the audience but only stared down at his violently shaking hands. Through Toastmasters, he tells me, he has learned that when you are on stage, you are in control of the crowd. In the *Competent Communication* manual, following the self-introduction, and seven lessons that focus on technical aspects of public speaking, the last two assignments are to "Persuade with Power" and "Inspire Your Audience". The emphasis shifts from becoming comfortable with stagecraft, to using rhetoric to influence an audience. At this point in the manual, the practice of public speaking becomes explicitly linked with civic participation and political power: the example given for the persuasive speech concerns a debate about local property taxes. Michael Warner points out that when people address a public, they often imagine that the public is an agent, moving towards judgment on a social issue: this may consist of a verdict in a court case, or on a fashion crime (2002). The anticipation of public action is an important force that generates the individual, bound to her social performance by a political principle or a moral posture. The *Competent Communication* manual is certain that to influence others, one must be sincere (Toastmasters 2013: 46), making speech appear as a true representation of the self.

In the instructions for the inspirational speech assignment, the *Competent Communication* manual advises speakers to "Avoid using notes, since they may cause the audience to doubt your sincerity and conviction" (Toastmasters 2013: 52). And my mentor in Toastmasters, a North American in his forties, told me not to write down every part of

my speeches: by leaving them a bit rough, they would seem spontaneous and sincere. In China, the effect of spontaneity may also function as a critique against Chinese genres of public speaking. These include *langsong* (朗诵), the memorized and stylized recitations of classical Chinese literature that are performed at public events, such as school assemblies. And people in China often mock the stiff speeches of politicians and bureaucrats, statements read off of a paper, approved by a committee.⁵⁶ In setting out his theory of how personality became more central to politics, Sennett discusses the French revolutionary politician Lamartine; Sennett explains that his speeches were accepted as spontaneous and sincere, even though “we know that most of his speeches were rehearsed, and that Lamartine often worked in front of a mirror” (1974: 229). For Sennett, “When we say the mask became the face of such a man, we mean that simply being able to generate emotion in public showed that the person acting had a superior, because ‘authentic,’ personality” (1974: 230). Seemingly unstructured speech seems fit to express an anti-traditional, revolutionary politics. In trying to convince a crowd of one’s sincerity, one can transform the mask into a mirror, engaging in “deep acting” (Hochschild 1983) in which one tries to convince not only the audience, but also oneself.

⁵⁶ At a Toastmasters event in Hong Kong, I hear a man giving a speech about using emotions to make speeches more powerful. He tells us that the politicians at the Chinese government’s recent Eighteenth Party Congress demonstrated poor public speaking skills. His speech had a directness that few American soft-skills trainers would approach: he tells us that to connect with audience members, we should play on their fears, should focus on “reproducible insecurity”: threats to their life, career, and relationships.

Speeches in Chinese Toastmasters clubs almost never focus on controversial social topics. I encountered a very few scattered talks that involved conspicuous positions on public issues. There was one speech about China's tense doctor patient relationships: the speaker discussed instances in which people attack or threaten physicians when they encounter problems in medical care. This speech addressed a national audience about a morally laden cultural problem; rather than addressing a civil society, the speech was decrying a lack of civil society. Another speaker took a firm stand against the pernicious habit of staring at smart phones instead of interacting with other people. When Toastmasters clubs in Beijing organized a debate contest, the questions did not provoke any particularly impassioned arguments. One question, telling in light of this chapter's argument about the dual processes of subject formation in Toastmasters clubs, was "Which is more important in Toastmasters clubs: public speaking skills or social connections?" At the final of the debate contest, the topic was whether men or women need more care. In club meetings, a few speeches do slip into a prescriptive mode: speakers suggest that audience members prepare emergency kits, or drink more water. This kind of public service announcement is not quite civic: it an expression of care, and corresponds to models of governance by a familial authority. Over a year and half of regular attendance at meetings, I heard only a scarce handful of talks in the genres of civic activism or advocacy so familiar

in the United States.⁵⁷ Analyzing the agendas of several years of our club meetings, it is clear that members usually ignore the “Persuade with Power” assignment: for their ninth speech, club members have given speeches about dating and about tennis.

In Chinese Toastmasters clubs, speakers rarely seek to “Persuade with Power”, but they do often try to follow the injunction to “Inspire Your Audience”. Club members give speeches urging their peers to work hard, or to follow their dreams. They are earnest rather than sincere. We have seen examples of such speeches, and will examine more in what follows. Following Michael Warner’s argument about sermons, I suggest that such motivational speeches do not address a public. Sermons are intended to affect a change in each individual, rather than to participate in an ongoing circulation of texts, in the imagined conversation that distinguishes public discourse from other forms of speech (2002: 82-5). Richard Sennett makes a related point, that a priest’s “... rhetorical powers always lead beyond his own personality” (1974: 234), drawing on shared frameworks rather than presenting individual views. In Toastmasters clubs, inspirational speeches participate in a shared politics of self-definition, tinged with regret, and which is framed as a lived cultural crisis rather than an individually espoused, future oriented political agenda.

Westerners in Chinese Toastmasters clubs more comfortably and spontaneously assume a democratic voice and privileged sovereignty. In our club, my mentor presented

⁵⁷ One woman mentioned starting a charity for stray pets; a few talked about their involvement in volunteer organizations. But there was little talk about these activities, and it was always very humble.

an advanced speaking assignment, from a manual devoted to “Persuasive Speaking”. He was excited to give this talk; he told me before the meeting that I should anticipate his speech, and that this was an issue he really cared about. The speech advocated raising awareness and regulatory standards for infant car safety seats in China. Like advice to keep an emergency kit at home, advocating for safety seats may appear as a form of paternalistic or maternalistic intervention: however, the speaker presents himself as addressing a pressing issue of common concern rather than as providing a useful piece of advice. The speaker concludes, “We can save a lot of little people’s lives... please don’t let my words be left on the table as we watch our little children’s lives trickle through our fingers, along with China’s future.” For a handful of Westerners who have been key figures in establishing Toastmasters in China, all older men, the work of teaching public speaking is itself a political project, part of civilizing mission.⁵⁸

In my observations of American Toastmasters clubs, I was struck by how often people are concerned with presenting their own moral convictions, giving speeches about

⁵⁸ There are some connections between Christianity and Toastmasters in China. Since proselytizing is illegal in the country, I must tread carefully here. A significant number of prominent members, active at the national level, are believers. At a conference, I hear an American in his sixties addressing his audience of young Chinese people as lacking in discipline. He tells them to follow the speaking manual exactly, to “do things right” according to “standard operating procedure”. He tells them that Americans bake, so they’ve learned to follow recipes: it’s not like a Chinese stir-fry where you can just add something in anytime. The *logos*, the body of his Christ is in a baked good. He tells the assembled people that “you can recreate yourself to be what you want to be”, with discipline, by making plans, committing to deadlines. He quotes Yoda from Star Wars: “Do or do not do... there is no try.” Otherwise, he says, you might as well “go party.” Ironically, many of these young people are learning to talk, so that they can go to parties.

racial tolerance,⁵⁹ animal shelters, world peace, and how to encourage your neighbor to recycle. In part, this is because the members of most American Toastmasters clubs are older than those of Chinese clubs; they seem to approach these spaces like town hall meetings or Rotary Clubs,⁶⁰ as places in which citizens create and affirm an ethical community. Some American Toastmasters clubs, concentrated in urban areas and college towns, are popular with younger immigrants and minorities. In these, speeches are far more similar to those given in Chinese clubs, advocating the virtues of hard work. Still, there seems to be a pervasive civic ethos in American clubs, marking a difference from modes of self-presentation in Chinese clubs. Goffman places the moral performance of “character” centrally in his analysis of the dramaturgy of everyday life, writing “In our society the character one performs and one’s self are somewhat equated” (1959: 252); character, for Goffman, is the spiritual or moral essence that a performance is intended to convey. He is

⁵⁹ A predominantly African American club on the South Side of Chicago, like many American clubs, meets in a church. The club membership has a modal age of around sixty. One of the younger members, a woman in her thirties, is a professional life coach. She gives a talk about fear and anxiety, and has us each share our fears with the person sitting next to us. I am somewhat uncomfortable with the way that club members consistently enforce standard white American English, but that is one of the reasons they come to meetings. White guilt haunts the meeting. The only white club member gives an improvised speech about Atticus Finch, while a white guest talks about her work in the Civil Rights Movement. These moral stances make me feel very uncomfortable, and don’t seem to pull down any boundaries.

⁶⁰ Which, incidentally, began in Chicago in 1905, the same year the founder of Toastmasters, Ralph Smedley began organizing public speaking clubs at a YMCA in nearby Bloomington, Illinois.

right to qualify the idea that the people equate themselves with their moral performances.

For many reasons, cultural and political, this is not always desirable or possible to do.

I am not suggesting that young adults in China do not define themselves through ethical projects and propositions. In China, netizens eagerly debate social issues online. Ethnographer Tricia Wang has found evidence that in some online forums, young adults come to define a sense an authentic personal identity based on individual political commitments.⁶¹ But in Toastmasters clubs, people see themselves in a different social vision. Their forms of public speech do not address civil society, but seeks their effect as collective articulations of social suffering, or as expressions of care. Social skills training is also in itself a mode of care. A veteran member of my Toastmasters club tells me about her ambition to teach high school students soft skills: how to listen, and how to express themselves. The Chinese educational system fails, she says, because it doesn't inculcate these things that will be useful your whole life. Unlike, she says, "chemistry."

However, when I asked club members how the skills they learn in Toastmasters help them at work, they typically could not explain how they had applied any new skills to their jobs.⁶² Few club members actually give presentations at work, and only a handful are

⁶¹ In her recent study of online identity formation among Chinese youth, Wang argues that voluntary affiliation with strangers creates an "Elastic Self" (Wang 2013); she shows that some online affiliations force people to become more morally reflexive (Wang 2013: 17), to integrate unexpected political information and to identify based on explicit values shared by voluntary associations. This seems accurate, but it is difficult to gauge the extent of these engagements.

⁶² When I ask Daisy, one of our club's most active members, for an example of how communication skills have helped her at work, she is at a loss. After a pause, her friend

employed in sales or service. Many people said that Toastmasters meetings make them happier and gives them energy, while some gestured broadly towards the importance of communication.⁶³ But by working to improve themselves, club members partake in what Teresa Kuan calls “an ethics of trying” that provides “moral comfort” (2015: 18). As they practice English and study confidence, they become confident that they are doing what they can to move towards a better future. This kind of moral confidence is more psychologically important to young adults in China than that which can be gained by performing a principled stance; the gaze of parents and classmates is more important than the gaze of the crowd, or the judge. Self-presentation skills are also an ethical practice in that they involve learning to care for others by attending to one’s demeanor, by pleasing them, by taking their perspectives.

prompts her: they had discussed this question before. Daisy then tells me a precise story about failed communication. While working at a company that arranged fun ‘experiences’ for corporate employees, she lost a client she after courting them for a month. Daisy is sure that this attests to her poor communication skills. A significant number of people in the clubs were or aspired to be teachers, and they find public speaking skills useful at the front of the classroom. Some use their communication skills to teach communication skills. But when pressed, the connection between communication skills and work feels quite brittle. ⁶³ In her study of communication training in a Russian factory, Susanne Cohen notes that “In a rather curious way, it was possible to reduce nearly all of the factory’s problems to ‘communication’” (2015b: 326). Perhaps people accustomed to working alone require communication skills most of all. A corporate trainer once told me a parable about a proud software engineer who had been stubbornly trying to solve a problem on his own; during his training he overcame his pride, asked for help, and solved the problem in two short hours. This example demonstrates one way in which corporate communication pedagogies are supposed to improve people’s efficiency, and their moral quality.

One Toastmasters club has been set up by corporate trainers, and for aspiring corporate trainers. The club incorporates workshops on presentation skills into every meeting. “How would you show the character *ren* to your audience?” *Ren* (人) means ‘human’; it is the mirror image of the character *ru* (入), meaning ‘enter’. In social skills training programs, effective communication depends quite literally on viewing oneself from the perspective of another.⁶⁴ Numerous Toastmasters club members transition from other careers to work as corporate trainers,⁶⁵ or aspire to do so, and a few even try to join the lucrative self-help industry.⁶⁶ Corporations invest in social skills training in the hope that it will smooth workflows within their organization; but Chinese young adults who are subjected to these training programs seem more concerned with talking to strangers than with increasing their productivity.

⁶⁴ The trainer cites Jerome Bruner’s book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986. Harvard UP.) to suggest that stories are twenty-two times more memorable than facts. Another club member, a corporate trainer in his mid-twenties, is a Chinese man who lived in Canada for many years. When I ask him what skill from Toastmasters he finds most useful in his profession, he says “active listening”. Club members sometimes say that taking roles in club meetings is a way to increase this skill: by being an evaluator, by counting how many times people say “um”, one learns to pay attention to Others.

⁶⁵ They teach communication skills and emotional self-management in what are known as EAPs, or employee assistance programs, mostly in foreign corporations. In another level of recursion, some people seek certification in what is known as T3, Train the Trainers to Train, through courses are offered by international companies.

⁶⁶ The stars of the self-help world make a lot of money. The sales pitch for a district conference mentioned excitedly that the inspirational speaker Yuan Yue would speak there, and that he had agreed to do so for free even though he usually receives 100,000 RMB per hour (around 15,000 USD).

Several new self-help organizations emerged from Toastmasters while I was in Beijing. The most visible one might be translated as The Persistence Society (*jianchi bang* – 坚持帮), a name evoking the weary virtue of patient effort. In March of 2014, just three months after the group was founded, I attended a group meeting with the founder. The organization already had over one and half thousand members, about half of whom were also in Toastmasters clubs. The founder of the Persistence Society, Alex Cheng,⁶⁷ later became a district governor in the Toastmasters organization. Cheng goes by the name of Dragon Brother (龙兄), and has published a book on public speaking.⁶⁸ Cheng begins the meeting by narrating his journey of personal growth, a story in which being rejected for a sales position inspired him to overcome his fears and limitations in order to achieve his dreams. His dream, he tells us, is to inspire our own “growth” (*chengzhang* – 成长).

More than any other self-help group that I encountered in China, The Persistence Society seems to promote a reflexive, ascetic, and instrumental mode of entrepreneurial self-management.⁶⁹ The organization makes people accountable for their self-actualization by using social media to set up a multi-tiered network of mutual monitoring, a system in

⁶⁷ real name

⁶⁸ *Records of a Public Speaking Expert's Maturation* (演讲达人成长记). In translation, the title sounds somewhat awkward, like something Sima Qian produced after attending a Dale Carnegie course and deciding to write a *bildungsroman*. In Chinese, it has a pleasant cadence.

[程龙. 2013. 演讲达人成长记. 电子工业出版社]

⁶⁹ At the meeting, for instance, Cheng brought out the Time Management Square, a technology that embodies instrumental self-management. This is a chart consisting of four quadrants, in which tasks are sorted along axes of urgency and importance.

which people commit to daily goals and encourage each other to complete these tasks. Yet these tasks are as likely to be about talking to strangers as about entrepreneurial enterprise. At the group's meeting, people share pledges to work on their confidence, social skills, and public speaking. Social contact with strangers appears as a highly reified commodity: using a Confucian phrase, one woman tells us she will make a "worthy friend" every week, while another says plainly that she wants to talk to strangers (*dashan* – 搭讪). When she pledges to speak for five minutes every day, even if only to a mirror, people laugh: either at the image of a person conversing with herself, or in sympathy with her loneliness. The Persistence Society demonstrates how psychological technologies of the self are being taken up in Chinese social, ethical, and somatic⁷⁰ ecologies of the self, at a time in which people are adapting to the possibilities, dangers, and psychosocial challenges of life among strangers. This meeting suggests that for many young adults, the problem of self-definition is more urgently social than professional. In discussing humor, energy, and personality, we have seen that the desire to charm strangers, to capture their attention in a fluid society, induces

⁷⁰ In the group, the body is to be managed reflexively and instrumentally, but also cultivated through Chinese arts. Cheng had arranged a physical competition for those present. The men have a push-up contest, and the women compete in squats: contest winners receive a copy of Cheng's book. Cheng lets us know that he runs marathons, and another man explains that he has set up a personal blog where he posts his exercise routines and diet. But the body also appears in particularly Chinese modes of self-care. One woman has vowed to soak her feet every day, another to drink more water, and another to rest and practice exercises to reduce eye strain. One man in his mid-thirties draws on Marxist historical materialism to argue that we can grasp the principles of change, and therefore are responsible for our lives. He talks about how to be enthusiastic, and how to spread positive energy. He tells us that he is learning English, and also kung-fu.

a particular temporal orientation. The moment becomes fateful before a job interviewer or a potential date. However, The Persistence Society demonstrates another temporality that also shapes how young adults in China understand themselves.

In Toastmasters clubs, members speak much more of persistence than about will power. In her speech, one woman suggests that at the top of the mountain there are eagles, but also snails: "I admire snails." During a Table Topics session, a young professional is asked, "Besides passion, what character or features do you think is important to get success?" He responds that "You insist on doing something, you struggle and you will practice more and more with the things you want to achieve... I need a platform to practice my oral English, so I come to Toastmasters again and again and again." Chinese idioms champion an astounding persistence: stories about filling up the sea with pebbles are read as inspirational.⁷¹ This ethos, well known to the college students and graduates in Toastmasters clubs, emphasizes practice over time rather than a heroic will.

Comparative philosopher François Jullien claims that Chinese culture is deeply undramatic.⁷² He suggests that Chinese philosophers conceive of efficacious action as a

⁷¹ The idiom 'Jingwei fills the sea' (精卫填海) describes a bird determined to fill up the ocean with pebbles; 'The foolish man moves the mountain' (愚公移山) is about a man who begins relocating a mountain, sure that his ancestors will eventually succeed; and 'grinding the pestle into a needle' (磨杵成针) tells of an elderly woman making a needle out of an iron rod. Westerners first encountering these sayings often think that they are warnings about stubbornness rather than examples of virtue. This was my reaction, and my classical Chinese tutor said that it was typical.

⁷² Drama means 'action' in Greek. In China skillful action is marked by subtlety; it is not a confrontation or even an event. Jullien writes that it "is not hard to see why China produced no epic" (2004: 59).

matter of disposing forces within a situation, forces that work through immanent processes that can be as difficult to perceive as growth or erosion (2004: 59).⁷³ For Jullien, this does not take place in the empty mathematical time that the Greeks called *chronos*, nor is it about urgently exercising the will in *kairos*, the moments of opportunity in which great, heroic events unfold (2004: 72).⁷⁴ In Toastmasters clubs, people share tips for success like making sure to eat breakfast, or changing who you sit with at lunch. Studying hard to improve one's oral English is an indirect and long-term mode of action. Chinese young adults are eager to seize opportunities for success, but young professionals have been developing their capacities through years of patient study. Part of the cultural work of self-help in China is instilling a vision of will power that operates in heroic, dramatic moments.

At a Toastmasters district conference, an American, about fifty years old, delivers a flat speech; it is ostensibly on the theme of "I believe I can fly", but actually narrates his professional disappointments. But his performance has low stakes. He is not competing with other speakers: rather, six participants in an evaluation contest will be evaluated on their evaluations of his speech. Three out of six of the evaluators suggest that the speaker should retell his story as an inspirational narrative. One suggests that "crash and get back

⁷³ Shigehisa Kuriyama emphasizes that in Chinese medicine time is not empty, but felt with all the senses, full of meaningful qualities (2002: 257).

⁷⁴ Francis Hsu argued that Chinese people respected hidden heroes, from a distance, because those heroes benefitted the public. There was no emotional identification with them, no desire to be them, little interest in their personal characteristics. In the United States, Hsu writes, a person idolizes a hero not as a public benefactor, "but the fulfillment of his own unsatisfied ego and dreams" (1981: 181). Hsu ascribes this to the urgency of succeeding on one's own in an individualistic culture (1981: 172).

up” would be a good structure; another says that it should be “difficulty to triumph.” In Clubs, many speeches are quiet odes to persistence, ending in medias res, lacking the dramatic transformative moments that characterize Western inspirational genres.

Evaluators will sometimes note the undramatic nature of speeches. After one speaker in our club talked about Martin Luther King’s high self-esteem, the evaluator told her that the story needs a climax. Evaluators tell speakers to emphasize hardships and turning points: by the level of international speaking competitions, these conventions are firmly in place, and the narrative of failure and triumphant rebirth is ubiquitous. Members of Chinese Toastmasters clubs do perform these narratives, both while giving speeches and in testimonials for Toastmasters, in which they confess to having been unable, weak, or fearful. They talk about what one speaker called going “from zero to hero.” My mentor in Toastmasters draws inspiration for his speeches from mythographer Joseph Campbell’s classic study *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1972), or rather from a TED Talk presenting Campbell’s work.⁷⁵ He told me that I should structure each of my speeches as a narrative of overcoming difficulty on the way to a triumph. But in Chinese Toastmasters clubs, moments of difficulty are far more prominent than those of triumph.

At the same conference as the evaluation contest, a speaker quotes top self-help guru Tony Robbins, author of *Awaken the Giant Within*: “it takes a second to change something within you.” But these seconds are mostly terrible ones. The speaker describes how, while

⁷⁵ Winkler, Matthew. “What makes a hero?” ed.ted.com

giving a speech in primary school, he wet his pants. Now, he tells us, he teaches children confidence. On stage at Toastmasters events, people talk about stutters, about being mocked, about wetting their pants, filling in the painful blank spaces of inspirational narratives, in which humiliation initiates personal transformation. Even without a transcendent substance, without interpellation by God or the law, the self can be stripped bare to the gaze. It can be shamed before parents and peers. Such instants induce the first part of the Hegelian dialectic: acute awareness of oneself as a social object. But for young adults in Chinese public speaking clubs, the moment is fateful not because they are arguing before an impersonal law, but because they stand in the court of social judgment. While young adults are talking about the importance of appearances, they are also criticizing Chinese society for being superficial. They want their appearances to be mirrors for the self rather than social masks.

Throw Away Your Face

At the final of a district speech contest for southern and western China, a woman recounts walking down the street, painfully conscious of her appearance. "I handed over the judgment of my value to the phantoms on the street", she tells us. When she entered an expensive store, she recalls, the salesperson implied that she could not afford a particular blouse. She says that, to prove her worth, she handed the clerk her wallet. The speaker urges the audience members, "take back your control", and asks us, "Have you done ridiculous things just to please a stranger?" She receives loud applause, and even, unusually, cheers. This speech about the "phantoms on the street" describes the collective

humiliations of China's stark class divide, while also implying a particular set of local meanings that attach to the concept of self-esteem. In this final round of the speaking contest, five out of six of the speeches are tales of shame.⁷⁶ This speaker suggests that in order to "take back your control" from social standards that make us feel inferior, we need to learn to value ourselves. Scholars writing about the social effects of self-esteem have focused on its use as a technique of governance, a way to dubiously empower the poor:⁷⁷ the Chinese government, and Chinese corporations, are certainly teaching self-esteem as a way to make people responsible for believing in their productive power.⁷⁸ But in China, both members of personal growth groups and psychotherapists use the concept of self-esteem to critique a society they condemn as narrowly materialistic, and as overly concerned with a superficial 'face' (*mianzi* – 面子 or *lian* – 脸).⁷⁹

A counseling psychologist once asked me "Is it true that in the United States people are fine with having regular jobs?" In China, she says, you are either a have or a have-not. When I suggest that material exigencies are less pressing in America than in China, the psychologist follows up with another incredulous question: "So in the U.S., it's fine to buy a

⁷⁶ The sixth was a tale of overcoming and rebirth, about the speaker's successful struggle with cancer.

⁷⁷ See for instance Cruikshank 1993, 1999.

⁷⁸ For instance, in his study of a vocational school for young migrant workers in Beijing, Anders Hansen found that classes on social skills and self-esteem were both part of the curriculum (2012: 417). One of the trainers emphasized that in China's liberalizing economy success was less and less bound to class background; speaking of his students, he said, "I think they often just lack a bit of self-confidence" (Hansen 2012: 427).

⁷⁹ This supposed characteristic of the Chinese people is itself the product of a complex history of encounter and representation (Liu 1995).

second-hand car or house?" It's not fine in China, she tells me. But after a pause, she adds that maybe in the cities people can accept a used vehicle; in the countryside, she says, everyone wants to show off. And so, we see another layer of meaning for self-esteem for social critics in China: as something modern, an escape from the backward, unthinking values represented by the countryside. But these are supposed to be part of a traditional, hierarchical, and ritualistic Chinese culture. Chinese reformers have seized on the idea that self-esteem is a necessary foundation for civil, egalitarian relationships. Influential social critic Boyang wrote that Chinese people have no self-respect, so they cannot treat others as equals: they can only toady to those above or abuse those below (1992: 19). Chinese social hierarchies may emphasize certain local pressures on self presentation, encouraging people try to appear well connected and powerful rather than to seek confidence itself, as a personality trait. One might suggest that in China the tactic of 'fake it till you make it' typically takes the form of what Ann Anagnost has called "the mimesis of power" (1997).

People want to escape from beneath a superficial standard of value that makes them feel inferior, but also from a superficiality that prioritizes good appearances over corrupt realities. The Chinese government goes to great lengths to present a good face to the world, and cover up social problems: people in Beijing notice that while they breathe in toxic air every day, the government suppresses the smog whenever the city hosts an international

event.⁸⁰ In China, elaborately staged public spectacles express an acute awareness of the importance of appearances, but these appearances are not understood as expressions of a true self. While young adults in China see their stage fright as a cultural problem, and while philosopher François Jullien sees Chinese culture as undramatic, missionary Arthur Smith suggested that Chinese people were wildly dramatic and theatrical; he saw this as ridiculous and connected it to the “cult of face” (Liu 1995: 66). In trying to account for Smith’s perception, we might speculate that if he saw people making a scene, they were not engaging in a sincere performance of the self but using performance as a tactic of social influence. We can see then that face is not a surface of a true inner self, so much as a social honor or reputation, something ardently pursued and consciously manipulated.

“Throw away your face!” suggests a venerable member of our club. “My face was once bigger than this,” he says, pointing at his round cheeks. At our club’s birthday party, he joins a companion to sing as the “Faceless Boys” duo. Dragon Brother, founder of The Persistence Society, tells us the secret to success: “Don’t want face!” (*buyaolian* – 不要脸).⁸¹ The moment of public shaming becomes fateful for the individual; but as suggested above, and as we will explore in the following chapter, many experiences of individual humiliation

⁸⁰ The clear skies that presided over the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference, held in Beijing in 2014 were referred to cynically as “APEC blue”. In such public events, officials take extreme care to minimize uncertainty.

⁸¹ Usually, in these settings, the word used is *lian*: although the concepts overlap, word they use for face, *lian*, indicates moral personhood, as opposed to *mianzi*, which is face as social status (Hu 1944). To not want face as *lian* is more cutting, more extreme; it is to deny a fundamental moral emotion in China (Wong and Tsai 2007; Fung 1999).

are also interpreted as collective injury. In China, people drawn to psychology widely understand their pursuit of self-esteem as set against the court of social opinion, with its materialistic standards; they are not upset about unreasonably skinny fashion models so much as worrying about money. They understand the desire for face as a particularly Chinese obstacle to risk taking, happiness, and personal growth. Young adults see their parents' desire for face as the reason they were pressured to play piano, and are told to choose safe government jobs instead of following their dreams. Members of Toastmasters clubs eagerly disseminate the good news that losing face is not fatal; that it can, in fact, be an impetus for positive change.

A Table Topics speech about the experience of giving a failed speech concludes, "Dare to lose your face, then you will improve little by little." In the same meeting, another speaker discusses how in order to improve, you must be flawed: "I'm grateful for... for I have a lot of room to improve." When the speakers make these assertions, there are sharp intakes of breath around the room. The idea that it can be good to expose one's flaws to others seems to be new, a breath of fresh air. But while they cast away the mask of artifice represented by 'face', by the value of wealth and power, people embark on treacherous projects of self-creation. And by struggling against appearances, by seeking to make public displays into an authentic self, one can make the visible self even more important.

"I believe that people like to be with real, positive people, optimistic, enthusiastic", a corporate trainer told me. To the extent to which this kind of personality seems to promise economic and social integration, it becomes a potential source of personal identity and a

thus a powerful standard for self-evaluation. The image that appears in the eyes of strangers becomes ever more important in a fluid society, in moments of imagined possibility, in interviews and on dates. But for young adults in China, a confident, assertive personality is not a privileged test of their moral substance, nor does social anxiety signal the threat of judgment before the law. We have seen that a distinctly Chinese social imaginary and temporal orientation mean that young adults on stage in Toastmasters clubs do not feel their visible personality to be a true self, sincere, complete, and absolutely subject to interpellation. They are learning to perform for strangers in order to access social roles: they want a standing gig, a second date and more. They place moments of heroic transformation within the slower exertions of study, work, and relationships.

In trying to throw away their faces, to uproot that part of themselves that is oriented to social values and public honors, Chinese young adults partake in a history of anti-traditional politics that opposed Confucian ritual, and later Maoist collectivism, with the authentic feelings of individuals liberated from tradition, free to pursue personal truth and authentic love in the spaces of the cosmopolitan city (Lee 2010). They are becoming sensitive to how they appear to the strange individuals who inhabit these spaces. Young adults are anxious to possess their social performance as an authentic individuality; and yet, as they set self-esteem against love of face, this elision of cultural logics shows that they are wary of appearances.

The Birthday Party

At our Toastmasters club's seventh birthday party, we are handed a packed agenda of performances and activities. One young woman, new to the club, complains to me that the party is so carefully planned, saying "that's not the Western way." Excitedly, she tells me that she recently visited a couple of bars, implicitly contrasting the fluid possibilities of urban life to the ordered sociality of the club. Some club members say that they come to Toastmasters to learn how to network, but in fact they soon become a tight network. The solidarity of these clubs appears similar to that of support groups or churches. However, while clubs draw on shared wells of suffering, they are not explicitly organized around a common identity. Club members will sometime acknowledge in passing that many of them are socially anxious, but they do not conceive of the club as an "illness sodality" (Raikhel 2016: 153), in which a disorder becomes an overriding category of identity. Club members present their tacitly acknowledged psychosocial limitations as a national failure, and their personal frustrations take on meaning within a broader cultural politics. While shared afflictions and ethical commitments are present in Toastmasters clubs, they are not central: the clubs are associations for self-cultivation through study, and especially for socializing.⁸² In voices that sometimes waver, in often halting English, club members share their pain. But in the clubs, self-presentation is not only a challenge but also a game. Meetings are usually filled with laughter.

⁸² Huang Hsuan-ying, interestingly, has suggested that many people in China study psychology as a mode not only of personal growth, but also a hobby and a form of sociality (2014).

A former club member, no longer active, has appeared at the birthday party. He gives a heartfelt speech about how he has seen people grow, and grow together, through the club. "Here", he says, "we feel comfortable and safe." The audience vocally supports this sentiment. For most club members, the act of joining a club does not signify the choice of a group or a framework within which to win recognition, although it can be that as well; it means, rather, immediate inclusion in a dense web of social relationships. Members of Chinese Toastmasters clubs turn their clubs into communities for companionship, dating, and professional networking. The clubs are knit together through joint events, speaking competitions, and by the many people who attend multiple clubs. Members organize frequent social activities, and often become close friends. The inside of a public speaking club can encompass the public outside.

Club members kept telling me that they feel relaxed and happy at Toastmasters meetings, which I found puzzling: didn't they come to face their fears, to struggle with a recalcitrant self in a desperate scramble for psychological capital? But members emphasize that they are united by a common goal. One explains that Toastmasters meetings are relaxing because they are not like work, where "you wear a mask". Club members tell me that unlike in their workplace or at school, there are no competing interests between people in Toastmasters. It sounds like in this open space, outside of a vital interpersonal whole, one need not take so much care to sustain a tense harmony, or listen quite so hard for what isn't said. Club members find the egalitarian and uncomplicated nature of this sociality

refreshing. They feel that they can take off their masks. This appears at least as important to them as the masks they learn to put on.

Bitterness and Admiration

O! father and mother if buds are nip'd
And blossoms blown away,
And if the tender plants are strip'd
Of their joy in the springing day,
By sorrow and care's dismay,

How shall the summer arise in joy,
Or the summer fruits appear?
Or how shall we gather what griefs destroy,
Or bless the mellowing year,
When the blasts of winter appear?

from *The School Boy* – William Blake¹

Tonight, a Toastmasters club has invited a guest speaker, Gao, a man in his mid-thirties who publishes a blog of pop science think pieces: his most popular article provided readers with a mathematical formula for determining whether they should marry their romantic partner, or hold out for someone better. Gao graduated from a top American MBA program. While in the United States, he tells us, he ran into a high school classmate, someone “like Sheldon” from the popular American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. Most people in the audience laugh, recognizing this reference to the character of a painfully awkward physics genius. The speaker explains that at his elite high school, everyone looked up to star students like this classmate. But now, Gao relates, having established a

¹ Blake, William. [1789] 1992. *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*. New York: Dover.

career in Silicon Valley, the man feels trapped in someone else's life. Gao presents this as a common dilemma: Chinese scientists and engineers are unhappy, because they didn't ever choose their majors, their interests, their careers. Gao tells us that this frustrated engineer is now asking him how to start a business. His message for the audience is that failure is temporary, relative, and maybe even a good thing, that a failure is a chance to reassess our lives. But because Chinese people, Gao suggests, are particularly risk averse and fearful of failure, they don't have the courage to be succeed, or to be themselves.

This message, which I heard in various forms from Chinese motivational speakers and psychologists, idealizes the kind of entrepreneurial, risk taking, self-making subject that self-help psychology commonly calls forth. But Gao's talk of Silicon Valley startups also signals aspirations for a Western, technological modernity. The speech outlines a cultural politics of autonomy, in which Chinese families and schools are obstacles to personal happiness: the audience members are addressed as the timid, frustrated products of these institutions. And there is the figure of Sheldon, a socially inept scientist who doesn't understand emotions. Between the young Chinese audience members and a cosmopolitan, fulfilled future, our speaker sees a tight barrier of interlocked cultural and psychosocial deficits. In Toastmasters and other social skills training programs in China, messages of entrepreneurial risk-taking convey not only aspiration, but also a deep sense of injury.

Despite his talk of courageous enterprise, and his criticism of Chinese culture, Gao is not a naïve follower of the self-help faith, nor does he wholly identify with a foreign

perspective. In a subsequent conversation, Gao suggests to me that while Chinese people need to learn to follow their dreams, Americans are realizing that it's often more practical to study engineering.² His feelings about China are conflicted: he is proud of Chinese people's work ethic, but he is concerned that Chinese business practices are "... bringing down the world's moral standards." Gao's message of confident risk taking is sensitive to China's economic and moral standing in the world, and it is addressed to people in a particular time and place. In Beijing, he suggests, now is the moment for taking risks.³

Tonight's audience is sitting in an English language training center in Zhongguancun, an area of Beijing often referred to as China's Silicon Valley. Many of the top Chinese and international technology companies have offices, research centers, or headquarters in close proximity to the young college students and recent graduates in

² He cited the success of the 2011 best-seller *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which offered Americans a stereotyped model of tough Chinese parenting, as an example of how Americans are interested in moving beyond talk of self-fulfillment. With a conflicted national pride, he cites American anxieties about the mathematical and technical prowess of Chinese students, and public intellectual Malcolm Gladwell's theory that rice farming societies, particularly in southern China, produce hard working and persistent people (2011). But minutes later, he expresses his shame that international companies have to learn to give bribes in order to do business in China.

[Gladwell, Malcolm. 2011. *Outliers: The Story of Success*. New York: Back Bay Books.]

³ Today, entrepreneurship is the biggest force in China's economy (Coase and Wang 2013: 175). The owner of a café workspace in Zhongguancun, explains that financial access and ethos are increasingly meritocratic: "Before 2010, you could only get access to other startups, angel investors or venture capitalists if you moved in certain circles. But now, anyone can get in touch with investors if they have a great idea, and investors are always eager to meet startups."

[Zhou Su. March 5, 2015. "Student Entrepreneurs Learn Harsh Lessons in China." China Daily. www.chinadaily.com.cn]

attendance. To many, the future seems both very near and frustratingly distant. As young professionals walk through Zhongguancun's commercial plazas, as they are drawn towards the more international and mobile sectors of the labor market, they reflect on themselves as Chinese people, injured by a damaging educational system. And as they wind their way underneath the glass towers of industry, passing through gritty malls lined with stalls of cheap, recycled electronic components, they see that they are negotiating not only their own futures, but also China's position in the global economy. In the first chapter, we saw how young adults in Toastmasters clubs learn to position themselves before an audience, and among strangers. Now, we will see how they place themselves temporally, between a past spent in Chinese schools, and an imagined future of technology, entrepreneurship, and international careers.

This temporal axis also maps onto two key elements of *suzhi* (素质), often translated as 'quality', a term which people in China use as a comprehensive, multivalent index of social status and moral standing (Kipnis 2006; Anagnost 2004). On the one hand, *suzhi* is associated with traditional Chinese social and moral hierarchies, in which education has long been the main path both to social mobility and to spiritual cultivation (Kipnis 2006, 2007). On the other hand, scholars have shown how assessments of *suzhi* are closely associated with the values of international economic markets (Yan Hairong 2003). Thus, the values of past and future converge on education. At a time in Chinese history that has produced unprecedented mobility and scandalous inequality, educational reform is a key field in which social reformers and cultural critics are laboring to plant new standards of

value. Recent anthropological studies of educational reform in China have focused on parents (Kuan 2015; Naftali 2009, 2010a) and educators (Kuan 2014; Naftali 2010b), and primarily on children. This chapter approaches the problem of education from the perspective of young professionals in Beijing, who have just emerged from Chinese schools, and are moving into labor markets. We will see how practices of assertive self-definition play a large role in educational reform movements, and that young adults' experiences of stage fright and social anxiety contribute emotional resonance to their critiques of Chinese schools. Graduates say that schools have not given them 'platforms' (*pingtai* – 平台) on which to practice confident self-presentation.

As people learn that they need to become visible to investors, interviewers, or to American university admissions officers, they are practicing defining an identity around their interests and ideals. This chapter will consider whether people are identifying themselves with the passionate personality that they construct, and the ways in which they this personality is subsumed in other identifications. By using Toastmasters clubs, and other platforms, to critique the educational system, young professionals are approaching self presentation in the mode of "speaking bitterness" (*suku* – 诉苦). As described in the previous chapter, *suku* has been a particularly Chinese mode of public speaking, as well as part of a modernist project, a technique by which one learns to identify oneself as the object of historical forces and the agent of social progress. In Toastmasters, speeches about and injured autonomy appear to be less about a self-expressing individual personality than about a shared cultural politics. In a nation changing so rapidly that people commonly

count a new generation every five years, young adults are acutely aware of their position in history. And recent graduates are still processing their collective memories of college and high school. Using Richard Sennett's terms, speeches in Toastmasters often involve the "presentation" of shared symbols and feelings, rather than "representation" of what are understood to be highly personal experiences (1974). This kind of social performance suggests that young adults Chinese public speaking clubs often do not approach public speaking as a chance to be recognized for their unique individuality. However, we will meet educational reformers, including American educational consultants and American educated social entrepreneurs, who are teaching Chinese young adults to project passionate individual ideals, and that they must sell themselves as authentic originals.

Creating Oneself, Creating the Nation

One member of our Toastmasters club is a tall, sweetly shy man in his mid-twenties, a teacher at an international high school in Beijing, a school in which elite Chinese teenagers study alongside their foreign peers. He is telling us that adults fear being creative: they are trapped by habit, and terrified of failure. In contrast, he offers us the image of Thomas Suarez, a twelve-year-old American boy who developed a software application. Suarez was invited to give a TED Talk: our speaker shows us a slide of a smiling boy on a well-lit stage. Toastmasters club members often discuss TED Talks; with their bright lights, dark backgrounds, and strong primary colors, these events associate public speaking with a

vivid, lucid, modern world.⁴ The teacher's speech moves from the image of a young software developer to a critique of Chinese education. He recounts how some Chinese students at his school invented a mnemonic dance to help remember the names of Henry VIII's wives; he is deeply impressed by their creativity, and by the idea that learning should be fun. Chinese education, the teacher has told me before, is not at all like the creative pedagogy in his international school, where students debate and give presentations. His speech addresses an audience of young adults caught between the stubbornly embodied limitations of their personal and collective history, and the possibilities represented by the frustratingly young tech entrepreneur, confidently performing on stage.

Their spring has passed, almost, eighteen or twenty odd years. Now the summer is full of confusion, heavy with smog and eighty hour weeks. Many, if not most, young professionals in Beijing can describe such a crisis. Articles circulating on social media make bitter allegations like this one: "Chinese education's biggest crime is producing large batches of nerd memory sticks with no creativity or thinking ability".⁵ Since the late 19th century, Chinese reformers have been shouting that Chinese education crushes creativity, and creativity is now a buzzword in discourses about education and parenting (Chumley

⁴ Members of Toastmasters clubs regularly discuss TED and BarCamp conferences, in which people present short talks on what are invariably presented as innovative ideas. Some club members participate in these events, which are regularly held in Beijing.

⁵ "Education is China's Greatest Poor Quality Fake Product" [教育是中国最大的假冒伪劣品]. 2013. blog.sina.com.cn

2011: 173; Woronov 2008).⁶ And today, most young adults in China will say that Chinese people are not creative.⁷ Careers in technology, entrepreneurship, and even the applied arts have been powerfully linked both to bright individual futures, and to a nationalistic pursuit of modernity.⁸ All of this discontent and aspiration provides a business opportunity, if you see it, if you dare to take it.

⁶ In his influential polemic *The Ugly Chinaman*, author Boyang asserts that Chinese people cannot think independently: “China’s literati did little more than add footnotes to the theories propounded by Confucius and his disciples, rarely contributing any independent opinions, simply because the traditional culture did not permit it” (1992: 21). Many intellectuals have felt a need to apologize for China’s perceived lack of creative dynamism. China’s most famous anthropologist, Fei Xiaotong, explained this apparent stasis in light of a relatively slow pace of social change over the course of Chinese dynastic history ([1947] 1984: 62), a stability which meant that traditions had great validity and were practically useful accumulations of “crystallized experience” (Fei 1980: 78). Fei also approached this problem structurally, explaining that the Confucian scholar gentry who governed dynastic China were characterized not only by their power and education, but also by “their separation from all practical technical knowledge” (1980: 84). These aristocrats did not produce, nor did they have incentives to improve production; Fei suggests that any technological or institutional change could only upset a social equilibrium that worked in their favor.

⁷ ‘What are your views on the gasoline shortage’, goes a joke popular in China. ‘What’s a shortage?’ asks the American. ‘What’s a view?’ asks the Chinese. Continuing a long tradition of Western stereotypes and Chinese cultural criticism, most people in China think that Chinese people are not creative. This is true even of those I have spoken to in the arts, who are apt to criticize other Chinese artists as imitators or technicians. In fact, people in these creative industries, more than anyone else, have a sharp sense of disappointment that not everyone who is an artist actually has anything to say.

⁸ The very image of China joining a cosmopolitan modernity is technological: in official discourse, China is supposed to “connect the railways with the world” (*yu shijie jiegui*). All around Beijing, hanging from overpasses on red banners, twisted into the metal of towering public sculptures, are eight characters setting forth the four pillars of the “Beijing Spirit”: one of these is innovation. The others are tolerance (包容), virtue (厚德) and patriotism (爱国). And President Xi Jinping has lectured scientists and engineers about how China was dominated by the West and by Japan because of its lack of technical innovation. [Buckley, Chris. 2014. “Xi Urges Greater Innovation in ‘Core Technologies.’” *NYTimes.com*, June 10.]

In China, teaching creativity is such an appealing entrepreneurial opportunity that it has itself become a genre of self-making. This sector has expanded quickly, and now even has its own service industry, in the form of companies that certify creativity programs. Many members of Toastmasters clubs are interested in educational reform, and several members of my club work in or had founded companies that seek to remedy the perceived deficiencies of Chinese education. In China, educational reform not only attracts sustained attention from people stuck in traffic, listening to public radio, but is a frequent topic of conversation among parents and young adults. In China, education is central to the politics of life chances. Changes to school admissions policies can cause riots,⁹ and education is a focus for cultural critique. Han Han, who is perhaps the most influential writer among educated young adults in China, became famous for his polemical attacks on the educational system and on the Chinese character. He dropped out of high school to become a novelist, essayist, and race car driver. Another famous dropout, Steve Jobs, appears frequently in Toastmasters speeches and in club members' conversation; his biography is displayed on booksellers' wooden carts all around Beijing, even right below Google's China headquarters, down the road from Zhongguancun.

In conversation, a member of my Toastmasters club, an engineering undergraduate, lists a number of things that Steve Jobs represents for him: technology, creativity, and listening to the "sound of your heart." Also, my companion says, Jobs represents changing

⁹ He Huifeng. May 15, 2016. "Thousands of Chinese parents take to the streets to protest university admission quotas." South China Morning Post. www.scmp.com

the world; speeches in Toastmasters clubs regularly cite Jobs' assertion that "We're here to put a dent in the universe." I have suggested that self-help psychology involves a transcendent orientation that sets the individual against their social position, and against society. Like Silicon Valley, the Chinese technology sector is densely linked to self-help psychology.¹⁰ The leaders of top firms including Baidu, Alibaba, and Cisco China have all written best-selling self-help books. The founder of China's largest publisher of personal growth and new age magazines, Wu Shi, first worked in information technology; he told me that he went into publishing because he saw a need to teach young people in China how to find their purpose and hold onto their ideals.¹¹ In Beijing, many members of

¹⁰ Taiwanese tech mogul Li Kaifu is a top selling self-help author in China; he also wrote the *Seven Letters to Chinese Students*, encouraging educational reform in the mainland order to produce more creative and autonomous students (Hendriks 2016: 67); Li Yanhong, cofounder of Baidu, China's top search engine, wrote a self-help book (Henriks 2016: 323); Lin Zhenggang, former president of Cisco China, wrote a book about positive energy; and Ma Yun of Alibaba also published a self-help book (Hendriks 2016: 323). Alibaba and some other Chinese technology companies, like their American counterparts, try to flatten management hierarchies and allow everyone express their views: seeking equality, merit, and dynamism, they place new pressures on people to speak up.

¹¹ Wu Shi (real name), founder of China's largest publisher of new age personal growth magazines, the Beijing Aquarius Publishing Group, worked in information technology in the early 2000s when, he says, no one was talking about inner life, about the importance of choices and dreams. He told me that when he founded his first magazine in 2007, his goal was to show people that life is full of possibilities, to teach them to do what they want, to live fully, and to hold onto their ideals. The publication quickly gained 20 million monthly readers. Wu Shi began to receive feedback from readers who were unhappy despite following their hearts. He decided that people don't know what they want, and require spiritual growth. That is, he told me, why in 2008 he founded *InnerLight*, a magazine focused on spirituality. He also worked with Zhang Defen, the top-selling self-help author, to open *Innerspace*, an online psychology magazine. Paolo Coelho, bestselling Brazilian author of spiritual allegories, also writes a column for *Innerspace*.

Toastmasters clubs are engineers and programmers,¹² working some of the most fluid and meritocratic sectors of the Chinese economy. These young professionals generally spend their days with computers; as we have seen, many cannot give any examples of how they use self-presentation skills at work. But in the speeches that they give in Toastmasters clubs, they imagine themselves interviewing at international companies, making pitches to investors, giving TED Talks about their revolutionary app.

Alongside the entrepreneurial and high-tech sectors, other opportunities for professional self-definition are also expanding rapidly in China; at the same time, there are a lot of people competing for these opportunities. Higher education in China has steadily expanded over the past two decades,¹³ and the central cities attract young graduates.

Among my friends in Beijing are designers, musicians, producers, writers, photographers, and videographers.¹⁴ In Beijing as well as other large cities across China, local governments

¹² In the US, few young people participate in Toastmasters. The primary exceptions are recent immigrants, and, in some places such as Silicon Valley, there are clubs full of young engineers and scientists.

¹³ In 1998 the government widened school recruitment, wanting to alleviate employment pressure and spur the economy by building up the education sector. Private schools opened, and enrollments soared. Before this, competition for higher education was intense, but everyone accepted to a university had a job waiting for them: as the saying goes, 'one turnip, one hole' (一个萝卜一个坑). According to a professor of counseling psychologist at a top Chinese school, several years after the implementation of these reforms, in 2003, suicide rates went up drastically. Cities received government quotas for student suicides.

¹⁴ Many of them are local Beijingers. Although they generally are not from privileged backgrounds, their creative pursuits have been facilitated by their proximity to cultural resources and trends in the capital, and because they have more rights and economic power in Beijing than outsiders. However, some people pursuing creative careers are neither rich nor local. I found that these individuals more than anyone uphold an ethic of creative risk taking in the name of a meaningful life.

are investing in art and design zones, hoping to establish lucrative creative industries.

Officials hope that these investments can also enrich other enterprises, that marketing and industrial design will help to pull China up the manufacturing chain, towards the Apple shaped light. At the same time, new online media platforms have literally put the promise of self-creation in everyone's hands. Some people can earn high salaries from their cell phones by opening public accounts on WeChat or other apps, building a readership, and soliciting advertisements. Self-help materials in China explain that idealism can also provide opportunities for professional self creation. Take, for example, this plainly stated advice from an article that an acquaintance posted on his WeChat account: if you want a better job, don't just dream of opening a coffee shop. Figure out what's wrong with society, since "Once you have a solution, often there are endless business opportunities contained inside."¹⁵

Social entrepreneurs, such as the ones involved in educational reform, are pursuing a promising path to a loveable career; but they are also positioning themselves against social institutions. They do so not only within a history of Chinese modernist critique, but also as a mode of entrepreneurial activity that more closely links personal identity with explicit, individual ethical commitments. Sociologically, these entrepreneurs are what Bourdieu would call an "ethical avant-garde" (1984: 367), members of a rising petit-bourgeois that is "Seeking its occupational and personal salvation in the imposition of new

¹⁵ "Feeling a Mission to Help People is More Likely than Scraping by to Lead to Your Entrepreneurial Success [主任的使命感比糊口饭更能让你创业成功]. 2014.

doctrines of ethical salvation” (1984: 367). Bourdieu sees this group as perfect salespeople, acting with great conviction to sell the new middle classes those aspects of elite lifestyles that they can afford, in the form of ideas, therapies, and ersatz luxuries (1984: 365). In the fourth chapter, we will analyze how Toastmasters club members talk about travel and hobbies, and how young Chinese social activists are teaching their peers that they should pursue such pleasures in order to have a richer life. For Bourdieu, the existence of these ethical entrepreneurs is part of what creates the need for their product, which is their own moral example.

In China, ideals of autonomy and possibilities for social engagement are not taken for granted; we have seen that young adults in Toastmasters clubs do not spontaneously produce speeches championing individual social causes. And so in China the moral example of ethical entrepreneurs is taking an oddly recursive form: many of them are financing their autonomy by teaching autonomy, and envision their mode of social engagement as spreading the teaching of social engagement. They express their sympathy by promoting empathy. Bourdieu suggests that a “sense of legitimacy” is one of this group’s “distinguishing features” (1984: 365); they are good at selling their convictions. As social entrepreneurs pitch their own ethical example, their most appealing product is the ability to confidently market one’s ideals. Members of Toastmasters clubs are predisposed to buy this ability: they are launching careers, tenuously sustaining a middle-class life in Beijing, and they idolize entrepreneurs. In addition, members of these clubs typically lack

exactly that skill that is so necessary both to entrepreneurship and to social activism: presenting confident conviction.

Psychologists in China are also ethical entrepreneurs, and indeed ones who assume significant professional risks. They can only legally register their offices as education or consulting companies (Huang Hsuan-ying 2014: 202), and their businesses subsist in a rapidly changing regulatory environment. In China, the profession of psychotherapy rewards a resourceful entrepreneurial spirit, and offers opportunities for social mobility. Chen Wei, my most iconoclastic interlocutor, is a former electrician from the countryside; he took the exam to become a psychotherapist, and now earns a living listening to the problems of Beijing celebrities, among others. He's now testing the waters of self-help social media, hoping to find additional sources of income. Chen's friend, who returned from Germany with a psychology degree, has opened a school that offers group classes on achieving independence through creative expression. Some psychologists find employment in summer camps teaching creativity and confidence. Other underemployed or ambitious psychotherapists are building internet sites, developing personal growth classes, writing self-help literature, and running team building retreats for corporations. Psychologists' position as entrepreneurs may be part of the reason why they view it as so important to teach people to define their own identity; as social critics, however, their professional status and analytic lenses align them more closely with modernist discourses about the Chinese character than with the language of civil society promoted by young activists.

Reaching for Creativity

I'm sitting in the gentle afternoon sunlight of a newly opened therapy and personal growth center, on the floor among the partly unpacked boxes. Suddenly, I receive a slap on my hand: "You can't eat that, it's dirty!" Ling, a Beijing psychotherapist, tells me that such slaps are what kill a child's curiosity. According to humanistic psychology, which has greatly influenced self-help, children are born naturally creative, driven to explore the world, to actualize their potential;¹⁶ Chinese psychologists often blame parents for crushing this potential, saying that they are culturally disposed to be over-protective and over-involved. And a great deal of discourse among young Chinese people, for instance on the online forum Anti-Parents,¹⁷ which now has over ninety thousand members, accuses parents of being overly strict and emotionally distant, or else excessively involved. Regardless of the specific charges made, the list of claimed damages always has the same items: lack of connection, curiosity, creativity, and confidence. Ling and her business partner have taken risks in the name of self-creation: they have just opened this center for

¹⁶ Humanistic and gestalt psychologists regard creativity as the flowering of life, but also as its root; creativity is the courageous act of overcoming habitual patterns so that one can make a life worthy of the name. Kurt Goldstein, who coined the term 'self-actualization,' wrote that "an organism is normal and healthy, in which the tendency toward self-actualization is acting from within, and overcomes the disturbance arising from the clash with the world, not out of anxiety but out of the joy of conquest" ([1939] 2000: 239). Georges Canguilhem defined pathology as that which makes the organism live in a "shrunk" world, while, "health is precisely a certain latitude, a certain play in the norms of life and behavior" (2008: 132). In the animal models used in biological research, anxiety is operationalized as a rat's unwillingness to explore its environment, typically the exposed parts of an elevated X shaped platform on which only two arms are safely enclosed. This is a suggestive way to visualize of the effects of fear on behavior.

¹⁷ 父母皆祸害

counseling and spiritual growth, their second venture in Beijing. Ling is an entrepreneur, and graduated from a self-help program that trains entrepreneurs.

I'm on a university campus, at a professional seminar led by Liao Rui, a family therapist who teaches at a top academic institution. Drawing on attachment theory, Liao explains that infants' secure attachment¹⁸ to their caregivers leads to trust, curiosity, and exploration of the world, and therefore ultimately to creativity. She emphasizes this last point: secure attachment leads to creative risk taking. As we will see in the next chapter, Liao excoriates Confucian culture for denying Chinese children secure attachment; she says that Chinese children live in fear because they are criticized and shamed, that they are born to be sacrificed for the good of their elders. While humanistic psychology describes an innate drive for creative self-actualization, attachment theory and object relations psychology imagine that creativity is born from an antagonistic struggle. This results from a clear separation between infant and mother, self and Other.¹⁹ These related lines of psychological thinking have been widely influential in social theory. For instance, sociologist Anthony Giddens sees secure attachment to the mother as the foundation of

¹⁸ Secure attachment means that children are upset when a caregiver leaves, but are not excessively distraught, and are easily consoled when the caregiver returns.

¹⁹ In this account, secure attachment ideally emerges from an oppositional struggle between infant and mother, a conflict in which each being must firmly realize its own boundaries before it can accept a distasteful interdependence. Melanie Klein, a key object relations theorist, calls this stalemate the "depressive position", and argues that only at this stage of separation can the infant regard the mother as an independent object: in our language, she becomes an Other. For Klein, this is the beginning of empathy. We will see that Chinese activists are using psychology in order to support an ethical relation to an Other, and are teaching what psychologists call theory of mind or mentalization.

trust in social institutions (1991; 1993). And in building his argument that recognition should be recognized as a basic human right, social philosopher Axel Honneth cites object relations theorist Donald Winnicott, maintaining that human creativity is based on secure attachment to the mother, a confident “capacity to be alone” (1996: 103); Honneth writes that the ability to be by oneself allows people to “become responsive to inner impulses and pursue them in an open, creative way, without fear of being abandoned” (1996: 104). A fair view of creativity however, might admit that it is often the shocks of life that set someone on a path apart. Eric Fish, author of *China’s Millennials*,²⁰ relates the story of a successful musician and software entrepreneur, who was interviewed for a Chinese television program championing innovation: the young man traced his creative inspiration to his parents’ divorce (2015: 107). The segment wasn’t aired. It seems that the official narrative needs people to have their innovation and be stable pillars of society too.

Xu, an American educated social entrepreneur in her twenties, has founded a company that teaches creativity and leadership through social engagement, running programs at top middle schools in Beijing. Xu’s company guides children as they each choose and study a social issue, suggesting an identification of creativity with individual social activism. Xu shares a parable with me. Some of her students needed to develop research projects in order to apply for an educational program in the United States. One mother, a rich official, planned an elaborate project for her son. When asked why she didn’t

²⁰ Fish, Eric. 2015. *China’s Millennials: The Want Generation*. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

let her son create his own project, the mother flatly stated that her son has no thoughts of his own. The entrepreneur of creativity sees a clear message: “If the kid really has no thoughts, it must be because of parents who never let him do what he wanted to do!” Xu tells me that Chinese parents are “over-protective,” using the English word; this, she says, is why children aren’t allowed to make mistakes. This is why, Xu explains, they fear failure, can't figure out what is right, don’t grow up, and lose the ability to think independently. In the United States, Xu tells me, children have time to play and do what they want.²¹

For many middle-class Chinese parents, play is a serious tool for developing the skills that will lead to psychological health and future success. And many Chinese people believe that Westerners know how to play better.²² They frame this as both a personal and a

²¹ In an odd twist, in America some people are attributing the ethic of “do what you like” to Confucius. A Harvard is on Chinese philosophy is extremely popular, and in it Confucian wisdom is turned into self-help advice: by starting with small things, connecting with others, and discovering what inspires you, you will be able to find a career that will mobilize your passions (Gross-Loh 2013). If the neighbor’s grass is greener, is it better actualizing its potential? Yu Dan, author of *Confucius from the Heart* promotes a similar interpretation of Confucius within China. She says that Confucius thought that “If you can make a good job of being yourself, then all over the world people will love and respect you like a brother” (2009: 38). However, the passage of the Analects that she is interpreting refers to the importance of living up to ideals of service to the world, meeting the demands of your role, not your soul.

[Gross-Loh, Christine. October 8, 2013. “Why Are Hundreds of Harvard Students Studying Ancient Chinese Philosophy?” *The Atlantic*.

Yu Dan. 2009. *Confucius from the Heart: Ancient Wisdom for Today’s World*. Trans. Esther Tyldesley. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Co./MacMillan.]

²² Take, for example, this article, which was forwarded on social media by a friend from Toastmasters who taught at an expensive kindergarten: “Foreigners Really Have Creativity: 24 Stay at Home and Delightful Parent Child Games” (2014). The article details how one can make playthings out of cardboard boxes, lay down roads with tape, and have a good time while building intimacy with your child.

national challenge. In her dissertation on arts education in contemporary China, Lily Chumley succinctly states, "... the discourse around the problem of creativity in China makes explicit links between the individual and the international, childhood play and global competition" (2011: 175). These are not new anxieties. In the 1930s, the founder of modern vernacular Chinese literature, Lu Xun, was impressed by the vitality of gamboling foreign children in Shanghai (Anagnost 1997a: 201). Sixty years later, influential social critic Boyang contrasted happy American children with harried, myopic Taiwanese ones (1992: 7). When we turn to lifestyle politics in the fourth chapter, we will see how Chinese young adults envy their foreign peers for knowing how to have fun, for being better at playing.

Chinese parents, as well as many teachers, lament the narrowness of Chinese education, and they worry about the harmful effects of excessive, isolating study on young people's character.²³ In 2001, no less of a national patriarch than Jiang Zemin expressed concern that students spend too much time with books, saying that they need to expand their range of social and practical engagement (Jiang 2001,²⁴ cited in Kuan 2014: 67).²⁵

["Foreigners are Really Creative: 24 Stay at Home and Delightful Parent Child Games [老外真有创意：二十四个宅在家里也充满乐趣的亲子游戏]." 2014.

²³ See Kipnis 2011: 41-42 for a suggestive example of a Chinese school schedule.

²⁴ Jiang Zemin. 2001. "A Talk Regarding the Education Problem [*guanyu jiaoyu wenti de tanhua*]." In Peng Li and Li Chen, eds. *The call for Education for Quality: Say "Reduce," Discuss Reform*. [*suzhi jiaoyu de huhuan: shuo 'jianfu,' tan gaige*]. Beijing: Xinhua Chubanshe.

²⁵ In her analysis of an educational enrichment program run by a psychotherapist, Teresa Kuan offers a reading of anxieties surrounding Chinese education that efficiently links concerns about national competitiveness and psychological health:

Because the child's body enters into too few relations, its capacity to act is diminished. This has implications not only for the national economy and China's quest for global strength, but also for a child's moral development

Middle class parents find themselves caught in a bind between ideals of happy self-actualization promoted by parenting literature, and intense social pressure to push their children to achieve academically; study usually wins out over play (Naftali 2010b: 601-2; Kuan 2015).²⁶ So too, government initiatives to ‘reduce burdens’ (*jianfu* - 减负) in school, have been stymied by parents who send children to supplemental classes, and by educators who have direct incentives to raise test scores. Nevertheless, parents are disposed to listen when psychologists and entrepreneurs tell them to let their children play, and to take risks.

In all of these stories about slapped hands, secure attachment, and stifled autonomy, personal creativity appears predicated on the ability to courageously open to the world, to fully engage with it. I take this to be an important insight, one that is central not only to

and his or her capacity to connect with his or her social, cultural and natural environments. (2014: 67)

Kuan sees this as a Spinozist way of thinking about the child: for Spinoza, people’s power grows through practice, as they encounter and engage with the world, entering into ever more “relations.” Following Kuan, I would suggest that Spinoza’s understanding of a subject that grows in power through multiplying engagements with the world, and not by exerting its will against it, can help us to understand Chinese perspectives on human development and personal identity. For example, while American educators typically view creative practices as enabling the expression of a pre-existing self (Jung 2007: 149), Chinese educators view creative pedagogies as means for scaffolding the emergence of emotional subjects, and cultivating an aesthetic sensibility by using the resources of China’s rich classical cannon (Kuan 2014).

²⁶ The educational system is also a source of suffering that psychologists deal with directly: middle school and even elementary students commit suicide due to intense pressure. On the other hand, many psychologists are complicit in amplifying these pressures, as some parents hire psychotherapists when students refuse to take tests, and some psychologists run programs that are supposed to use psychology to improve children’s learning ability.

academic theories of creativity but also to ethical and existential philosophy;²⁷ but the lines drawn from openness to creativity can easily be twisted to suggest that what is at stake is confidence itself rather than sensitivity, capacity, and opportunity. For Chinese educational reformers, creativity signals that a person is healthy and unafraid; but the widespread desire to develop creativity also responds to a deep-seated fear: be creative, or be nothing.

In the words of my mentor in Toastmasters, to sell a startup company to investors, you need a “this will change the world kind of attitude.” *Purple Cow*,²⁸ a popular self-help book about marketing, puts it this way: “You’re either a Purple Cow or you’re not. You’re

²⁷ Psychologist Rollo May also writes that creativity arises from an expansive spirit in an intense encounter with a world, emphasizing that this is a reality of insecurity and disintegration. May mentions that creativity itself produces anxiety, by shaking up existing patterns of relation to the world ([1975] 1994: 93). The meaning of creativity in these psychological accounts is slippery, encompassing both the action of initiating changes in the world, and the capacity to respond flexibly to it. Many philosophers follow a line parallel to that of humanistic psychologists. For Deleuze and Parnet, for example, creativity “is assembling, being in the middle, on the line of encounter between and internal world and the external world” ([1977] 2002: 52); they condemn the bad faith and decadent neuroses of those who cannot be open to encounter the world so that they can affect and be affected by it. This line of thinking is also suggestive of Martha Nussbaum’s idea that *eudaimonia*, is founded on contingency and vulnerability, on openness ([1986] 2001). In Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche, risk is central to the ideal of *amor fati*, love of fate ([1962] 2006: 27). He points out that Nietzsche’s ideal men should be risk takers: “Shy, ashamed, awkward, like a tiger whose leap has failed: thus I have often seen you slink aside, you higher men. A throw had failed you. But, you dice-throwers, what does it matter? You have not learned to gamble and jest as one must gamble and jest” (Nietzsche [1891] 1966: 292). For Deleuze and Parnet, risk taking has immediate qualitative effects on the personality. For example, they write that personal charm is an embrace of contingency, “... a throw of the dice which necessarily wins, since it affirms chance sufficiently instead of detaching or mutilating chance or reducing it to probabilities” ([1977] 2002: 5).

²⁸ Godin, Seth. 2009. *Purple Cow, New Edition: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable*. New York: Portfolio.

either remarkable or invisible. Make your choice.” Ulrich Bröckling, a sociologist who studies individualization and entrepreneurship, suggests that what is perceived as novel and innovative largely depends on social constructions of the status quo; he suggests that creativity is usually a matter of manufacturing distinctions rather than of actual invention or discovery (2016: 104). Bröckling shows that in this sense, creativity is in fact an assertion of creativity that receives social acceptance, and he suggests that in order to receive this recognition, “Being decisive is the element of difference” (2016: 111). We might add that one needs to learn not only confidence, but also how to see oneself through the eyes of strangers, to manipulate this image but also to identify with it. Scholars have traced a history of romantic thought through which creativity came to be understood as the expression of an authentic inner self.²⁹ Symbolically, these romantic worldviews closely bind personal identity with outward expression. Practically, the effect of identity also depends on self-expression to the degree that artists seek social recognition for their art. When people try to sell their creations by presenting them as sincere and passionate expressions of their unique personality, performance may come to seem like a mirror of the true self.

²⁹ Suggestively, Rollo May writes that during the Renaissance “There were no boundaries to human creativity if, as Michelangelo put it, the individual could but ‘trust himself.’” (1950: 161). Following Charles Taylor, we can see that the desire for self-discovery through creative expression means that in the contemporary world, “The artist becomes in some way the paradigm case of the human being, as an agent of original self-definition” (1991: 62). Creativity offers a path to a richer life, both materially and spiritually, and self-expression “is now what realizes and completes us as human beings” (Taylor 1989: 377).

Confident Pupils

“American children, no matter if their grades are good or bad, if they are ugly, tall or short fat or skinny, every one struts arrogantly, is spirited, anyone at all thinks they are very special, is a somebody (*renwu* - 人物). In other words, these children are all extremely confident.” So begins an article from a parenting blog titled “Why Is Every American Child so Confident?”³⁰ Popular psychology materials circulating in China generally assume that Western children, and especially American children, are all confident. The unnamed author of this article suggests two reasons for this: first, American kids have ample opportunities to perform in front of others, and second, they receive a lot of praise. The author incredulously recounts how she saw American teachers praise children that blabber on, telling them that they have unique views. She writes about a teacher who invites a child to the front of the class to present the single answer he got correct, and is astounded when the child’s classmates cheer for him “without sarcasm”. All American teachers are like this, the article claims. The author depicts this pedagogical approach as a refreshing alternative to Chinese education, to being disciplined by parents and shamed in front of classmates. Self-esteem is a major concern in recent Chinese parenting literature on producing high achieving students (Kuan 2015). Chinese educators are debating the role of self-esteem in

³⁰ “美国孩子为何个个自信.” This article was forwarded on social media by a graduate from a Carnegie Training course, and comes from a WeChat public account with the anxiety inducing name “Study to Be Perfect Parents” (学做完美父母).

learning,³¹ and we have seen how the self-esteem is a prominent theme in Toastmasters clubs.³² The article's author presents self-esteem as an antidote for unrealistic social ambition, and she not always clear on how best to administer this seemingly foreign medicine. For instance, the article suggests that parents should actually tell their child that even if she turns out stupid and ugly, they will still love her. Some Chinese materials on promoting confidence and self-esteem seek to do so in particularly local ways, sensitive to the importance of social integration, and irritated by brashness: one article for educators suggests that confidence comes from having a role in the class, and that teachers should take students down a peg if they are getting too arrogant.³³ But the article on American children presents an individualistic, liberal, democratic vision, telling parents to have

³¹ A 2009 article reports the heated controversy attending a paper delivered at a Shanghai education forum by Dai Feng, an elementary school math teacher from Zhejiang province. Concerned about the confidence and self-esteem of students, he advocated the "innovation" (创新) of not making red marks on student papers; he gives students both responsibility and credit for finding and correcting their own errors. Dai was awarded first prize for his paper, despite objections from some educators that this method will leave students unable to deal with challenges and frustrations. A powerful principle has last word: student need to know when they are wrong.

[Qian Yu. 2009. "作业批改'只打勾不打叉'好不好." news.qq.com]

³² At a Toastmasters club meeting, the club president, a Taiwanese American man, is introducing the evening's theme: "Excellence". He has a nine-year-old boy, and when he helps him with homework he wonders "What is the standard ability of an above average nine-year-old boy." But his message is that "... when I start to accept the math ability of my son as he is, I could see the improvement, the real improvement." In a squeaking, halting voice that bunches and tenses, he says that "it can be difficult for use to see our own excellence, because we are blinded by the standards of other people", and that if we learn to praise each other the world will be a better place. He then tells us to clap if we feel that the person on our left is excellent, then on our right, and then ourselves. The response is halting.

³³ "Methods for Developing Self-Respect in Students (学生自尊心的培养方法)." 2011.

children make choices, to include them in family decision making, and to give them privacy; the author claims that “This kind of spirit of respect is what our society lacks”.

Like many people in China, the author imagines that Western children are used to having ‘platforms’ (*pingtai* - 平台), and that this access gives them the advantage of self-confidence. The article emphasizes a central, anxiously recited tenet of the self-help faith: that confidence is important above all, that we are all already confident, that confidence comes from within, and only from within, and not from the opinions of others. But the article assumes that one must practice performing in order to develop confidence. Public performance appears in the article as an oddly reified, aspirational commodity. The author claims that American institutions strive to provide equal opportunities for students to participate in all activities; she says that in America anyone can play on the team or act in the play, and everyone will cheer for them. The author is describing a fictional America,³⁴

³⁴ Researchers have documented how participation in American extracurricular activities has long been correlated with class background (Ortner 2002a), a trend that seems to be deepening (Snellman, Silva, and Putnam 2015). The author’s perception of American inclusivity is also the exact opposite of what Korean anthropologist Hyang-Jin Jung noted in her study of an American high school. Jung perceives that American students are isolated by the policing of peer interaction, by activities that segregate students by interests and by access, and she is struck by a remarkable lack of collective recognition. Jung recounts how classmates were not even invited to the school orchestra’s concert, but only parents (2007: 160). Jung also questions the degree to which American education involves equal opportunities for self-expression, perceiving that expression is encouraged primarily in classes for gifted children (2007: 154). Jung noted that the only classroom interactions permitted were between teacher and student, and never horizontally between students, as is more common in Korea: the only exceptions occurred in classes for gifted students (Jung 2007: 160, 164). Jung’s account describes a subject that on the one hand is interpellated as an individual before an authority, split from its peers and isolated, and on the other hand is expected to perform before an anonymous audience. If those who do have access to the

but her account does reflect American's fictions about itself, aspirational visions of inclusivity that endure even in schools that are organized around competitive and institutionalized individualism. The article about American children suggests that performing in a school play will help one long after graduation, will help an adult to assert herself in the workplace. The author tells a story about her friend, a frustrated Chinese biology PhD working the United States. This scientist is depicted as far more skilled than her American colleagues but, critically, as lacking in confidence, unable to open her mouth to explain her own achievements: while the self-aggrandizing Americans get ahead, the quiet Chinese misses her chances.

The programmers and engineers in Toastmasters clubs would easily recognize this image of a frustrated scientist, sitting quietly in meetings. As one club member told me, in the international company she works for, "If you are not confident you won't be assigned important roles." She then paints a verbal depiction of programmers who work for five years but are not promoted, because they never communicate with other people. While Toastmasters club members suggest that programmers are held back by their individual psychosocial limitations, they also interpret the visceral frustrations of the workplace as the result of Chinese cultural and institutional conservatism. Young adults in China complain that in Chinese workplaces, no one can innovate; they associate this stasis with both Chinese culture and communist bureaucracy. A young psychotherapist tells me that at her

stage are so eager to claim their time in the spotlight, this only underscores the fact that access is so unequal; it seems like a mark of insecurity rather than confidence.

old government job at a university, no one could be creative. Any changes would generate more work for resentful colleagues, and new initiatives were stifled by bureaucratic procedure. The sense of such complaints is that nothing moves with vigor in official institutions and state-owned enterprises, but only floats slowly through the torpid ranks of seniority.

In their speeches, Toastmasters club members sometimes offer impassioned defenses of the creative power of youth. There is Thomas Suarez, the young software developer who we met earlier. Another member of our club gave a speech called “Just Because We are Young”; she cites Bill Gates, another famous dropout engineer, to suggest that innovation comes from the young and the bold. These accounts suggest how meritocratic and competitive economic ideals are rooted in the embodied frustrations and the micropolitics of everyday life. As the article on American children indicates, people in China place these intimate experiences in relation to global markets and to Chinese cultural politics.³⁵ Books

³⁵ In his influential polemic *The Ugly Chinaman*, author Boyang asserts that Chinese people cannot think independently: “China’s literati did little more than add footnotes to the theories propounded by Confucius and his disciples, rarely contributing any independent opinions, simply because the traditional culture did not permit it” (1992: 21). Many intellectuals have felt a need to apologize for China’s apparent lack of creative dynamism. China’s most famous anthropologist, Fei Xiaotong, explained this perceived stasis as a produce of social conservatism, and the gentry’s position as moral scholars, community leaders with no connection to technical knowledge and no incentive to innovate. Fei also points the relatively slow pace of social change over the course of Chinese dynastic history ([1947] 1984: 62), a stability which meant that traditions served as useful accumulations of “crystallized experience” (Fei 1980: 78).

on American education are top sellers in China, and people reflect on Chinese education from the perspective of an idealized, confident West.³⁶

When I ask an elementary school psychologist from an expensive private school what personality traits Chinese parents most desire for their children, she replies without hesitation that they especially want their children to be confident; she says that parents feel that confident children will get more opportunities, won't be bullied, and will be liked by their teachers.³⁷ This desire for confidence, in her view, is why many parents encourage their students to study music and other performing arts. The psychologist goes on to explain that parents want their children to learn public speaking skills, so that they can be "future leaders." Drawing language that evokes the popular novel *Wolf Totem*,³⁸ which depicts the Han Chinese as passive pastoralists, the psychologist suggests that Chinese

³⁶ In her study of elementary education in contemporary Beijing, Terry Woronov notes how Chinese people look to an imaginary America for ideas about how to reform education (2006: 34). In 2000, the best-selling book in China was *Education for Quality in the U.S.* [素质教育在美国 Huang 2001]. by Huang Quanyu (Woronov 2006: 40). Huang suggests that "Because the American education system encourages individual development and nurtures each student's genuine self, American children are self-actualized while their Chinese counterparts are not" (Woronov 2006: 41). In Huang's thinking, the ability to express one's inner self leads to confidence, entrepreneurship, and the happy self-actualization that this generation of middle-class Chinese parents desires for its children (Naftali 2010; Woronov 2006: 44). In the United States, meanwhile, some psychologists are anxious to defend against the disapproving glance of the Tiger Mother; a recent bit of statistical research accepts the idea that Chinese parenting produces academic success, but counters with the suggestion that American parenting leads to greater happiness (Pomerantz et al. 2014).

³⁷ According to a longitudinal study of shyness in Shanghai classrooms, teachers used to favor quiet children, viewing them as intelligent, but now teachers prefer students who speak up (Chen et al. 2005).

³⁸ Jiang Rong. [2004] 2009. *Wolf Totem: A Novel*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt. New York: Penguin.

people are adopting a Western “wolf culture”: “You must become a wolf, or you will die.” But developing confidence is not only a matter of aggressive self-promotion. Parents are also concerned with their children’s psychosocial development, their ability to obtain recognition and support. Teresa Kuan, for instance, cites a Chinese parenting expert who tells parents about the importance of throwing children’s birthday parties (2015: 168), suggesting that they must care for the child’s self-confidence, personality, and “likeability” (2015: 169). The conditions of access to social networks are changing in China; personality is joining wealth, power, and education as a valued commodity. Parents want their children to appeal to others through personal charm and the markers of a high-status lifestyle, like elaborate birthday parties. But they still want their children to associate with the good students; and in classrooms where academic achievement brings privileges, popularity and good grades are closely linked.

My research suggests that not only upper and middle-class parents are concerned with their children’s confidence and social capacity. In my study of an arts based social skills training program for migrant and lower-class children in Beijing, I found that parents were eager to tell me that Chinese education is boring and narrow. Members of the NGO running the program told me they sought to remedy the deficiencies of Chinese education by teaching empathy, emotional awareness, and emotional expression. But the parents talked about how they hoped that the program would provide their children with opportunities to play with their peers, to become more popular, confident, and playful. One mother said of her daughter: “I especially don’t want her to be obedient.” This sounds

surprising, given a common perception, and careful research (Fong 2007: 91), suggesting that Chinese parents highly value obedience: however, these elementary school children were quite young. And so perhaps for now, let them play. Parents were worried about their children's ability to make friends, and one mother was concerned that urban children in particular lack confidence. Like urban parents, rural parents in China regard academic achievement as the main channel for social mobility (Kipnis 2011). However, successful Chinese rural entrepreneurs seem more likely than urban professionals to emphasize the importance of acquiring practical experience. Even in a country where some mothers try to boost their children's test scores with special soups, some of these rural entrepreneurs are willing to experiment with alternative schooling for their children.³⁹

Chinese students, like their parents, are concerned with confidence. They link experiences of disordered sociality and anxiety about public speaking to Chinese education,

³⁹ While most Chinese parents see mainstream education as the safest path to security, success, and social mobility (Kipnis 2011; Kuan 2015), some parents emphasize practical experience or even emotional intelligence (Kuan 2015: 172), which here appears as part of a revaluation of the dominant patterns for achieving security. My sense is that this attitude is more common in southern China, where entrepreneurship is especially widespread, and among those who have themselves succeeded without much educational capital. For instance, in the mountains outside of Beijing there is an indigenized Waldorf school where the children learn tai-chi and calligraphy: most of their parents are not the educated bourgeois one might expect, but rather successful, entrepreneurial migrants from the countryside. Parents have to be willing to live near the school. Some middle-class parents, too, are sending their children to the Montessori and anthroposophic elementary schools that are appearing in major Chinese cities. However, teachers who work in the schools complained to me that parents don't understand their approach or are even very uncomfortable with their teaching philosophy, and simply regard the schools as expensive Western imports that will give their children an edge.

which emphasizes listening rather than speaking. Young adults often complained to me that Chinese schools have not provided them with platforms for practicing self-presentation skills; serious students are actively seeking out such platforms, including public speaking clubs and debate clubs. Between 2011 and 2013, debate leagues expanded into cities all across China, organized and sponsored by American educational companies in cooperation with the Communist Youth League. Companies selling debate carefully choose safe topics, and they pitch their product not as a way to promote pluralism and critical thought, but as a way to increase confidence and creativity.⁴⁰ As they look towards international business and international schools, Chinese students are not only seeking to become confident, but to become confident in English. In recent years, China's two most popular educators have both been unconventional English teachers: Yu Minhong of New Oriental, and Li Yang

⁴⁰ I spoke with Zachary, a young American who works for a company running debates in China. Top schools in China have contracts with the American National Speech and Debate Association, and many teachers came from the United States to help set up debate clubs. The first league open to any school in China was only established in 2011-12, but by 2013 had expanded to most Chinese cities. Debates are conducted mostly in English, and the exercises are sold as American style debate (美式辩论), a cultural exercise that raises quality (*suzhi*). The company thus aligns itself with the education for quality movement. Topics are chosen carefully, and debate is presented as part of the "speech contest" genre rather than as about critical thinking and a plurality of voices. The debate league is supported by the Communist Youth League of China, and receives major sponsorship for running events from consulting companies that help Chinese students apply to universities abroad. Zachary tells me that one of the largest consulting firms is headed by a devout Christian who doesn't drink. Yet the company has events at which Chinese high school students are encouraged to get very drunk, as part of teaching them how to "be Western", and helping them to overcome perceived social deficits.

from Crazy English.⁴¹ Both like to tell triumphant narratives of overcoming their shyness in order to learn English and achieve success.⁴² In Li Yang's popular mass classes, students are encouraged to shout loudly in English (Woodward 2008), practicing volume more than vocabulary.⁴³

The 2013 film *American Dreams in China*,⁴⁴ which dramatizes Yu Minhong's life, begins with a strong message: confidence is the key to success, and, moreover, it's a basic requirement of American culture. In the film, the thinly veiled proxy for a lost, ambitious young Yu reads Dale Carnegie. He succeeds in overcoming his shyness, and founds a chain of schools in which English teachers address packed auditoriums with the high energy performances of salesmen or self-help gurus. Yet the movie frames Yu's success less as an example of American dreams of self-creation, than as the fulfillment of a nationalistic China Dream.⁴⁵ In a climactic scene, Yu confronts executives from EES, which stands in for ETS, the American company that administers tests including the SAT. The executives are threatening to sue Yu's company for stealing copyrighted materials, which it has. At the

⁴¹ Li Yang admittedly beat his American wife, Kim Lee, in 2011; his image suffered but his schools still survive.

⁴² Yang was very introverted. See: Zhang Rui. 2006. "The Business of English." www.china.org.cn

⁴³ In Toastmasters and other personal growth groups in Beijing, people circulate the idea that shouting or singing in public is a good way to overcome psychological barriers to happiness and success.

⁴⁴ Chan, Peter. 2013. *American Dreams in China* [zhongguo hehuoren]. Hong Kong: Edko Films.

⁴⁵ A government campaign, started in 2013, promotes the 'China Dream' (中国梦), later officially translated more individualistically, as 'Chinese dreams'; this campaign blends narratives of self-fulfillment with nationalist themes.

meeting, Yu's partner takes a confrontational stance: telling the executives to back down, he says "You hear me loud and clear, in English." But Yu proposes to admit his company's wrongdoing, and to settle out of court. However, he moves to take the moral and tactical high ground.

Yu impresses the American executives with his studiousness and with his memory; he demonstrates that he has memorized all of the American legal codes relevant to their dispute, word for word, on the flight to New York. He tells the executives that they don't understand Chinese students' determination, and berates Americans for mistreating Chinese people. Yu says that by establishing his company, he is seeking justice for his friend, a brilliant, frustrated scientist who failed to establish a career in New York because of discrimination. "The playing field has never been even", Yu says righteously. He reminds the executives to be careful, because China is their most important market. And in a final, triumphant maneuver, Yu lets the Americans know that their lawsuit has given him the "perfect opportunity" to take his company public on the stock exchange: the lawsuit has provided him with free publicity. In addition, when he performs a public apology, Wall Street investors will recognize his company's "integrity and courage". Yu is not apologetic in the least: but he will perform the public rituals of contrition, for his own ends. This mask is not a mirror. At the end of the film, we see images of famous Chinese entrepreneurs, like Alibaba's Ma Yun and Lao Ganma, the Old Godmother, face of a much-loved line of Sichuanese condiments, of the flavors that enrich instant noodles in countless Chinese dorm

rooms.⁴⁶ In the vision set forth by the movie, confident self-presentation skills will lead to success as a student or as an entrepreneur, and will help China rise to its rightful place as a leader on the global stage. It seems telling that Yu's business partner is now funding both creative entrepreneurship and the performing arts in Beijing.⁴⁷

Making Good Eye Contact with the Arbiters of Fate

In the summer of 2013 I attended a conference that several Chinese college students organized for high school students. I went hoping to meet some ambitious and thoughtful young adults; I didn't realize that the college students had planned the event in order to teach their younger peers self-presentation skills.⁴⁸ The conference was well publicized, and enlisted the services of a large consulting firm that helps students apply to American universities. Every year hundreds of thousands of Chinese students apply to American schools, and many Chinese students are learning to craft a passionate persona in order to please American admissions officers. Most of these students enlist the services of educational consulting companies, whose agents teach them that their grades matter less than their interests, their projects, and the ability to confidently present a clear, well narrated identity. For two days at a conference center in the north of Beijing, a set of powerful, contrasting discourses converged on a single challenging and culturally loaded

⁴⁶ Especially famous is Lao Ganma's delicious chili black bean sauce. Chinese food seems like a particularly potent source of cultural pride in China.

⁴⁷ Xu Xiaoping, founder of the Zhenge Jijin startup fund, and a major supporter of an independent theater in Beijing.

⁴⁸ Not incidentally, the University of Chicago is trying to establish classes teaching these self-presentation skills to elite students in China and India.

question, the question that new members are called to answer in their first speech at a Toastmasters club: “Tell me about yourself.”

Fifty students from around China are sitting in a large new auditorium, the boys in shirts or suits, the girls in professional dress, almost all wearing black and white. A speaker is lecturing them, his satisfied stomach rounding out a shirt with Chinese buttons and a Chinese collar. His speech aims to instill a sense of national pride in these elite students, before they fly abroad. The lecturer draws on themes from the ‘national learning’, or *guoxue* (国学), movement, a nationalistic popular revival of Chinese classical culture (Farquhar and Zhang 2012: 279). His speech weaves threads from China’s spiritual traditions into a rambling motivational shaming. The students are told that Confucian social responsibility means that they should study hard, for the nation, and so as to pay back the parents who have sacrificed so much to raise these little “pandas”. We hear that a Daoist awareness of change can help us maintain a positive attitude, while reminding us to adapt ourselves to nature: we should get up early to study. A girl in the audience is nodding vigorously. The speaker says that China’s greatest pride is its indestructible culture, and tells the students that they need to be transformed by education, and especially by reading the Chinese classics. He uses the term *jiaohua*, meaning to civilize, enlighten, or indoctrinate, a word whose two characters signify education and transmutation (教化). Rather than depicting tradition as a barrier to self-actualization, the speaker makes classical education central to ethical self-making.

Rather than locating will power within the individual, this speaker suggests that people draw resolve from nature, history, and ideals, and especially from the nation. Breaking down the character for will or ideal, *zhi* (志), the speaker suggests that its bottom component, symbolizing the heart, represents a call to “serve the people” (*wei renmin fuwu* - 为人民服务).⁴⁹ This is the moral slogan of the Chinese Communist Party, and captures a vision of social engagement that is strikingly different from liberal understandings of civil society. Literary scholar Lee Haiyan has recently argued that the Chinese Communist Party has created an “atrophy of moral imagination” by claiming a monopoly on moral agency (2014: 2). Specifically, Lee suggests that the state undermined “stranger sociality” by making everyone ideally the same. Drawing on Emmanuel Lévinas and Zygmunt Bauman (1993), she accuses the Communist Party of “aesthetically collapsing” the distances between people, and thus denying them the possibility of having ethical encounters with strangers (Lee 2014:21). Analyzing exemplary comrade Lei Feng, the central figure in government propaganda promoting public service and civil morality, Lee suggests that

Lei Feng conceives of his existence as entirely for the Party and the people, but he achieves this only by permanently dissolving himself in the “we.” Thus when Lei Feng extends a helping hand to a needy person, he is not traversing the distance/difference from the I to the other, but merely going from the self-same to self-same. (2014: 22)

⁴⁹ As for the other component, *shi* (士), our speaker explains that it means to put down roots, to be connected to nature and history: it doesn’t usually have any of these meanings.

While I agree with Lee's insights, I view her approach as overly individualistic; like other thinkers inspired by Lévinas, she seeks to found ethics in an encounter between two disembedded strangers. But the puzzle before us is whether and how young adults in China are identifying themselves as public actors, in relation to the Others of a liberal society, to the gaze of strangers and of an impersonal law. It is therefore important to note that Lee conveys her sense of moral crisis in terms of Chinese people lacking an "other". Young ethical entrepreneurs, including the organizers of this youth conferences, are teaching people in China to relate to this Other through firm handshakes and clear ethical stances. However, these visions of civic engagement will not necessarily undermine the state monopoly on moral agency that Lee identifies. The Chinese government is working to harness ethical idealism, and ethical entrepreneurship, to promote social stability, solidarity, and integration.

In any case, students have not come to this conference in order to save their country but in order to leave it. In case the students did not yet sufficiently identify themselves with the nation, the speaker launches into a long discussion of the dragon, the totemic symbol of the Han people.⁵⁰ It's time, he says, for Chinese people to stop "being cows and horses", a phrase referring to hard labor, and to become dragons. The speaker's performance might strike a liberal Westerner in the audience as an unusual motivational speech, but an

⁵⁰ Who sometimes call themselves "descendants/disciples of the dragon" (龙的传人).

intelligible one nevertheless. But one particular exchange shows just how distant the ethic expounded on stage is from a broadly Western sensibility.

In the West, the speaker states, one plus one is two: “How much does it equal in China?” He singles out a student sitting near the front. The young man, sensing a trap, is reluctant to answer: finally, the student exclaims “I don’t know!” “Correct!” replies our mentor. In China, he explains, the proper response is, “How much do you want it to equal?” Two plus two is five: for Orwell this the terrible nightmare of Big Brother, crushing the capacity for independent thought, severing the roots of the human spirit. But for this speaker it appears as the beautiful flower of a Chinese tradition in which calculation is always interpersonal, the balance hanging on a social relationship rather than an equals sign. In the West, he continues, people ask what you want to drink, and you tell them what you want; in China, you answer “Whatever,” but you pay close attention to see how the other person treats you. The speaker uses these examples to demonstrate Chinese culture’s emotional maturity and interpersonal sensitivity; however, many within or outside of China would have quite different assessments.⁵¹ Denying what one knows seems like a dangerous invitation for corruption, abuse, delusion, and humiliation. To allow that one plus one might not be two is to violate the moral imperatives to stand up for oneself, and to speak the truth. It is to knowingly fail the Asch conformity test, to give up any claim to

⁵¹ Boyang, for instance, sees such guarded communication as spineless (1992: 19).

one's own perspective, an intolerable self-abasement.⁵² One need not see self-assertion as the foundation of pride, or directness as the most ethical way of regulating relationships; nor does one have to be sincere about every utterance. And yet, in drawing an example from mathematics the speaker gives us a lucid example of how the Other of transcendent, impersonal logic can open up space for an independent self. His speech gestures towards the self-effacing limits of the values of harmony and interpersonal adjustment.

While this speech conveys a self-consciously Chinese message, even among the filial pandas and nationalist rhetoric peek pages taken from Western psychology. The speaker piously recites that while interpersonal relationships are important, self-esteem is even more vital. Although these messages may seem incongruous, self-esteem does not necessarily depend on direct self-assertion. And the students are not likely to perceive any sharp dissonance between the themes of self-definition and self-adjustment: after all, we will see that they are here to learn how to get ahead through adaptation, studying how to dress themselves to please American eyes. In comparison with the first lecturer, the second speaker spins the more familiar self-help tale of the self-made man; but he tells it in a way that seems strangely insincere.

A thin Taiwanese man takes the stage with the smug air of an art forger who just sold his Mona Lisa. He claims to have a PhD, to be an expert in psychology, and to have

⁵² Along with other psychological research programs, the Asch Conformity Experiments were motivated by post-war fears of totalitarianism, and by anxieties about maintaining individuality in a mass society.

had a distinguished international consulting career: he drops the names of some prominent world leaders. He later tells me that he runs a corporate training center.⁵³ For now, on stage, he presents himself as a sophisticated consultant. He says that he began his career as a taxi driver in Taipei. He proudly tells the students stories about his shifty business practices, such as pretending not to have change, or rounding up fares; it seems that for the speaker, these stories demonstrate an admirable ambition. But the main focus of his speech is the importance of appearances; he talks about washing his taxi and writing “Taiwan’s best taxi” on the window. Appearance is everything in his redundantly three-pointed patented formula for success, based on self-presentation, image, and exposure. But from his perspective and from mine, this is all a confidence game. One must be self-assured, he says, and one must receive attention. In fact, the speaker suggests that a person must speak on every social occasion in order to benefit from feedback and to build social connections. Above all, one must be visible. Schools don’t teach these skills to children, the speaker says: that’s why, he explains, he took his son out of school in Taiwan after the third grade. Like ethical entrepreneurs, like parents and students in mainland China, he sees confident social skill as the missing element in Chinese education. This speaker is teaching students how to use a public image in order to get ahead, but he doesn’t suggest that public appearances involve a personal commitment, or that they reflect the substance of the self. But then even sincerity becomes a lie in the reflexive mirrors of image consultants and advertisers.

⁵³ He now owns a corporate training center in western China, and, according to him, when we spoke he was soon to open three more centers around the country.

As in the first speech, personal and national confidence appear inseparable. With seeming admiration, the speaker talks about how Starbucks opened a branch within the Forbidden City. This branch was eventually closed; for some Chinese people, this Starbucks branch symbolized a humiliating neo-colonialism. This speaker seems to admire Starbucks for its highly visible real estate acquisitions, but he does have some stir up discontent about the political economy of coffee. He explains that coffee beans now grown in Yunnan province are already top grade, but the profits all flow abroad. Whereas the first speaker talked about culture as China's indestructible heritage, this one is interested in monetizing it. He asks why there aren't slick brands for Chinese food. In fact, there are many. For example, in 2012 a young IT professional turned entrepreneur founded a chain of fast-food stores selling *jianbing* (煎饼), a kind of breakfast pancake commonly sold from roadside carts rather than in sparkling malls. The founder, Chang He, became a minor celebrity. At a 2015 conference on entrepreneurship at Beijing's elite Tsinghua University, he spoke to fervid applause about his vision of people holding a branded *jianbing* in one hand, and a Starbucks coffee in the other. Chang offers this as an image of "cultural victory" (*wenhua de shengli* - 文化的胜利), begging the question of what kind of culture Chinese fast-food represents.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ My friend in the audience, a young Chinese professional, suggests that Chang presents himself as filled with *qinghuai* (情怀), deeply motivating sentiments that are generally evoked in a Confucian gentleman by the thought of social duty. In the Chinese literary cannon, poet scholars are often called away from individual cultivation in the countryside in order to serve the nation. Now, entrepreneurs can link themselves to these notions of duty.

It had been a bizarre morning, for me, certainly, even if not for the students who were nodding along. Outside, the sunny conference campus heightens the unreality of the proceedings. A towering white edifice, unfolding petals like the monumental temple of a space cult, is watching over immaculate green lawns. Sleek slate corporate suites open onto paths that wind beneath arching willows, over marble bridges, curving through fields of preternaturally orange flowers that glow in the shade along a rambling canal. I pluck an apple from a tree, and pet one of the deer that are roaming in a large enclosure. I wonder who this place was made for. Over lunch, I ask the organizer of the conference, a college student back from the United States for summer vacation, why he had put together this event. He tells me that Chinese students are poorly prepared for studying abroad. First, he emphasizes that since Chinese students don't choose their field of study, they don't get good at what they do. They lack passion. Above all, however, the organizer shares his concern that his peers lack the "soft skills" to succeed abroad, both socially and academically; the need to develop these "soft skills", he says, is why he himself studied public speaking before going abroad. Following the morning's lectures, and after lunch, the rest of the conference is spent teaching students how to sell themselves to American schools.

That afternoon and the following day, the conference events are run by American consultants, graduates and former admissions officers from top American universities. They divide students into teams, and have them compete to design a product, a logo, and a sales pitch. This exercise is common in the creativity classes offered in top Chinese high

schools, and in creativity courses that ambitious young Chinese adults take online;⁵⁵ the exercise has students practice social skills of collaboration and presentation in the context of a corporate or entrepreneurial fantasy, and as a competitive game. In between sessions of group work on marketing a product, students are learning how to sell themselves, receiving tips on being interviewed by American schools. The consultants split the students into several groups of about fifteen, and we shuffle into conference rooms that smell of damp ashtrays. While the conference center gleams on the outside, the interior has received less attention. Appearances matter a great deal at the conference, and in the design of the conference center, but a Chinese social critic might suggest that these appearances are only superficial masks. Inside this room, the walls are framed with fake wood, and covered with musty, faded fabric panels. The students gather around a pitted conference table, and learn that in order to impress admissions officers they need to speak up, to leave an impression, and that, above all, they need to be interesting.

During the first session, a former admissions officer from an elite American university tells the students that as an officer, it would only take him “five seconds” to see if a student was interesting. He explains that the answer to the question “Tell me about yourself” should never be a life history, should never be given in what Toastmasters club members call “the Chinese way”: rather, one should respond with specific interests and

⁵⁵ Stanford University is a particularly flashy beacon of innovation. Two members of my Toastmasters club had, together, taken an online course on creativity taught by Stanford’s Tina Seelig. And YouthMBA, an organization that helps Chinese children become more confident and creative, is inspired by the influential Stanford d.school.

passions. He guesses, presumably based on his experience, that many of these students can't explain what their interests are, or why these things interest them. The next day, during a session of mock interviews, he tells a student "You never had to choose", explaining to him that this injurious lack of autonomy is why he doesn't know his own passions, or doesn't have any. His assessment of Chinese students may seem presumptive, and is guided by some particularly American standards. But the counselor is trying to help these students to face the practical challenges of going overseas.

The teacher spends most of the session teaching the students to construct life narratives around their passionate interests, around hobbies or quirks. Educational consultants in China offer what is sometimes called "activity management",⁵⁶ in which they have students develop hobbies, tell them to join extracurricular activities, and make them articulate an academic interest.⁵⁷ The idea that students would volunteer in order to have something to write about for an admissions essay strikes some young adults in China as an example of Chinese cynicism and superficiality, even though Americans are teaching them to play this game. But we see that the admissions counselors are advocating a kind of "deep acting" (Hochschild 1983), drawing on emotional and intellectual resources. They emphasize that a convincing story requires both a passion and a justification, *pathos* and

⁵⁶ Thanks to Eric Hendriks for introducing me to this term.

⁵⁷ Although even within China, excelling at a musical instrument or other pursuit can help a student to get into a top school, as can taking a leadership position in a school club: these activities add a certain amount of points to an application. However, test scores are by far the most important factor in admissions.

logos. The counselor explains to the students that they need to be emotionally engaged with their work, passionate, but also that they need to have reasons for liking certain subjects, or wanting certain jobs: they must be able to give a logical, discursive account of themselves. Again, we see the objectified subject, the individual committed to her identity, emerging when she is called to justify herself under the gaze of a powerful stranger.

While most members of Toastmasters clubs are a bit older than these high school students, they too orient themselves in a world in which they feel pressure to project confidence and to demonstrate their passions. For instance, one member of our club gave a speech about a job candidate who failed an interview at international company in Beijing because he seemed too careerist: the company wanted someone who is “passionate” about their product. Young professionals and top students in China are learning that passions make you visible and interesting, that passions will get you a job or an acceptance letter. However, the students at the conference seem less worried about displaying and justifying their passions than about being asked about them in the first place.

One after another, students in the conference room describe feelings of social anxiety and ineptitude. One engineering student says “I want to be more comfortable in groups”, and another says he is troubled by his inability to talk to strangers. As one student talks about his shyness, he is being told to make good eye contact. Another student expresses a common sentiment: “I need to get more social experiences because I focused on study too much.” Several students say that they came to the conference to improve their confidence. One rising sophomore, who tells us that he had worked on a television production, is not

like the others. He tells us that he is very confident, saying “I like to talk with strangers, so they can feel my confidence and comfort.” But for him, no less than for the shy students, visible confidence is an important key to who he is, not least in the eyes of the Westerners who would decide if he could fly abroad.

A Potential Prophet

I first met Li Bo when he came to our Toastmasters club, at the invitation of our club president. As an educational reformer and a cosmopolitan entrepreneur, Li embodies the aspirations of many club members; but on his face, one can also trace the fractured lines of a highly individualized life course. When called up to the front of the room to introduce himself, he says “Don’t ask me where I’m from”; he tells us that his family is originally Chinese, but that he has moved twenty-five times. Although just a bit older than that, he stands before us with poise and presence. His slight frame is adorned in quiet but fashionable clothing; his girlfriend hangs adoringly at his side. Li tells us that he likes education, dancing, and, evoking gasps around the room, entrepreneurship. When our club president mentions that Li graduated from Duke University, there is another sharp intake of breath. She publicly implores him to give our club a lecture, he acquiesces.

A month after his first visit to the club, Li returns to talk about his work and his worldview. He explains that he has founded an educational consulting service because he wants to make “not test-taking machines, but people”. With a barrage of psychological terms and concepts, with videos and exercises, he wants to show us that the mind determines our experience, that the mind is the primary obstacle to self-actualization. For

example, he gives several people a piece of chocolate, and asks them to rate their eating experience on a scale of one to ten: without waiting for their replies, Li suggests that for some people the chocolate is a two, for others it is an eight. His point is that the chocolate matters less than our perception of it, that external reality does not determine our experience. As he begins to explain how our future self should manage our present self, he runs out of time and rushes quickly through Van Gogh as an innovator, the importance of punctuality to a pleasant meal, and the power of “purpose” to enrich life, to helping us acquire “a wealth of experience”. He concludes by urging us to “think like an entrepreneur, live like an artist.” Perhaps the reverse would be better? Most artists in Beijing live rather far from the subway lines. But Li’s point is that that entrepreneurs and artists alike are curious and creative. He says that both are “hooked into life”, doing something, now.

Li Bo and I have lunch one day at a Japanese restaurant. At first his eye contact is fleeting, his gaze perpendicular to mine so that he appears like a figure in an Egyptian relief. His style of conversation is choppy, punctuated with non-profit buzzwords and meta-linguistic: he explains what he's going to say subsequently, although usually the flow of words doesn't let him cover all of these bullet points. It is clear that he has experience pitching projects, and that he reflects extensively about himself and his actions. He is always thinking about what other people might be thinking, and has ready justifications for his views and actions. Any inquiry I throw out immediately bounces back in the form of a carefully rehearsed answer. In this manner, Li shares the development of his ideology and his career, his interest in the “human factor”, and in using “art and science for unleashing

human potential." As an undergraduate student, he participated in the DukeEngage program, funded by the Melinda Gates Foundation. This program brought him and eleven other undergraduates to a city in southern China, where they used the arts to teach a variety of academic subjects; more importantly, Li explains, they hoped to use art to impart lessons about self-confidence and the importance of having dreams. In Li's view, they were addressing a crisis of identity among Chinese youth. People underestimate, he says, how "a lack of self-identity hinders long-term development."

Li came to China a second time as part of a dance performance, and he tells me that being on stage was psychologically transformative. Like the formerly shy celebrity English teachers discussed above, Li Bo tells a story of overcoming the limits of his personality through public performance. The freedom of self creation can be identified with the liberation of the dance floor. Dance has an unacknowledged place in the history of liberal thought and existential philosophy. Rousseau located the root of *amour-propre*, sensitivity to the gaze of others, in the prideful preening of a community dance: this was where he placed the origin of envy, competition, and inequality. And for Kierkegaard, a philosopher so achingly embarrassed by his own existence, the dance was a tantalizing vision of freedom. He writes that "If a person could have a part just once, could lead the waltz of the moment just once – then he has lived, then he becomes the envy of the less fortunate, those who are not born but rush headlong into life" ([1844] 1981: 105). If Kierkegaard were to join a Toastmasters club, he could have a role in every meeting, and go waltzing every weekend. Many Toastmasters club members are involved in social dance, and so too were a number

of the young Chinese entrepreneurs who I met in the course of my research. Dancing offers both a way to meet people, and an embodied experience of liberation. Recall Edgar, who worked through crippling social anxiety using dance therapy, slowly slipping out from under a social gaze that had pinned him in place.

When a young entrepreneur whose personal history traces fractured lines around the globe, a man who found freedom through dance, speaks about the importance of creative self-definition, it is clear that his ideology responds to some difficult conditions for identity formation. When Li Bo discusses feeling “hooked into life,” it seems to me that he is describing those experiences of symbolic and practical social integration that produce a sense of identity, the moments when one feels “The fusion of the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’ in social activities” (Mead [1934] 1967: 273). These experiences are not about exerting conscious control: one becomes free as an automaton. But Li suggests a very deliberate path to deriving this freedom. Although he talks about opening to the world, this is in some ways the opposite of what is called mindfulness: rather than escaping the self by accepting suffering, one escapes from painful diffusion by consciously precipitating the self, defining an explicit identity that might lead to social, economic, and psychological integration. Li is teaching young Chinese people how to construct such an identity. Li tells me that after completing his undergraduate studies in behavioral economics, he returned to China to start his company, running courses and camps that teach creativity, empathy, teamwork, and “self-awareness”. Li is occupied, he says, by a question that would drive Willy Loman mad: “How to help a nation of young people find themselves?”

Li Bo also makes a strong pitch that the value of individual self-actualization promotes social responsibility. Li suggests to me that in China, which does not have a reliable rule of law, the “human factor” has an especially important role to play in creating a better society, in fighting corruption, pollution, and social indifference. As an example, Li offers the idea that if people would only learn to value work as a creative expression of the self, this would help to alleviate China’s food safety problem: at the moment, “people who make food don’t really care about making good food.” Li’s nobly intentioned attempt to ground social justice in individual enterprise is foreign in China, but the idea that moral virtue is a site for social intervention is an ancient logic.⁵⁸ In Li Bo’s thinking and in Chinese political philosophy, the key way to improve governance is to raise the moral quality of the leader; and the key way to improve moral character is through education, broadly construed. Currently, the Chinese Communist Party seems to really hope that raising the educational level, and therefore quality (*suzhi* – 素质), of officials will improve governance and obviate the need for fundamental structural political reforms.⁵⁹

Young, idealistic Li Bo is flying freely in China. The educational sector is flooded with money and vertiginously open. In China’s wild markets, there are few legal and professional barriers to prevent him, or other ethical entrepreneurs, from setting up educational enterprises. These entrepreneurs of psychological capital perform a vital role of

⁵⁸ The image of social virtue emanating from the ruler’s self-cultivation is an old trope in Chinese political thought (Ames 1994; Farquhar and Zhang 2005).

⁵⁹ The government is trying to raise the quality of officials by requiring that candidates for high-level posts have graduate degrees. These can, however, be ‘honorary’ degrees.

translation,⁶⁰ bundling the concerns of educators and officials into neat pedagogical programs. Li's company works with top high schools in Beijing, including experimental high schools that are supervised not by local authorities but directly by the Ministry of Education; some of the school principals are in the Ministry. Li learned the importance of confident expression by pitching projects, and through a dance performance. He now has audiences at the highest levels of government, and his pedagogy of "self-awareness" could reach the two hundred million students in Chinese primary and secondary schools.⁶¹

Young, international, and entrepreneurial, Li knows the power of defining an identity around clear propositions and ideals. But many people in China are prepared to hear his message: that you need to know who you are, and that you need to know that you need to know. Psychologists who work with young adults are especially receptive to this idea. In the mental health center at a top university in Beijing, two counselors are telling me that Chinese youth do not develop an identity. Citing Erik Erikson, one suggests that "People should develop an identity during adolescence." She continues: "Now in China they don't develop, they just prepare for tests. And they don't know that they need to think independently." When students arrive in the relative freedom of college, the counselors say,

⁶⁰ In the sense of translation developed by Bruno Latour, in which translation involves transposing concerns between different fields. Rose argues that psychology gained wide purchase as a form of governance because psychologists were adept at this function of translation (Rose 1998: 55).

⁶¹ About one of every thirty-seven people now alive.

they have no interests of their own and are utterly lost. “Who am I?” and “What do I want?” They can’t answer these questions, the counselor explains. Then again, who can?

Empathy as Activism

Over the past decade, Beijing has become an international hub for art and design. In the autumn, during the yearly Beijing Design Week, futuristic sculptures grow in the courtyards of central Beijing, sprouting over the old tiled roofs. In the design expo, Western creative professionals are pitching their proposals with lofty talk so far above their modest projects that it’s hard to see the grounds. Some Americans are making nice maps of recreational bike routes: they sell themselves as environmentalists. A few Europeans are thinking of ways to brand the charm of old Beijing: they suggest that this is both cultural preservation and economic empowerment. It’s not so clear that this way lies the path to authenticity, or to self-actualization. But young adults in Beijing and China’s other central cities are learning the benefit of appearing innovative and idealistic. They also realize that in order to sell themselves to investors, to stand out in a market, they need to know what other people like to see, to reflect on themselves from the perspective of an Other. Seeing oneself through the eyes of other people can be conceived of as a psychosocial exercise. Chinese activists are busy developing social interventions that teach people how to take the perspectives of other people, drawing on psychology and using the performing arts.

On a Sunday afternoon in winter I visit a craft fair, a marketplace crowded into a courtyard that must have once belonged to a wealthy family. Dozens of foreigners are trying to sell homemade jam, organic snacks, patchwork purses stitched by impoverished

women somewhere halfway around the world. One young Chinese man has a stall selling inspirational magnets: one says “Goal digger”. It appears that some people are in the market for a purpose, professional or existential. A Chinese woman in her thirties hands me a translation of the book *Improv Wisdom*,⁶² explaining that she teaches theater to what are often called ‘migrant children’ (*liudong zidi* - 流动子弟); these are the children of workers who have come to the cities from the provinces, children who have little access to the schools and social services available to legal urban residents. The woman tells me that her organization uses improvisational theater to teach migrant children to be sensitive to other people. Depicting this intervention as a redistribution of psychological capital, the activist explains that poor children will become more economically competitive by developing the capacity to recognize other people’s emotions and intentions, and the ability to view themselves through the eyes of others.

Numerous organizations in China, including some of the country’s largest NGOs, are now using art, acting, and improvisation to teach migrant children how to take the perspective of an Other. The attentions of activists express a concern for social justice, but this concern is also expressed in part as a civilizing project. When I spoke with activists who work with migrant children, they often depicted abusive families. They talk not only about physical injuries, but also about failures of recognition. The founder of one NGO tells me about a father who didn’t believe his son had a medical problem affecting his coordination;

⁶² Madson, Patricia Ryan. 2005. *Improv Wisdom: Don’t Prepare, Just Show Up*. New York: Bell Tower.

not until he saw the child spill a drink did he believe him. In the next chapter, we will see that psychologists often accuse Chinese parents of not knowing how to read (*du* - 读) their children. Psychologists tend to think that this is especially true about poor parents, who they say are authoritarian, sometimes abusive, and generally unable to respect or even understand their children's perspectives (Naftali 2010b: 601).⁶³ Social activists have greater access to children than to their parents: but, as we will see in the next chapter, psychologists are teaching Chinese parents to treat their children as others with distinct feelings and perspectives.

Recent anthropological discussion of "emotional pedagogies" (Wilce and Fenigsen 2016) has focused on how these psychological interventions teach people to label and manage their own emotions. But in her discussion of techniques such as "sensitivity training", Eva Illouz has shown that both corporate managers and relationship counselors spend a lot of time teaching people how to pay attention to the feelings of others (2008). In China, many psychologists, and activists who draw on psychology, see themselves as working to reform a callous society; by teaching empathy through the performing arts, they engage in a shared ethical project of building a modern, civilized polity. Because the ability to identify oneself in the eyes of another is a key form of psychological capital, they find

⁶³ Naftali begins her article by discussing a quote from a Chinese educational reformer: "'Are children persons or objects?' asks the author of an essay published in China under the title 'Erroneous Views of the Child in Family Education' (Wang, 2002: 104). It might seem a peculiar question, but the writer, the former deputy head of the Wuhan Education Research Institute, is not being rhetorical. In fact, he observes, quite a few contemporary parents in China 'are not entirely sure of the correct answer'" (Naftali 2010: 590).

even more sympathy for their mission. While activists are teaching drama to poor children, urban middle-class parents are enrolling their offspring in enrichment activities that use play and performance to stimulate psychological growth.

Theater has been an important mode of social action in China and elsewhere, as a means for stimulating class consciousness and shaping popular sentiment.⁶⁴ Chinese modernizers taught peasants and workers to narrate themselves as agents of change and revolution, to realize themselves as objects in a social field so as to become the subjects of history (Anagnost 1997b). But in these psychological interventions, theater is not promoting consciousness of oneself as a member of a class, but consciousness of oneself as an individual before an audience, interacting with other individual actors.

Young activists teaching dramatic skills to poor children are teaching something that they and many of their peers are themselves interested in learning, as they seek to remedy the perceived deficiencies of their education. For many young adults in contemporary China, the capacity for self-creation on the stage of history seems linked to their ability to perform on a smaller platform. Alongside Toastmasters clubs and debate leagues, grassroots improvisational theater and comedy scenes have sprung up in Beijing and Shanghai over the past several years. China's most famous stand-up comedian, Joe Wong (Huang Xi), was himself an international student, a frustrated scientist in America, and a

⁶⁴ Many of these interventions can be traced to Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. China has many worker's theaters.

Toastmasters club member.⁶⁵ Most bitterly, young adults say that the Chinese educational system has left them lacking in confidence and empty of passion, has stolen the springtime of their youth. A young businesswoman tells me, sadly, that passions should be developed when children are young. “We lost this time,” she says wistfully. Referring to China’s college entrance exam, she reflects: “What did we do before college? All I can think of is preparing for the *gaokao* (高考).⁶⁶”

Yuan Lei, a young Chinese woman who just graduated from Duke University, is spending her summer teaching drama to migrant children. She tells me about an exercise in which she has children look into each other’s eyes, in order to increase what she calls “awareness of other people”. Yuan is working with a man who is well known in Beijing’s Toastmasters clubs, and is also a central figure in Beijing’s stand-up comedy scene. One evening at a club meeting, I hear him give a speech attacking the Chinese educational system; he says that it measures everyone by one standard, excluding anyone who fails to conform. The speaker talks about his work with a foreign NGO in western China, running improv workshops in schools and factories; he hints at the revolutionary promise of this intervention, its potential to unleash critical thought. As a child, he tells us, he always asked questions: “How big is the universe?” But if he didn’t accept the answers given, he says, if he kept seeking to understand, he’d be sent out of class. His curiosity was slapped down,

⁶⁵ Beam, Christopher. May 21, 2015. “Can China Take a Joke?” New York Times Magazine. www.nytimes.com

⁶⁶ China’s National Higher Education Entrance Exam, taken by almost ten million students every year.

his creative impulses were denied. We cannot take these accounts at face value: they articulate a range of personal frustrations, and convey multiple historical, cultural, and political meanings. Still, there are very real reasons why students, parents, and psychologists all regard the Chinese educational system as psychologically damaging. And long hours of solitary study certainly play a role in suggesting the appeal of social play.

Taking Interest

On the subway one evening, two members of my Toastmasters club are complaining about Chinese education. One, a young and restlessly energetic woman, says “It’s why I matured late” (*wanshu* – 晚熟). She tells me that in order to be psychologically mature, you need to know who you are and what you want. Our companion agrees, “Yeah, lots of us don’t know what we like.” “Maybe it would be better if parents would tell us when we were little”, the restless woman continues, tell us “That we need to find out what we like.” College counselors, of course, agree. Psychologists, activists, Western educational consultants, American universities,⁶⁷ and young adults returned from abroad are all teaching Chinese people to actively define an identity based on clearly stated choices, preferences and ideals. Ethical entrepreneurs, in particular, demonstrate that identifying

⁶⁷ In particular, I saw a lot of activity from people and programs associated with Stanford and Duke. I came across the work of Stanford professors who set up peer counseling programs China, who teach improv acting, and who offer online creativity classes. Duke’s DukeEngage program sends students to teach Chinese teenagers empathy and self-expression, in ways that have sometimes caused controversy, not least because undergraduates are coming to teach high schoolers they cannot speak with on brief trips that some might call “voluntourism”.

oneself with individual convictions can lead to a sense of identity, to symbolic, social, and economic integration. To the degree that young adults in China see their social convictions as a path to securing an identity, they may come to identify themselves with their expressed ethical stances. The space that will be available for this mode of self-definition largely depends on political developments; over the past several years, the Chinese government has become increasingly wary of NGOs, but leaders are also working to develop civic consciousness and social entrepreneurship.

The head of a psychological counseling center at a top Chinese university tells me that he encourages students to find their interests and pursue their passions. He explains that the university wants to promote a culture of civic engagement, saying “we hope this culture will provide a sense of identity.” Students born in the nineties, he tells me, are more independent than those from the eighties, they have more views: “our job is to encourage this”, he tells me, adding “we hope that these will be the coolest students.” The psychologist calls this sense of civil participation “elite consciousness” (*jingying yishi* - 精英意识). A sense of ownership, one might say, more aristocratic than democratic. Even as educational reformers seek to help their peers to find their own passions, and as they set themselves against hierarchy and tradition, they reproduce the central value of education as a Chinese form of social capital and moral cultivation. In Toastmasters meetings, recent college graduates in the clubs speak bitterly about excessive study, but they do so while working on their oral English, spending their evenings and weekends on self-improvement. They talk about famous dropouts, but they admire good students. And like most young

adults in China, Toastmasters club members overwhelmingly identify themselves, nervous on stage, sitting quietly in meetings, as the products of a shared history. In the next chapter, we will see how in China social skills training can conflict with young adults' sensibilities, and that confident self-assertion can actually come to threaten their sources of social identity. When I speak with Chinese students in the United States, they tell me that they appreciate the way in which students participate in the classroom. Still, they say, sometimes they wish that their classmates will stop talking, so that they can hear the teacher.

Clarity and Tension

I do my thing and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you, and I am I,
and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.
If not, it can't be helped.

from *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* – Fritz Perls¹

The goal of therapy is the “three harmonies”, she tells me. With oneself, with others, with the world. But Ling, a Beijing psychotherapist, hastens to distinguish this formula from a well-known proverb, “harmony is the most precious” (*yiheweigui* - 以和为贵), a saying that Ling sees as an invitation to “repress ourselves” (*yayi ziji* - 压抑自己). Ling’s careful distinction reveals a perceived tension between valued consonance and self-effacing passivity. She is the psychologist who slapped my hand to demonstrate how Chinese parents smother their children’s curiosity. For many Chinese therapists, the bad kind of harmony is all too perfectly in tune, with authorities, traditions, and interpersonal pressures.² Echoing a lineage of modernist reformers concerned with the Chinese character

¹ [1969] 1992. Gouldsboro, ME: The Gestalt Journal Press, 4.

² Of course, there are exceedingly good reasons to be suspicious of harmony: harmony (*hexie*) has become a keyword in Chinese government propaganda. The Chinese government is also explicit about its hopes to use psychology to promote harmony,

(Liu 1995), these psychological experts worry that the consuming interdependence of Chinese society prevents people from developing a distinct voice. They are teaching people to speak up, for themselves. Ling, a woman in her early thirties, presents herself less as the conduit of a scientific psychology than as a spiritual leader. She is wearing loose pants, an embroidered shirt of rough white cloth, a silver pendant and bracelets of colorful beads. She makes these bracelets herself; some of them are on sale behind the front desk, a carved Chinese furnishing of curving beams.

We are sitting on the third floor of a therapy and personal growth center that Ling has recently opened, in partnership with another psychotherapist. In a new district of gleaming glass and orderly hedgerows, they have assembled a retreat for spiritual cultivation (*lingxiu* - 灵修). Calligraphy scrolls hang in the ground floor reception room: far out from the city center, there is room for a back garden, planted with scallions and strawberries. The second floor has rooms for practicing calligraphy; Ling not only conducts psychotherapy, but also runs 'national learning' (*guoxue* - 国学) courses on the Chinese classics. Like her careful distinction between orders of harmony, the space that Ling has built shifts between worlds; and she is walking a narrow line between past and future, stepping carefully between selfishness and self-development, lingering at a troubling threshold. While young professionals in personal growth groups position themselves between the past of their education and the future of a new economy, psychologists like

declaring that a harmonious society depends on creating harmonious personalities (Naftali 2010b: 595).

Ling see themselves as intellectuals propelling China into modernity. And while young adults in China are learning the power of taking up conspicuous social ideals, Chinese psychotherapists have long positioned themselves as social critics. In contemporary China, numerous psychologists have become public commentators (Henriks 2016); through print and broadcast media, they set themselves to work dismantling logics of kinship and reciprocity. By encouraging individuals to put their preferences and feelings into words, psychologists hope to establish a new kind of harmony.

Many schools of professional and self-help psychology encourage people to communicate directly. Promoting a language ideology of contracts and negotiation, psychologists want everything out on the table, clear words for a world of disembedded exchange and fluid social bonds. The concept of language ideology describes cultural variation in people's understanding of how language can and should be used.³

Anthropologist E. Summerson Carr has described psychological interventions that rely on an "ideology of inner reference" (2006), which conceives of language as describing phenomenon that are preexisting, and that are located within the speaker. Carr associates this language ideology not only with psychotherapy, but also with confession (2013). We will see that psychologists in China are teaching people that they must state their preexisting, individual feelings and interests. They understand direct speech as a way of

³ Judith Irvine defines language ideology as "the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" (1989: 255).

respecting other people's autonomy: one tells them where they stand, one doesn't wear a deceitful mask. In this ideology, direct expression also appears as a way to respect one's own autonomy. By explicitly asserting one's individual desires and interests, one stakes one's claim, joins in the contest of wills, seeks dignity by subjecting oneself to tests of strength. I suggest that the ideology of inner reference is often accompanied by a principle of mandatory confession, in the name of transparency and of self-determination: I will refer to this as an ideology of direct expression.

Transparent, contractual communication addresses the twin Others of strangers and the law: it participates in building a modern, trusting society, and a rationalized market economy. In contemporary China, many people would like to claim their own interests. They also feel a sense of moral crisis, saying that people in China cheat each other. They would like to know what other people are after, and to be able to defend their interests using clear contracts. We have met young professionals who say that they have not been giving choices or platforms, that no one has listened to them. Young adults in China chafe at what they see as denials imposed by school and family; they want to say what they want. And yet, they often sense that direct expression is impossible, rude, and counterproductive.

Psychotherapeutic ideologies of direct expression involve actors who build and defend tense interpersonal boundaries. Eva Illouz argues that

... while psychology supposedly addresses and helps resolve our increasing difficulty in entering or remaining in social relations, it actually encourages us to put our needs and preferences above our commitments to others. Under

the aegis of the therapeutic discourse, social relations are dissolved by a pernicious utilitarianism that condones a lack of commitment to social institutions and legitimizes a narcissistic and shallow identity” (2008: 2)

Young adults in China find assertive self-definition appealing. But if they stake themselves on rigidly defined individual interests, then they will threaten important sources of their own identity: their relationships with other people, and their ethical practices of deference and care. This chapter shows how psychotherapists in China, and influential Chinese self-help authors, encourage people to approach relationships as negotiations, and to identify themselves with the emotional intensities that ensue from direct, oppositional, conflictual expression. We will continue to focus on social skills, examining advice about communication in families and in intimate relationships, as well as changing ways of talking to strangers. Building on Illouz’s critique of psychology, the chapter shows how ideologies of direct expression are being shaped in encounters with Chinese language ideologies and constructions of the self, and how they are being translated into a history of Chinese cultural critique and social politics. In China, psychologists set a willful independence against traditional families, and set a principled transparency against corruption. They want to shatter what they see as a repressive harmony.

But if interpersonal networks can feel stifling, psychologists’ new harmony appears as a war of all against all. In the last chapter, we saw young adults learning to present passionate ideals, or even to be ethical entrepreneurs; as public stances that individuals are called upon to defend, these principled social commitments begin to transform the mask

into a mirror. But psychologists are also interpellating young adults as political actors by advocating that they defend their independent interests, even within intimate relationships. Insofar as this involves pressing one's claims and invoking impersonal contracts, this locates the self in a willful tension between self and Other. Furthermore, self-help psychology not only promotes treating relationships as contractual exchanges, but also involves writing up contracts with oneself, a self that is always guilty because never actualized.⁴ In this contract, one is indebted to others, and to one's own future self; one is in an always unsettled relationship with other people and with one's conscience. If young adults see the appeal of direct expression as a right, they are wary of it as an obligation, as a test of strength and as a mandatory confession. Especially within close personal relationships, people in China generally do not want to identify themselves as antagonistic, or guilty, any more than they want the label of a chronic mental illness (Hizi 2016). Perhaps, then, it is therapists who urge their clients to kill the father.

Cold Civilities

⁴ Ulrich Bröckling writes that self-help interpellates a guilty subject, that "In every incentive to do 'more' the verdict of 'not enough' is hiding" (2005: 9). He points to one particular self-help technology that is meant to promote autonomy: "... contract texts, in which the individual makes a binding agreement with herself to reach certain goals" (Bröckling 2005: 18). The National Association for Self-Esteem also suggests that "... honoring commitments is an aspect of healthy self-esteem" (healthyselfesteem.org/rate-your-self-esteem). It is a matter of pride to fulfill the terms of these agreements with the self.

In her book, *Let Your Beloved Suffer*, the number one top selling Chinese language self-help author, Zhang Defen, advocates “divorcing” one’s parents.⁵ She wants to cut away the fetters of care that, she says, make others into passive infants, and that tangle one up in interpersonal pressures. In an interview that appears on her blog, Zhang writes:

If I care about my parents, children, and spouse, I am just like a marionette with many strings pulling at me. If he approves, I’m very happy, if he doesn’t approve I’m unhappy, so I turn into a marionette. At the moment I am cutting the strings from my body one by one, many of those that can’t be cut I am loosening a bit.⁶

Zhang feels that her parents’ emotions shouldn’t be her responsibility; she explains that when she feels guilty about her emotional detachment, she reminds herself that to help others is to hurt them. “Don’t be a victim, and definitely don’t be a savior”, she tells her readers. Autonomy appears to be not only about self-determination, but also about separating from others. In the harmony of a liberal society, relationships are limited by the terms of an uneasy social contract.

Zhang Defen’s language of cutting and loosening strings suggests the historical resonance of her project of self-determination. In the early 1980s, when the government began to allow farmers to seek profits, this was described as ‘loosening ties’ (*songbang* - 松

⁵ Zhang Defen. 2013. *Let Your Beloved Suffer* [*Shede Rang Ni Ai de Ren Shouku*]. Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, 49.

⁶ “心灵导师张德芬：反心灵鸡汤很好。” zhangdefen.jiangshi.org

绑). And the move to untie individuals from interpersonal networks has been central to Chinese modernist ambitions. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Chinese reformers connected the virtue of individual independence to national independence from colonial influence (Duara 1997: 55). Liang Qichao, the most influential social reformer of the early twentieth century, wanted to create a new citizen (*xinmin* - 新民) for a new nation-state. Liang saw a disciplined autonomy (*zizhi* - 自治) as the way to ensure collective freedom, and thus personal freedom from oppression and insecurity; he wanted to liberate people from tradition, and from their own desires (Svaverud 2010: 203-4). To implant gyroscopes, we might say, to free people from social standards, but subject them to self-rule. But nationalist reformers like Liang consistently subsumed the personal autonomy of the small self (*xiaowo* - 小我) to that of the great self (*dawo* - 大我) of the collective (Svaverud 2010; Kleinman et al. 2011). As the individual and the nation emerged together, intellectuals separated them into a sometimes extreme duality. Kang Youwei, Liang's teacher, wanted to abolish all personal ties. Instead of marriages, people would enter into short-term contracts; children would be brought up collectively, and every effort would be made to create conditions of complete equality (Elvin 1985: 179).⁷ Equality, individualism, nationalism, and totalitarianism are closely linked, founded on transcendent, utopian principles.

⁷ A Chinese acquaintance of mine, a lawyer and labor activist, recently got married. He has encouraged his wife to sleep with other men, and before their marriage, he asked that she sign a contract stipulating the strict limits of their relationship: separate property, shared housework, and the right to sleep around.

The individual atom is a foundation of capitalism, but is also an element of communism. As the communists gained power in China, early twentieth century discourses championing individual independence waned, those of national independence persisted, and consciousness of class struggle came to the fore. Nevertheless, the Maoist government strongly institutionalized the individual in order to draw citizens out of their families and into state projects (Fong 2007: 94; Yan Yunxiang 2003).⁸ As the reform period began in the late 1970s, the government embraced the virtue of independent initiative as a means of economic development. In the early 1980s, The All-China Women's Federation promoted the "Four Selves" (*si zi* - 四自): self-esteem, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and self-strengthening. The aim of this campaign was to help women, portrayed as overly dependent, adapt to the demands of the new market economy (Jia 2003). Over the following decade, Chinese leaders decried the passivity of Chinese people (Sigley 2006, in Kuan 2015: 46). More recently, the government has turned to psychological interventions to create independently motivated worker citizens (Hansen 2012; Yang 2013, 2014). Ideologies of personal enterprise can shape intimate relationships. For example, scholars of neoliberalism have argued that this economic logic actively produces disconnection, not only through structural forces, but also by configuring social relationships as temporary alliances for pursuing individual interests (Gershon and Alexy 2011: 800). While Chinese government

⁸ Earlier, after the 1911 Xinhai Revolution ended the Qing Dynasty, politicians had worked to turn imperial subjects into citizens of a nation-state, subjected directly to bureaucratic authorities. This involved weakening or circumventing the local gentry that had previously been incorporated into imperial government (Fei 1980).

interventions encourage independence from the state, psychologists and self-help authors like Zhang Defen focus on another institution of care and control: the family.

Zhang's breakthrough best-seller *Encounter the Self You Haven't Known*⁹ tells the story of Ruoling, a young executive in an unhappy marriage. The prospect of a divorce, of an intimate social revolution, clouds the horizon of the novel. The story is driven by temptation: Ruoling is contemplating having an affair with Li Jianxin, a co-worker whose given name means 'constructing the new'. The book begins with Ruoling driving her Lexus, which we meet on the second line. She has had a fight with her husband, and is driving aimlessly. When she runs out of gas, she encounters an Old Man; he soon inducts her into the self-help faith, teaching her a doctrine that is most closely associated with "The Secret":¹⁰ the idea that we literally create reality with our thoughts. In Zhang Defen's book, Ruoling learns that our mental frequencies create the world, but also that our emotions and habits become ingrained in each of our cells, forming a painful subconscious. Her teacher, the Old Man, suggests that quantum mechanics demonstrate that consciousness can overcome the heavy weight of this psychobiology. Despite its materialism, and although it is fueled by desire, Zhang's book also draws on Daoist and Buddhist themes. In a mythical

⁹ Zhang Defen. 2012. *Yujian Weizhi de Ziji*. Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House.

¹⁰ Byrne, Rhonda. 2006. *The Secret*. Hillsboro, OR. Beyond Words Publishing.

vision that also evokes both Daoist spiritual cultivation and a liberal state of nature,

Ruoling learns that she should return to an authentic, presocial self.¹¹

Early in the book, Ruoling has an epiphany that life is a series of masks (*mianju* – 面具). She is anxiously anticipating dinner with her mother-in-law, who doesn't like Ruoling because she hasn't produced any grandchildren. In China, the relationship between wife and mother in law is paradigmatically tense. At dinner, Ruoling does not stage a confrontation: rather, she decides to play the part of a good daughter-in law so well that she'll win an award (2012: 25). She is polite, and the mother-in-law responds in kind; Ruoling sees evidence that her performance affects her interactions, creates her reality. In the book, true self and social mask are in tension, but not quite opposed. The Old Man explains that our social masks are part of the self; neither the true core, which he defines as peace, love, and joy, nor exactly a foreign imposition. He does, however, provide Ruoling with an interesting psychological narrative that suggests an ideology of direct expression. The Old Man explains that we began to be alienated from ourselves as babies, when our parents kept us from crying because our passing discomfort reminded them of their own profound unease (2012: 34). Therefore, says the Old Man, we must be allowed to express our feelings; this despite his author's admonitions not to impose our emotional needs on

¹¹ There are also Buddhist admonitions to avoid grasping the ego (2012: 74), or trying to identify the self with its possessions. Zhang uses Americans to demonstrate this selfish materialism: the character Ruoling decides that car accidents in America are often caused by people who believe that they possess the road, and that anyone who passes them is insulting their face (*mianzi*) (2012: 183).

others. Zhang clearly enjoys giving advice: at the end of the book her protagonist Ruoling is promoted to the position of “management development manager” (2012: 202), meaning that she’ll be a corporate trainer. And ultimately, the Old Man gives her a disciple of her own.

Self-help authors like Zhang are teaching people to distance those around them, encouraging them to assert their wills and to verbally expression their emotions. However, while psychologists present emotional expression as a path to a truer self, they are introducing a social style with its own restraints. Chinese psychologists are telling parents to teach children to say ‘thank you’; in China, saying ‘thank you’ is often a mark of emotional distance. In a series of civilizing campaigns, from the 1930s through the 90s and beyond, the Chinese government has tried to promote use of phrases like ‘thank you’ and ‘please’. Haiyan Lee writes that these polite but distancing words “are minor ritual invocations intended to conjure up an illusion of equality in casual encounters”, and she suggests that “The campaign to make status-independent politesse part of everyday speech amounted to an officially sponsored tutorial on stranger sociality” (Lee 2014: 8). While self-help authors try to cut through the fetters of the family, they bind individuals to the legalistic, deontological, universal ethics of a liberal society.

In China and elsewhere, psychological social skills training develops a style of speaking that focuses on exchanges between unrelated, disembedded individuals. In a discussion of late Soviet psychology, Suzanne Cohen suggests that the most the most

radical element in foreign theories of communications was their egalitarianism;¹² these theories also introduced a strange tension between an ethical imperative to consider the perspectives of other people, and an injunction to maintaining interpersonal distance from them (Cohen 2015).¹³ In tracing historical links between self-help psychology and management science, Illouz also notes this tension between cooperative communication and carefully drawn interpersonal boundaries (2007). Many people in China perceive these styles of communication as cold, but also as more modern and more civil.

One evening, at a personal growth salon in Beijing, the teacher shares a story about a foreigner who was kind to a stranger. After waiting outside for an hour on a cold winter day in Beijing's central business district, this Westerner finally succeeded in hailing a taxi: but rather than getting in, he offered the cab to an under-dressed woman. In China, this parable of egalitarian civility takes on meaning within a history of encounters with the

¹² A brittle egalitarianism is now fashionable in some circle in urban China, where rich patrons have taken to sponsoring dinners for migrant workers, bridging the economic gulf between urban and rural castes with a fragile recognition.

[He Dan. July 31, 2012. "Free dinners battle bias against migrants." China Daily. Branigan, Tania. September 10, 2012. "Chinese migrants invited to dinner in attempt to bridge social gulf." The Guardian.]

¹³ Cohen writes that Sidorenko, a Russian communications expert, says that during the Soviet period many felt that Western techniques of communication seemed foreign because they were rigid, rather than the "intersubjective mingling of personal worlds" (2015: 451) that marked Russian interpersonal relationships. While this was strange, Cohen writes that "For Sidorenko, however, the most foreign aspect of the training was the principle of 'partnership' itself, which she calls 'revolutionary' in its egalitarian promise of mutually attentive communication but completely 'alien' to Soviet citizens of the '80s, who lived in a 'state and a society as a whole that did not propose psychological equality'" (Cohen 2015: 452).

West, and in relation to a perceived moral crisis, often referred to as a crisis of trust (Yan 2011; Feng 2004; Wang and Yang 2013). Modernizing elites in China have worked to teach people how to relate to others “beyond the ties of blood and soil”; Haiyan Lee writes that “The problem of trust is thus bound up with that of civil society, a framework in which waning confidence in the system can be made up for by mutual promise-keeping and mutual regard” (Lee 2014: 7).

In the late Qing dynasty, missionaries in China remarked that one could not even get directions from a stranger (Smith 1894: 252), and foreign accounts of China depicted a callous cruelty (Hayot 2009). In the early twentieth century, Chinese modernist writers decried the numbness (*mamu* - 麻木) of Chinese people; Lu Xun depicted a society of people who eat each other. Contemporary news media cause moral panics by reporting incidents of corruption and callousness. People in China worry about being cheated, and that many of the people they pass on the street would not stop to help them if they had an accident. They know that people in China are unwilling to help strangers in part because they fear the legal and financial risks of helping others (Yan 2009a), but they cannot forgive this numbness. Like the modernist authors that Haiyan Lee describes, psychologists often feel called “to fill the arid Chinese hearts with love and sympathy, to make them identify with each other and feel for each other’s pain, and to galvanize the ‘sheet of loose sand’ into a community of sympathy” (Lee 2010: 254).¹⁴

¹⁴ As discussed in the introduction, Chinese society has not been powerfully influenced by religious institutions that loosened the moral bond of the family (Lee 2014: 6; Weber [1951]

Sun Yat-sen, architect of modern China, did not depict an oppressive Chinese tradition, but rather one with an excess of unrestrained freedom: he saw Chinese society as no society at all, as a “sheet of loose sand”.¹⁵ Chinese anthropologists encountering the West have been interested in the way in which liberal individualism not only allows people to claim rights, but also places limits on individual action, and they have wondered how it involves people in responsibilities to strangers (Fei 1984 [1947]; Yan 2009: 168; Li 2012).¹⁶ Chinese social scientists are debating the degree to which this kind of civic consciousness is emerging in China. Some researchers suggest that physical mobility and stranger sociality as factors that are supporting the growth of a civil ethic in contemporary China, involving people in moral obligation to strangers (Jankowiak 2004; Jing 2011); others point to consumer markets as sites that foster civil politeness and promote legal rights (Davis 2005; Hooper 2005). Self-help psychology, especially social skills training, is also playing an important role in creating a sense of civic obligation. We have encountered activists who use psychology in order to teach people to relate to the Other, to strangers and to an

1968; Fei [1947] 1984). Weber argued that “The great achievement of ethical religions, above all of the ethical and asceticist sects of Protestantism, was to shatter the fetters of the sib. These religions established the superior community of faith and a common ethical way of life in opposition to the community of blood, even to a large extent in opposition to the family” ([1951] 1968: 237).

¹⁵ “The Three Principles of the People.”

¹⁶ In Chinese anthropologist Li Rongrong’s ethnographic study of a California town, she is stuck not by the freedom of the individual, but by the fact that a community can determine what an individual is allowed to do with his plot of land (2012: 279).

impersonal law, and we will meet several more.¹⁷ As the Chinese state continues its historical project of constructing a civil, modern polity (Anagnost 1997), it too is drawing on psychological expertise:¹⁸ the Communist Youth League is providing empathy training.

In 2011, infant Wang Yue was hit by a car in Guangzhou, and numerous people walked by before someone stopped, too late, to help. This incident, caught on surveillance camera, has come to symbolize a crisis of civil indifference. An undergraduate studying in Beijing, who volunteers as a peer psychological counselor, told me that the Wang Yue affair inspired her to show people that society can be caring. She now runs a 'Free Hugs' event on campus every semester. For some young people in China, hugging is now perceived as part of a modern, psychologically healthy habitus.¹⁹ In Toastmasters club meetings, there are frequent chants encouraging people who happen to be sharing the stage to "Hug! Hug! Hug!" And at Toastmasters meetings and conferences, people are regularly instructed to massage the people sitting next to them. Members of Toastmasters embrace familiar faces in their home clubs, but they also try to produce a sense of community with people they don't know. In the speaking contest at a Toastmasters district conference, a club member who is

¹⁷ In discussing *yangsheng* health cultivation practices in Beijing, Farquhar and Zhang explain that people are quite conscious of "... the public political labor that has gone into constructing a modern and proper city environment. Nowadays, in the midst of a *yangsheng* vogue among the rapidly growing retired population, a civil public space and a cultivated life are often conflated" (2005: 314).

¹⁸ Psychology is being put to a similar civilizing use in Russia, where on psychology radio show, exhortations to care for the public spaces in a housing complex expanded the notion of family "into what might be called the political intimacy of liberal civil society" (Matza 2009: 505).

¹⁹ Tatlow, Didi Kirsten. May 7, 2014. "More Hugs Please, We're Chinese." New York Times.

well-known in the organization discusses the premarital communications training that she has been attending, for months; she talks about the importance of self-reflection and of expressing appreciation. At the end of her speech, she makes a show of inviting everyone in the audience to her wedding.

In May of 2014, the Toastmasters community in Beijing organized an event to celebrate the organization's ninetieth anniversary, even flying in speakers from abroad. In a large, sparkling hall at a Beijing university, a Distinguished Toastmaster from Bangalore addresses an audience of several hundred people. The first exercise he leads us through involves sharing something we that we are ashamed of with the two people sitting beside us. The speaker later explains that this is intend to turn us "from strangers to friends". Confessional bonds rapidly link up across the tiered seats. Then the speaker, suggesting that self-respect comes from "doing things for others that they can't repay in kind", has us share something that we are proud of. I tell a story about helping someone during a difficult time, and am flooded by powerful, unexpected emotions of fierce pride. These exercises aim to constitute a collective, and to imprint a message of virtuous, disinterested selflessness. However, their moral emphasis on actions that cannot be repaid suggests a dichotomy between self-interest and altruism, markets and morals; in addition, by using the emotional power of shame to create community, the exercises interpellate a guilty subject. The ideology of direct expression is not only about claiming one's rights, but also about proclaiming one's debts, about responsibly owning one's actions. This confessional

vulnerability gives power to the Leviathan that polices the boundaries of civil society, to the gaze of the Other.

Unraveling the Family

Teacher Bai's clients find her in a densely constructed part of Beijing's Chaoyang District, tucked away inside a solid office block, in maze of bare concrete. Several other psychotherapists also work in the office, seeing their clients in three sparse, tiled rooms: one is narrow, one is large, for family therapy, and one is equipped with a box for sandplay therapy²⁰ and a reclining Freudian couch. But Teacher Bai and I are sitting in the main office, where the office accountant is scrolling through documents on a computer. The room is quiet, save for the distant sound of traffic from the second ring road. In the early afternoon, the bright sunlight is too vertical to reach into the dim space. On the wall, there are posters illustrating psychologist Virginia Satir's model of the self: an iceberg, a set of concentric circles, and a progression of cabalistic spheres, representing the path to what Satir called "congruent communication". Satir, whose therapeutic system is extremely popular among Chinese psychologists and corporate trainers, advocated a style of communication that is completely direct and rational, and which she therefore regarded as fair, honest, and mature. Teacher Bai is explaining to me that Chinese children are helpless because they are not given chores, are not allowed to do anything but study. The phone

²⁰ This is a sandbox within which people can arrange a variety of toy figures. Sandplay therapy is quite common in China (Zhang 2015: 325); therapists in Beijing told me that they use this approach because Chinese people are often unwilling to verbalize their emotions.

rings, and Bai has a brief conversation. Hanging up, Teacher Bai tells me that the caller was a woman asking for advice: someone in her office likes her, and she is calling for guidance on how to handle this unwanted attention. Bai explains that the woman is already married, and adds that she has already called the office once to discuss this problem. Considering that many people in China, are hesitant to seek out psychologists, fearing stigma (Hizi 2016), I express surprise that this situation warrants professional advice; Bai explains that the woman doesn't want to offend anyone, and that "Chinese people can't say no."

Some days later, I discuss this incident with Jian Lili,²¹ a psychotherapist and one of China's most influential psychology bloggers. Jian Lili associates this phone call with Chinese clients who "won't take responsibility" for their own life decisions. She goes on, "Chinese culture doesn't encourage people to grow up. They are like infants." Several psychotherapists suggested to me that Chinese people remain "infants" (*ying'er* - 婴儿); by this, they mean that people expect to be taken care of by their parents, by institutions, and also by their therapists, from whom they tend to expect highly directive therapy (Zhang Li 2014). At the time of writing, the idea that Chinese people are overgrown infants has exploded into Chinese social discourse. At the end of 2016, Wu Zhihong, psychotherapist and author of a newspaper advice column, published *Nation of Giant Infants* (*Juyingguo*),²² a polemical attack on the Chinese character. Authorities quickly pulled the book from the shelves. Perhaps its attacks on the Chinese tradition were circulating too widely,

²¹ Her own pseudonym.

²² 武志红. 2016. 武志红. 浙江人民出版社.

undermining ongoing government attempts to bolster national self-esteem and cultural pride. In his book, Wu claims that because of filial piety, Chinese people do not develop beyond a mental age of six months: seeking symbiosis with their mothers,²³ they cannot tell the difference between themselves and their environments. In our terms, we might say that they are trapped in a primary narcissism, unaware of the Other. Again and again, Wu calls Chinese men weak mama's boys, and explains that Chinese people need caretakers.

A therapist from a university counseling center tells me that Chinese people are infants because they expect that others will consider their needs.²⁴ She gives an example: students at her school had to pay a fee, and although the students were notified, some forgot to pay. Rather than blame themselves, the counselor explains, they complained to school officials that teachers had failed to attend to their needs. Parroting the annoying students, the counselor says, Teacher, "you didn't take responsibility for me". With

²³ The Oedipus complex is structured by themes of domination, forbidden sexual desire, rebellion, and dismemberment. In the Ajase complex, which Kosawa Heisaku offered to Freud as a central myth structuring the Japanese psyche, the fundamental source of shame and psychological conflict is not the individuals' frustrated desire, but rather a shameful anger which causes an inability to find unity with the other: the subject seeks resolution not by killing the father but by achieving harmony with the mother (Ozawa-de Silva 2007: 421-423). The moral core of the story is not repression, but separation.

²⁴ While some Chinese psychologists infantilize the demand for material care, others see the desire for recognition as childish. A professor of clinical psychology explained that problems with self-esteem result from high expectations: when you are little, your teacher may give flowers as prizes, but later on if you do well and don't get one you'll be upset. Similarly, a corporate trainer tells me about the importance of self-affirmation (自我肯定). Speaking about people's need for recognition from others, he uses the image of a child who has drawn a picture and holds it up to her mother, wanting to hear how good it is. Other people are eager to embrace their inner child (Pritzker 2016), but this amounts to the same project of bolstering self-esteem.

indignation, she relates that school officials censured the teachers. For anthropologist Yan Yunxiang, these demands for care are symptoms of China's incomplete individualization: Yan describes people who seek resources or redress from the party state, rather than advocating for themselves in the legal framework of a liberal polity (2010: 29); he depicts young adults who seek money from their families, but don't take responsibility for themselves (2009b). The idea that Chinese people are unweaned infants suggests a neoliberal reading, appears to conspire in an ideological program in which people are told to take responsibility for themselves so as not to demand social services from the government.²⁵ However, these ideologies can also further these ends by encouraging people to care for each other (Muehlebach 2012). In China, Ma Zhiying has shown how the state is using the language of '*guan*' (管), meaning both care and control, to shift responsibility for psychiatric treatment from state institutions and onto families (2016). In any case, although they criticize an infantile dependence, Chinese psychologists are not teaching people that they should not make demands on the state, or on other people. They are teaching them to make demands in a different way: rather than claiming care, mature psychological subjects are supposed to assume the right to sit at the negotiating table, as rational adults.

Alongside the diagrams illustrating Virginia Satir's theory of congruent communication, Teacher Bai's office displays another poster, another set of spheres and arrows diagramming another system that is extremely influential among Chinese therapists

²⁵ Andrew Walder has described the development of an "Organized dependency" on the Chinese state and party cadres (1986).

and corporate trainers. In transactional analysis, people are understood to assume three roles within relationships: they act as creative but needy children, nurturing but critical parents, and rational, empathetic adults.²⁶ In this therapeutic system, the ideal is to become a rational adult, not a helpless child or an overbearing parent. Psychologists portray Chinese people as childish, but they lay the blame on their elders, on Chinese families and the traditional values that they represent. Since they arrived in China in the early twentieth century, psychologists have been trying to liberate individuals from extended families they depict as repressive, ritualistic, cold, and patriarchal, and to establish nuclear families that are oriented to individual development (Ma 2014: 106-7). In China, psychotherapy provide specialized languages for articulating broad concerns about education, parenting, and social change. This discourse depicts Chinese children who are shamed, criticized, and expected to obey (*tinghua* - 听话).

²⁶ "I still can't say 'I love you' to my mom," Jennifer tells me, explaining that Chinese parents are emotionally and physically abusive. "Inside my heart there is a critical parent", she says. I'm at a coffee shop in the business district, talking with this corporate trainer and Toastmasters club member. She had visited my home club the previous evening, and we had both participated in the improvised speech segment. Jennifer says that she had been unhappy with her performance, and that it had bothered her greatly: "that's the critical parent." After my turn, I too had immediately thought of how I could have handled the question better. After these improvised speeches, I often wished that I had said something else, something more clever, something that came to me moments too late. In talking about the "critical parent", Jennifer is using the language of transactional analysis. She identifies this critical voice as her mother, from whom she feels distant. When a person feels bad about her performance in Toastmasters, Jennifer tells me, "what we can do is the adult can talk to the parent, say it's OK." The rational adult is the voice of self-esteem, the voice that opposes social values. Jennifer blames China's hierarchical culture for her professional and existential frustrations, saying: "I was passive before, I didn't know what I need."

For Liao Rui, a family therapist who teaches clinical psychology at a top academic institution, Confucianism is a sinister force, the perverse morality at the heart of China's developmental and social problems. She is fond of citing stories from the *Twenty-four Filial Exemplars* (*ershi si xiao* - 二十四孝), such as that of a poor man who decides to kill his son so he can afford to feed his mother (*wei mu mai er* - 为母埋儿). While digging a grave in which to bury his son alive, this Chinese Abraham finds gold, a reward from heaven for obeying the bloody command of filial duty. In seminars and professional workshops, Liao tells her audience that Confucian families will always sacrifice children for the good of their elders,²⁷ and she asks how children can develop secure attachments in such a culture.²⁸ Attachment theory arrived in China not long ago,²⁹ and therapists have quickly adopted its language to critique Confucian deference to the elderly, cultural practices of foster-care (*jiyang* - 寄养),³⁰ and the extended family's involvement in raising a child. In our conversations, therapists often extrapolated from insecure attachment to a paranoid lack of trust,³¹ which they then

²⁷ Francis L. K. Hsu, based on genealogical records, claims to have found scattered evidence of children who actually sliced off their own flesh to serve to ill parents (1981: 82).

²⁸ In early imperial Rome, the father was allowed to kill his son. Mauss suggests that a revolt against this led the Romans to enshrine the legal persona, ancestor of the Western individual, as a right. This development was further institutionalized and extended by the revolt of the Plebs, which led to their right to citizenship ([1938] 1985: 16).

²⁹ The biggest event facilitating its spread was an address at the 2008 World Congress of Psychotherapy, held in Beijing (Huang Hsuan-ying: personal communication).

³⁰ In which families arrange for children to be raised by relatives, or by another family that is better able to provide for the them.

³¹ Researchers have actually found equal or higher rates of secure attachment in China, as compared to the United States (Kagan et al. 1994; Archer et al. 2015).

blame for a variety of psychological and social diseases, from anomie to suicide.³² These psychologists, like prominent theorists of individualization who we discussed in the previous chapter (Giddens 1991; Honneth 1996), rely on narratives of infancy that depict a proper early separation from the mother as the root of adult psychological and social security.³³ Teacher Bai tells me that because Chinese people are raised by their grandparents, they are insecurely attached, they never develop trust: that's why they seek comfort in food, and why they are paranoid.

When we met Teacher Bai in the introduction, she was explaining that Chinese people have no "other" (*taren* – 他人). She elaborates: "we didn't have interviews, our jobs were assigned... in interviews, there is an other". When Teacher Bai says that Chinese people "have no other," this is at once a moral and a cognitive condemnation. Many therapists in China attribute a kind of primary narcissism or solipsism to their compatriots, who, they suggest, are too comfortably ensconced in networks of kinship and distribution

³² Some members of Toastmasters have come to interpret their own social anxiety through the lens of an idealized nuclear family intimacy, blaming it on parents who don't communicate, or who leave children with grandparents.

³³ Anthony Giddens emphasizes that mass societies depend on trustworthy regulatory systems, yet writes of anxiety as a pathology based on poor attachment to the mother (1991). Giddens suggests that social trust emerges from secure attachment as an infant; in attachment theory, this secure attachment is measured by an exercise known, perhaps significantly, as the 'stranger situation'. He has also controversially pointed to verbal disclosure as a key method of building trust in impersonal modern societies (1991; 1993: 190); critics have pointed out that this idea ignores the importance of non-discursive practice in building trust, and that it reproduces popular psychology tropes of transforming society by transforming the self (Jamieson 1999). Confession, interpellating a guilty subject, founds these theories, in which intimacy is expiation. This is the Freudian "dirty little secret" that Deleuze and Parnet write against ([1977] 2002: 42): a selfish desire, a moral debt.

to become self-aware subjects.³⁴ The specter of mystical participation, of a people who cannot differentiate between self and world, stirs the ghosts of colonial cultural theory; while we should let these specters rest, psychological development does vary across societies. We have suggested some of the specific social pressures, and processes of subjectification, that push some people to mentally constitute the Other. Anthropologists are still debating what it means that some groups of people won't speak about the minds of others.³⁵ And there is also a recent psychological research program that uses false-belief tasks to explore how theory of mind develops cross-culturally: predictably, Westerners always seem to reach the finish line first (Liu et. al 2008).³⁶ But as discussed in the first chapter, there is a great deal of individual variation in people's ability to represent the mental states of others, and in how much they practice doing so. It is likely that these skills are both more challenging and more necessary in a world where many people now have less in common with those around them. The notion that one should separate out from others is also tied to an ideology of willful striving. Jonathan Friedman suggests that the

³⁴ Christopher Lasch also worried about the pernicious effects of improper attachment; but he blamed parenting experts for harming mothers' ability to care for, and discipline, their children (1979: 176).

³⁵ Anthropologists have recently debated the cross-cultural applicability of the idea of theory of mind (Robbins 2008; Duranti 2008). Duranti suggests that an explicit theory of mind, involving positing and labeling the emotions and desires of others, is only one mode of understanding and interacting with others; such propositional knowledge has a place alongside neural, embodied, and culturally organized ways of understanding and living with others (Duranti 2008: 491).

³⁶ Psychologists working within Western populations are also concerned with developing people's theory of mind; they even teach it as a form of intervention, most explicitly in the 'mentalization' based therapies developed by Peter Fonagy.

concept of primary narcissism is culturally specific, constructed relative to a particularly modern need to separate oneself from kin in order to identify with a self-determined project (1994: 172). According to a critical discourse now prevalent in China, because of overprotective and overly controlling parents, Chinese children are never allowed and to have their own projects, and they never need to. Like many therapists and intellectuals, young adults in China accuse parents of crushing their autonomy. However, unlike young adults, psychologists depict Chinese parents not only as overbearing but also as overly indulgent.

Remember Teacher Bai's admonition: Chinese children are little emperors, arriving by Caesarian section: they "don't even have to struggle to be born." Therapists allege that overprotective and overly controlling parents never allow Chinese children to formulate their own goals and struggle to realize them. Theorizing subjectification within our framework, we might say that without this exertion, without the practices of willful autonomy that Erikson regarded as the foundation of personal identity, a Hegelian, dialectical subject does not emerge. Because they do not struggle to work against the world, or to separate from their natal family, children have neither a self nor an Other. The separation of self and Other is central not only to Hegelian dialectics, but also, closer to the roots of liberal thought, to Rousseau's philosophy. In his narrative of social evolution, people individuate by attaining "consciousness of Self and Other" (Morgenstern 1996: 134),

viewing themselves from an external perspective and in comparison with others.³⁷ In Rousseau's thought, this individuation not only sets the moral trap of *amour-propre*, but also initiates a theoretical and spiritual quest for a new integration. For Rousseau, this is not a longing for the mother, but for an absolute law whose justice can be absolutely affirmed.³⁸

Psychological parenting advice, like the kind now circulating in China, aims to create families governed by the rule of law. Sociologist Anthony Giddens, who enthusiastically builds arguments around self-help materials, advocates directly disclosing emotions (1993: 191): he wants to promote what he ironically calls "pure" relationships, pure because they exist only to fulfill individual interests (1991, 1993). For Giddens, parental authority always requires an explicit verbal justification; in this way, he suggests, "coercive power gives way to authority relations which can be defended in a principled fashion" (1993: 109). This doesn't give parents space to bend the rules: they are bound to their word. In much self-help parenting literature, children are supposed to become choosing, consenting, rights bearing partners in the family; parents are told to speak the

³⁷ In Rousseau's thought, "Individuation refers to the process whereby a person becomes conscious of him- or herself as a person, a process which requires conditions of mediation. A being living purely in immediacy would have no sense of its boundedness, no sense that it is a distinct creature among other distinct creatures. In contrast, a person is made conscious of his or her differentiation through comparison and reflection" (Einspahr 2010: 443).

³⁸ "Dependence on men, since it is without order, engenders all the vices, and by it, master and slave become mutually corrupted. ... If the laws of nations could, like those of nature, have an inflexibility that no human force could ever conquer, dependence on men would then become dependence on things again ... and freedom which keeps man exempt from vices would be joined" (Einspahr 2010: 457).

truth and keep their promises. Under these contractual terms, there is little room for what Andrew Kipnis has called “non-representational ethics”, an ethos in which emotions are to be expressed in ways that support networks of personal relationships, or *guanxi* (关系) (1997: 111). As an example of this language ideology, Kipnis describes Chinese parents who lovingly lie to their child that no, the nurse isn’t going to give you a shot (1997: 111). For psychologists, this kind of care violates children’s rightful autonomy.

Psychologists are concerned that Chinese children do not learn to recognize others, but also that they have never been recognized as beings with their own interests, emotions, and views (Naftali 2009, 2010b: 601; Sun 2011: 343; Kuan 2015; Woronov 2016). Chinese therapists seem to imply that Chinese parents may not have a properly developed theory of mind, that they don’t see their children as having a separate existence. In inexpensive, widely popular parent-child communications workshops (*qinzi xunlian* - 亲自训练), often organized by neighborhood associations, psychologists teach parents to “read” (*dudong* - 读懂) their children. The idea that parents should strive to respect their children’s opinions is now widespread among middle class Chinese people (Kuan 2015: 4), and is promoted by parenting advice that presents a liberal and democratic vision of family life. Shweder and Bourne have described the ideal scene of a thin autonomy, in which a child is asked what he or she wants to eat for dinner (1984: 194). Pasta or potatoes, little monster? You’re free. But won’t you eat what’s on your plate?

Psychologists in China often express their concerns about individual responsibility, autonomy, and respect by saying that Chinese people lack a sense of “boundaries” (*bianjie* -

边界).³⁹ For psychologists, these are the boundaries that separate rights bearing, sovereign liberal subjects, as well as the temporal and contractual boundaries of capitalist exchange. This metaphor of boundaries might be extended to describe the borders of a self that is defined by social categories: by sexuality, religion, or ethical lifestyle choice. A self standing out against a background of contrasting possibilities. One is either is, or is not, a localvore pastafarian, even if mother doesn't know what to make for dinner anymore. As young adults in China are learning to define and pursue their preferences, commitments, and ideals, these crystallizations create interpersonal and intrapsychic tensions, create boundaries between people.

As part of their own project of care, Chinese therapists are working to create psychological, physical, and temporal boundaries around the child. While parenting experts suggest treating children as equals, they also promote the idea that childhood should be a special time for play and discovery (Naftali 2010a; Kuan 2015).⁴⁰ In parenting

³⁹ The article "Chinese Parents Commonly Lack a Sense of Boundaries" (中国的父母普遍缺乏界限感) explains that parents never wean their children, who remain fearfully attached. The author finds it contradictory that children want to choose a spouse but ask help parents for help buying a house.

⁴⁰ In the 1960s, anthropologist Francis L.K. Hsu suggested that Americans actively isolate of children from the flow of life, making their transition out of the home shocking (1981: 105). Hsu suggests that American children learn early on that their preferences matter, developing rich fantasies and an expectation that the world will conform to them; Chinese children, on the other hand, are enmeshed in social webs with multiple points of authority, and in which their preferences do not matter much (1981: 88). Furthermore, children in the nuclear family are subjectified by a unified parental authority, by one system of truth, and they bind themselves to a particular set of views. In networks, there is a great deal more contingency, practicality, and compromise (Hsu 1981: 107). By isolating children, the ideal American nuclear family makes the transition out of the family traumatic, creating a

literature, parents are advised to foster a discursive intimacy, but to maintaining psychological and physical boundaries.⁴¹ Advice to give children their own rooms (Naftali 2010a) provides a spatial example of how psychologists create interpersonal boundaries. Psychologists tell parents to give children a sanctuary that will nurture their independent spirit, and to have them sleep on their own.⁴² Popular advice warns parents not to enter their children's rooms without knocking. To a Chinese sensibility, this formality disincorporates the child from the family: but many young couple see that appeal of having a room of one's own. These aspirations provide a concrete metaphor for the work that psychologists are carrying out, carving an intersubjective space into a set of dismembered subjective worlds.

Asking for Help

shocking alterity that potentially leads to a thorough subjectification; it nurtures secondary narcissism in a hothouse for ego ideals; and it suggests control and preferences as the basis for personal identity. The self is bound into a tenuous proposition, raised in a bubble and then unleashed to impress the world with the patterns of an isolated existence.

⁴¹ Towards the beginning of my fieldwork, I sat in on a psychology class at university. The topic was "Legal and Ethical Issues in Abnormal Psych." The lecturer discussed how privacy is a right, saying that even psychiatric patients have the right to privacy when sleeping or showering. Students, living in dorms with communal showers, were quick to point out that they don't have the rights of these patients. The lecturer also explained that behavioral interventions were ethically tricky, that in the United States people feel they shouldn't be manipulated because they believe they are born free.

⁴² According to Stearns (1994: 208), in the United States experts began to write disapprovingly about co-sleeping from the 1920s, though the practice had generally stopped around 1900. In the United States, the prohibition on co-sleeping is meant to foster autonomy, but also expresses anxieties about inappropriate sexual behavior or attraction (Shweder, Jensen, and Goldstein 1995).

As I'm sitting in Teacher Bai's office, the phone rings again. Last time it was a woman seeking to escape from her colleague's advances: now, someone is calling to ask the office accountant for help, for a favor. The accountant hangs up, and turns back to face the computer. Teacher Bai expresses disapproval, saying that Chinese people always want favors. In China, people use affectively laden exchanges to build relationships and to get things done (Kipnis 1997; Yang 1994); but Teacher Bai sees this kind of exchange as psychologically harmful. She insists that services should be compensated with currency. "If you don't take a little bit of money," she explains, "then you are making the other party into a child." One might add that by giving money when receiving help, one avoids emotional debts, and retains a sense of sovereign independence.⁴³ These overlapping modes of exchange, as ongoing relationship or as bounded contract, shape how people in China evaluate their personalities. Contracts can seem modern and clear, but also cold.

Teacher Bai proudly relates how she forced her daughter to pay a friend for a ride to the airport.⁴⁴ It is easy to see the self-serving side of ideologies in which helping others is harming their autonomy. But why do people not want assistance? To make accepting favors

⁴³ In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche sees exchange and promise keeping as the very origin of morality. On the one hand, he sees people needing to learn to remember their debts, and to fear punishment for defaulting. On the other, he suggests that the will, promising, contracts, and self-consistency are aristocratic prerogatives: the "sovereign individual, like only to himself, liberated from the morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral," he writes, "how should he not be aware of his superiority over all those who lack the right to make promises and stand as their own guarantors" ([1887] 1967: 59).

⁴⁴ Fei Xiaotong points out that in Chinese villages money was only used with outsiders ([1947] 1984: 93).

as odious as helping one's friends, one needs to know guilt. In *The Anatomy of Dependence*, psychoanalyst Doi Takeo analyzes the Japanese concept of *amae*, a positive feeling of dependence and being cared for, an affective orientation that, Doi's friend points out, even a puppy seems to readily understand ([1971] 2014: 15). Doi proposes that Westerners struggle with this feeling because they oppose freedom to dependence, and regard gratitude as shameful ([1971] 2014: 86). As in Japan and many other societies, people in China regard many debts as socially productive. Accepting favors or gifts can be dangerous because they lead to entanglements, but not because they reveal the limits of a normative self-sufficiency.⁴⁵

While young professionals in China moralize autonomy, their internal conflicts are not centered on guilt at interdependence; rather, they feel guilty about seeking independence. Young adults I speak with describe feeling caught in a double bind between familial pressure to settle down and the lure of unknown, individual enterprises. Young adults in China are earnestly discussing the need to assert their autonomy in the context of major life decisions: what to study, where to work, who to marry (Yan 2010, 2016). They are questioning social values and venerable scripts for success, but their autonomy would be injured if they were to kill the father. Young adults in China know that they gain power by from being embedded in a multiplicity of networks of *renqing* (人情), the human feelings

⁴⁵ Bialecki and Daswani discuss how the distinction between commodity and gift maps onto a set of anthropological dualisms, including Marilyn Strathern's contrast between dividual and individual selves (2015).

that flow through relationships. They know that they will need help purchasing an apartment, and that their parents hope to help. While Toastmasters club members may be reserved with strangers, within clubs they are not at all shy about asking each other for assistance. And like many young Chinese people, they are eager to establish productive and reproductive relationships with their peers. Some will show off their success by wearing matching clothes. In short, social relationships form their identity rather than threaten it.

Self-help relationship advice presents a very different image of happiness. In many such materials, sex is good but psychological interpenetration is a dirty lower instinct. Sometimes, authors warn that people can become addicted to each other. For prominent social theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1992) and Judith Butler (1997),⁴⁶ the very image of oppression is the codependent relationship, and all relationships threaten to swallow the autonomous self. Giddens defines “pure” (Giddens 1992) relationships by their disinterested emotion, and by their strict boundaries. American self-help materials can be extreme in advocating separation between partners, and in telling people that they must

⁴⁶ Judith Butler reveals a deeply felt individualism when she writes about how the subject is condemned to forever repeat the shameful dependence of childhood. In a deeply strange passage, she explains that because as children we didn’t choose to love, but loved as dependents, “That accounts in part for the adult sense of humiliation when confronted with the earliest objects of love — parents, guardians, siblings, and so on — the sense of belated indignation in which one claims, ‘I couldn’t possibly love such a person’” (Butler 1997: 8). Relationships with our parents have shaped who we are, but Butler assumes that they are the ultimate foundation of the psyche, and that childhood attachments are shameful. In an expulsive stance, Butler insists that that “real” self is the rejection of anything it doesn’t like, specifically desires that threaten the coherence and sovereignty of the ego (Butler 1997: 9).

clearly express their needs if they hope to develop self-esteem and true intimacy.⁴⁷ The emotional intensity of explicit and antagonistic negotiation within relationships may make this mode of interaction seem more intimate and real than the quiet construction of a shared world. These negotiated contracts, these signatures of consent, also appear as apotropaic charms against the messy risk of interpersonal relations. It is important to ask what sociocultural conditions are necessary to make interdependence appear not only as an economic or existential risk, but also as a profound discomfort, as a threat to self-esteem.

We can find some hints in an article that explains that “Western Men Don’t Help Hold Women’s Bags”.⁴⁸ This article was posted on many social media accounts; I found it on a platform for Chinese who’ve returned from overseas, who are referred to as ‘sea turtles’ (*haigui* - 海龟).⁴⁹ In it, the author uncritically accepts her foreign friends’ harsh criticisms of Chinese gender relations, and of Chinese women’s behavior. German women, the article claims, know how to cook: they also drive trucks, paint walls, and travel

⁴⁷ In some American self-help materials, compromise is a threatening loss of self. Psychologist and sex educator David Schnarch, author of *Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships* (1997. New York: Norton.), argues that intimacy is smothering, because each partner wants understanding and recognition. Schnarch advocates a “self-validated intimacy” based on maintaining strict separation. Perversely, he maintains that the key to good sex and happy marriage is to never compromise. “We help couples develop themselves within their relationship rather than focusing on compromise and negotiation, because compromise and negotiation sounds great but it really kills sexual desire and passion” (“Third Age Interview with Dr. David Schnarch.” crucibletherapy.com). With or without negotiation, it seems that in much self-help psychology, passionate intimacy involves getting off on conflict.

⁴⁸ 2014. “西方男人不帮女人拎包.”

⁴⁹ A pun: ‘sea turtle’ sounds like ‘returned from overseas’.

independently. German men, the author writes, respond by being gentlemen, respecting women, and treating them as distinct, independent individuals. She attacks Chinese women's magazines for teaching readers how to *sajiao* (撒娇), or throw tantrums; she presents this as a traditional Chinese tactic for attracting men, a skill that is demonstrated in the seventeenth century novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*jinpinglei* - 金瓶梅). In China, she says, women treat themselves as goods to sell in return for security. The author claims that this is the downfall of Chinese society: it causes men to chase success, and women to pursue men with crafty tricks. The result, she claims, is a society is full of calculation, lies, hypocrisy, and insecurity. The article ends with a call for people to not give in to social norms, but to actively attack traditions. This article demonstrates how, for some young adults in China, the ideal of independence appears in connection with a critical objectification of China, under the imagined gaze of a Western modernity. The author claims respect and equality, not only rights but also responsibilities: she wants women to shoulder a burden.

In an improvised speech about her life goals, a guest at our Toastmasters club in Beijing announces that she will join our club because modern girls can be independent, and she wants to learn how. In Chicago, a shy Chinese graduate student tells me that traditionally, Chinese women were supposed to be quiet and “not have a lot of ideas about things.”⁵⁰ But modern women, she says, are supposed to have their own views. Worldwide,

⁵⁰ She cited the idiom ‘In women, lack of talent becomes a virtue’ (女子无才便是德).

self-help psychology for women is tightly bound to feminist discourses of equality and rights, and to an anti-traditional politics.⁵¹ Empowerment experts aim to uproot what they see as habits of deference and service to others, inculcated in women by a patriarchal culture (Bröckling 2005; Sa'ar 2016).⁵² In China, career women are commonly called 'manly women' (*nü hanzi* - 女汉子); this is usually not a compliment. Unmarried women approaching thirty are often labeled as 'leftover women' (*shengnü* - 剩女). This term has recently spurred social debate.⁵³ It also inspired the *Leftover Monologues*, a performance first staged in 2014, which questions the social pressure on women to marry, to settle down and to settle for less. Members of Beijing personal growth groups, including Toastmasters clubs and *Lean In* reading clubs,⁵⁴ were involved in this production. However, even within self-help groups, Western perspectives on gender relations are not going unchallenged in China.

In a relationship workshop in Guomao, Beijing's central business district, people are questioning the teacher's message of independence. A man and a woman each wonder if happiness is really to be found in self-sufficiency. One suggests that love is about caring for

⁵¹ Similarly, "Modern Japanese advice books focus on women's independence and on what stands so implacably in the way of it: Japanese culture" (Hochschild and Tanaka 2003: 66).

⁵² In Chinese, but not in English, there are many volumes of Dale Carnegie extracts and extrapolations compiled specifically for women.

⁵³ See Fincher, Leta Hong. 2014. *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*. London: Zed Books.

⁵⁴ Part of a global phenomenon inspired by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's controversial 2013 career advice book for women, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. (New York: Knopf.)

each other; in the context of the workshop, this statement is a theoretical challenge. The teacher is trained in verbal aikido, and tries to throw this doubt to the floor. He says that one should give without expectation for return. But the question then returns: is it healthy to give without receiving? While the therapist tries to present an image of individual actors and disinterested love, this may not appear to his students as a believable romance, or a satisfying one. When Allison Alexy studied Japanese women who seek marital counseling, she found ambivalence about the ideal of independence. She reports that although women are not always happy to serve helplessly dependent men, many value the sense of identity comes from being part of the family, and feel that "Loving someone is about allowing them to relax into dependence" (Alexy 2011: 914). In China, dependence can even be attractive, a strategy of seduction.⁵⁵ That handbag isn't very heavy, anyway: not literally.

One night in a hutong alley in central Beijing, six men, four women, and two cats have gathered for a psychological salon. It's free, but you are supposed to bring a snack to share. The teacher, a woman in her early thirties, explains that she is Christian and Buddhist, and that she began reading about psychology after experiencing suicidal depression. The topic of the night is how to ask for help. The teacher explains that since women have been told be independent, they now need learn how to ask for assistance. She

⁵⁵ One afternoon during the improvised speech segment of a Toastmasters club meeting, a woman receives a prompt that asks how she would hit on a co-worker in the elevator. The woman's response was that the elevator should break, so the man can protect her: she would like to present herself as an "elegant woman who is trying to be shy." Shyness and diffidence can be positive qualities; they do not necessarily represent weakness, and they are not necessarily valued because they keep people quiet.

tells the story of a woman who went hiking in the desert, struggled with her heavy bag, but repeatedly refused to let a male friend help carry it. The teacher explains that women want to be cared for, and that men want to be manly and help them; she suggests that asking for help is a good way to initiate a relationship. A proud independence would disdain such tactics. However, in advocating that women ask for help, the teacher is not only criticizing the ideal of independence. She also suggests how networks of interdependence can present an obstacle to seeking help.⁵⁶ The teacher describes how as a child she once accepted a sweet potato from a neighbor, and was severely reprimanded by her mother. She tells us that she learned not to accept kindness, and her heart closed up. It seems likely that her mother was wary of owing someone a favor. The gift is never free.

And so Teacher Bai tries to limit the cost of relationships with money and contracts. While her accountant helps people as a favor, expecting reciprocity, she does her part to civilize Chinese people: to teach them to respect interpersonal boundaries, to cease their impositions. Teacher Bai tells me that if acquaintances stop by her house unannounced, she sends them away on principle. In the world that she works to build, respect requires explicit advance consent.

Confucius at a Cocktail Party

⁵⁶ Tocqueville remarked that Americans were willing to help others, if the cost was low, suggesting that this resulted from all being relatively equal and relatively vulnerable ([1840] 2004: 658).

While many psychologists attack Confucian culture, one of China's most influential self-help books tries instead to update it. In her best-selling, much maligned book *Confucius from the Heart*,⁵⁷ author Yu Dan seems to affirm the wisdom of the ancient sage; however, she makes it at times unrecognizable. Anthropologist Zhang Yanhua aptly characterizes the book as seeking "an imagined coherence" between Confucian moral cultivation, interpersonal harmony, and competitive market individualism (2014: 41). Zhang also points out that Yu Dan assumes a maternal voice, diluting Confucian wisdom into a succoring milk for readers strained by alienation and social competition (2014: 34). In the text, Yu presents a rambling bricolage of Confucian exegesis, self-help parables, and reflections on contemporary alienation. She also civilizes her readers habits of self-presentation, giving advice on manners, speech, and personal relationships. Rather than promoting Confucian relationships of hierarchy and interdependence, Yu presents a vision of liberal pluralism.

In the book, Yu warns against coercive or grasping love, and writes that the earlier children are independent, the better the parent (2009: 71). She goes on to say that "Confucius shows us that we must respect every person equally and rationally, maintain a tactful distance, and give each other breathing space" (2009: 73). This doesn't quite cut it as an exegesis of Confucian thought, with its respectful but never equal or disembedded

⁵⁷ Thousands of prisoners in Shandong province have been given copies of *Confucius from the Heart*, to help them find confidence and happiness (Zhang Yanhua 2014: 42); and the book sold extremely well in Zhongguancun, Beijing's hi-tech zone (Zhang Yanhua 2014: 41). [Yu Dan. 2009. *Confucius from the Heart: Ancient Wisdom for Today's World*. Trans. Esther Tyldesley. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Co./MacMillan.]

relationships; in fact, Yu is unwittingly referencing Schopenhauer's prickly vision of society as a huddle of porcupines who stay close enough to share warmth, but far enough to avoid each other's quills (2009: 68). This image cuts a sharp boundary around each porcupine.

In discussing Confucian guidelines for personal conduct, Yu removes the original context of official courtly life, turning advice about ritual propriety into tips for being a civil conversationalist at a social gathering. Yu admonishes her readers to not go on and on about their children or their golf game: she explains that nobody cares, and that such a person "... strips away the rights of other people to choose a topic" (2009: 118).⁵⁸ Using the language of rights, Yu teaches her readers how to win friends among the strangers at this imagined party. In a bit of almost audible rationalization, she notes that although Confucius emphasized action over words, in our age one must learn to communicate one's brilliance (2009: 108). Yu offers these suggestions about self-presentation in connection with civil manners and self-promotion; but she also values a confident, direct, open personality as a remedy for shadowy corruption.

Again, Yu's social imaginary is a cocktail party, one in which the Confucian gentleman, or *junzi* (君子), displays his strong moral character through social grace. Yu Dan writes that "at a party, a *junzi* will feel completely at ease with everyone there, whether old friends or strangers; but a petty person will skulk in a corner with their best friend, the two

⁵⁸ European visitors to a newly founded United States were shocked by bad manners, since democratic equality made deference and hierarchy shameful. Deference was replaced by an equal friendliness: President Jefferson was noted for choosing dinner conversation topics that would please all of the guests equally (Kotchemidova 2005: 10).

of them muttering away to each other, thick as thieves" (Yu 2009: 92). Yu distinguishes between "association" and "clique" (2009: 91-2); she explains that an "association" involves shared ideals, but a "clique" involves shared interests. Yu associates cliques with "cronyism" (2009: 92) and corruption, with personal relationships that preclude being "absorbed into the big collective" (2009: 92).

The Chinese central government is now in the midst of an anti-corruption drive, conducting political purges and performing public displays of moral leadership. Yu's passages on the nobility of social mingling are in line with this political project. Yu partakes in a tradition of Chinese reformist thought that aims to sever personal ties, and to bind individuals into a greater collective. She seeks help from an extroverted personality, making happy gregariousness into the sign of a clean conscience. Recall how Kierkegaard saw silence as the mark of the Mephistopheles, writing that one must speak to come before the just law. For Yu, open speech is less an obligation than a sign of moral certitude. In the book, spiritual peace comes not from confession but from virtuous idealism, while petty interests result in an "uneasy conscience" (2009: 92), in people who "skulk" in private associations. Yu advocates being public, open, transparent, talking not only to friends but also with strangers.

Yu wants to inspire idealism, and tells people to practice self-promotion. But unlike the young, foreign educated activists that we met in the last chapter, she is not advocating that people take up discursively articulated positions on social issues. She tells the reader that ideals are only good if they come from the heart; they must be nurtured in calm peace,

and through sensitivity to the environment (2009: 147). Confucius, Yu writes, is scornful of the ambition for social improvement if it is not matched by ability, and accompanied by a proper deference for superiors: only with humility can you aspire "... to govern a nation by means of courtesy and rites" (2009: 136). At least at times, Yu is suspicious of conspicuous morals, and wary of eloquence.

Yu quotes the *Analects*: "It is rare, indeed, for a man with cunning words and an ingratiating face to be benevolent" (2009: 138).⁵⁹ We might say that the man could be running a confidence trick. A number of Chinese psychologists, including Teacher Bai, told me that interdependence makes people in China paranoid; Bai tells me that even when Chinese people say "whatever" (*suibian* - 随便), they are always paying close attention to how others treat them. In a society in which people take care to maintain face, and in which a sweet potato can seem dangerous, even a friendly smile might seem suspect. Recall how Toastmasters club members enjoy the disembedded, unencumbered sociality of the clubs, where they don't have to pay such close attention to personal politics. A number of my Chinese friends speak of being wary around their peers, worried that they might be after something.⁶⁰ Some psychologists and social scientists suggest that people in China are

⁵⁹ Similarly, in the last chapter of the *Dao De Jing*, readers are warned that "Sincere words are never beautiful / and beautiful words are never sincere. / The noble are never eloquent / and the eloquent never noble" (Hinton 2002: 91). The *Dao De Jing* also begins with a warning that the way that can be put into words is not the eternal way.

⁶⁰ And Ethnographer Tricia Wang reports encountering a "fear of friendships" (Wang 2013: 6) among Chinese youth; she interprets this as a result of both Confucian emotional restraint and a history of mutual spying.

anxious because the scars of the Cultural Revolution are so raw, a silenced history that Arthur Kleinman has portrayed as the repressed unconscious of the contemporary Chinese psyche (Kleinman et al. 2011). These cultural and historical forces, combined with economic uncertainty and widespread corruption, produce a widespread sense of insecurity in China

Confucius famously marked the age of thirty as a time for a person to stand firm. Yu Dan writes that “Thirty is the age at which to build up inner self-confidence”, and explains that “This self-confidence is not set up in opposition to external things” (2009: 168). Yu explains that one does not conquer mountains, but is raised up by them. We could read this passage as suggesting that confidence is not an internal trait, or about standing one’s ground, but rather the fruit of being well rooted in the world. Haiyan Lee discusses Adam Seligman’s (1997) distinction of confidence from trust: whereas confidence is a result of communal ties and roles, trust is an achievement of political and economic contracts (Lee 2014: 5). Yu’s passage is suggestive of the way that in today’s China, even as people worry about corruption, about poisoned food and abusive officials, they generally don’t place their trust in negotiations secured by legal rights, or through self-assertion, but rather seek confidence through social connection.⁶¹

⁶¹ In 1793, at the summer retreat of the Qianlong emperor, during the first British embassy to China. The Emperor had already assented to allow British trade, but Lord McCartney continued to press for explicit commercial and diplomatic rights in a manner that the Chinese found indecorous and presumptuous (Hevia 1995). He had the Emperor’s word, but McCartney still wanted a contract.

In offering heartfelt advice for spiritual malaise, Yu Dan reveals an ambition for constructing a civil life among strangers, among people with no connection to oneself. Yu suggests that “true harmony” is marked by “... a tolerance towards others, a kind of melding and mingling, all the while maintaining different voices and viewpoints” (2009: 93). In a later chapter, Yu Dan returns to the idea that one must learn to tolerate and understand others. She emphasizes how Confucius adapted his lessons to each student, recognizing that “Two clouds can only come together to produce rain when they meet at the same height” (2009: 181). For Yu, this is a call for tolerance and pluralism. At this point she launches into the conclusion of the book, on fortifying oneself with the wisdom of the ancients in order to meet the challenges of modern life.

Like Yu Dan, philosopher François Jullien notes how Confucius tailored his lessons to his students (2000: 226), but he interprets this quite differently. Rather than a way to respect their autonomous perspectives, Jullien sees this as a strategy of exerting didactic influence; he describes as a manner of instruction that emerges from a Chinese tradition that is suspicious of definitions, of words that can never capture the essence of moral virtue, or of other crafts (2000: 245-7). If one is seeking to verbally grasp a principle, this manner of speech seems evasive. But Jullien maintains that it is in a sense more direct, indicating the thing and not the theory (2000: 238, 247). To use some Buddhist imagery, words serve as an

indexical finger pointing at the moon.⁶² In China, this recognition of the limits of language is encoded not only in philosophical texts, but also in an array of common expressions.⁶³

While psychologists advocate styles of explicit communication and contractual relationship, people in China have philosophical and political reasons to be wary of words. On the other hand, many people long for transparency and certainty. Anthropologist Susan Blum reports that when her husband instructed Chinese high school students to write about paradise, many described a realm where people speak directly and have civil relations with strangers; Blum says that in these essays, “The craftiness of Chinese society was deplored, yet acknowledged” (Blum 2007: 79). In China, the ideology of direct expression captures common aspirations for modernity and security; but as longings for a better future, these aspirations hardly suggest that people today should place their trust in appearances, in words, in contracts.

Peace, Love, or Understanding?

A psychotherapist in her forties tells me that she wants a divorce, because she has nothing to talk about with her husband. She says that her friends, both men and women, can’t understand why she doesn’t just have an affair: “Must you insist on communicating with him?” they ask with chagrin. Scholars have demonstrated that the ideal of an intimate,

⁶² Often attributed to Zen patriarch Huineng, as in the idiom “Huineng points at the moon” (慧能指月).

⁶³ For instance, the sayings ‘here, silence surpasses speech’ (此处无声胜有声), ‘all is in the silence’ (一切尽在无言中), and the idiom ‘the meaning can only be known, not transmitted’ (只可意会不可言传).

companionate marriage has gathered strength in China during the reform era (Evans 2012; Yan 2016). Yan Yunxiang suggest that factors including smaller families and even social insecurity have contributed to a rise in intrafamilial intimacy (2016: 252-3). However, Yan notes that this intimacy looks very different from that which is depicted in academic literature on intimacy in Western societies, an intimacy which is ideally based on mutual self-disclosure by equal, preexisting, separate individuals. Yan writes that “the Chinese understanding of intimacy is precisely the mutual transgression of individual boundaries” (Yan 2016: 254).

Yan suggests that these habitual violations of interpersonal boundaries create conflict; however, I suggest that treating relationships as bounded contracts can produce tense cycles of will, tension, guilt, and self-justification. This creates the effect of identity at the antagonistic boundaries of self and Other. It also identifies the true self as a political homunculus, defending its selfish desires.⁶⁴ In China, self-help books and psychotherapists are teaching their subjects that authentically intimate relationships should be rational exchanges, as equal partners directly negotiate individual claims for self-fulfillment. Within

⁶⁴ This is none other than that “perverse idea of human nature” (Sahlins 2008: 112) which has such a long history in the West, in which the real face of humanity is psychopathic selfishness, maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain (Sahlins 1996). Haiyan Lee has shown how Chinese modernist writers mobilized this view of human nature to advocate sexual liberation and freedom from hollow traditions (2010). The idea that the self is defined by likes and dislikes has founded liberal political philosophies and psychological accounts of the subject: as Marshall Sahlins notes, “the initial stages of the Freudian ‘reality principle,’ involving the separation of ego from external objects (as from the mother’s breast) by differentiated sensations of pleasure and pain, make up a psychoanalytic version of the Hobbesian epistemology” (Sahlins 1996: 414).

these relationships, the ideology of direct expression is meant to serve as a technology of communication that allows people to assert individual interests, create transparency, and avert conflict.⁶⁵

One evening, while visiting a Toastmasters club in Beijing's Chaoyang district, I saw this model of communication vividly demonstrated. A man, about thirty-five years old, is acting the part of a husband; he invites another club member to act as his wife. The husband returns home late, and he has forgotten to do some errands. His wife is angry. The ghost of Carl Rogers⁶⁶ drops in, modeling his characteristic style of reflective listening: "What I'm hearing is you're upset", says the husband. He apologizes, and directly, verbally

⁶⁵ Some people find it innocent to tell the parties to a conflict that they just need to talk it over. Giddens suggests that global relations should be modeled on a communicative intimacy, in which firm negotiation is somehow paired by an evenly tempered lack of antagonism (1993: 196). Illouz writes that "... in the therapeutic worldview conflicts can be resolved, not by appealing to shared norms or shared values, but by using adequate linguistic techniques" (2008: 134); this is both interpersonal and geopolitical (2008: 91). Dialogue is certainly central to any hope for a better future, but a therapeutic geopolitics that proceeds by fixing communication can be truly offensive. One evening at a dinner I saw next to Kenneth Gergen, an academic psychologist who has influentially theorized the self as a performative construct. Hearing that I was Israeli, he told me that he runs peace workshops in Israel and Palestine. I inquired as to their method. Gergen told me that, as in an African village, they pass around a stick and only that person can talk. This Kumbaya method strikes me as idealistic, offensively so. Writing about Habermas, Ricoeur sees the appeal of communicative ethics in establishing a universal principle that respects multiplicity and autonomy; however, he also sees the search for universal frameworks as a regression from practical ethics: "The paradox is that the concern with justifying the norms of communicative action tends to conceal the conflicts that lead morality back to a practical wisdom whose place is that of moral judgment in situation" (Ricoeur [1992] 1995: 280).

⁶⁶ One of the most influential of all psychotherapists, who developed a style of therapy based on reflecting people's state of mind back to them, helping bring it to the surface of their consciousness.

expresses that he cares for his wife. Our speaker presents a series of concrete steps for resolving intimate conflicts, involving listening, acknowledging mistakes, asking questions, and agreeing with legitimate criticisms. He tells the audience that in relationships, people should state the positions of both partners in order to understand their needs and wants. This is a democratic vision of society, but one which reduces relationships to demands and obligations, words less noble than the liberal terms rights and responsibilities. In this rational drama, husband and wife do not allow their threatening emotions to play a role. In this model of communication, we must take up a position on stage, but it is not permitted to make a scene.

While psychological forms of intimacy encourage direct expression, they also tightly regulate emotions. On the one hand, strong emotions are seen as irrational obstacles to adult conversation. On the other, people are normatively supposed to verbalize their emotions, are obligated to do so. Korean anthropologist Hyang-Jin Jung, writing about self-realization in an American midwestern church community, argues that emotional expression is not a liberation but an obligation, “a postmodern refinement of the modernist emotional control” (2011: 295). The baby boomers that she studied oppose their free expression to the emotional repression of their parents, but Jung argues that their parents had space in which to escape sincerity, and for “emotional complexities that betray the effort to ‘express’” (2011: 294).

A few Toastmasters club members told me about frustrating telephone conversations, about trying to talk to parents who, in the words of one aspiring corporate

trainer, “don’t want to hear about my feelings”. Psychologists and lay people within China often depict Chinese people as being unable to express their feelings.⁶⁷ Therapists in China accuse Chinese parents of not knowing how to express love, or even of not loving (Krieger 2009: 97). And psychiatrist and anthropologist Arthur Kleinman was famously frustrated by the reluctance of his Taiwanese patients to talk about their feelings; he used the concept of “somatization” to describe how, in his view, his patients expressed their psychological pain in physical terms (1980). The emotional culture of direct expression is arriving in China along with a package of Hallmark holidays. On holidays including Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, on both Valentine’s Day and its Chinese counterpart, Qixi, most young adults in China send messages through social media. Toastmasters clubs have holiday themed meetings, and speakers remind their peers that every day should be Mother’s Day.

Many Chinese people of an older generation resist the idea that love should be expressed directly or frequently, feeling that this cheapens the word. Yan Yunxiang describes how, while young people in rural China court each other with pop songs, their elders had their own manner of expressing themselves. Yan reports that in the village

⁶⁷ As is the case in contemporary discourses about sentiment in Vietnam (Tran 2015: 488). Tran’s interlocutors, like my own, felt that before, people were false and unfeeling: “A number of my respondents even suggested that before *đổi mới* [reforms beginning in 1986] people only experienced their feelings superficially. However, when I asked them to reflect further on this claim, many of them reversed their positions. That this characterization is so widespread yet does not stand up to much scrutiny reflects the persistence of the imagined links among modernity, progress, and individual self-discovery”: by saying that the past as suppressed emotions, which so important to defining a sense of self in contemporary Vietnam, people also depict past political regimes as dehumanizing (Tran 2015: 489).

where he does fieldwork, "... older villagers insisted that actions mean more than words and that there are hundreds of ways to express good feelings between the sexes"; some of them criticized love songs because "All they do is repeat the same phrase 'I love you' again and again" (Yan Yunxiang 2003: 75). Young adults in China are more willing than their elders to put their love into words. But they are not willing to view these words as contracts or commitments, or to use them as tools for carefully maintaining personal space and the ideal of emotional transparency.

An article on "How Americans Date" suggests how strange it can seem to have so much faith in the power of words.⁶⁸ This article, written by a Chinese woman studying at a university in the United States, explains to readers in China that Americans are extremely serious about relationships. The article depicts a world of casual sex, but this does not shock the author: she is surprised by how reverently American students use words. "In America, a 'relationship' is a very serious matter", the author explains. She writes that Chinese men will sometimes call a woman "old lady" (*laopo* - 老婆) and "girlfriend" (*nüpengyou* - 女朋友) even if the future of the relationship is unclear; the author finds this sweet. But in America, she explains, people don't say these words lightly, but treat them as commitments: with surprise, the author describes an American couple who won't admit that they are a couple, even after they have been appearing together at parties for months. In China, young people

⁶⁸ "Dating Strategies: How Americans Date." ("恋爱攻略：美国人是这么谈恋爱的.") 壹心理.

often reveal their romantic feelings through highly public declarations, demonstrating their sincerity not through words, but through dramatic acts of social commitment.

The vocation of psychotherapy depends on the virtues of maintaining interpersonal boundaries, restraining emotions, and encouraging people to verbalize their feelings.⁶⁹ However, I agree with Eva Illouz's assessment that "the reflexivity and verbal disclosure of emotions advocated by psychologists and by the experts in EI [emotional intelligence] may ultimately disturb a subtle and more efficient manipulation of social relations and situations" (2008: 208). Direct expression expresses an impulse to define and reflexively control one's position within a social space. This often makes interaction more awkward, more rigid, binding the individual to a set of propositions, to contractual claims and obligations. If it needs saying, communication always has a context; ethical speech involves not only transparency, but also good timing, conscientious framing, and sometimes silence. But these things are not simple to systematize, teach, to turn into careers or interventions.

Beijing's Renmin University was the first university in China to set up a peer psychological counseling program. This program was developed with the help of psychologists from Stanford, and the head of the program told me that it was difficult to translate the American materials. She explains: if you ask someone "How do you feel?" (*ni ganjue zenme yang* - 你感觉怎么样?) in China, you will get no response, or at most might, perhaps, will hear "I'm rather annoyed" (*wo hen fan* - 我很烦). At an evening event on

⁶⁹ Illouz argues that therapists' evaluations of emotional intelligence reflect their own therapeutic emotional style (2008: 210).

campus, called “Time for Your Feelings”, I watch counselors use the Disney movie *Frozen*⁷⁰ to teach students that their emotions affect them, and the people around them, and should therefore be carefully managed. Influential psychologists, such as Daniel Goleman and Martin Seligman, have defined emotional intelligence as the rational, instrumental management of emotions. Some Chinese schools have begun testing programs to teach ‘EQ’, or emotional quotient.⁷¹ This kind of emotional management not only involves reflexive self-control, but also shapes how people interact with others.

According to a psychologist at Renmin University’s counseling center, students change profoundly after they complete training to become peer counselors: she tells me that students become more tolerant, respectful, introspective, and spiritually independent. Students also learn that ethical interactions involve explicitly constructing a representation of the other person’s emotions and desires. We might say that they practice an explicit and individualistic theory of mind. After their training, the counselor tells me, students begin to say things like “you aren’t listening to me.”⁷² It seems that they shift the terms in which they

⁷⁰ The protagonist of the movie has magical powers, which can be either creative and destructive according to her emotional state.

[Buck, Chris and Jennifer Lee. 2013. *Frozen*. Walt Disney Pictures.]

⁷¹ For instance, elementary schools in Nanjing are teaching emotional intelligence, an initiative that began with an October 2013 training course for 50 teachers (金陵晚报. July 4th, 2014. “‘情商’怎么教? 明年有望进入小学课堂: 金陵晚报.”).

⁷² Stearns argues that over the course of the twentieth century, Americans came to have less patience for the emotions of friends, family, and children; at the same time, experts came to increasingly define care as listening (1994: 245). Chinese self-help books discuss how to console a friend who breaks up with their boy or girl friend (for example, Cai 2014); several times, I heard counselors and young adults in China use this scenario to demonstrate the need for emotional and communication pedagogy.

demand respect from others, not seeking the social honor of face, but demanding recognition as beings with their own preferences and emotions.⁷³ Chinese social organizations are teaching parents and children to interact in this way.

One peer counselor told me about her work as a volunteer for Project Hope, a massive government affiliated NGO⁷⁴ that aims to improve education for poor children. When I about her work with these children, the counselor explains that volunteers have the children ask about their parent's favorite foods, learn their birth dates, and write cards expressing love for their parents. Like other Chinese educators, these volunteers see fit to tell children how painful it was for their mother to give birth to them. The invocation of Confucian indebtedness serves a moral purpose; in this context, however, this sentimental education promotes not only filial piety but also theory of mind, teaching children to recognize their parents' emotions and preferences. Project Hope volunteers also teach the parents to reciprocate, and to say "I love you" to their children. As we have seen, a variety of psychological interventions are advocating this kind of discursive intimacy. One especially widely forwarded article about parenting gives the following advice about talking with your child: "Remember to say to your child: I love you, you are my baby!" In

[Cai Kangyong. 2014. *Cai Kangyong's's Way of Speaking* (Cai Kangyong de Shuohua Zhi Dao). Changsha: Hunan Arts Press.]

⁷³ Stuart has described a process by which, beginning in early modernity, honor gradually became less about deeds, and less about duty: it became an internal quality (1994: 46-9), and finally, in early modern Europe, even a right (1994: 69).

⁷⁴ It is what's known as a GONGO, or 'government-organized non-governmental organization'.

case this wasn't terrifying enough, the article also offers the following item: "Every day when you come home from work and see your child, first of all ask them with a smile: 'child, are you happy today?'"⁷⁵

A Good Offense

"I would rather offend some people than not get ahead," a young entrepreneur tells me, a man who has just spoken at a salon for Chinese youth. In Toastmasters clubs, social feedback is simple and supportive. But in the intense leadership retreats popular with Chinese executives and ambitious young entrepreneurs, which have also been called encounter groups, the dialectical process of self-objectification is far more punishing. On a sunny afternoon, I am sitting in a cafe with this entrepreneur, Zhao Hong, along with two of his fellow graduates from a very expensive team building course.⁷⁶ Zhao recalls how he stood inside a circle of two dozen peers, being criticized from all sides.⁷⁷ Zhao and his friends suggest that this exercise has helped them to become more real: they describe it as a process of peeling back layers of illusion. But I sense that the heart of what they are identifying as the true self is not in the onion but in the tears.

⁷⁵ "每天下班回家看到孩子, 首先微笑着问他一遍: 孩子, 你今天快乐吗?"

["优秀的孩子是这样培养的。"]

⁷⁶ One woman says that she paid 25,000 RMB for 14 classes, at a discount: that's about 260 USD per class. Another student paid significantly more; "but", the students say "it's worth 100,000!"

⁷⁷ What Tom Wolfe referred to as "lemon sessions"; he traced its history as a line from prep schools to the Esalen institute and Fritz Perls. This technique remains popular in American personal growth circles.

[Wolfe, Tom. August 23, 1976. "The "Me" Decade and the Third Great Awakening." New York magazine.]

The three graduates, all in their mid-twenties, tell me that most people are phony; but after this course, they say, they really know each other. As an example, one woman says that if she doesn't like Zhao's shirt, she will tell him so. "People usually wear masks", she tells me, bringing her hand to her face. As elsewhere, she uses the image of a mask to capture the alienating demands of social performance. By tearing down what is perceived as an inauthentic mask, one feels oneself to be revealing a truer face to the world, even if it needs cosmetic surgery. Conversation over our table has shifted from the true self to one woman's recent eye surgery, the double eyelids she had made to look more Western. As these three young entrepreneurs discuss the importance of caring less about what others think of you, they paradoxically reinforce the idea that everyone's opinion matters.

As an entrepreneur building a lifestyle brand, Zhao is sensitive to the power of owning an identity. He tells me that his business is a reflection of himself; that, ultimately, he is selling himself. The self-help training programs that Zhao frequents teach him to view himself as a social object, to look into the mirror, to perfect his product. But the training programs help Zhao to establish an identity in multiple ways, not only teaching him to see himself in the eyes of others. The programs promise material security, social status, and the possibility of autonomous self-definition. And they also appealed to Zhao as a way to establish social connection. Zhao has told me that he had first joined these personal growth groups after breaking up with his girlfriend, because he was lonely.

Zhao says that self-help training has taught him to get along with people; but he seems to have learned that social graces are a form of self-alienation. In Western

psychology, personal growth and verbal self-assertion are closely linked, even identified. Everything must be said and judged in the heroic moment. This ideology of direct expression has influenced therapy and social criticism. Anthony Giddens approvingly quotes a self-help maxim: "I'll express my negative feelings as soon as I become aware of them, rather than waiting until they build up – even if it means upsetting my partner" (1993: 193). Christopher Lasch is critical of primal scream therapy, which he sees as self-indulgent, yet he regards narcissistic pathology as the result of unexpressed anger, an "impotent rage" that the subject seeks to relieve through fantasies of success and power (1979: 39). And when gestalt psychologist Fritz Perls provokes his patient Gloria until she resists, he reads her anger as a sign of ego strength; in the famous video of their session, he tells her, "You didn't have to cover up your anger with a smile. In that moment you were not a phony."⁷⁸

When Dale Carnegie began helping his students to overcome stage fright, the first technique he employed was to have them talk about something that makes them angry.⁷⁹ Out of Egypt,⁸⁰ out from colonial influence, out of a bad marriage, anger can create the effect of identity, an intense emotional experience of justified confidence and symbolic

⁷⁸ Shostrum, Everett L. 1965. *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*. Corona Del Mar, CA : Psychological & Educational Films.

⁷⁹ Edwards, Paul, ed. 1941. *Current Biography*. New York: HW Wilson, 139.

⁸⁰ Moses had to win friends and influence people, since he was trying to get them all to head into the desert. The bible tells of his hesitation, his doubt, his questioning: was this really the voice of God? The bible suggests that Moses had trouble with public speaking, which is why he asked his brother Aaron for help with the community organizing.

integration. Writing about how politics can collapse into collective psychology, Richard Sennett argues that a social group's "genuine moral outrage" often becomes such an important part of their identity that it eclipses the political issues at stake (1974: 304-5). In social activism, in nationalism, and in daily life, anger is a potent source of identity. However, many societies regulate anger, and view its expression as shameful (Briggs 1970). In China, public displays of anger are common (Zhang Yanhua 2007: 54). Although anger is widely regarded as injurious, not only relationships but also to the body (Farquhar and Zhang 2012: 204-12),⁸¹ people in China often use expressions of anger to formulate moral accusations (Zhang Yanhua 2007: 63). Making a scene in public involves strong emotions, but people in China widely understand that confrontations are not only about expressing internal emotions, but also tactic for exerting social pressure, for seeking sympathy. This can be a risky tactic, since publicly expressing anger places a person before the court of social opinion, and since it can disrupt a valued harmony.

My friend, a young Chinese professional, tells me a story about a dinner with colleagues and foreign guests. Uncharacteristically, it wasn't understood who was paying for the dinner, or if people would be splitting the bill. One of the colleagues kept asking her manager who would pay, at first in private; when she couldn't get an answer, she asked

⁸¹ In my research on Buddhist care in Taiwanese hospices, I found that Buddhist chaplains believe that restraining anger is positive and healthy rather than dangerous: indulging in anger only feeds one's tumor. On the other hand, the central idea that appears in American intuitions about the connection between personality and cancer is "a link between emotional assertiveness and resilience to cancer" (Harrington 2008: 101), an assertiveness that involves imagining oneself as battling the tumor.

publicly. It seems she felt that she had a right to know who would be paying before she ordered. My friend felt strongly that her colleague could have kept asking in private, or just dropped the question: "This is Chinese EQ", she suggests. Of course, one doesn't have to be Chinese to value tact. But this incident demonstrates a sensibility that does not encourage making a scene, spoiling the mood, and having everyone lose face. A typically Chinese alternative to confrontation is oriented to long-term relationships: one pays close attention to how one is treated, and adjusts one's behavior accordingly. This is the kind of silent accounting that psychologists in China associate with paranoia. However, it can obviate the need to assert oneself in the moment, to seek the satisfaction of justice in a settled bill. In China, people will often fight in order to pay the bill, and friends usually take turns paying for each other rather than going Dutch.

One member of our Toastmasters club, a woman in her thirties who has worked in foreign and Chinese firms, explains to me in English that in Chinese companies, one must learn to "observe and take correct action", adding the idiom *chayanguanse* (察言观色), meaning to 'examine speech and observe expressions'. For her, sensitive adaptation to others is not a failure of self-assertion, but a powerful tactic. Collapsing very different language ideologies into each other, she tells me that "communication is the magic in *guanxi*." This statement suggests that in China, techniques of self-presentation that imagine a world of strangers, that focus on first impressions and fateful moments, are finding application in within dense interpersonal networks. In these settings, brief opportunities to influence others are no less precious, or less challenging, than when among strangers. Many

of the young professionals in personal growth groups want to believe that their future depends not on personal relationships, on *guanxi*, but on their performance. But the “real China”, some members of my Toastmasters club tell me, is a world of banquets and backroom deals. In this setting, one should know when to avoid making a scene: a tactical, long-term orientation is the mark of “Chinese EQ”.

Indigenous genres of Chinese self-help, like *guanchangxue* (官场学) (on the art of bureaucratic politics) and *houheixue* (厚黑学) (on ruthless subterfuge), present subtle tactics for thriving within institutional hierarchies: they teach people to restrain and carefully time their speech, to read between the lines, to assess situations, how to give others face and how to decline offers politely. These concerns simply do not appear in American self-help books. One book about speaking skills that self-consciously styles itself as Chinese reminds readers that the Confucian gentlemen doesn’t speak too much.⁸² Such books discuss the skill of entertaining not as a matter of developing humor or charm; they devote chapters to hospitality in restaurants and karaoke parlors.⁸³ Some books on social skills explicitly

⁸² Xiao Xiangyin. 2013. *The Art of Speaking: The Most Chinese Flavored Charm and Eloquence* [*shuoha de yishu: zui you zhongguowei de meili koucai*]. Beijing: Zhongguo Huaqiao Chubanshe.

⁸³ A self-help book by the Taiwanese celebrity Cai Kangyong, for example, explains how to be a gracious host at a karaoke parlor, arranging music, conversation topics, and atmosphere so that everyone has a good time (Cai 2014.) Teresa Kuan uses the art of hosting to illustrate Chinese notions of indirect efficacy, of disposition: “The essential subjectivity of the party hostess is less significant than the hostess’s skill at disposing and arranging” (2015: 26).

[Cai Kangyong. 2014. *Cai Kangyong’s Way of Speaking* (*Cai Kangyong de Shuohua Zhi Dao*). Changsha: Hunan Arts Press.]

advocate polite lies. *Cai Yongkang's Way of Speaking*, written by a Taiwanese celebrity, begins by praising flattery as a way to build good relationships. Cai suggests that, rather than flattering someone directly, one can seem more believable by passing on flattering words from others, even if they never really quite said them (Cai 2014: 304). Sincere directness is not a key concern in these self-help books. The arts of covertly influencing people are also elaborated in ancient Chinese tactical treatises,⁸⁴ and in popular soap operas about courtly life (*gongting ju* - 宫廷剧).

Therapist Ling, who wants right kind of harmony, explains to me that “We don’t say yes or no”, because Chinese people don’t want to offend anyone who they don’t know: their father might be an official. She sees this cultural propensity as a challenge for Chinese psychologists, and for management science. As social critics, Chinese psychologists often emphasize that indirect styles of communication are craven, not only obstacles to talk therapy, but also symptoms of the internal injuries sustained in a society where one cannot

⁸⁴ This is “antirhetoric” (Jullien 2004: 155): it is not about convincing with arguments, but about disposing someone to accept your view. It is not about expressing oneself, but about getting others to reveal their true thoughts (Jullien 2004: 158). This is not about expression: it is an art that must be cultivated through deep internal work, and reflexive self-knowledge. In the Warring States era (475-221 BC) text *The Master of Demon Valley* (鬼谷子), effective speech depends on cultivated sensitivity to oneself and to others:

This interrelated knowledge is likened to a mythological fish that has only one eye and thus must travel in pairs. With this knowledge, perception of form is like the relationship of light and shadow; then you can see into words without missing anything, like a magnet attracting needles. Your dealings with people are subtle, your perception of their feelings and mental states is quick. It is like yin to yang, like yang to yin; it is like round to square like square to round. (Cleary 2001: 13).

seek justice, cannot speak. One journalist who wrote against Communist Party censorship tells the story of a man who pretended to be silent for years, throughout political purges (Blum 2007: 81). Chinese idioms like “the gun shoots the bird that sticks its head out” (*qiang da chutou niao* - 枪打出头鸟) encode a need for careful discretion. Against this background, Chinese psychologists are promoting therapeutic theories of communication and intimacy that tend to view self-assertion as the emergence of a 'true self that has been repressed by society.

Liao Rui, the family therapist who teaches that Confucianism is perverse, shows members in her professional workshop two videos. In the first, an American baby is splashing happily in the bathtub, repeatedly saying “No!” while his parents laugh. In a second video, a Chinese toddler is forced to practice math until she cries: Liao tells her students that Chinese children are not allowed to say no. In Western philosophy, the act of refusal, of negation, is emotionally and symbolically charged. Marcuse sees Hegel’s narrative of antagonistic struggle as the “self-interpretation of Western civilization” ([1955] 1974: 115). He writes:

This is the notion of the individual which must constantly assert and affirm himself in order to be real, which is set off against the world as his ‘negativity,’ as denying his freedom, so that he can exist only by incessantly winning and testing his existence against some-thing or some-one which contests it. ([1955] 1974: 113)

This “illusion of politics”⁸⁵ (Furet 1978) makes the subject into a perpetually self-justifying actor; it provides motive for turning the mask into a mirror. One must convince others, and oneself, of one’s righteous sincerity. Marcuse writes that Hegel’s narrative ends in the peace of true knowledge, in the clear light of a rational consciousness. Today, more wary of true knowledge, we might say that the trial is over, the dispute has been resolved, judgment has been passed on a mortal soul.

In her workshop, Liao Rui says that “In the city extroversion is healthy, but in the country you will be killed if you are extroverted. If you go around making a scene you will offend everyone.”⁸⁶ Almost everyone in the audience gives a knowing laugh. Liao goes on to say that in country, to stand out is to be “haughty” (*kuangao* - 狂傲).⁸⁷ Are less confrontational forms of selfhood then part of the past, the countryside, covered with the scent of earth and sweat? No longer fit for aggressive self-making, among strangers? In China, the longing for transparent communication finds wide sympathy. People are sick of

⁸⁵ Marcuse’s account evokes what historian François Furet, borrowing from Marx, has called the “illusion of politics”, the idea that “Action never meets obstacles or limits, but only opponents” (1978: 43. In Ehrenberg 2014: 365);

⁸⁶ Lionel Trilling, writing about the protagonist of Moliere’s *The Misanthrope*., says “Alceste’s point of pride is his sincerity, his remorseless outspokenness on behalf of truth. The obsessiveness and obduracy of his sincerity amount to hubris, that state of being in which truth is obscured through the ascendancy of self-regarding will over intelligence” (1972: 17). In Europe, people seeking authenticity and self-expression have been seen as foolish, nihilistic, alienating, arrogant, and morbidly weak (Lindholm 2013).

⁸⁷ Yan Yunxiang discusses a personal quality called *laoshi*, referring especially to “obedience and honesty” (2003: 77. Yan writes that until the early 1980s, women in the village he studies valued this trait in potential suitors, but that they have gradually come to view this trait negatively. The virtues of being *laoshi*, Yan suggests, are only virtues within “intragroup interactions”; in markets, women feel that *laoshi* is easily bullied and cheated (2003: 77-8).

corruption, tired of not knowing where they stand. However, making contractual demands, especially within personal relationships, can seem crude to many people; it can threaten valued relationships, it can turn into a headache. Directness not only conflicts with sensibilities easily aggravated by brashness, but may also be less psychologically pressing in a culture in which direct expression has not served as such an important test for the self. Chinese institutions do not often encourage directness, nor do Chinese self-help books present it as a virtue.

However, for young adults in China and elsewhere, the ideology of direct expression provides a useful justification when they act against the wishes of their parents (Farrer 2002; Tran 2015): they want to say what they want. If young adults feel frustrated when they talk to their parents, this only makes it more likely that they will raise the next generation of Chinese people quite differently. When they start their own families, they will be conscious of democratic ideals, even if they do not fully embrace them as principles for governing personal relationships. In professional contexts, things in China are also changing. Many young adults are working in foreign companies, and millions have studied abroad. They are a minority, but an influential one. In a generation, they may create a different business culture, one that favors a different form of communication, one that encourages speaking up: this depends on larger political and economic circumstances. But as Marshall Sahlins points out, despite their illusions, Americans spend most of their time

in institutions that are not governed by legal or democratic norms (2008: 23).⁸⁸ However things may change in China, it is important to realize that direct expression is an ideology, a selective vision of the social world. While the values of restraint and harmony can be deeply conservative, it is also the case that contractual satisfactions cannot guarantee just or happy relationships. They can even work against them.

At a Toastmasters district conference in 2013, the keynote speech was given by Vikas Gopal Jhingran.⁸⁹ Jhingran is Indian PhD engineer who won the title of World Champion of Public Speaking in 2007, in Toastmasters' International Speech Contest. In his speech, Jhingran describes becoming frustrated with his social skills while studying and working in the United States. He suggests that students in the West are formally trained in "communication"" and "presentations", and that in India, people don't have chances to speak. Jhingran describes standing at the front of the room in a Dale Carnegie Training course, his hands shaking violently: "Nobody should be so scared of anything in life." He talks about finding confidence among strangers, and he presents a moral conviction. Jhingran describes playing on his own exoticism in order to win friends, objectifying himself to talk ownership of his image. He tells us that when he found out that meditation

⁸⁸ He also points out that democracy is always founded on hierarchy: "Even apart from the history of slavery, the same contradictions remain true for contemporary Americans who are pleased to believe they 'live in a democracy' although they spend the far greater part of their lives in undemocratic institutions such as families, schools, capitalist workplaces – not the mention the military and bureaucratic organizations of government itself" (Sahlins 2008: 23).

⁸⁹ Jhingran is also the author of a book called *Emote: Using Emotions to Make Your Message Memorable* (2014. Pompton Plains, NJ: Career Press).

is cool in America, "My stock went up." He also suggests that arranged marriage makes for good cocktail party conversation. Jhingran describes a fatalistic "Eastern Culture" in which things are "meant to be", but his message collapses the distinction between activity and passivity: "you didn't choose your plight, you make it right." Jhingran's speech demonstrates one way that someone has reconciled the value of autonomy and the reality that, in some sense, "everything in your life is arranged". There are many reasons for people not to insist on asserting their desires; we must live in the world, as much as we may wish to change it. And having things arranged for us is not necessarily oppressive. When a Chinese therapist like Ling tries to distinguish the good kind of harmony, these cultural and existential tensions are audible.

Skillful Words

Among the psychotherapists I met in Beijing, Chen Wei stands out for consistently, critically reflecting on the foreign nature of his field. At many points in our conversations, he used a Chinese perspective to oppose Western psychological doctrines, bringing their foreign elements into sharp relief. Unlike most therapists I encountered, Chen Wei grew up in the countryside, and is male. He always reacts strongly against the self-help materials that I bring for his consideration. One afternoon, I show him photographs of popular psychology slogans that the government has placed on the subway cars, promoting positive energy (*zheng nengliang* - 正能量).⁹⁰ Chen exclaims that this slogan is a way to "fool" people

⁹⁰ See photograph in Appendix B. Since 2012, this has become a key phrase in government propaganda (Bandurski 2015). It comes from a self-help book: Richard Wiseman's 2012

(*hunong* - 糊弄).⁹¹ Several times, he repeats, "You can't be responsible for yourself!" Indeed, he was not alone in making this critique. In China, it would be hard for most people to maintain an illusion of independent self-definition. Some psychologists are sensitive to the political economy of autonomy; "How can I be myself?" one college counselor asks me rhetorically, when housing and education are so expensive.

Chen Wei critiques psychology in ways that cut especially close to its liberal bones, and to its language ideology. He does not think that intimacy is about equality and directness: he relates how he told some women that at times they should lie to their men in order to stroke delicate male egos. Chen Wei also tells me that Americans should stop speaking up, should learn to listen to their better-informed superiors: I have learned that Chen is skeptical of authorities, but even more of upstarts.⁹² He does not see silence, difference, or hierarchy as inherently bad, or relentless sincerity as the path to happiness. And when I tell him that everyone is talking about the importance of having dreams, he tells me that it's a disease (*maobing* - 毛病).

book *Rip It Up: The Radically New Approach to Changing Your Life* (London: Macmillan). The Chinese translation was titled "Positive Energy" (正能量).

[Bandurski, David. December 15, 2015. "The CCP's "positive energy" obsession." China Media Project. cmp.hku.hk]

⁹¹ Yang Jie writes about popular perceptions that self-help psychology is *huyou* (忽悠) which Yang translates as "entrapment" (2013: 305).

⁹² As Liah Greenfeld writes, "Generals should outrank colonels, because they are generals — this is good for all of us — and everyone, but everyone should outrank children. That the awareness that [*sic*] this is so is painful for so many of us is a tragedy of our society. Equality is not a God-given right; when experienced as such, it is a curse" (Greenfeld 2013: 306-7).

Over dinner one evening, I mention to Chen Wei that Chinese psychologists are teaching people that they must express themselves directly. I'm not surprised that he has thought about this, or that he doesn't like it one bit. When I ask him about what Chinese social skills look like, he answers by way of example. His examples emphasize that people are made up by social rituals and cultural traditions, rather than defined by struggling against them in the name of sincerity and individual expression. Chen begins by saying that in China a person must be able to hold their liquor, and should master toasting at banquets. He then tells a story about his acquaintance, a prominent psychologist. When one of her parents died, he offered a traditional formula of condolence, meaning that one should overcome one's grief and adapt to the new situation (*jie ai shun bian* - 节哀顺变). He then asked "Are the family matters being taken care of?" This is a traditional inquiry, one that expresses care by inquiring about the many practical arrangements that grieving people need to handle. To apply Sennett's terms, he was "presenting" his sympathy in a shared language, rather than "representing" it as a personal feeling (1974). But Chen Wei tells me that the psychologist replied by speaking of her "emotions" (*qingzhi* - 情志); she said that because of her emotional state, she didn't notice who was making arrangements, and didn't notice much of anything at the funeral. Chen animatedly exclaims "Chinese people don't talk about feelings!" (*qingxu* - 情绪) For him, resisting the ideology of direct emotional expression is not only a matter of maintaining Chinese cultural integrity, but also a practical matter of interpersonal efficacy. Chen says that communication need not be explicit, that actors can adjust social emotions skillfully, ritually, by saying the right things at the right

time; but, he suggests, they can only do this if they are empowered by a shared tradition.

Chen says that “Adjusting consciousness” is the “function of culture”. “Now”, he continues with wistful provocation, “there’s only this damned psychology.”

Interests and Ideals

If a person has no dreams, how are they different from a salted fish?

做人如果没梦想，跟咸鱼有什么区别？

Shaolin Soccer – Stephen Chow¹

Participating in our club's Mandarin language speech contest, an earnest, thoughtful IT professional implored members of our Toastmasters club to be themselves. Jiang tells the audience that "Lots of people like to blame others: you don't study! You aren't like other people!" He says that if a person isn't busy trying to advance their career or to get married, then everyone thinks they are a bad onion. "I can't be like the other onions", he states, telling us that he had earnestly tried. Jiang says that his mom is upset that he doesn't seem interested in getting married. He says that he has tried dating some girls to make her happy: but nothing felt right. With consternation, he tells us that his mother got angry at him, exclaiming, "You're different from other people. You're not normal!" (*ni bu zhengchang* - 你不正常). Slight giggles erupt from the audience, and are swiftly swallowed up. Jiang explains that he got angry as well, and sought to settle the matter of his normality. "So I had this lifetime's first experience of going to a mental hospital", he says, and describes his trip to the most renowned psychiatric hospital in Beijing. Jiang admits he was a bit worried that the doctors might find something wrong, implying that he means a stigmatized mental

¹ 2001. Universe Entertainment.

illness; after all, he says, “I’m not married yet.” He tells us that he filled out a questionnaire with several hundred items, and was certified sane: “My mom was very dissatisfied.”

Jiang gets to his main point: “Of course I can’t be an onion! Onions are fine, but I’m an apple.” He suggests that Steve Jobs, who wouldn’t listen in class, was also an apple; but Jiang says that because his parents supported him, Jobs went on to surprise the world.

Several other apples also appear in the speech. There is Hong Baoyu, a character from the classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, who refused to take the imperial exam to become an official; and there’s Van Gogh, who didn’t sell a painting for years: he wasn’t a bad onion, but a great apple, says Jiang. “I’m an apple too”, he continues, and “We’re normal.” In this speech, Jiang’s individuality appears not only as a call for self-definition, but also as a plea for tolerance and as an awkward realization. He tried to be fit in, but he couldn’t. Jiang refers to psychological expertise not to define a new abnormality, but to broaden the definition of normality. The idealism of Steve Jobs, the refusal of Hong Baoyu, the amateur paintings of Van Gogh: all appear as challenges to the social order, to the values that animate Jiang’s upset mother. This speech became a reference point for subsequent discussions in our Toastmasters club and in others. Its message of self-definition in the face of constricting values resonates with young people in Chinese cities. They often recite it with the ardor of converts, and a revelatory freshness that can be disconcerting. They reassure each other that it is fine to be an apple. But if people are advocating for the freedom to be themselves, they are also anxious to become different, in a good way.

Across my research sites and in daily life, I encountered young adults who directly say “I want to have an interest,” or who explain “My friends and I decided that the most important thing is to be interesting” (*youqu* - 有趣, *youyisi* - 有意思). At public events, they will raise their hand to anxiously ask “What are my passions?” Without irony or self-consciousness, they circulate articles like “Be an Interesting Person”:² often, these materials conflate being interesting with being self-focused and stubbornly assertive. Young adults might praise an imaginative friend by telling her “Your brain hole is so big!” (*Naodong tai da le* - 脑洞太大了): this recently coined slang phrase expresses approval of people with bold, surprising, different ideas. This eager discourse of self-definition references new possibilities and incitements: to travel, to date, to take up a hobby. To a large extent, the desire to formulate and pursue a unique passion responds not only to new possibilities, but also to the social, economic, and psychological rewards of differentiating oneself in a mass society (Simmel [1903] 1950)).³ In the previous chapters, we have seen how members of personal growth groups learn to define themselves by their hobbies and fashions; how activists teach young adults to confidently sell their passions; and how psychologists instruct people to directly express their individual interests. In this chapter, we will place these psychological projects in the context of a broader youth culture, which shapes the ways in which young adults in China approach self-help psychology. Discourse about

² 2007. “芮成钢：做一个有意思的人比什么都重要。” blog.sina.com.cn

³ Young entrepreneurs encourage their peers to just do something “badass” (牛).

apples and onions is only the beginning of a process of individuation that draws on particular a set of psychosocial capacities: on self-objectification, and on imagination.

One Toastmasters club member, a recent college graduate, aptly characterizes many members of his generation: “we all know we need to be ourselves, but we don’t know who we are.” To many young adults in China, lack of self-awareness signals a cultural deficit. Like public speaking, self-promotion, and self-assertion, the ability to find oneself is a social skill. Drawing on self-help psychology, ethical entrepreneurs are teaching young adults in China how to be themselves: how to see themselves as objects, and to visualize their objectives. They are telling young people that they must have dreams, that they need to have interests and ideals. These terms have multiple meanings. Interests can be the things that you like or the things that you want; ideals capture aspirations for social but also personal perfection. In this chapter, we will touch on social activism, slang, self-help materials, and speeches from Toastmasters clubs in order to feel the palpable novelty of self-definition in contemporary Chinese youth culture. In contrast to accounts of individualization that see autonomous desires as natural, we will see ways in which young adults are not claiming their autonomy so much as creating it by constructing their inner gyroscopes, their interests and ideals. They are learning to visualize explicit goals, for themselves and for society, and to pursue these transcendent objectives with an instrumental will. In doing so, they are reconfiguring the relationship between identity, desire, and image. People are learning to imagine who they could be, but also to question who they really are.

As young adults seek to define themselves, they are creating a shared, liberal vision of multiple values and competing interests. Over the past few decades in China, the values of happiness and pleasure have become legitimate and widespread justifications for individual action (Rofel 2007; Farrer 2002; Kleinman et al. 2011; Yan 2009; Zhang 2010). Indeed, scholars have placed hedonic values centrally in reform era cultural politics. People defend sex as natural, and cast socialist control of desire as unnatural repression (Zhang 2005; Lee 2010: 301); bodily indulgences taste sweeter against a history of deprivation (Farquhar 2002). But the pursuit of a good life is never only about physical desires. In anthropologist Lisa Rofel's conversations with Chinese youth, they "quickly turned to the importance of having wide-ranging aspirations, hopes, needs, and passions" (2007: 4), objectives that can orient a self-determined life. In this chapter, we will meet young adults who are pursuing both physical pleasures and moral satisfactions: interests and ideals, collapsing into each other. Whether they are the assertive self-definitions of lifestyle, or the grandiose claims of moral justification, reflexive modes of public display are bringing people in China into a closer relationship with the image of the self. This is about instrumental action and moral confidence, about seeking satisfaction and being loved. This is a relation to the Other, to a tenuously posited identity, to the life one might claim among strangers and in their judging eyes.

Having Interests

It's 1:30 at night, and we're sitting in a fluorescent bright, greasy Xinjiang restaurant on Drum Tower East Street. Posters and flyers cover the grimy white tiled walls,

advertising upcoming punk, metal, and rock shows in the neighborhood. My friends and I are eating barbecue, having beers. Across the small room, there's a table of men in their early twenties, tattooed and pierced. When most of them leave the restaurant, two come join our table, unbidden; they are perhaps attracted by my tattooed female companions. Blitz is dressed in a militant punk style, and has a shaved head. His younger friend, nineteen years old, is wearing a flat brimmed baseball cap; he introduces himself as Cash Banger, and says he is a DJ. After a few minutes of conversation, Blitz warns me that "Some of the punks are fake!" During my time in Beijing, several artists, skaters, and hip-hop fans told me, unsolicited, that some of their number are inauthentic; they were sharing important information in a conspiratorial tone. People like Blitz have studied how to perform particular lifestyles, and they are now concerned with defending their investment, their commitment, their authenticity.⁴ Only compounding their headache, large numbers of their peers are now anxious to claim their own interests and styles.

This encounter took place at the urban center of China's alternative youth culture, a community in the heart of Beijing. Gulou, or Drum Tower, used to be where the government marked the hours with drums and bells. Now, young people with dreadlocks and tattoos are wandering the alleys around Drum Tower East Street, walking to the rhythms of various subcultures from the West, or from Japan. In a sense, these carefully studied bohemian performances began as stage plays. Gulou's alternative lifestyle cultures

⁴ Dick Hebdige suggest that every subculture quickly encounters this issue (1979: 122).

grew up around the Central Academy of Drama; beginning in the late 1990s, underplayed actors opened coffee shops and boutiques in the area. Now, the neighborhood is bustling with bars and restaurants and so many tourists that some of the hipsters are moving away. And the future of this colorful area is in doubt; for inscrutable reasons, the central government began bricking up many of the area's small shops in the summer of 2016. Some speculate that this is about the real estate interests of a few officials, of a clique; others that it is a matter of tidying up the face of Beijing. This move will probably only encourage the punks, secure in their oppression.

Punks like Blitz, members of one of Beijing's earlier imported subcultures, use the term *weipeng* (伪朋), or false punk, to describe those who have the clothes but not the matching spirit. The Chinese word for authenticity, *benzhen* (本真), is not common in daily speech. However, with the proliferation of lifestyle choices, or fashions, some young adults have begun to distinguish between performances that are superficial masks, and those that are authentic mirrors. The Chinese language offers a colorful lexicon of formal and slang words for expressing doubt about the connection between person and presentation;⁵ this

⁵ Many of the slang terms center on the character 'bi' (屌, more politely written as 逼), which is a very vulgar way of referring to female genitalia. The term *niubi* (牛逼), which means cool or badass, is ubiquitous, to the degree that the character *bi* has been largely washed of its vulgarity. To be *dou* (逗) is to be funny, to be a *doubi* (逗逼) is to be a generally amusing person. But to *zhuang* (装) is to pose, and to be a *zhuangbi* (装逼) is to be a 'poser': one pretends that one is very *niubi*, or badass. In the past several years witnessed the rise of the somewhat sarcastic term *bige* (逼格), or badass style. To ride a fixed-gear bike is *niubi*: but making your own fixed-gear bike out of bamboo has a much higher *bige*. Other, older terms also center on the authenticity of self presentation: *xuwei* (虚伪), which means hypocritical, *zuozuo* (做做), which means affected, and *jiaoqing* (矫情), which means to be affectingly

lexicon is expanding even further as people come to appreciate the social power of constructing a unique individual identity. The value of being different has been appreciated before in Chinese history, especially in times and places with a surfeit of educated and unemployed young adults.⁶ But now, it seems that most young adults in China want to be unique; it is now mainstream to want to be “non-mainstream” (*feizhuliu* – 非主流). Many of my friends and neighbors in Gulou were creative professionals employed in design, marketing, and the media. They embody the *gexing* (个性), or “individual nature”, that adolescents and young adults in China now idolize. We will see that developing this kind of personality means constructing individual interests and ideals, and trying to realize them. It is a form of enviable autonomy, and it requires financial, cultural, and psychosocial capital. On the whole, young adults in China are pursuing individuality quite earnestly; but the aspiration to be special is sometimes mocked by savvy members of subcultural clans, or, as we will see, by a significant group of young people who regard the project of being oneself as a luxury or an affectation.

unconventional. Someone who wants to get in on all the action can implore an old hand, ‘*dai wo zhuangbi, dai wo fei!*’ (带我装逼带我飞): take me posing, take me flying!

⁶ Expanding education and limited opportunity are not new: seventeenth and eighteenth century China, the lack of public roles for literati led them to perform contortions of eccentricity; self-expression became routine and commercialized (Huang 1998: 94), and identity became merged with style (Huang 1998: 100). Liah Greenfeld discusses similar moments in European history: in 16th century England, where educated men could not find jobs (2013: 367); and then in late 18th century Germany, where, under similar conditions, large numbers of people suddenly tried to earn a living as writers (2013: 478). For Greenfeld, these moments trace the emergence of a modern madness.

"I'm unconventional", announces a guest at a Toastmasters club, telling us that his name is Genesis. The previous guest's name translates as 'Study Strong': we can see why for some young adults in China there is such a powerful appeal to choosing one's own labels, words that reflect one's own aspirations. Even if people in China want to become something different, and even if these individual desires are increasingly legitimate, it is not so easy to adopt a new habitus. Scholars report that people in China are anxious to consume foreign goods in the right way (Zhang 2008, 2010), and to perform a sexual identity in the right way (Rofel 2007: 5). For Judith Butler, the subject is chained to social categories by this anxiety to "reinstate the norm 'in the right way'" (1997: 28). But as Michael Warner suggests, people can never really fully identify themselves with categories that emerge as abstractions, constructed in the public discourses of politics and lifestyle (2002: 182). Warner suggests that this gap between self and representation leads to a general feeling of inadequacy, and to anxiety about one's authenticity. On the one hand, people in individualizing contexts like China are learning that they are supposed to be developing their own interests and ideals. On the other, people are always already labeled with social categories, and discovering their own passions in existing public representations. The task of positioning oneself in a mediated world is then doubly destabilizing: one is not only incited to chase omnipresent images of greater fulfillment, but also to run through a haunted funhouse of mirrored images suggesting the elusive truth of one's own identity. Yet even lifestyle politics seems oriented to reflexive, individual choices, we can distinguish different connections between lifestyle and identity. What may be construed as expressions

of the self are also cultivated, studied performances. And what appears as a matter of asserting individual interests is also about establishing social connection with strangers.

Scholars of global cultural change have argued that economic prosperity leads to so called “self-expression values” (Inglehart 2000), that as people satisfy their basic needs they begin to claim the right to self-definition. In this triumphant account of Westernization, nations climb up the hierarchy of needs towards autonomous self-actualization. This is also an everyday theory in China. People often suggested to me that interest in leisure activities, and in psychology, is growing so rapidly because China’s problems of ‘warmth and fullness’ (*wenbao wenti* - 温饱问题) have been resolved. The narrative of a transition to “post-materialism” (Inglehart 2000) not only overlooks how the desire for autonomy is elaborately constructed, but also that self-expression is itself often a way to seek social connection, is a response to social fragmentation. Autonomy is not only an “ideal”, but also a “condition” (Castel 2014).

In Toastmasters clubs, some young adults anxiously discuss the feeling that they lack the cultural capital to access to social connection. One club member relates going to a music festival with some female classmates, and feeling ashamed at not knowing the bands: he explains that his confidence was destroyed by a sense that he was “not good enough” to be with these potential romantic partners. In China, aesthetic choice has only recently become a primary component of youth identity (Huang Shan 2014: 116).⁷ In his thesis on

⁷ Even the category of ‘youth’ (*qingnian* - 青年) only came into use in the late imperial era, and only for aristocratic sons (Levy 1968 – in Shaw 1994: 419).

music scenes in the Gulou neighborhood, Huang Shan offers a history of the largest, broadest category of countercultural identity in China. The term *wen yi qing nian* (文艺青年), or ‘artistic youth’, emerged from late 90s subcultures, but it only entered popular culture a decade later (Huang Shan 2014: 45). The term initially referred to students who sought out the arts, and were a bit different from their peers. For these *wen yi qing nian*, participation in cultural activities was a practice of resisting a mainstream culture that they depicted as conformist and thoughtless: lacking in authentic, reflexively considered value (Huang Shan 2014: 67). Some people in Beijing told me that the term *wen yi qing nian* was never positive, that it always meant you were odd: you were an apple who just couldn’t be an onion. However, others told me that the term used to be, or still is, a desirable label. Regardless, over the past decade the term *wen yi qing nian* has evolved: it became a well-known lifestyle choice, and therefore also a pose for people to take (Huang Shan 2014: 46-7). Now, when the term is used mockingly, it is not because it signifies an odd person, but because it implies that their oddity is an affected posture.

Despite increasing cynicism about people’s authentic commitment to their chosen lifestyles, in China young people who are visibly different have often had to fight to assert their style. This is not only because they encounter resistance from parents, but also because of limited cultural capital: even in the internet age, it is not easy to learn about cultural movements that emerged in distant times, places, and languages. Young adults in Gulou are studying and translating materials on punks, and hippies, and circulating these materials through social media. Many other young people are just buying the clothes of

fashionable Western lifestyles. Authenticity appears not only as a matter of class, but also of doing your homework. Within these lifestyle communities, there is not a lot of irony, and hipster detachment from self-presentation is only now appearing, and only among a very few people. Access to foreign cultural resources is too precious; status comes from proximity to these materials, not from maintaining an ironic distance.

These social communities create the possibility of turning aesthetic choice into an identity. Jonathan Friedman famously analyzed the difference between the European *flâneur*, who dresses up in the hope of being recognized, and the Congolese *sapeur*, whose obsession with designer clothing participates in an existing, collective social game. Friedman writes that “The narcissist without a cosmology is a cynic, however desperate. The narcissist whose identity is integrated into a larger system of meanings is an authentic clothing freak” (Friedman 1994: 183-4). Colin Campbell makes a related distinction between the late eighteenth-century dandy and his bohemian descendant who was born a century later: while the dandy engages in an elaborate social game of stylized self-presentation, the Bohemian believes he is driven by “duty to his personal genius” (1994: 198); in Colin’s view, the Bohemian has learned to define himself self through “an imaginative dwelling on ideal models” (1994: 171). While the Romantic Bohemian is an idealist, and the *flâneur* is a cynic, they are both disembedded individuals, dependent on a tenuous recognition. Both claim to transcend existing social values, and establish an identity in relation to the Other: among strangers, and before an impersonal law. This is a historically and developmentally new situation for young Chinese adults.

At a summer music festival in Beijing, I sit down in a plaza bursting with vibrant blooms of youth. This rest area is labeled “*Dashan Square*.” *Dashan* (搭讪) means to pick up a girl, or a guy, or even just to initiate conversation with someone you don’t know; it is a highly reified concept for the act of talking to a stranger. It’s what Blitz and Cash Banger did in the restaurant. In print and especially online, young adults in China, primarily men, read ‘secret texts on *dashan*’ (搭讪秘籍).⁸ Many young Chinese people think it’s cooler to pick someone up than to meet a romantic partner through an introduction.⁹ *Dashan* is perhaps a test of confident virility, or a way to find authentic, individual love; it is certainly a shared aspiration. An American music festival would not have an area specifically labeled as a place for talking or flirting with strangers. But on this summer afternoon in Beijing, in thick characters a meter high, the act of talking to strangers is clearly marked.

⁸ The strangest bit of advice I’ve found is from an article that appeared in the *People’s Daily* in 2001, and is still in circulation: I encountered it on a dating website that, if the counter is to be believed, has received 150,000,000 visits. It’s about how men can increase their attractiveness. Dress well, make money, have a wine cellar, help a homeless person or a poor student. And give your lady some excitement. If your apartment is boring, generic, you could buy a surfboard or rock climbing equipment to show that you chase excitement. Place some foreign magazines or money around. Maybe some Japanese comic books, or a menu from an Amsterdam marijuana bar. Most men are boring, so get a hobby. Maybe collect things, like cars or watches: discussing the details of your collection will make you attractive. The article includes the following anecdote: Mr. Zhang is a world expert on nocturnal mammals. On Valentine’s Day, he visited his girlfriend. The watchmen outside her building were confused by a strange residue; Zhang told them that it was bat urine. Soon after, the lady married him.

⁹ As evidenced by this joke forwarded on WeChat: “公交上一男生离一女生有一点距离，然后他上去说美女可以要你电话吗，那女生做娇羞妆答曰可以，这时旁边一男生说，下次再演可以不穿情侣装吗...”

Like individuality (*gexing*), and like talking to strangers (*dashan*), visibility is a highly reified concept among young Chinese people. The word *xiu* (秀), from the English word ‘show’, has begun to appear in many slang phrases. People in love, for example, might *xiu* their love ostentatiously (*xiu en’ai* - 秀恩爱). One slang word does not suffice: there is also *shai* (晒),¹⁰ meaning to display yourself on the street or online, which appropriates a character for basking in the sun. *Shai* is typically followed by *xingfu* (幸福), meaning good fortune.¹¹ In online forums, people *shai* their toned physiques, their consumer products, their happy relationships. We see that people are learning to be public in a new way. While a concern for appearance is of course not new in China, people are now soliciting recognition for their own achievement of happiness.¹² Most young adults in China are not committing to a defined subcultural style, even if they wear conspicuous clothing. But they are committed to pursuing their own autonomous, individual happiness. They sense that if they want to become themselves, and benefit from being different, then they must clearly envision their desires. They are trying to find out what they want, and what they like.

Being Interesting

¹⁰ From the Cantonese phrase *shai ming* (晒命), which refers to drying your seafood in front of your doorway, showing off your happy fate (*ming*).

¹¹ Since the turn of the century, the concept of *xingfu* has been very important in public discourse and government propaganda (Zhang Yanhua 2014: 37), as a state of contentment that Chinese people should try to achieve.

¹² Liah Greenfeld explains that happiness used to mean good luck; the Chinese *xingfu* also means good luck. Greenfeld writes that happiness was redefined as an achievement, a triumph of self-making: “Through passions—ambition and love foremost among them—one expressed, discovered, and realized one’s authentic and sovereign self. Happiness was the realization of this self-realization” (2013: 342).

Wang Lijun, a psychotherapist in his twenties, works at a firm that runs psychological summer camps and enrichment programs. He tells me that parents of six or seven-year-old children ask him questions along the lines of “My kid likes to draw. What should I do about it?” Wang explains that parents, concerned with educational attainment, often regard such hobbies as a waste of time. While Chinese psychologists trade these horror stories, many of them use their expertise to contribute to this atmosphere of academic competition. Wang is employed by a company that sells psychology as a set of techniques for improving children’s academic performance. He tells me that grades are the sole pillar supporting the fragile identity and esteem of Chinese students; anthropologist Terry Woronov has also suggested this (2011: 83). Chinese teachers’ promotions are linked to test scores, and they favor top students. And rather than viewing art students as talented or interesting, peers often regard them as unable to meet academic standards. They are seen as bad onions, not as good apples. Wang, who is from the countryside, sees this singular measure of value as source of psychological vulnerability that is unevenly distributed between the village and the city; he emphasizes that in rural areas, there are no extracurricular activities or arts classes.¹³ When I tell Wang that in America the best students are not the most popular ones, he immediately suggests another standard for evaluation: “Oh! They’re seen as not having individuality?” (*gexing*)

¹³ In the United States, a 2015 article described pervasive class based exclusion from extracurricular activities, activities that the authors argue are vital for developing social and psychological capacities to succeed academically and professionally (Snellman, Silva, and Putnam 2015).

“It’s odd”, two undergraduates from a top Chinese school told me, “that the best students aren’t necessarily the most popular.” Professors, students, and recent college graduates all told me that, until recently, students at top schools generally looked up to the best students, the so called ‘study hegemons’, or *xueba* (学霸). In his study of secondary education in the rural township of Zouping, in Shandong Province, anthropologist Andrew Kipnis found that academically successful students were universally admired. He writes, “I was unable to convince Zouping students of the social significance of categories like ‘nerds’ and ‘geeks’ in American high schools” (2011: 118).¹⁴ But on the campuses of top universities in Beijing, there has been a recent and distinct shift in the terms of social esteem. When I asked students from Beijing universities who among their peers was most widely admired, every respondent described the new idols on campus, the so called ‘great gods’ (*dashen* - 大神): these are students who succeed academically while also developing their own hobbies, interests, and ideas.

When I ask two members of my Toastmasters club what traits they admired in their classmates when they were in school, one jumps in excitedly: “Individuality!” (*gexing*). Her friend, more calmly, explains that she likes people who have passions. The first woman, Daisy, says that she has read about how American students like athletes and beautiful

¹⁴ Sinologist Victor Mair has also written about the lack of a term equivalent to ‘nerd’ in any Chinese dialect, the closest cognate being something like bookworm.
[Mair, Victor. March 5, 2013. “Nerd, geek, PK: Creeping Romanization (and Englishization), part 2.”

Mair, Victor. March 10, 2013. “Chinese character transcriptions for ‘nerd’.”
Language Log: language-log.ldc.upenn.edu/nll]

people. From elementary through undergraduate levels, Chinese schools provide a very different social ecology from their American counterparts. Students in a class, or *banji* (班级), take all of their courses together, usually for several years. Students not always but often compete for recognition collectively, in contests against other *banji*. Within each *banji*, students generally recognize who among them excels in various ways: at English, at dancing. The most beautiful girl will be known as the *banhua* (班花), or the 'class flower'.¹⁵ While this consensus may not be perfect, and while some students may feel envy, most will recognize and even admire the flower's beauty. The *banji* are hierarchical, but they provide a degree of unquestioned social inclusion. You do not see the kind of adolescent *ressentiment* that is so common in the United States, a celebration of the freaks and geeks in a society that idolizes athletes and prom queens.¹⁶ They must be vapid or phony: a consoling if spiteful thought.

The *banji* provide a continuous scaffold in which students can develop an identity through social integration, rather than through chosen identifications. Students do not need to dress up as punks or goths in order to join a lunch table: at most, they can try to stand out by altering their school uniforms. The *banji* are inclusive, but they can also be socially claustrophobic. College counselors report that there are frequent interpersonal problems

¹⁵ The most excellent male is the *bancao* (班草), or the 'class grass.'

¹⁶ While there has recently been some intellectual backlash against self-esteem, it has never been more important in popular culture. At the 2015 Super Bowl halftime show, Katy Perry is telling us all that we are all fireworks; Lady Gaga has a foundation to promote the self-esteem of her fans, who she calls "little monsters." We see, again, self-esteem as an expression of *ressentiment* values.

among students, who usually have to live together in cramped dorms for several years. Yet both counselors and students told me that when students look for friends outside of their *banji*, their peers regard them as abnormal. This is by all accounts changing, at least by the undergraduate level. In our conversations, counseling psychologists said that over the past half-decade many college students have begun to affiliate based on shared interests and hobbies. They told me, approvingly, that students now feel less pressure to stay within the social confines of their dorms. However, as we have noted, outside of the university Chinese society offers relatively few “re-embedment” mechanisms like clubs, religious organizations, and volunteer groups (Yan 2016: 252). We have seen how social spaces that do exist, such as Toastmasters clubs, can quickly become sites for reproducing a tight-knit sociality. Within them, identity is formed less through individual commitments than by participation in shared projects, including the shared discourse championing individual choice. Young club members are anxious to have hobbies, to be interesting, and they want to do something besides study and work.

At a 2013 Mandarin language speech contest at a Toastmasters district conference, a man in his thirties explain that while Chinese people fear being “amateur” (*yeyu* - 业余), America is a country of “amateurs”. An amateur can even become president, the speaker exclaims, mentioning Reagan. The speaker explains that being an amateur doesn’t mean being bad at something; it means that one does not pursue it for material ends, but rather as a means of “self-cultivation” (*xiuyang* - 修养). Chinese people, the speaker preaches, are too fearful to waste time on being amateurs. Even as most of them idolize individuality, *gexing*,

young adults often complain that their peers will criticize them if they spend their time on anything other than building a safe career. But the perception that Chinese standards of value are uniformly materialistic seems to be a product of contemporary economic and academic pressures rather than a timeless culture. Chinese people have long engaged in a variety of pleasurable pursuits as a means of psychophysical and moral “self-cultivation”. And we have noted, the desire to be non-mainstream has now become mainstream.

Psychologists and many young adults have good reasons for complaining about narrow social standards, strict parents, and pressure to make safe choices. But some young adults told me that their parents actually support them in exploring different careers and interests. Middle-class Chinese parents have been educated to desire happy self-actualization for their only children (Naftali 2010; Woronov 2006: 44). Again, we see that concern with developing hobbies and interests is not only about self-expression, but also about social connection. Parenting experts are teaching Chinese parents that their children must have something to talk about with their friends. They suggest that investing in hobbies, and in the products of pop culture, will make children interesting and therefore well liked, will help them join in common, we might say public, conversations; psychological experts say that these investments will prevent children from forming

inferiority complexes (Kuan 2015: 168-9).¹⁷ Educational authorities, at least at elite schools, are also promoting ideals of self-actualization.

The head of a counseling center at a top university told me that in today's China, if you do anything well, if you have a passion for anything, then you won't starve. This, he said, is the message that the university, and the counseling center, wants to promote.¹⁸ Perhaps, in the face of social stratification and a surplus of college graduates, the idea that one can succeed in any field, at least on one's own terms, functions as a fuzzy social palliative. People in China talk about the need to promote the value of self-expression through lifestyle. Psychologists and some young adults perceive that they are subject to a singular standard of economic, academic, and moral value, and they see this as a particularly Chinese problem: people want only top brands, only brand name universities. They regard this as a cultural limitation, as a basic, backwards way of thinking that is opposed to a Western sophistication and (post)modern multiplicity.

¹⁷ The depressed young Chinese adults that Jason Ingersoll studied sense that they are supposed to have more to talk about with their peers (2010: 196); some of them study "eloquence" (口才) (2010: 199).

¹⁸ China's top university, Peking University, is taking up themes of self-determination and non-material aspiration in its marketing materials. A recent recruitment video tells the story of a young woman who, against the wishes of her violently angry father, studies to become an astronomer. The idea that success isn't only a matter of security or profit in a traditional career is excitingly new, and a limited set of narratives circulates widely through social media: the Peking University graduate who opened a noodle shop, or her classmate, a woman who followed her dream of becoming a paleontologist.

“From a successful person to an interesting person: that distance is actually precisely the distance between China and the world”:¹⁹ so proclaims a 2007 interview titled “Being an Interesting Person is More Important than Anything.” Rui Chenggang is a former competitive public speaker,²⁰ a Yale World Fellow, and until several years ago he hosted financial shows on China Central Television: he is now in prison on shadowy corruption charges.²¹ In the interview, Rui says that American elites taught him the importance of being interesting: he claims that these elites are not focused on money and status. In these crowds, say Rui, the highest praise is to say that someone is an interesting person, inspiring and full of ideas; on the other hand, to say that a person is boring is the worst possible criticism. Rui wrote an article on the subject, the title suggesting to people that they can and should “Be an Interesting Person”. This article was posted and forwarded and reposted on social media by members of Toastmasters and other self-help groups. In it, Rui first explains to readers that an interesting person has thoughts, judgments, and passions, is smart, cute, and amusing.

¹⁹ “从一个成功人士到一个有意思的人，中间的差距其实也就是中国跟世界的一个差距。” [2007. “芮成钢：做一个有意思的人比什么都重要。” blog.sina.com.cn]

²⁰ In 1998, at the age of 21, Rui represented China at the International Public Speaking Competition, run by the English Speaking Union. Incidentally, Rui was instrumental in stirring public outrage against the branch of Starbucks in the Forbidden City, which is discussed in the second chapter.

²¹ Rui Chenggang was arrested for corruption in 2014 as part of a larger shakeup of the CCTV television network administration; the investigation focused on executive Li Yong, as well as Ling Jihua, former president Hu Jintao’s right hand man. Ling was removed from the Party in July of 2015, one of the highest profile targets of Xi Jinping’s ongoing anti-corruption campaign. Rui remains in prison.

But there is more to the matter: Rui says that in order to have an interesting life one must accept risk, forgoing material security.²² His article portrays Chinese people as boring, not creative, excessively careful, lacking in confidence, and narrowly focused on building careers and purchasing property. Once again, we see a Chinese social critic explaining lack of confidence as a Chinese cultural characteristic. In rejecting these safe instincts, Rui endorses some tragically absurd flights of individualism. For instance, his article includes an encomium to a farmer in Shandong Province who built his own airplanes: the amateur aeronautic engineer ended up killing himself by crashing into a neighbor's pig farm, leaving his family with a large debt. But, Rui writes, he had a great smile. Rui explains that what is interesting is to do things just because you want to.

But Rui not only tempts his readers to risk flying: he also threatens them with social death. In the article, being interesting will get you friends. Rui writes about an Australian acquaintance who bought his elderly wife a sports car that, Rui says, she had always wanted; now, he reports, the woman has an easier time getting her grandchildren to come over. Rui suggests that being interesting is what will keep your relationship together even when your partner is white-haired and wrinkled. He states that Bill and Hillary Clinton have stayed together because they find each other fascinating; when Rui interviewed Bill Clinton, he cites, Clinton told him that "After all these years, we are still very much interested in each other." Whether or not this particular couple exemplifies marital bliss, in

²² Rui's example of such a sacrifice concerns Yale graduates who come to work in China because it's interesting, putting their even higher paid careers in the United States on hold.

a fluid society many people worry about their partners getting bored. In China, as elsewhere, self-help articles about relationships often emphasize the need for shared hobbies, and suggest that one should be searching for a fascinating companion: these materials say that such people are self-actualized, and will help you to self-actualize.

Rui suggests that justifying one's actions as contributions to the nation is decidedly boring; he is reacting to nationalist rhetoric that is ubiquitous in China, and perhaps in particular to the bureaucratic speech surrounding him at China Central Television. Furthermore, in Chinese traditional literature moral idealism is often expressed as *qinghuai* (情怀), the feelings of devotion that move a Confucian scholar-official to public service; as suggested above, linking one's views to the fate of the nation remains a safe and familiar way to present social idealism in public. Rui says that people should not seek meaning and validation outside of themselves. In fact, he writes that doing anything "meaningful" is boring, represents the old way of thinking.²³ In numerous articles about personality and interests, Chinese readers are told that if they are boring they will be alone, and that being interesting means doing exactly what you feel like doing.²⁴ It is ironic that what some social

²³ As I read him, the worldly Rui uses the value of being interesting to convey a veiled criticism of nationalist sentiment. He discusses an elderly Sichuanese man who, in an extreme example of DIY, made his own paraglider. It worked: emboldened by his success, the man divorced, sold his house, and bought a professional paraglider. For Rui, all of this is positive, interesting. But when the elderly extreme athlete was on television, he said that he wanted to use his hobby to focus the world's attention on China. For Rui, this exemplifies the boring habit of older generations, who seek to do things that are "meaningful."

²⁴ Another article, on dating in America, suggests that if you are boring you will be alone, and being interesting means doing exactly what you feel like. The author, who studied

scientists call post-materialist values involve pursuing everything instrumentally: pleasure, meaning, and, not least, a sense of self.

Another article that is also circulating on social media exemplifies how the desire to stand out as an individual creates a need for constant self-justification, supporting a sense of self that is bound to ideals and dreams. The article is by a self-consciously iconoclastic young Shanghainese man, who proudly tells his readers that he has always demanded the best for himself.²⁵ He writes that after graduating from Wharton, he quit a high paid job in venture capital because it wasn't challenging enough. The author justifies this move by stating his life goal: to be interesting. He reports thinking that this is the greatest value that he could ever provide to another person. Subsequently, he finds that this formulation of his life goal is too vague. He writes that after months of anguish, he arrived at this mission statement: "To grow and to help others grow. To live and to help others live."²⁶ He explains

abroad in the United States, says that spending your time looking for love will make you boring. Be egotistical (*ziwo* - 自我) like Americans: drive six hours to buy fishing tackle. This will keep you interesting. "A life without interests and hobbies is a boring life. If your life has no surprises, people won't take any lasting interest in you, because they see through you immediately."

[*"Dating Strategies: How Americans Date."* ("恋爱攻略：美国人是这么谈恋爱的.") 壹心理.]

²⁵ "A 22 Year Old Youth, Who Gave up His Million a Year Salary, Teaches You to Search Your Heart for the Self You Really Want to Become." ("放弃百万年薪的22岁小伙，教你找寻你内心真正想成为的自己.")

²⁶ He writes that because challenges will test our commitment to our ideals, we must know exactly what we want; again, interests define the self as an oppositional actor. In order to determine one's ideals, the author advocates a method from American motivational speaker Steve Pavlina: this involves writing the purpose of your life down on a blank sheet of paper repeatedly, until you find an answer that comes not from habit or from the external world, but from your own heart.

at length that this is an age with no fixed role models or standards; he doesn't see that being able to realize your dreams might in itself constitute a social standard. Terrifyingly, the author writes that his favorite realization about dreams is that: "Your dream is like your car. If you are in full control of it, you are not driving it fast enough." The author later became an ethical entrepreneur, selling "unique experiences" to wealthy Chinese clients.²⁷

Dreaming of Flight

Chen Wei, the iconoclastic psychotherapist we met at the end of the previous chapter, told me that he wonders why people in Beijing are always talking about their next vacation. Indeed, Beijing Toastmasters clubs are filled with talk about travel. During his improvised Table Topics speech, a college freshman discusses how he will find a summer job so that he can travel to Tibet. When he mentions a common perception that young Americans often go traveling after college, two or three voices call out "gap year!" Budget travel guides fill Chinese bookstores, and students speak about backpacking with tremendous excitement.²⁸ Many young Chinese people want to visit Tibet, an exotic destination that is only an inexpensive domestic flight or even a road trip away; if they go, then their jealous peers assume that they are on a quest for self-discovery and personal

²⁷ More recently, he has established a brand of healthy yoghurt in Beijing. [Global Times. September 5, 2016. "Le Pur sets itself apart in China's yogurt industry." globaltimes.cn]

²⁸ Thailand and Nepal are cheap and accessible from China, and the settings of popular Chinese travel comedies: the two countries are full of young Chinese backpackers. Chinese professionals are learning the joys of a road trip in a private automobile, while college students take short, cheap tours within China.

transformation.²⁹ In self-help materials, the route back to yourself often passes through foreign lands: the authors of these materials are usually women. In Toastmasters clubs, nearly all of the speeches that I heard about travel were given by women. Some Chinese social observers have suggested that women in China have a bit less pressure than men to stay and invest in their careers; or perhaps, having been more objectified by others, they are both more self-aware, and have more reason to escape and redefine themselves.³⁰ As people travel to become worldly, modern, and interesting, they interpret their journeys against the “hegemonic referent” (Lee 2010: 251) of the Chinese nation. When they travel abroad for pleasure, many people reflect back on China as a place that isn’t enough fun.

In describing her trip to Cambodia, one member of our Toastmasters club talks about how she was “tortured” by the “pure smiles” of the locals. My friend from the Gulou neighborhood traveled to Nepal, and made a documentary about the hippies living there:

²⁹ If individuality is like an improvised a jazz solo, they don’t have a large repertoire of phrases. (This metaphor comes from John Lucy).

³⁰ Liu, a cultural activist teaching young Chinese to define themselves, once commented to me that women are more active and exploratory than men, and that there are many more female than male backpackers. In his view, they are under less pressure to invest in their career, and he says they see themselves and the world more clearly. Author Leslie Chang suggests that in China women are more free than men precisely because they are less valued by the natal family (2009: 57). These impressions may demonstrate an ideologically inconvenient form of freedom opened up by traditional gender roles. More darkly, this supports a Hegelian understanding of a subject that gains self-awareness through being objectified by a dominant alterity. Sinologist Mark Elvin finds early evidence for expressions of individual subjectivity in the Chinese tradition in two poems from over five hundred years before the common era, both likely written by women: “The individual is conceived here as a distinct locus of decision-making, and experiencing a life that is partly pre-determined and partly the consequences of her own choices. Whether or not it is an accident that both these early examples refer to women, I do not know” (1985: 159).

her goal, she tells me, is to show young Chinese people that there are many different ways to live. This filmmaker was impressed by the vitality of the Nepalese people; she tells me that they are poor, but they dance and sing at every opportunity. For her, and for other young adults I spoke with in Beijing, Chinese people seem less lively in comparison to foreigners, less able to enjoy life. Maybe even less ‘ku’ (酷), or ‘cool’ (Moore 2005). Some of the common words young adults use to talk about leisure have been loaned from English: if you want to ‘haipi’ (happy: it has become a verb), you can go ‘shopping,’ or to a ‘pati’ (party). ‘Hai’ means ‘high’: and if you are having a really good time, then you are ‘playing very hai’ (*wande hen hai* – 玩的很嗨). While psychologists, parents, and young people are concerned that Chinese children don’t have enough chances to play, some people in China are also concerned that adults don’t know how to play.

The author of an article on “The Happiness of Foreigners”,³¹ is concerned that her compatriots don’t know how to enjoy life. This article, which I found when several members of self-help groups posted it on social media, begins with a litany of anxieties. The author worries about giving presentations at work, and about having insufficient linguistic and cultural capital to fully participate in her international workplace. But the author’s deepest doubt and self-loathing emerge when she compares herself and her Chinese coworkers with foreign colleagues, who seem to be bursting with vitality. She writes that the foreigners arriving for work all appear to have “injected chicken blood” (*dajixie* - 打鸡

³¹ “一个从普华跳到到奔驰的人写的: 老外的幸福.”

血), saying, "Morning! Sunny day! Isn't it?" The author, less happy after her morning commute, thinks "sunny my ass." In her eyes, the beautiful foreigners present a lively, glowing, bright contrast to the Chinese "walking corpses" (*xingshizourou* - 行尸走肉). For foreigners, she writes, every day is a holiday, without high expectations, with no desire for face and no concept of honor and disgrace. Her German co-worker, for instance, is learning ballet, does yoga, goes out with friends after work, even if it's late, and she flies off for weekend trips around China. Faced with this much energy, the author describes a sense that she's wasting her life. She writes that foreigners live freely and treat themselves well, and she supposes that they aren't making five year plans and worrying about buying big houses. The author does not mention that Chinese professionals are often working long hours, typically for lower salaries than their foreigner colleagues, and that they have only five vacation days per year. Nor does she mention the soul crushing smog.

We have seen how people in China perceive social failures as simultaneously personal and cultural; so too for failures to have fun. And to the degree that people are obligated to choose their lives, a good time is not only allowed; it becomes an important measure of personal, and national,³² success. For Bourdieu and other thinkers, the pleasure duty is a direct reaction against regimes of value that come to be perceived as repressive.³³

³² Since 2006, the Chinese government has developed a measure similar to Bhutan's index of "Gross National Happiness" (Yang 2013: 294). Happiness is a way to for the government to maintain social stability, but I would suggest that in China national happiness is also a mark of successful modernity.

³³ Indeed, many interpreters of pleasure, self-expression, and positivity have seen these pursuits as a reaction to Protestant strictures (Ehrenreich 2010; Bourdieu 1984; Campbell

But this revaluation of values can be a trap: “The fear of not getting enough pleasure, the logical outcome of the effort to overcome the fear of pleasure” (1984: 366). Bourdieu explains that “This doctrine makes it a failure, a threat to self-esteem, not to ‘have fun’” (1984: 367). In the context of China’s anti-traditional politics, self-centered desires can easily be identified as the true self, moaning audibly behind a thin propriety. This idea appealed to early 20th century Chinese reformers who, influenced by Western intellectual currents, wanted to liberate a sexuality they saw as concealed behind a hypocritical Confucian propriety (Lee 2010: 178). Pleasure and sex can quickly turn into utilitarian pursuits, leading to an ugly, instrumental attitude in which the value of every moment, and of the self, is defined by the *telos* of profit or orgasm.³⁴ Young adults in China seem less likely than their American peers to regard sex as the end of every interaction,³⁵ but they do seem increasingly concerned with sex as a central aspect of identity, with sexuality.

1987; Jung 2011). Others point to new worldviews that have devalued anything beyond the individual lifespan (Lasch 1979). Many self-help materials in China configure the value of life in terms of bucket lists and avoiding regret, restless play made mandatory by death. More than a desire for pleasure, this is a fear of missing out.

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, building on Bateson, argue that in some societies sexual interaction, and even quarrels, do not seek a climax, but rather maintain a plateau, “a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation towards a culmination point or external end (1987: 22). Deleuze and Guattari critique Western thought and action for their instrumentality, writing that it is a “regrettable characteristic of the Western mind to relate expressions and actions to exterior or transcendent ends” (1987: 22).

³⁵ Eric Henriks writes of the “ascetic hedonism” of the “pick-up arts”, describing how some Americans and Northern Europeans turn the pursuit of sex into a harsh discipline (2012). This asceticism does not seem to be influential in China. Anecdotally, men who take classes on how to pick up women are happy enough if they subsequently find a girlfriend (Yang 2009).

At Toastmasters district conference in Hong Kong, a group of club members from southern China arrive in black t-shirts with bright English letters, saying “BE A SEXY TMCer [Toastmasters Club member].” Widespread anxieties about sex and attractiveness are expressions of a “perverse implantation” (Foucault 1978) that has young Chinese people increasingly aware of sexuality as a problematic aspect of the self.³⁶ In China, sexual and economic potency overlap powerfully, in ways that are conditioned by local history and understandings of the body (Farquhar 1999). However, young adults in China are pursuing sexual pleasures without some of the cultural structures of guilt and of competitive utilitarianism that make the orgasm duty so overwhelming in the United States. Sex is a test of the self, but it is not so central to the psychic economy; and young people talk less about sex than about romance and relationships. People in China are experimenting with a variety of sexual possibilities, enabled by increased mobility and by the internet. But we have seen that among Toastmasters club members, dating is a new and shared concern; this is the case for many young adults in China. At Toastmasters club meetings, people talk about awkward first kisses or their inability to get dates with frustration and self-mockery, but not with shame.

[Yang Guang. 2009. “Picking up girls makes failed businessman success.” China Daily.]

³⁶ Referring to men as ‘handsome brother’ (*shuai ge* – 帅哥), is a casual greeting or flattery, used by both men and women; during the period of my fieldwork, I heard several people quickly follow this greeting with a public explanation that they are not homosexual. This strikes me as a new anxiety.

At a Mandarin language speech contest in our club, a woman speaks of her frustration in love, and her wide-ranging travels in search of a beautiful stranger. She tells us about her journey to Yunnan province, “capital of romantic encounters”; to the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, looking for a herder to settle down with; and to Xiamen, “capital of romance”, a southern coastal city famous for its seductive colonial architecture. Although she didn’t realize her dreams of romance, she assures us that she is doing well: upon her return to Beijing, she joined a hiking club, a book club, and this Toastmasters club. She presents herself as actively overcoming the disappointment of her romantic fantasies with the quiet triumph of pleasurable, sociable leisure. Her narrative of travel draws on a shared fantastic geography; people in the audience recognize the speaker’s references to the “capitals” of romance. For young adults in China, travel often has an erotic allure.³⁷ This does not necessarily focus on the exotic foreigner. It is more typically a narrative of wandering souls crossing paths in beautiful locations and having “colorful encounters”, or *yanyu* (艳遇). Young Chinese travelers sometimes tease each other, or test each other’s inclinations, by asking one another if they have had *yanyu* on the road. They are going far away to find their own peers; we have seen that they often have difficulty connecting with each other in their daily lives. Some people in China do feel that lack of sex makes one a

³⁷ Gary Sigley, in his study of “lifestyle migration” to Southwest China’s Yunnan province, describes how “The sense of independence, self-growth, and discovery that is part of youth travel as a backpacker or independent traveler also contains a strong sense of sexual exploration and fulfilment” (2016: 256).

loser: but young adults in China also have ample resources for resisting this standard for self-evaluation.

In this speech contest, five out of six speeches are about dating; however, two of these speakers decide that dating is not for them. One is Jiang, who gives his speech about “Apples and Onions”; he describes arguing with his mother when she pressures him to find a girlfriend. Many young adults are familiar with these social pressures.³⁸ In another speech, romance also appears as an unwelcome obligation. A graduate student tells us that during her college years, some young women, specifically those born “after 1985”, said that if you don’t date in college you will regret it your whole life; this wasn’t for her, she says, she studied while others were caught up in this “love-ism” (*aiqingzhuyi* - 爱情主义). To appreciative laughter, the speaker animatedly depicts a subsequent series of failed romances. She says that one suitor was socially incompetent, and also tried to stalk her. Another, she tells us incredulously, was so connected to his mother that he tried to mother her. When she called him her second mom, he corrected her: “No, I’m your third mom. My mom is your second mom”; it seems that he was trying to entangle her in a traditional, patrilocal family. A third man, from Shanghai, knew that his parents wouldn’t let him marry an outsider (*waidiren* - 外地人). This last story sounds to me like a protest against China’s class divisions, and also against the weakness of individuals who won’t assert their autonomy by resisting materialistic social standards. The speaker discusses being labeled a

³⁸ In China, some young adults even seek the services of fake boyfriends and girlfriends, especially to accompany them home for the Chinese New Year holiday.

“leftover woman”. For many young adults in China, dating is not only an expression of individual desire or identity; it is an awkward social pressure that comes from parents and peers. I later ask the speaker if she felt that everyone felt the need to date in college. She told me that it’s fine not to date, that “Sex is not a required course”.³⁹

Whether they embrace their dates or push them away, young adults in China are articulating new desires that bind the self to an image: an image of personal fulfillment, which is also a model that guides both instrumental action and ethical selfhood. We might see the image of personal fulfillment as a parallel to the utopian imagination, as a transcendent *telos* that objectifies the self and sets it willfully against the world as it is. In *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Colin Campbell explores how consumer hedonism supports the narcissistic pleasures of idealism, with “an overriding concern with self-image serving to articulate the two” (1987: 216).⁴⁰ Campbell also distinguishes “traditional hedonism”, which involves the arts of maximizing specific bodily pleasures, from a “modern hedonism” that uses emotional manipulation to continually optimize the quality of experience itself. He offers a technological and cultural account of

³⁹ A psychological peer counselor suggested to me that Chinese undergraduates may be upset if they don’t have sexual relationships, but they will blame it on external factors, not on themselves: thinking, for instance, that there were no good candidates. The counselor told me that her school’s counseling center only began to receive many questions about sex very recently, in 2013.

⁴⁰ I heard a market researcher explain that the Chinese movie *Tiny Times* (2013), widely criticized for its blatant materialism, was not exactly materialistic: in the researcher’s view, people in the movie wanted to achieve the “most badass state” (最牛逼的状态). While I disagree with his assessment of this particular movie, I think that he is onto something when he uses the phrase “most badass state”.

distinctly modern relationship to pleasure, a relationship that he says emerged from the ability to stimulate emotional fantasy through literacy, and was encouraged by a Protestant emphasis on individual inner experiences (1987: 75-6). Rather than experiencing emotions within a “communal ritual” (1987: 75), Campbell argues, people learned the skill of “granting or denying symbols their power” (1987: 76); we have discussed this process as one that sets up an opposition between self-esteem against social value, but that makes people anxious to receive validation.

The power of imagination is central to Campbell’s narrative, supporting both consumer fantasy and Romantic idealism. Campbell calls the new capacity that consumer culture depends upon “day-dreaming” (1987: 77). Jonathan Friedman has also suggested a powerful alignment between imagined pleasures, moral heroism, and personal identity; he emphasizes that this is a highly contingent configuration of the self: “The principle of the daydream, the Walter Mitty principle, the principle of alterity, of the construction of a social self, all are specific to the modern individual and cannot be universalized” (1994: 150). People in China are now learning how to daydream, and are being taught how.

An influential market research firm in Beijing reports that Chinese people born in the 1990s have very specific aspirations for the good life;⁴¹ many can describe in detail the kinds of products that they want to buy, the kinds of house plants they will keep. In China,

⁴¹ China Youthology. 2013. “Big Times, Small Worlds: Report on the Lifestyles of Chinese Post-90s Youth [大时代,小世界: 中国90后青年生活形态报告].” *City Zine* [Chengshi Huabao] 19: 29-66.

ethical entrepreneurs of self-definition are not only teaching people to create themselves through work, but also through leisure. For example, I met an undergraduate student from Duke who was spending a few weeks in China teaching what she called psychology to high school students. Her curriculum suggests to students that their parents are obstacles to self-actualization, and also encourages them to visualize how they will appear in the future: their hair styles, hobbies, and pets. I met a young woman from Hong Kong who was volunteering to teach Beijing elementary school children how to plan vacations abroad: she told me that this intervention is supposed to teach creativity, critical thinking, and presentation skills. These activists are not liberating repressed human drives, but inciting desire, teaching children and young adults to craft images of fulfillment.⁴² To use Campbell's term, they are teaching them to daydream.

The R. Kelly song "I Believe I Can Fly" appears regularly in Toastmasters clubs; sometimes a club member will sing a few lines as part of their performance. Activists who are teaching people to daydream are also teaching them to get away from, to transcend, their situation: professional, material, and psychological. A foreigner in Beijing tells me that she takes trips to the countryside teaching children that they can be anything they want to be. One year, she says proudly, they brought a pilot along: the following year, a child said that he wanted to be a pilot. For Bourdieu, a wide range of hobbies and pursuits express the

⁴² These pedagogies of the virtual parallel educational interventions sponsored by Google in the United States, in which children learn programming by imagining and controlling future movements of characters on a screen. Virtual worlds are unlikely to reduce our illusions of mastery.

“dream of social flying”, evoking a “practical utopianism” (1984: 370), an aspiration to establish an identity independent from social class. We can see travel and hobbies not only as attempts to escape from class identity, but also as ways to differentiate oneself in order to derive a social identity: to get attention, to find community, to have stories to tell.

Furthermore, leisure pursuits can in themselves produce a sense of identity: one has a destination, and will experience new challenges and stimulations. Some people feel their existence by jumping out of airplanes,⁴³ while other dreams of social flying involve actual piloting.⁴⁴ In his article on how to “Be an Interesting Person”, Rui Chenggang provides his readers with the example of the farmer who made his own airplane, and tragically crashed

⁴³ Psychological anthropologist Charles Lindholm has linked extreme sports to a need to feel authentically alive (2007: 47); participation in these sports is growing rapidly (Benedictus 2016); this may be a response to widespread alienation.

[Benedictus, Leo. August 20, 2016. “Why are deadly extreme sports more popular than ever?” The Guardian.]

⁴⁴ In Hebei province, in the mountains outside of Beijing, there is a housing development named Jackson Hole, a rough copy of the American resort town (Jacobs 2015). Its English name seems calibrated to make rusticism into an elite sophistication; these Arcadian developments are new in China. Journalist Andrew Jacobs describes residents of Jackson Hole talking about the warmth of human relations in the suburbs. It appears that they feel neighborly good will as a relief from urban distrust, even if their relationships are buffered by good fences. Jacobs describes the residents of Jackson Hole gathering in their wine tasting rooms, discussing the pleasures of equality and informality:

‘The sense of community is enhanced by more than a hundred clubs known as ‘dream-gathering tribes.’ There are tribes for boy scouts, baseball, knitting and calligraphy, with new ones constantly being added, said Mr. Huo, the marketing employee. ‘If you dream of flying, we can take you to a flying school,’ he said. All classes, he added, are free.

Up here in the somewhat fresher mountain air, everyone is equal, but different.

[Jacobs, Andrew. December 8, 2015. “Living a Frontier Dream on the Outskirts of China’s Capital.” nytimes.com]

it; Rui also includes the tale of a retiree from Sichuan who left his wife to build a new life around his homemade paraglider. Most people, however, are happy enough to sit in economy class, on their way somewhere else.

ASK

More directly than anyone else that I met, one man has made it his business to teach young Chinese people that they must know what they want, and what they believe in. Liu, a college graduate in his mid-20s, is trying to teach his peers to become themselves through a series of media platforms, videographic projects, and offline events, collectively called ASK. I first met Liu at a monthly youth conference sponsored by a qualitative market research firm. While these events usually feature five or six speakers, this month's conference is solely devoted to Liu. Guests wander through a Beijing courtyard that has been remade into an office full of funky flair. Employees are projecting videos from their ongoing research project on post-90s youth, images of restless idealism. "I want to feel like I'm always on the road. I don't want to settle down", riffs one young man. The first speaker at the conference is a college student with dreadlocks, who appears to embody an envious freedom. She's a visual artist, and an occasional fashion model; she is regularly featured in blogs about creativity and self-determination, and contributes paintings and writing to them. Her message is to bravely follow your dreams, to overcome the fear of failure and craving for stability that, in her view, prevent her Chinese peers from finding happiness. She tells us that lots of adults are doing things that aren't entirely "reputable" (*zhengjing*

shi'er - 正经事儿), but they are happy. In a room full of earnest young people, faced with this young woman, I feel anxious to self-actualize.

Soon, Liu takes up the theme of brave self-determination. He tells us that Chinese youth are passive, frozen in fear; he says that because they never had a chance to ask questions, they don't know what they want or who they are. Liu says that although older generations criticize youth for having no patience or persistence, the real problem is that young people have never learned what is worth doing, for them. In order to stimulate critical reflection among his peers, Liu is recording hundreds of young people in various cities around China as they ask a video camera any question that they wish to ask. As we have seen, many young adults in China feel that modern people are supposed to have their own passions, and their own opinions as well. They are supposed to think for themselves.⁴⁵ Liu is trying to stimulate people to "actively choose" the kind of life they wish to live, a project that involves teaching them to reflect critically on social mores. The audience members are already doing so, but in a surprising way.

The moment Liu concludes his presentation, a lively discussion erupts. About sixty people are packed in short rows in a long, narrow conference room: most of them are

⁴⁵ Jane Collier uses the bracketed term "thinking for oneself" as a central concept in analyzing the emergence of a bracketed "modern subjectivity" (1997: 5). Between the 1960s and the 1980s, as people in the Spanish village that she studied entered the labor market, they also reconfigured the relationship between self and visible action. People in the 1980s were normatively supposed to be doing what they wanted to do, and their actions were thus interpreted as authentic. As wealth moved from landed inheritance to entrepreneurial labor, people came to realize that they have some agency in determining their social identity.

college students or recent graduates. Revealing what is at the forefront of their minds, the first several questions aren't directly related to Liu's presentation: they are about dating and sex. "When will I have a girlfriend?" asks a man in his early twenties. Some people laugh, but he isn't ashamed to ask this question. A woman about his age wonders why she doesn't have a boyfriend: after all, she says, "I'm quite open" (*wo ting kaifang de* - 我挺开放的). This phrase denotes a liberal attitude to sex (Farrer 2002). Another, naively bitter question from a man in the audience: you people with a boy or girlfriend, or married people, "Why do you think you are better than the rest of us?" We see that among young Chinese adults sex and romance appear as collective aspirations, but then also as social demands. They are contested standards for self-evaluation, and also mirrors in which young adults are straining to find themselves.

The discussion soon turns to individuality, a topic provoking equally raw anxiety. Several people express a fear that they have no individuality (*gexing*). Others doubt that they can really be passionate about anything. A serious young man in a blue blazer feels a need to say that there are other values besides good grades. And one man says bitterly that because he is from the poorer interior provinces (*neilu* – 内陆): "I didn't know what hobbies are." But the general sense of bewilderment and lack is not universal. Several women resist the idea that they need to ask questions, or to be themselves. One says, "I don't have a problem." But Liu is teaching young adults in China that they do have a problem, that they haven't had opportunities to define themselves. Many of them already agree. So too do the market researchers who are hosting the conference. During the discussion, one researcher

explains to the audience that in order to escape a sense of inferiority, in order to establish self-esteem, we must create internal standards of judgment: we “need to know why we live.” She suggests that if we can show that we are happy following our passions, then our parents will eventually accept our lifestyle.

Over the next four months, I came to understand some of Liu’s motives for teaching young adults that they need to define themselves.⁴⁶ Over lunch one day, I ask him why he founded ASK. “I have more self-awareness than other students”, he offers, saying “self-awareness” in English. It seems to Liu that, despite being confused and unhappy, his peers never question what they are doing. In our terms, they are not transcendent, reflexive, objectified. They can’t step outside of themselves, or their values, in order to see themselves.⁴⁷ They have no mirror. Like the counseling psychologists that I spoke with, Liu defines self-knowledge as being aware of one’s strengths and weakness, and, above all, determining what you want. Liu is himself involved in psychological self-help groups, as well as with international associations that promoting youth entrepreneurship.⁴⁸ Like the ethical entrepreneurs who are reforming Chinese education, Liu is not only an

⁴⁶ Liu sought me out, interested in soliciting my input as a social scientist on a series of events he was designing to stimulate critical thinking through games and discussions.

⁴⁷ Recall that both disembedding from social affiliations, and assuming a reflexive relation to values, are central to a wide range of theories of identity. Philosopher Charles Taylor suggests that “... the very term ‘identity’ is somewhat anachronistic for premodern cultures” (1989: 42) because one did not assume a reflexive relation to values.

⁴⁸ The influence of popular psychology is quite direct. Liu had been at a leadership course the day before I first met him. And like the dreadlocked artist, he had been involved with the UN affiliated youth leadership program AIESEC.

“entrepreneur of himself” (Foucault 2008) who invests in his own productive capacity, but also an entrepreneur of entrepreneurial self-actualization.

Over coffee on Drum Town East Street, Liu and his girlfriend, Xu, complain to me that their peers have only superficial hobbies. We met Xu in the chapter on educational reform: she told the parable about a parent who planned her son’s school project for him, depriving him of the ability for independent thought. Xu runs courses that use social engagement to teach high school students, in her terms, leadership, creativity, quality (*suzhi*), and “self-consciousness” (*ziwo yishi* - 自我意识). According to Liu and Xu, young Chinese people tend to claim that music, movies, travel, or eating are their hobbies: but they haven’t seen many movies, heard much music, or been much of anywhere. Liu says sardonically, “I like to travel: once in three years.” I point out that many young people feel that they are supposed to have passions and interests, are anxious to have them; I remind Liu of a woman who raised her hand after his lecture to nervously ask “What’s my passion?” Liu rethinks his attack, and says that in recent years people have become “aware that they don’t have this thing”; I would suggest that this awareness is a defining element in the subjectivity of Chinese young adults.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Axel Honneth, building on Ehrenberg’s (2009) theories of depression as a reaction to the weariness of self-creation, writes: “It may well be the case that with the ideal of self-realization’s inversion into an external compulsion we have reached the historical threshold where the awareness of this inner emptiness has become the experience of a growing portion of the population: urged from all sides to show that they are open to authentic self-discovery and its impulses, there remains for individuals only the alternative of simulating authenticity or of fleeing into a full-blown depression, of staging personal originality for strategic reasons or of pathologically shutting down” (2004: 475). See also Taylor 1989: 19.

Still, Liu and Xu continue to emphasize the superficial, consumer nature of their peers' attempts to become more interesting, to have hobbies. They buy brand name outdoor clothes, or DSLR cameras, but they don't know how to behave like "backpackers", says Xu, using the English word. Rather than realizing that independent travel is new for many young people, or asking why one needs to behave like a "backpacker", in the right way, Liu and Xu perceive this as superficiality; they regard it as an aspect of Chinese culture and a source of national shame. In China, people just take care of the "surface kung-fu" (*biaomian gongfu* - 面子功夫), says Liu. Taking a foreign perspective to view his own nation, he says that Japanese people think that Chinese don't do their jobs well, that they just do things more or less good enough, close-enough.

ASK's inaugural offline event was held in the winter of 2014, in Beijing's 798 art district, in, quite appropriately, a former industrial space converted into an art gallery. Over one hundred young adults are gathered to discuss how to care for themselves, the gallery's tall shell echoing with talk about money, love, and purpose. Those in attendance participate in Liu's media project, entering a booth to be video recorded asking a question. And they answer questions, too, attaching stickers to large charts set up in the center of the space, marking their views on social issues: "How old is someone before they are 'left-over'?" "What would you think if your boyfriend/girlfriend had been with over 100 people?" "Is work for money, or for fulfillment?" Liu tells me that the idea is to stimulate the people in attendance to think critically about their values. One might also say that Liu is teaching people by example that these moral stances can serve as anchors for a self-defined identity.

His work demonstrates the way in which the bound individual emerges when one takes an oppositional political stance in public. Liu discusses a project in which he asked people to label themselves, sharing what he views as the most interesting response he has heard: a girl in Shanghai told him, "I am me."

We next hear from the owner of the art gallery, a Westerner. He is a former executive in the China branch of a giant multinational technology corporation, and is now a creativity consultant. He is hosting the event for free; he seems to share Liu's goal of stimulating critical reflection in China, but he assumes a more missionary position. He tells me that, aside from Christ, "the American Dream is our best export." Yet he is preaching a message of mindfulness, a message that personal growth gurus brought to America from the exotic Orient, only to reshape it in a crucible of individualistic aspiration. In a mix of English and Chinese, the gallery owner gives a speech that skims across flow,⁵⁰ Daoism, yoga, and the Alcoholics Anonymous Serenity Prayer. Telling the assembled audience, "Empower yourself through mindfulness", he leads us through an abbreviated session of Tibetan mantra meditation. Syllable by syllable, "OM MA NI PAD ME HOM" resonates powerfully in the tall brick and concrete space. A last exotic syllable, "RIIII" slowly fades into the air. I do feel very peaceful. This spiritual mashup, though, is not about peace. It is all about activity, positivity, and productivity. The gallery owner tells us that in the

⁵⁰ Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of being sufficiently challenged to not get bored with a task, but not so challenged as to become frustrated. Csikszentmihalyi was a long time faculty member of the University of Chicago's Department of Comparative Human Development.

American corporate suite, for instance at Monsanto,⁵¹ they like to chant mantra,⁵² and that Lady Gaga is into flow. This retired executive tells us that there are no bad jobs; he cleans his own toilets! I wonder if he has every tried assembly line work. Self-esteem may seem to provide an escape from social standards, but it can certainly support social structures. This egalitarianism rings as hollow as a mantra in the halls of restless efficiency.

The next speech is from Xu, who talks about how young Chinese people complain that they don't know what they like. Xu says that when students ask her "What is a self?" (*ziwo* – 自我), she tells them that that it's the kind of life that you want; but she adds that the self is also the way in which you balance your desires with social reality. This statement is not only practical, but it also undermines the romantic conception of the true self as something that already exists within us. Compromise with the external world is framed not as the root of alienation, but as the path to an identity. While young adults in China are talking about dreams, they tend to be practical in thinking about what these mean in the context of their lives: they need to account for themselves to themselves, to their peers, and especially to their parents.⁵³ When I run a discussion group at an ASK event,⁵⁴ young adults

⁵¹ A company that did not achieve notoriety as a bastion of progressive spirituality.

⁵² Barbara Ehrenreich colorfully describes a shamanic retreat for CEOs, some of who have come to believe that they can find the best path through irrational markets by connecting with their intuition: "There, in a candlelit room thick with a haze of incense, 17 blindfolded captains of industry lay on towels, breathed deeply, and delved into the 'lower world' to the sound of a lone tribal drum" (2010: 22).

⁵³ Francis Hsu argued that "Chinese children's dreams are far less grandiose and their fantasies are far more down to earth" (1981: 92).

⁵⁴ At ASK's second offline event, I lead a discussion group on the topic of anxieties for about fifteen attendees. Someone brings up the concept of "comfort zone": to my surprise,

are eager to use this forum to discuss strategies for dealing with their parents, for convincing them to support their decisions and aspirations. As much as they dream of social flight, the young cultural activists that I encountered in Beijing are for the most part well grounded. They know that it is not enough to dream of a meaningful and self-determined life: one must have tools with which to create such a life.⁵⁵

As I mingle with the crowd at the day's event, I meet some of Liu's natural allies, people who are telling young people in China to become autonomous and entrepreneurial. There are representatives from a company that certifies creativity training programs, and from an organization that supports young entrepreneurs. And there are two employees from Junior Achievement, an American NGO that is now teaching financial literacy and entrepreneurship in public schools across China.⁵⁶ One of the employees, a young Chinese

everyone is familiar with it. They all seem comfortable sharing their thoughts with the group; a number want to use this forum to discuss tactics for handling parents who oppose their choice of vocation. When I elicit things that make them fearful, the list that emerges reflects the conflicting pressures that they feel to compete, and to keep their ideals. They fear: falling behind their peers; wasting time and not reaching their goals; being changed by reality; and being unable to be the person they wish to be. This list reveals an identity stretched between a sense of intense social pressure and the desire to make a life recognizably one's own.

⁵⁵ After Xu's speech, we hear from a number of invited guests, including myself and two psychotherapists. One has a message of self-esteem. She takes the word for self, *ziwo*, and breaks the characters apart, declaring that they indicate "the self (*zi*) in my (*wo*) eyes". With the calm gravity of a preacher, she declares that we care too much about other's opinions, she projects a righteous, dignified indignance.

⁵⁶ As of 2013, the venerable American organization Junior Achievement (JA) is teaching financial literacy in all of Beijing's public elementary schools. A woman employed by JA told me that the organization had secured this commission after twenty years of lobbying. JA was founded by early 20th century American industrialists, and is now headquartered in

woman, tells me that she is involved with a media platform called *China Sandwich*.⁵⁷ She explains that this is a project with a social mission: the founder of *China Sandwich* wanted to tell the stories of normal people, and in order to do so he relies on volunteer journalists. If they seek to represent normal people, I ask, then whose stories do they tell? People with “interesting lives”, the woman replies, inspiring people who are “living their own lives”; when I inquire further, I realize that this means stories about successful entrepreneurs. Liu’s project, ASK, has become a node in a constellation of allied media platforms and youth programs, supported by businesses and NGOs, Chinese and foreign, that are busy telling young Chinese people that they must define themselves by their passions, interests, and entrepreneurial activity.

A couple of months later, ASK held its second event, in the same space. The young artist with the dreadlocks is working at the desk, behind a line of colorful rubber bracelets; she is part of the avant-guard that is already coolly cynical about these modes of self-discovery. The pure white bracelet asks, “Beautiful Tibet, have you purified my soul?” This time the event attracts even more representatives from educational and entrepreneurial organizations, and from the media. The audience has grown significantly. The second event follows a similar format to the first. Liu tells the story of a man who wanted to be a teacher, but his parents said that his grades were too good for a profession so lacking in prestige.

the Evangelical fortress of Colorado Springs. Millions of children in China have been enrolled in their programs.

[China Development Brief. 2016. *Junior Achievement China*. chinadevelopmentbrief.cn]

⁵⁷ 中国三明治

Liu says that he is certain that behind young people's concerns about finding one's dreams or finding a way to make money lies a more basic question: "What are my interests?" He tells us that people ask him how to figure this out all the time. Among strangers, guided not by tradition but by a distant law, interests and ideals provide confidence, they enable action.⁵⁸ They also open up valuable paths to social identity and recognition.

One guest speaker is presented as a model for self-definition because she spent a gap year working at a restaurant in New Zealand. This young woman tells us how nice and polite and pleasant people are, out there. Abroad, she says, she learned to say "hello" to strangers, and that strangers are actually "very 'nice'" (很 nice), using the English word 'nice'.⁵⁹ The young woman tells us that she discovered she is shy and introverted, and that she enjoys routines. What she learned on her journey, she says, is that she doesn't enjoy traveling at all; her message to her peers is that one doesn't have to be on the road in order to be free. The way that she presents herself shows that she feels pressure to find herself, but that she does not feel pressure to present herself as extroverted or enthusiastic, or to fit every experience into a coherent narrative of personal growth. This young woman reflects about China, and about herself, from abroad; but she brings a Chinese perspective along with her, and she reaches her own conclusions. The afternoon's event concludes with a

⁵⁸ "If the individual self must be its own source of moral guidance, then each individual must always know what he wants and desires or intuit what he feels" (Bellah et al. 1985: 77).

⁵⁹ She worked in a restaurant in New Zealand; she tells us that people appreciated the food, and also told her she was humorous even though, she proclaims, "I'm extremely boring!" ("我及其无聊!") Perhaps she was perceived as amusingly awkward or earnest.

presentation by some young, mostly foreign entrepreneurs who have founded a social enterprise: they claim to make the world better by planting trees in cafes.

Fantasies and Photographs

“Every day, I get up and look at myself in the mirror and ask ‘why am I so fortunate?’” So says the recent college graduate to an audience of several thousand marketing professionals. The master of ceremonies cuts in to add that every day, he looks in the mirror and wonders why he’s working so hard. In June of 2014 I attended a conference about marketing to Chinese youth. It was called “Young People Matter”, and was held in a luxury hotel in Beijing’s business district. A few companies are advertising in the opulent reception hall: a billboard asks, “Do I have a dream?” Inside a cavernous event space, several thousand people sit on chairs branded with the logo of social networking site Renren. Everywhere, there are large banners that cryptically proclaim: “The world’s fifth largest country”.⁶⁰ This motto reminds us that there are two hundred and twenty-five million people in China between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six, seventeen percent of the Chinese population, and that if they were to form a country it would be the fifth most populous state in the world.⁶¹ There is a lot of money to make if one can sell these citizens a dream, however modest. These dreams need to seem achievable: an inexpensive hobby, a few days of travel. This young man, who likes who he sees in the mirror, tells the audience how he turned his amateur photography into a part-time job while in college; he states his

⁶⁰ “世界第五大国”.

⁶¹ After the total populations of China, India, the United States, and Indonesia.

conviction that only lazy people are unsuccessful. He mentions that he spent ten days traveling in Tibet with friends. And, using a few English words, he tells us about the goal he has set for himself: to “follow my heart”.

The conference organizers have set up a parade of youth role models. The first speaker is Liu, from ASK. Using the slang term ‘resigning nakedly’ (*luoci* - 裸辞), he tells the audience about leaving his job without another one lined up. He says that he wanted to follow his dream: to teach young people that they need to define their own identity.⁶² When thinking about how people construct an identity through hobbies, travel, and lifestyle, it is tempting to think of all of these behaviors as consumption. However, we should keep in mind David Graeber’s admonition that by relying on the concept of consumption as a social analytic, we further an ideology that reduces human behaviors to acts of production and destruction (2011: 502). Nevertheless, this study of self-presentation among Chinese youth would have a serious gap if it did not consider, at least in passing, how advertising companies contribute to shaping people’s sense of self. This is particularly the case because, like activists, advertisers are teaching the transcendental orientations of daydreaming, of transcendence, of idealism. Marketing companies long ago figured out that they can sell

⁶² At this forum, Liu discussed being oppressed by family and society, being unable to develop and express one’s “individual value” (个人价值). He mentions that it is very hard to be independent by age thirty, due to housing costs. Liu is making a very potent critique, not only of skyrocketing real estate prices but also of traditional standards for evaluating and governing the life course. Confucius, in describing the markers of his own development, famously said “at thirty, I stood on my own” (三十而立). Liu reverses this language, saying “one cannot stand at thirty” (三十立不起来).

both personality and moral approval (Packard 1972), and they have conducted extensive research on how to do so. It is not only that executives are capitalizing on youthful anxieties about social evaluation, or on youthful idealism: in a mediated age, visible image and conspicuous ideals are interchangeable currencies. Both personality and principles are fundamental ways of positioning oneself within a public, before an audience.

At the marketing conference, the next speaker tells us that she spent half a year walking from Beijing to Guangzhou, in the far south of China; she stopped in every county along the way to formally request local police records of sexual violence and domestic abuse. Although these records are officially public, she didn't receive many replies. Glowing with a halo of authentically recognized narcissism, youthful solipsism, *imitatio dei*, and justified pride, she tells the audience, "I'm like Martin Luther King."⁶³ Her social identity is supported by the courage of convictions, the friction of conflict, and the benefit of widespread sympathy. My point is not to undermine this woman's brave actions, but rather that her ingenuously direct self-presentation demonstrates how novel of this configuration of the self is in China, this manner of deriving an identity by publicly speaking truth to power. A subsequent speaker, a college sophomore studying advertising,⁶⁴ is attracted to a different kind of feminism, but she too positions herself in opposition to power. Her

⁶³ I heard people mention Martin Luther King several times in Toastmasters clubs; speakers used King as a model of someone "persistent", and as someone with high self-esteem, because he had a good mother.

⁶⁴ She participated in a youth creativity festival; as is typical in the creativity pedagogies described in the second chapter, this involved teams competing to design marketing campaigns.

message to the audience is that she loves herself, and she loves sex, just as one can love art.⁶⁵ She tells us that she is “a rebel!” (*fankangzhe* - 反抗者). Other speakers follow, including the amateur photographer. These entrepreneurial and socially engaged youth are ostensibly sharing inspirational stories. But they are being probed for marketing insights, paraded before the assembled marketing professionals.

Later, during a panel discussion, we hear from a market researcher in his mid-thirties. He has a unique name that seems optimized to appear at the top of an internet search: Skalar. He shares a parable with the audience. When given two different options, Chinese executives chose a very boring car advertisement, a commercial that surveys had suggested no one liked. Viewers preferred another, more exciting advertisement, one with people acting happy; but, Skalar explains, the executives said that “Chinese people can't enjoy like that”. Again, we see a Chinese social critic who blames his country for not being very much fun. This market researcher, who specializes in studying Chinese youth, explains to the audience that “rebels” still care too much about the outside world: in his view, this makes them insufficiently interesting. Recall that the article about “How to Be an Interesting Person” defines being interesting as doing things just because one feels like it, and explicitly rejects the idea of doing things for the nation. Perhaps this disgust is a reaction against ubiquitous political slogans, against the ghosts of a recent past, when revolution overshadowed individual concerns, or against the continued, deep entanglement

⁶⁵ She was in a show inspired by the *Vagina Monologues*, which was revealingly named *BCum*.

of individual and national aspirations. But the young people on stage at the conference do not feel that their form of civic politics erases their individuality: quite the opposite.

Skalar, a young but seasoned marketing specialist, continues to make provocative, pithy proclamations, saying that this is a “post-dreams age”. Liu, whose business is teaching self-definition, backs up this suggestion, comparing dreams to a direct marketing pyramid scheme. Yet he mentions how often young people ask him about dreams, about finding them and pursuing them. A television executive jumps in, saying that while contestants on reality shows talk about their dreams, off camera they say that they really just want to get girls. Despite the direction of this conversation, it is clear that the language of dreams is not dead for the assembled advertisers. They are learning how to miniaturize dreams so as to better insinuate them into Chinese people’s lives.

Skalar gives an example of a successful advertising campaign, one which makes dreams easier to identify with: one ad shows an overweight young man putting on athletic clothes to go for a run, while another depicts a child overcoming his fears in order to jump off of a diving platform. These kinds of small daydreams, scaled down heroic dramas, implant narratives of triumphant rebirth into the smallest nooks of everyday life. Either of these visual advertisements could easily be narrated as a speech in a Toastmasters club: in fact, I heard almost identical speeches, in which the speaker begins by depicting themselves as formerly fat, or fearful, and proudly tells us that they are now running or swimming. Mentors and speech evaluators are teaching Toastmasters club members to present this narrative of challenge and triumph. The confidence to overcome fears and physical

limitations is only the beginning; people are learning to gather the gall to assert that they are special. Skalar explains that youth like confident brands: the assembled professionals are told not to worry about being a “poser” (*zhuangbi* — 装逼). The only problem, says Skalar, is if your “style isn’t badass enough” (逼格不够高). It seems that like young adults in personal growth groups, Chinese brands are being given assertiveness training. On stage at the marketing conference, a CEO is saying “Be yourself!”⁶⁶ A woman who became famous from a television talent show appears; she’s now the face of Nabisco in China, and she explains that their cookies represent a special spirit and a unique culture.

One of the entrepreneurs on stage that day later sought me out, a man about forty years old; he wanted to learn about hippies. In a dumpling shop in Gulou, he tells me about how he had traveled to San Francisco to see the hippies. He even visited the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, which in the 1960s was the crucible of American New Age spirituality, and of humanistic psychology.⁶⁷ It seems that this man is clear that a subcultural lifestyle is not an expression of an authentic, preexisting inner self so much as something that one becomes through study. This entrepreneur was an early member of Beijing’s punk scene, and even

⁶⁶ This slogan appears in the extremely materialistic hit movie *Tiny Times*. The main character is a young woman who begins working as an intern at “ME” magazine. When she first comes to the office to interview for this position, the words “BE YOURSELF” hang on the wall above the scurrying models, and the other young women who want the internship. Authenticity, in a sense, is a question of who we would like to be, an always yet to be realized potential (Lindholm 2013: 371).

[Guo Jingming. 2013. *Tiny Times* (小时代). China Film Group.]

⁶⁷ Teachers at Esalen included psychologists Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir, and a long list of the most influential figures in spirituality, personal growth, wellness, and counter-cultural thought. See Kripal 2008.

published a book about the scene. He is now clean-cut, sophisticatedly hip. He tells me that he believes in the potential of brands to create positive social change: by way of example, he says that Nike has made running fashionable in China. This entrepreneur sells stylish accessories online, with the slogan “Brave youth”. He shares his hope that this brand identity will help a few young people find the courage to chase their dreams. And he mentions that some of the punks walking around the neighborhood are fake.

Just down the alley is Drum Tower East Street, the dreadlocks, the music venues, the restaurant walls covered in posters for punk, for metal, for rock, for gypsy jazz. A few are even for burlesque shows. Across the road, two minutes farther down, is China’s Central Academy of Drama. The culture of self-definition that is emerging in China has direct links to the performing arts. Both acting and self-definition involve imagining an identity, and then trying to embody it. Liu, founder of ASK, graduated from Communication University of China,⁶⁸ a school focused on media and performance art. Ma Jiajia, who opened China’s first chain of friendly, bright sex shops, met her business partner and started her venture while at Communication University. Ma has gained a degree of fame: she now sells herself as a marketing guru, and as an activist who is liberating women through her brand. In her writing, she compares herself to Coco Chanel.⁶⁹ To act, or to become oneself, one has to bravely imagine who one wants to be.

⁶⁸ 中国传媒大学

⁶⁹ In a marketing presentation, she explicitly advocates making people uncomfortable about their image, in order to inspire them to change and become cooler. She also asserts that ninety percent of Chinese people born before the 1980s didn’t know how to love. She

The Meaning of Existence

Young adults in China are using a new term to describe people who try to get attention: they use the verb phrase *shua cunzaigan* (刷存在感), 'to brush on a sense of existence'.⁷⁰ Its meaning traces a rough etymological trajectory from filling the screen of an online chat with one's own words,⁷¹ to speaking incessantly about oneself and one's ideals, to parading an existential depth: laying it on thick. Young adults apply this term to those who are affectingly contrary or political, or who seek attention through ostentatious ethical stances.⁷² Some young adults will accuse peers who are involved in social activism of *shua cunzaigan*: this may seem conservative and reactionary to American ears. But we have seen that some young people in China are indeed learning to display ideals in order to establish a personal identity; and ego ideals can attach as easily to the ego as to the ideal. In addition,

herself advocates a modern attitude of consuming men: "The old woman pleases men, the new woman consumes men".

[“马佳佳在中欧商学院演讲之PPT完整版.”; “90后马佳佳：我的工作与性有关.”]

⁷⁰ The term "sense of existence", *cunzaigan* (存在感), only came into wide usage in China around 2009. It originally arrived through Japanese translation of Western existentialist philosophies. It is also the title of a Korean self-help book, translated into Chinese in 2013 (白智娟. 2013. 译者: 黎颖瑜. 中信出版社.). Based on time limited searches of the top Chinese search engine, Baidu, one can see the rapid rise of this term in recent years. Baidu yields only two results for 2001; in 2007, people were asking philosophical and social questions about how to increase one's sense of existence; in 2009, top results no longer suggested any connection with Japanese philosophy.

⁷¹ To fill up the screen with your words is to *shuaping* (刷屏), brush the screen.

⁷² Liu, for instance, has been accused of *shua cunzaigan* for running ASK. A Chinese anthropologist in her early forties was shocked when I told her about this term. She said that "before, we were just here!" An academic psychologist that I spoke with was similarly surprised by the idea that young people are defining their own identities: "I never thought of that before... yeah, young people are trying to create an identity for themselves. That never occurred to me [to do for myself]."

in recent years there have been a number of high profile incidents of corruption in Chinese nonprofit organizations,⁷³ and the government has prosecuted alleged spies embedded in foreign NGOs. After a century of continuous upheavals, many people are weary of politics, and treasure stability. Whether common reactions against outspoken positions are motivated by cynicism, realism, or paranoia, young adults are often wary of taking up public ethical positions. Ethnographer Tricia Wang studied how Chinese young adults create new political identities in online forums; she reports that even when young adults long to find places where they can express unpopular views on social topics, many encounter a “paralyzing” anxiety at the thought of publicly taking up a contentious position (2013: 70). This act can have very real consequences, not only from authorities, but also in the deafening court of public opinion (Wang 2013: 69).⁷⁴ Political ideals strike many young adults as unwelcome, impractical, and vain.

When I ask my friends how to say ‘hipster’ in Chinese, they usually offer the word *xiaozi* (小资), meaning petite bourgeoisie. To many young people in China, idealism appears to be not only an affectation or a risk, but also the privilege of the upper class.⁷⁵ This is the

⁷³ Such as the case of the infamous Guo Meimei, who falsely presented herself as working for the Red Cross, and who habitually posted pictures of herself with luxury goods online, Maserati cars and Hermes bags. In another link between lifestyle and drama, Guo was a student at the Beijing Film Academy.

⁷⁴ Wang gives the example of a woman who, while studying at Duke, tried to intervene in a Free Tibet protest. Based on a video of the incident, she was perceived as sympathetic to the protesters: netizens tracked down her identity, posted her personal details online, and attacked her parents’ house (2013: 69)..

⁷⁵ In the 2016 song “Life is More than Hustling and Scraping Along” (“生活不止眼前的苟且”), folk rock musicians Xu Wei and Gao Xiaosong, sing that “there’s also poetry and

case when idealism is expressed as civic activism, and also when it is phrased in the terms of official government efforts to foster concern for the nation, to develop an “elite consciousness”. It is not surprising to hear Skalar, an expert in marketing to youth, suggest that rebels still care too much, that advertisers in China should moderate their messages of social idealism. However, many young Chinese adults do broadly admire idealism, because it seems positive and interesting. Young adults in China sometimes describe the poles of youth culture using two authors, both of whom became famous by winning the same student essay contest.⁷⁶ For every young adult who admires Han Han, who dropped out of

distant fields.” (“还有诗和远方的田野”). But many young adults in China reacted against this song, not necessarily for being flowery, or an inauthentic bid for attention, but as expressing an unrealistic idealism, at odds with the material realities of their lives. In some online design and marketing circles, people wrote that “Life is more than poetry and distant fields, there’s also my stupid client” “生活不只有诗和元芳，还有傻逼甲方”.

⁷⁶ The New Concept Writing Competition (新概念作文大赛). Another, younger winner of this contest presents an interesting case study. Justin Sun, an entrepreneur in his twenties, won the contest and was admitted to Peking University. The following narrative is based on the account of his classmates in Beijing. While an exchange student in Hong Kong, he made contact with Chinese dissidents. This inspired political writing; his classmates suggest that this helped his application for a master’s degree at the University of Pennsylvania. Apparently, some of these writings were plagiarized from a scholar of the Tiananmen Incident, and Sun was estranged from the expatriate dissident community. He then decided to change the world through business, and sought to harness the power of blockchain technology to make China’s financial sector more transparent. This endeavor proved too big for a recent graduate, and he ended up owing his creditors. At this point, in 2013, Sun launched a pay-to-chat app, Callme (*Peiwo*), which quickly became a tool for adult chat and escort services. He has been romantically linked with Ma Jiajia, the sex toy entrepreneur who proclaims herself a new Coco Chanel. Justin Sun paid to place an advertisement on the NASDAQ billboard in Times Square. It did not advertise a product or company. It read “Individualism: China’s New Generation After 90s”, and featured a five-story image of himself, and his name. This story combines the themes we have discussed: idealism, opportunism, elitism, and a desire to reform China, study abroad, technology, loneliness, and sex, with a large helping of narcissism.

school to chase his dreams, there is at least one who favors Guo Jingming, author of explicitly materialistic fantasies. While most young adults in urban China aspire to self-definition through hobbies and style, they are also aware that many markers of individuality are luxury goods. Therefore, as they spin narratives of self-creation they also become entangled in the class politics of lifestyle.⁷⁷

Aesthetic and lifestyle choices not only define an authentic self because they are chosen, but also because they imply a political commitment. Richard Sennett writes that in eighteenth century Europe, as new social ideals challenged the old order, people understood these ideals as they were embodied in representative public personages; discussing one such figure, Sennett writes that “the man and the principle were one because without this man’s presence there was no other way to imagine what liberty meant” (1974: 103). Sennett argues that as competing social visions have multiplied, details of self-presentation have come to mark distinct political communities, “they symbolize what the conflict is about” (1974: 238). While Sennett is concerned with defending, or constructing, a rational legacy of civic life, his analysis suggests how lifestyle politics can more closely bind the self to its visible appearance. Whereas Erik Erikson’s theories of identity emphasize that political commitments should ideally emerge from a process of principled, autonomous self-definition, political commitment is also a social consequence of displaying one’s

⁷⁷ Sherry Ortner has argued that in the United States, with ideologies of equality that preclude discussions of economic class, fashions and hobbies have come to function as a proxy for class (2002). Class and lifestyle are certainly connected in the United States, but they may seem even more so in China.

embodied class habitus, or of choosing a style of self-presentation. The individually chosen mask can easily become a mirror because putting it on is be a potentially confrontational public act, an antagonistic, visible stance that one may be called to account for.

As discussed above, Colin Campbell closely associates consumer hedonism and social idealism, writing that both involve “the habit of identifying with ideal images” (1987: 214).⁷⁸ Campbell sees the attempt to become good through disinterested acts as motivated by narcissistic pleasure and by guilt; he struggles with the dualistic parameters of self-interest and altruism, depicting moral pleasure as an obstacle to genuine idealism. More recently, scholars have argued that neoliberal modes of action and identity have collapsed moral sentiment into market rationality. If giving to others becomes a form of investment in the self (Muehlebach 2012: 24), as for ethical entrepreneurs, then altruism draws closer to self-interest. But morals and markets have never really been separate in the first place, certainly not in China; nor is it in itself bad to enjoy being recognized as good. I am not seeking to unmask the hidden selfishness or narcissism of social activists, like those who are promoting assertive self-definition in China. Rather, I am suggesting that before a person

⁷⁸ Similarly, in his discussion of narcissism Freud suggests that ideals do not always deeply shape the subject, that deeply cathected ideals can bind the individual to himself as much as to external objects ([1914] 2012: 24); Lacan expresses similar concerns about the aggressiveness of social saviors, “the philanthropists, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer” (1949: 509). More directly, sociologist John Hall has suggested that “there is likely to be an elective affinity between civil society and fashion: for all the pretensions to which the latter can be prone, it remains the area in which many can experiment with and try on new conceptions of their selves” (Hall 1998: 33).” Since people can choose both clothes and ideals, both can seem like expressions of the self.

can invest in a self, they need to learn to project an image of what they wish to become. As Campbell points out, learning to do this is a cultural and historical process. But whereas Campbell and other theorists have suggested that the psychological need to be good is driven by guilt, conspicuous idealism may be more fundamentally motivated by a desire to be, to receive attention, to feel confidence, to find the symbolic and social integration that produces an identity. As social changes have caused a widespread identity crisis in China, they have thus created an important force in the halting, limited emergence of a civil society.

At a 2014 youth conference on “The Meaning of Work”, the invited speakers demonstrated the strong links between identity crisis, self-making, and civil society. Two college seniors describe how they earned several thousand yuan by selling their handicrafts online, and how they donated some of the profits to rebuilding efforts in areas of Sichuan still recovering from the earthquake of 2008.⁷⁹ Another speaker, a young man who had studied in California, expresses his commitment to market solutions for social problems: he has set up a website promoting social enterprise in China. We hear from a young man who has opened a painting workshop in Gulou, who says he wants to encourage people to have hobbies and enjoy life. A skeptical middle-aged woman in the audience asks him: “You’re from Beijing? So you don’t have much financial pressure?” The man is taken aback. I’m just normal, he says, average and middle class: actually, my family is poor. He is claiming an

⁷⁹ This tragedy catalyzed social consciousness among many young Chinese people (Yan 2011: 66-7).

authentically lower-class background in public, not in communist terms but as a way to justify himself, to demonstrate a commitment to his individual self project. He is, he says, working to have the lifestyle that he wants. We also hear from the business partner of Ma Jiajia, the sex toy vendor who compares herself to Coco Chanel. The final speaker at the conference is a quiet young woman who works on environmental protection. But the story she tells looks inwards, to protect her personal choices: she gives a speech about herself, her personality, her love of animals. She explains that her environmental work, although poorly compensated, constitutes her identity. She doesn't present her work as altruism: "I'm very selfish," she tells us, I want to find "a sense of existence" (*cunzaigan* – 存在感).

From Mask to Mirror

The bound self, categorically defining its own social existence, is a power and a fetish. Young adults in China learning to look in the mirror. They are coming under the thrall of the image of an ideal self, powerfully potent and socially approved. But they are doing so under particular circumstances that shape what it means to present oneself publicly. Only a few are claiming to be saviors, and their peers often regard them with skepticism.⁸⁰ We've seen that in Toastmasters clubs, people rarely make sweeping moral

⁸⁰ At the University of Maryland's graduation ceremony in May of 2017, Yang Shuping, a graduating senior from China, was invited to give a speech. Yang majored in psychology and in theater, and in the video of her talk she appears to have practiced public speaking, pausing for applause where she anticipates it. In her speech, she criticized the air quality in China, and praised the air of freedom in the United States. While perhaps expressing gratitude to America, or trying to win friends, she was swiftly attacked by Chinese students in China: not because they are happy with the air they breathe, but because they felt, for many reasons, that this wasn't the right occasion to present this message about their

claims in the nature of civic activists. They focus on shared cultural and social critiques, rarely taking individual positions; this collective politics does not commit them as individual agents, but interpellates them as flawed Chinese people. In support of a shared cultural politics of autonomy, young social activists are promoting psychosocial practices of imagination and self-objectification. They are teaching people to become confident, to differentiate themselves, and to justify themselves to others using their interests and ideals. Scholars have described how the autonomous individual seeks the self in its justification (Campbell 1987: 211; Gauchet 2014: 288; Rose 1998: 100; Sennett 1974). The individual, bound to account for itself, appears as an oppositional political actor, advocating its stance against power, against parents, or against a background of competing possibilities. Young adults in China identifying with their visible personality not only because it seems to embody their autonomous choices, or due to ideologies that urge them to express an inner truth. They are bound to their public image insofar as they become political actors pursuing individual lifestyles, desirous daydreams, and sometimes social causes. These are public commitments, and they harden the mask into a mirror.

Richard Sennett has argued that “As the masks people wore in conflict or radical leadership came to seem disclosures of their personality, these issues could quickly metamorphose into attempts to justify one’s appearance; one’s stand on issues became a

country to this foreign audience. Furthermore, people quickly discovered that she is from Kunming, a city with relatively high air quality. She didn’t quite misrepresent herself in the speech, but she indulged in some dramatic exaggeration, and she came across as inauthentic.

matter of justifying oneself" (1974: 239). Sennett argues that people easily forget that public political commitments are no more or less than positions in "a game for power"; people who organize around a social cause may "gradually begin to believe in, to cling to, the defend the posture itself. It is on the way to becoming a real definition of who they are" (1974: 304). My sense is that in China, even as young urban adults are feeling the social potency of assertive idealism, even as they are justifying their interests to parents and peers, they are well aware that self-definition is a craft and a tool. Some are trying to define themselves around an authentic core, many more are consciously studying how to perform in social games that provide a sense of identity, a sense of existence. But amidst strangers, between bewildering possibilities, as an outsider in the city, it is powerful to convince ourselves, and others, that this is real love. That we are working out of passion, that everything is about our choice and not our station. An inner compass is often our only justification to parents, peers, investors, and to ourselves. It is a tool for positioning ourselves in a changing world. And it is an insurance against regret, because at least we can say we did it our way. But emotionally and attentionally, to become oneself is to be bound to a tenuous proposition or an ideal position. In China, as elsewhere, will and reason and sentiment and choice are fixing the self ever more firmly to its public presentation. There are tangible benefits to crafting an individual face to perform for Others. But even as the image grows in power, and grows into the self, we do not have to be possessed by the mask.

Confidence and Change

It is laid upon the stammering to bring the voice of Heaven to Earth.

Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant – Martin Buber¹

The question “Who are you?” can be a challenge, as well as an invitation to reflect on oneself. First-time visitors at Toastmasters clubs are asked to stand up and introduce themselves, and new members give their first speech about who they are. As they work to project their voice, young Chinese adults in Toastmasters clubs and other self-help groups are learning how to answer for themselves. Before an audience of strangers, they are defining an identity around energetic personalities and personal interests, ethical principles and social ideals. When they begin to work through the *Competent Communication* manual,² Toastmasters club members are told to appear confident and humorous; by the end, they are cast in the role of politicians. The “Persuade With Power” assignment presents a setting of liberal, egalitarian debate, offering the example of a speaker who advocates reducing pollution in a local lake. Students of public speaking are told to appear sincere, and to appeal to the audience using both “logic” and “emotion” (Toastmasters 2013: 46), the rhetorical tools of *logos* and *pathos*; while the manual mentions the importance of emotional

¹ page 59

² Toastmasters International. 2013. *Competent Communication: A Practical Guide for Becoming a Better Speaker*.

appeal, the instructions for this speech conjure a sphere of rational discourse by highlighting the “Burden of Proof”. However, the next and final assignment, “Inspire Your Audience”, presents a different vision of political life. Personality and principles transmute into charismatic power, enhanced by psychological theory and addressing a crisis of identity.

The manual illustrates the inspirational speech assignment with images of speakers on their platforms trying to motivate employees, and trying to effect regime change.³ The speaker is now talking down to a crowd, each individual isolated before the stage, the personality on stage embodying the whole. This final assignment is not quite a public speech at all, in Michael Warner’s sense (2002); it is more of a sermon in that it does not address an ongoing discourse so much as seek to influence each person. The manual explains: “You motivate and challenge listeners to adopt higher, nobler attitudes, feelings, values, hopes, desires, behaviors, and goals and elaborate on the advantages changes will bring to listeners” (Toastmasters 2013: 51). The manual recognizes that advocates of change are likely to encounter resistance; the inspirational speech assignment ominously notes, “you may want to mention the struggles that will be encountered in the process and what will happen to those who don’t cooperate or who try to prevent the change from happening” (Toastmasters 2013: 51).

³ The manual suggest that “you could discuss how and why the current political leadership came into power, their mistakes, how these mistakes have affected the community and listeners themselves, and how listeners’ complacency will allow more mistakes to happen” (Toastmasters 2013: 51).

Aspiring public speakers are taught to use Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to analyze the audience. Using the example of an executive who is restructuring a company, the *Competent Communication* manual tells readers to address the employees' sense of safety, desire for belonging, need for self-esteem, and longing for self-actualization: "Will there be opportunities for promotion? Will I be able to achieve my goals?" (Toastmasters 2013: 51). A manager trying to meet sales targets is instructed to use the stick of exclusion and carrot of integration: "Point out that those who don't help the company move forward will not have a place in the organization, but those who do will have new opportunities and will experience the excitement of being part of a winning team" (Toastmasters 2013: 51-2). The enthusiastic language of the manual implies that the effervescence of identity will inspire a new commitment to the sales team and its goals. After club members have completed this inspirational speech, Toastmasters International recognizes that they have constructed a solid foundation for public speaking: "Congratulations! You've finished your tenth speech! You are now eligible for the Competent Communicator award" (Toastmasters 2013: 53).

In ten short assignments, club members have moved from making confident eye contact to pulling off confidence tricks, from telling jokes to wielding regal power. As we have seen, this appears as a process of becoming oneself. In their various attempts to establish a self-sovereign autonomy, the Greeks, Hegel, Sartre and the *Competent Communication Manual* all try to close the existential distance between the object in the spotlight and the acting subject. The manual repeatedly tells its readers that persuading people depends on being perceived as sincere, but this is not only a matter of appearances.

To the extent that young adults in China are seeking to define who they are, they also feel a need to clearly articulate what they want, thus taking ownership of their actions. Without possessing desires and convictions, interests and ideals, it would be almost perverse to present oneself as a unique, choosing individual. The social performer puts down the mask and takes up the mirror, becoming more transparent, more subject to the spell of the law, more open to interpellation by the specular power of ideology. She is not only speaking down to the crowd, but also justifying herself under a social gaze. These eyes may belong to peers, to parents, or to the collective of the nation, the great self struggling to assert itself in history. Or, if people see themselves as justifying individually chosen stances, they may commit themselves before an impersonal, eternal law. The subject is thrown into the court of rhetoric, the divine *logos*, the heart of confession.

Social death can be fatal, and in any society people seek confidence in their social standing. One way to derive this confidence is by reciting individual devotions to correct moral principles. In China, discursive models have played only a supporting role in securing social or technical certainty, in seeking virtue. While Confucian scholar officials are expected to reflect on their conduct, Confucius did not offer principled codes so much as techniques for self-cultivation. Anthropologist and legal scholar Erika Evasdottir argues that in Western legal, religious, and epistemological systems, people have settled their anxiety for certainty by means of determining "orthodoxy" in principles; in China, this need has been met using the "orthopraxy" of ritual and precedent (Evasdottir 2004: 14-15). I would add that a transcendent orthodoxy becomes important in democratic or

revolutionary politics, whether they take place in the nation or in the family. Under conditions of rapid social change, as young people in China come to feel themselves as atoms precipitating under the gaze of Others, they are seeking new ways to secure their social being. They are trying to show that they are interesting and idealistic. Many young adults are learning to tell jokes, and some, often returned from abroad, are learning to sell the satisfaction of righteousness.

In his discussion of the politics of personality, Richard Sennett uses the concept of the “doctrine of immanence (Sennett 1974: 231). By this, he means that listeners understand public speakers to be embodying their individual conviction in the moment, representing their personal opinion rather than presenting a shared, continuing reality. Sennett contrasts this kind of immanent public performance with that of a priest, who speaks in the name of a transcendent system of meaning. From China, what Sennett calls immanence and transcendence both appear otherworldly. In advocating for a vision of social change, a politician is not a self-contained immanence; he depends intimately on the transcendent, the unrealized, the future, the imaginary. This is the case when he is appealing to *pathos*, playing on hopes and fears, as well as when he assumes the “transcendental pretense”⁴ of a disembedded *logos*, in which rational argument maintains an aloof distance from its social contexts and consequences. Chinese thinkers have not tended to seek meaning in an

⁴ What Robert C. Solomon has called the “transcendental pretense” (1993, in Hall and Ames 1995), is an insistence that one is engaging in purely logical speech, with no social contexts or considerations.

unchanging transcendent world, but in a practical orientation and an immanent good (Farquhar and Zhang 2012: 242; Hall and Ames 1995). Some young adults in China are learning what Sennett calls “immanence”, in which the individual speaker presents an individual conviction against a transcendent value system. But it is more accurate to say that they are learning transcendence, are learning that the individual should oppose an existing social system and its immanent values of materialism, practicality, and patient cultivation.

As young adults are studying how to ‘be themselves’, they are trying to become someone else. They are coming to identify with their objectives and ideals, their future and not their past or present. In the sense that a personality can harden into an object, rather than remain a loose set of traits, it crystallizes around its tensions with the world. For Weber, the individual personality depends on a transcendent justification for itself, a prophetic *telos* that orients action; without an objective beyond an immanent advantage, one cannot have “... an inward aspiration toward a ‘unified personality,’ a striving which we associate with the idea of personality.” ([1951] 1968: 235). The attempt to be autonomous by setting and realizing personal goals makes one grasp for solid discursive principles, sinking the hold of a transcendent law deep into the self.

To the degree that people really come to identify with the discursive positions that they use to shore up their eroding boundaries, they risk losing sight of their surroundings. They turn towards themselves and their stated intentions. Falling deeper under the spell of interpellation, they move towards becoming thoroughly public, thoroughly guilty, and

perpetually self-justifying. While people everywhere fear the gaze of others, the Others of a liberal society are everywhere. The sense that one is always before the judge is, I believe, a major cultural factor underlying the uneven distribution of social anxiety disorders. The ideology of autonomy has put many people in precarious situations, but it also presents a more subtle danger. In the same breath as it tells them to realize their own ideals, it has called them before an amorphous Other, under an omnipresent gaze that pins down who they really are, while telling them to act in order to determine their fate. As people work to master themselves as social objects, they develop psychosocial capacities of assertive self-definition that enable them to behave as autonomous agents. But self-confidence can become an end in itself, a sign of salvation and a source of power.⁵

⁵ Authoritarianism depends on the dynamics of anxiety and control, domination and *ressentiment*: recall a certain failed Austrian art student whose testicles may not have been in place. Hitler worked for years on practicing elements of body language and gesture, using photographs to understand how he appeared on stage (Enoch 2014). The website of a public speaking school in New Delhi offers the following bit of encouragement: “World has seen great speakers like Chanakya, Guru Nanak, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King Jr., Swami Vivekananda and many more. Now, it is your turn to be in the list” (wabstalk). One might add Charles Manson to the list: he took classes based on Dale Carnegie’s principles (Guinn). The Indian school’s website even has a bit of Nietzschean language, listing two courses: “Public Speaking”, and “Super Human Skills”. The website says that the school’s founder, Rocky Saggoo, received training from Craig Valentine; Valentine is a prominent Toastmaster who became an inspirational speaker and corporate trainer. The website’s profile of Mr. Saggoo boasts of his passion for public speaking, presents a long list of accomplishments, and ends by detailing a list of five phobias that he has successfully overcome.

[Enoch, Mike. July 3, 2014. “Mein Camp: Unseen pictures of Hitler . . . in a very tight pair of Lederhosen.” dailymail.co.uk.

Guinn, Jeff. 2014. *Manson: The Life and Times of Charles Manson*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

www.wabstalk.com]

Young adults in Chinese Toastmasters clubs admire those who can speak with confidence and energy. I found myself drawn to the power of captivating public speakers. These performers talk about their doubts and fears, but then they share their confident conviction. As people in China or elsewhere wish to become themselves, they long for the social approval that can give them a role in something greater. They strive to master the object that appears under the gaze of the Other. We well know the influence of politicians who seem to say what they mean, who are so seemingly self-assured that they produce an image of complete self-consistency. Michael Warner analyzes Reagan, the actor president, as an example of a leader who was supposed to embody sincere “self-unity” (2003: 160); whose supposed “self-identical representativeness” (2003: 172) turned his politics into a matter of personality and branding. Using Nixon, Richard Sennett describes the psychological dynamics of such self-consistency. Sennett writes that “... Nixon in each of his incarnations believed in each one of his appearances as really him”, and maintains that the modern “politician of *ressentiment*” is not a cynic: “His masks of virtue are for him at each moment true” (1974: 281). So too, one might say that Twitter Trump appears to be just Trump: public and private collapse.

In the terms of existential philosophy, the in-itself has become the for-itself.⁶ Because it has been so thoroughly subjectified by the public eye, the subject imagines that it knows

⁶ The Hegelian synthesis appears complete; the social being seems to have been mastered, even if this self-possession is built on an ungrounded delusion. Hegel was aware of this possibility, and called it the unhappy consciousness; but he believed that true faith could resolve this dilemma in the heavenly court.

itself objectively, through the mediation of an imaginary Other. This subject, desperate to prove his virtuous value, to be good, will never denies his words or actions. He will loudly defend himself from narcissistic injury. If those within earshot have an ideology of direct expression, which supposes a psychic need to verbally assert our real, individual desires, then they will perceive this antagonism as sincerity. The aggressive directness of a willful, *ressentiment* subject, set against the world, trying to change it, can produce an optical illusion of potent authenticity.

Reflections

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:1

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.

*Dao De Jing*⁷ Verse 1

⁷ trans D.C. Lau

When I return to Chicago from China, I feel impinged upon by gyroscopes and boundaries, by ethical displays and conscientious civility. On the bus, people apologize for brushing past, however lightly: as if we weren't all in it together. When Chinese nationals or other foreigners apply for visas to come to the United States, they fill out a long form, on which they pledge that they are not terrorists, prostitutes, or communists.⁸ Even before they arrive on American shores, people must make binding verbal commitments. These forms reveal less about the applicants than about the assumptions of a cultural system in which people feel themselves as subject to the law, empowered and restrained by impersonal principles. Contracts, rights, and transparency play obvious and extremely important roles in supporting human flourishing, but these too tidy ethical instruments need to be carefully placed within the unruly mess of life. Terrible things happen in China every day because people have no legal recourse. I do not wish to be a cultural apologist for an authoritarian and corrupt system: such apologists have made it easy for Western observers to ignore the value and relevance of Chinese traditions of social thought, and the shortcomings of their own.⁹ At a moment in which the liberal pretense of rational discourse feels so fragile, it may be useful to reflect on other ways of organizing public life.

⁸ form DS-160

⁹ In comparing Confucian and Socratic moral traditions, Shweder suggests that the former does not seek the reasons for rituals and rules often enough, in respect to a higher value: I would add that the value is often assumed to be peace and harmony, and that these are immanent if potentially oppressive goods. And the Socratic tradition loses sight of the limits of rational thought, the need for thick cultural traditions the create shared moral world (2015: 223).

Public speech can be regarded as a ritual, a culturally patterned spectacle with immanent value. By pulling away from the lenses of sincerity and insincerity, expression or repression, we can begin to think about how the possibility of liberal pluralism depends on regulating public performance. And if we hope for a stronger rule of law in China, we might also recognize that many of our freedoms, the capacities that we actually enjoy, cannot be secured through formal legal rights. As Marshall Sahlins points out, even in democratic countries we spend most of our time in institutions that are not governed by legal or democratic norms (2008: 23).¹⁰ In an intellectual reconstruction of Confucianism as an alternative to Western social thought, David Hall and Roger Ames say that “the Confucian alternative would suggest that almost all of the actual rights and duties that the sociopolitical order promotes are sustained by extralegal institutions and practices, and are enforced by social pressures rather than punishments” (1998: 284). They contrast “Rites and Rights”, and suggest that “Individual autonomy does not necessarily conduce to human dignity” (1998: 284). One can arrive at this point from within the Western philosophical tradition as well. In a passage titled “From the Sense of Justice to ‘Principles of Justice’”, Paul Ricœur discusses the social contract and autonomy, suggesting that these are fictions

¹⁰ And in any case democracy is always founded on hierarchy: “Even apart from the history of slavery, the same contradictions remain true for contemporary Americans who are pleased to believe they ‘live in a democracy’ although they spend the far greater part of their lives in undemocratic institutions such as families, schools, capitalist workplaces – not the mention the military and bureaucratic organizations of government itself” (Sahlins 2008: 23).

“... intended to compensate for forgetting the foundation of deontology in the desire to live well with and for others in just institutions” ([1992] 1995: 239).

At a Toastmasters meeting in Beijing, a young woman is sharing her favorable impressions from her recent trip to the United States. She was impressed by elderly people who drive around on their own, independently: she says that they “live their lives themselves”. But in the parks of Beijing, retirees are dancing, together. Young Chinese adults who visit the United States often tell me that they enjoy a sense of freedom. They feel relief that no one bothers them, release from networks of care and exchange. They enjoy a sense of clarity and predictability. But if they stay longer, they may see this cold peace shattered by eruptions of underlying chaos. Americans pay a high price for their interpersonal boundaries, for placing their faith in an adversarial law. We pay in bills for defensive medicine and in fear of our neighbors. At our borders, and far beyond them, people suffer for our anxieties even more; they feel the fury of self-justified interventions, in the name of freedom. The illnesses of institutionalized individualism arise not from insufficient legal protection, but from overly zealous policing. These plagues are intensified by the myth of equality combined with the fact of exclusion. In a world where “no one has to be your friend” (Fein 2015: 2), anxious introversion is a social problem. It can be a consequence of exclusion, a reason for social disconnection, and a repository of silent rage. The figure of the lonely shooter, an isolated student, resentful of popular peers, appears too frequently in our news headlines. Around the world, we see that identity is a problem: both

as a painful lack and as a reactive hardening of social categories. Psychological anthropology has an important role to play in illuminating these dangers.

Social scientists have sought the roots of this identity crisis in isolation and narcissism, and seek new solidarities that could pull people into projects larger than themselves (Taylor 1991; Honneth 2007; Castells 1997).¹¹ Realizing that we are social creatures, some have felt that social recognition should be protected as a right. Axel Honneth, for example, is sensitive to the danger of not making provisions to meet people's need for an identity. But Honneth reduces our need for social existence to a thin right, an empty acknowledgement. He writes that "moral injustice is at hand whenever, contrary to their expectations, human subjects are denied the recognition they feel they deserve" (2007: 71).¹² Being recognized as what we wish to be cannot be a right; not can a word of praise sustain an identity. The issue of recognition is inseparable from the other problems of social fragmentation, structural individualism, and economic distribution. But in any case, formal recognition is not as vital as substantive integration: people do not need personal recognition, but they suffer without social roles. And while new solidarities can be useful, if dangerous, tools for producing social integration, identity should not be reduced to politics. By taking an ecological perspective on identity formation, we can examine how people

¹¹ Manuel Castells suggests that people are developing "project identities" that coalesce around specific political aims, cutting across existing social categories (1997).

¹² No doubt a popular slogan among academics.

attain a sense of who they are not only by identifying with transcendent, discursively justified projects, but also through social and symbolic integration in their daily lives.

Erik Erikson brought to consciousness the fact that a “psychosocial identity” ([1968] 1994: 167) was a psychic necessity, and he also set out how identity depends on a system of cultural meanings as well as on concrete paths for integrating into the productive life of society ([1968] 1994: 156). Like other thinkers of the post-war period, Erikson was wary of conformity, totalitarianism, and charisma. He regarded the appeal of extremist movements to young adults as rooted in a developmental and historical identity crisis. But while Erikson saw the importance of traditions and collective frameworks in sustaining an identity, he retained his liberal vision of a principled, choosing, self-consistent subject;¹³ this figure partially occludes his important insight into our reliance on practical engagements and shared visions, in order to see ourselves.

Whereas Erikson states that "True 'engagement' with others is the result and the test of firm self-delineation" ([1968]: 1994: 167), this dialectical and antagonistic formulation has it backwards. Rather than constructing clear lines around ourselves, staking the self on a tense negotiation at the boundaries of self and other, we in fact construct always tenuous identities through relationships and not against them, identities that are constituted by intersubjectivity and identification. By studying how young adults in China are piecing

¹³ For example, Erikson is sure that people absolutely need to see themselves as responsible for their own fate ([1968] 1994: 89). Like so many theorists, he assumes that he subject requires narrative consistency.

together identities under conditions of rapid social change, we can see that quotidian connections, friendships and clubs and hobbies, are psychologically and socially consequential. They are not less important than explicit social categories or political solidarities; nor is the issue of identity in daily life separate from that of ideology.

Building the Mirror

Keep up self-reflection
and you'll never be enlightened.

Keep up self-definition
and you'll never be apparent.

Keep up self-promotion
and you'll never be proverbial.

Keep up self-esteem
and you'll never be perennial.

自见者不明；自是者不彰；自伐者无功；自矜者不长

*Dao De Jing*¹⁴

Over the next ten years, the Chinese Communist Party's ongoing urbanization campaign will remove hundreds of millions of people from their rural social networks. In the cities, a large measure of autonomy is already a fact of life for the many Chinese people who travel for study and for work, within their country and abroad. As young adults in

¹⁴ Verse 22 (Translated by Hinton 2002: 25)

China try to find a place for themselves in a changing world, they are increasingly called upon to imagine what they might become. Especially in China's major urban centers, young adults live on their own. As young people continue to reassure each other that they should make their own choices, "the division between the allowed and the forbidden loses out to the division between the possible and the possible" (Ehrenberg 2009: 8). And it hard to gauge what might be possible, who one might become.

In much self-help psychology, to accept reality is to be 'negative'. The promise of humanistic therapy and personal growth is that "you can change, you can achieve self-mastery, you can control your own destiny, you can truly be autonomous" (Rose 1998: 158).¹⁵ Writing about the therapeutic culture that emerged in the United States in the 1970s, sociologist Alain Ehrenberg notes that "It no longer acknowledged the limits reality imposed on all lives, whose recognition had been a requirement for any cure" (Ehrenberg 2009: 122). There are many dangers to promoting restless self-improvement. Scholars have remarked that the ideology of self-making is useful for extracting labor, that it promotes a "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011), and that it produces narcissism and social disconnection. Self-help psychology can focus people inwards, leading to psychological and political vulnerabilities. In addition, I suggest that the transcendental orientation of self-making can

¹⁵ Nietzsche's account of *ressentiment* depicts suffering people seeking to blame someone for their suffering; the priest points the finger back at the person, initiating a self-directed *ressentiment*. The idea that "you alone are to blame for yourself!" ([1887] 1967: 127-8) is the message of popular psychology, and our cultural criticisms of it are inseparable from political criticisms.

make reality an inconvenience. The powers of positive thinking, daydreaming, and self-assertion carry a cultural load of moral solipsism and Platonic idealism, a confidence in fiction that is all too welcome in a post-truth age.

The drive to establish instrumental and moral mastery leads to a transcendental ontology of the self, in which what truly matters are principles and justifications; where what is really real is the unrealized and the intangible, the eternal and unchanging.¹⁶ This is an aspersion on the people actually living in a world of constant flux. While critics usually focus on his “I think therefore I am”, Descartes, who was notoriously pugnacious, built his epistemology on an ontological proof of God which effectively asserts that ‘Anything I think, is.’ Spinoza had to remind European philosophers that thought is not reality (Deleuze 1988: 148; Spinoza [1677] 1994: 148-151).¹⁷ This question returns in a range of continuing ontological arguments, across academic disciplines. Crucially, Spinoza valued embodied being in the world as the foundation of knowledge; and he sought to understand how our concepts were shaped by human prejudices and limitations.¹⁸ In Chinese philosophy, the value of practical experience has long been central.¹⁹ Chinese thinkers have

¹⁶ Kierkegaard sees pleasure and social grace as meaningless frivolities, while “the accounting and the judgement are essential” ([1844] 1981: 154).

¹⁷ In Spinoza’s terms, thought is not extension. He writes: “... how easily we are deceived when we confuse universals with singulars, and beings of reason and abstraction with real beings” ([1677] 1994: 151).

¹⁸ Locke’s empiricism did not uncut the idea that knowledge is seated in a rational self; rather, it posits a core self that must rationally assemble and evaluate sensory impressions (Taylor 1989: 163). This empiricism does not cultivate sensual, practical engagement.

¹⁹ See Farquhar 1994 or Kuriyama 2002 on the role of experience, which cannot be discursively conveyed, in Chinese medicine. Speech, also, is not about providing a clear yes

doubted the ability of words to capture the essence of truth or moral insight, and have often been wary of articulating universal principles.

As people in contemporary China feel the power of the image to shore up a collapsing sense of self, young adults are pledging to closing the gap between their situation and their chosen identity. But not every adolescent knows that they need to actively find a way to derive a social identity through self-definition; this is a culturally elaborated skill, and self-help psychology appeals to young adults in China in large part because they sense that it can help them to become proficient at self-definition. People's capacity to create an identity among strangers is shaped by social and individual variation. Psychologist James Côté's research suggests that even within a given social group people vary widely in how actively they develop "identity capital" (2002). Côté recommends teaching students that they need to invest in a particular identity, that they should position themselves in relation to particular groups, values, and skills (2002: 120). Similarly, social scientist Liah Greenfeld argues that "Preparing young people to cope with the systemic demands of modern society, and most specifically with the responsibility for the formation of one's identity, should be the focus of general education" (2013: 267). I would suggest that any attempt to teach adolescents to define themselves should be very careful not to bind them too closely to discursive justifications and social labels. And any pedagogy of self-

or no: in analyzing clinical interviews with practitioners of Chinese medicine, Zhang Yanhua has argued that speech is a way to feel out the entire situation of the patient, that a non-committal "unh" can indicate a great deal (2007: 116).

creation must not confuse assertion with existence. If only those who speak loudly have a place, it will be hard for people to remain open to the music and the cries of the world.²⁰

While I have been critical of many psychological doctrines, Chinese psychologists are working to define and treat a variety of individual and social problems, not least the problems of autonomy and identity. They are working with imperfect tools to intervene in dynamics that are often harmful, and to treat those injured by a system that can be crushing. Chinese psychologists and intellectuals have good reasons to seek transparency and self-assertion, and to hope that people will speak up for their interests and ideals. I hope that this dissertation can stimulate some psychologists within China to consider their patients' problems from a fresh perspective, and to reflect on the cultural elements embedded in their own expertise. Specifically, therapists would do well to question the language ideology of contracts and debate, its insistence on principles, rules, and direct expression. The transcendent ideals of egalitarian communication do not necessarily lead to democracy or to social goods. Above all, I would like psychologists to be wary of encouraging self-consistency in the name of promoting autonomy. By calling on people to state their interests and ideals, they interpellate them as self-justifying political actors. They encourage people to fixate on the gaze of a distant Other, even when no one is looking. This

²⁰ Writing from a Buddhist perspective, David Loy points towards "a spiritual path that focuses on the liberation of awareness: to say it again, release not from this world but into it" (2009: 12).

hall of mirrors is filled with righteousness; and when a person assumes that everyone is always looking, even shame turns into vanity.²¹

Therapists in China and elsewhere are teaching freedom as the awareness of oppression, autonomy as guilt and self-restraint, and communication as interpersonal distance. Many of them seek to establish social trust on theories of universal conflict, working to replace interpersonal affections with apotropaic contracts and the pyrrhic victories of the individual. They teach self-acceptance alongside restless self creation. Chinese therapists fight against what they perceive as a culture that produces dependent infants, who cannot recognize distinct others; however, many of them then teach narcissism as a cure for solipsism. It is also ironic that Chinese people in personal growth groups claim a cultural lack of social skills. To remedy this, they turn to awkward models that reduce human interactions to blunt programs.

In psychotherapy and in self-help psychology, the bound individual appears as a political actor, pursuing personal interests and advocating social ideals. We have seen in contemporary China, psychologists and activists, many of whom studied abroad, are working to produce the cultural and psychosocial foundations of this bound individual. Anthropologists well know that the individual is a culturally contingent formation of the

²¹ The underground man writes: "It's perfectly clear to me now that it was I who, owing to my boundless vanity, and hence also my exactingness towards myself, very often looked upon myself with furious dissatisfaction, reaching the point of loathing, and therefore mentally attributed my view to everyone else" [Dostoevsky, Fyodor. [1864] 1993. *Notes from Underground*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonksy. New York: Vintage, 43]

self, but this reflexive, dualistic, autonomous individual remains deeply entrenched in social science theories of identity. It is present in common tools for analyzing subjectivity, in theories of mirror stages, interpellating gazes, and in Hegelian dialectics of subject and object; scholars should regard these as describing aspects of subjectification that are activated under particular conditions, rather than as universal accounts of key developmental processes. Not everyone wants defend tense borders between themselves and Others, and not everyone has a reason to stake so much of themselves on mastering the image that strangers can see. In contemporary China, fragmentation and isolation are giving weight to the institutions and ideologies of individualism.²²

But the connections between language, truth, and the subject remain very different in China and the West. Language is integral to humanity, and discursive self-presentation is always psychologically important: but it matters in different ways at different times. While Western culture has been enraptured with what can be spoken, identified it as the universal law, the world does not actually begin with a word. However, relationships with strangers often do. In mobile, mediated societies, individual differences in psychosocial disposition are leading to newly critical forms of inequality. Within China, young adults are framing

²² Alexis Tocqueville suggested that in an individualistic society, since each person becomes weaker through disembedding, they must learn the art of voluntary association or lose their freedom ([1840] 2004: 595). Anthropologist Francis Hsu felt that Americans love voluntary associations not so much for the political reasons that Tocqueville described, but because of loneliness, and the necessity of finding a peer group (1981: 110, 396). Young adults in Chinese Toastmasters groups are clear about this; as we have seen, they approach public speaking not primarily as an opportunity to represent private feelings, but as a way to present a shared historical consciousness and as a way to connect with their peers.

their personal frustrations in the language of shared cultural critique. This shared historical consciousness attests to the pervasiveness of a disordered sociality; it is also one example of a local resource that young adults in urban China are using to mitigate the effects of social isolation. Toastmasters clubs provide another example, as we see how club members quickly form tight interpersonal networks. In these clubs and through a variety of self-help technologies, people in China are studying a set of cultural, institutional, discursive, and psychosocial skills for deriving an identity among strangers, for defining themselves. But even in a changing, fragmenting world, identity does not depend solely on personality and principles. Relationships, care, and belonging are no less precious now; and social connection is a resource through which people create themselves.

Young adults in China are not agentively resisting self-help psychology so much as adapting it to fit their own practices, discourses, and sensibilities. They are practicing public speaking, but they are attuned to the benefits of silence. This is more than quietism, and cannot be explained away as a rationalization emerging from a place where it's dangerous to speak up for oneself. Chinese philosophy has elaborated the power of flexible discretion because it is effective, and because it captures perennial aspects of human existence. The saying 'great wisdom appears foolish' (*dazhiruoyu* – 大智若愚) indicates a strategy of concealing one's abilities or positions, retaining the freedom of blending in with the crowd, of being recognized as an ally despite having personal interests. It is neither sincere nor hypocritical, but a way to remain oneself, among others. As Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "Whatever is profound loves masks" ([1886] 1966: 50).

In a limited but significant sense, China has been more individualistic than the West: people have been defined less by categorical identifications than by their location in infinitely variable networks of reciprocity (Fei [1947] 1984; Hall and Ames 1998; Ames 1994b: 202).²³ Western philosophers struggle to think about identity in terms other than similarity and difference, while psychological theories of identity formation describe processes of conscious commitment to defined social and political categories, entailing rights, obligations, and willful efforts to authentically realize discursively articulated ideals. Young adults in urban China are learning the practical and psychological advantages of becoming socially legible through explicit identifications, from athletic pursuits to signs of the zodiac; some are also experimenting with the political potential of social categories of identity, and trying on the identities of activists. For deracinated youth in China and elsewhere, identification in terms of distinct categories can provide a path to re-embedding in the social process, especially if this identification brings attention or creates affiliation. Young Chinese adults are drawn into a slowly expanding array of venues for voluntary association based on hobbies and interests, civic concerns and tastes in music. At the same time, they inhabit these forms in their own way.

Emperor Muddle²⁴

²³ The individual is “not one of a *kind*”, but “*one* of a kind” (Ames 1994b: 194).

²⁴ also known as ‘Hun Dun’ or ‘Wonton’

The Emperor of the Southern Sea was called Hurry Up. The Emperor of the Northern Sea was called Suddenly. The Emperor of the Middle Between was Muddle. Hurry Up and Suddenly often went to the land of Muddle, where he treated them with goodness. Hurry Up and Suddenly wanted to repay his virtue and decided, 'People all have seven holes – to see, hear, eat, and breathe with – but Muddle alone has none. Let's see whether we can't help by boring some.' Every day they bored him a new one, and on the seventh day, he died.

*Zhuangzi*²⁵

This story about being “bored to death” (Girardot 1988: 77), comes from the Daoist classic the *Zhuangzi*. Like numerous Daoist parables, this story warns us against precipitating a solid form, against defining an identity (Girardot 1988: 258); it is also perhaps mocking the Confucian project of progressive civilization (Girardot 1988: 98-100). Muddle's fate reminds us that carving our own masks, taking possession of our social face, can be fatal. We might see this as a warning about the political danger of standing out, but it is also about the unintended consequences of universal ideals. This distant myth has echoed down the ages. In China, it resonates with daily sensibilities and common idioms in which autonomous, visible commitments lead not to liberation, but to a deadly rigidity. A well-known aphorism tells people today to “treasure confusion”²⁶ (Farquhar and Zhang 2012: 221), reminding us that it takes skill to avoid showing one's cards and being dragged into a social game. Not only that: Chinese philosophical thought and social practice suggest

²⁵ Hamill and Seaton 1999: 57.

²⁶ Or, “It's difficult to be muddled” (*nandehutu* – 难得糊涂) (Matthysen 2015).

that even the most eloquent orator can only gesture to a living reality, and that the most important moments in life rarely take place on stage.

And yet, a clearly defined identity can help one to gain a purchase in many of contemporary China's diverse and rapidly changing institutions, to secure a place in the undefined spaces of the city. Every day, many young Chinese people are getting on stage to give speeches, addressing an imagined public and viewing themselves in its mirror. By seeking to define themselves among strangers and before the law, young adults in China are dismantling logics of kinship, learning to experience themselves as autonomous individuals bound to a reified society. But the inside of a public speaking club can encompass the public outside. However social and political structures change, there will be strength in connecting, virtue in yielding, and the self need not be defined by tests of its sovereign will. The mirror is a mask. When lifted with care, it can reflect the light that surrounds us.

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Appendix A: Mirrors



Figure 1, Intertwined. Photo by author.



Figure 2, Happiness. Photo by author.



Figure 3, Uncivil Society. Photo by author.



Figure 4, Harried Children. Photo by author.



Figure 5, Presenting Themselves. Photo by author.



Figure 6, Teaching Empathy. Photo by author.



Figure 7, Shared Space. Photo by author.



Figure 8, Parents' Eyes. Photo by author.



Figure 9, And Possibility. Photo by author.



Figure 10, Together. Photo by author.

Appendix B: Images



Figure 11, Hold On. Handholds on Beijing's subway line 10, reading "Positive energy every day." The opposite sides featured a series of short inspirational pieces on maintaining a good attitude. The listed phone number was for an advertising company. Over most of a nearly two-year period of field research, this positive energy literally kept commuters on their feet. (Photo by author, 2014)



Figure 12, Reading. A woman reads Dale Carnegie on the Beijing Subway. (Photo by author, 2014)



Figure 13, Dreams. A sign in the Beijing subway reading “China dream, subway dream.” A government campaign promoting the ‘China Dream’, later officially translated more individualistically, as ‘Chinese dreams’, merges self-fulfillment with nationalist narratives. Such slogans circulate absurdly. (Photo by author, 2014)



Figure 14, Good Fortune. A sign reading *fu*, for good fortune, hangs over a Toastmasters meeting in Beijing. (Photo by author, 2014)



Figure 15, Book Cart. A bookseller in the Wudaokou university district, in front of Google's China headquarters. (Photo by author, 2014)



Figure 16, Be a Hero. People's hero Lei Feng, offered here as a model of service and self-improvement. Calls for civic solidarity and exhortations to self-improvement are not specifically capitalist, but modern. (Photo by author, 2014)



Figure 17, Filial Piety. A tablet in Beijing's Daoist White Cloud Temple (白云观), one of a series illustrating the *Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars*. The boy has melted an icy lake with his body heat in order to catch fish for his sick stepmother. For some psychologists, such stories represent a culture of predatory parenting. (Photo by author, 2014)



Figure 18, Peace of Mind. A sign besides Wat Chedi Luang, a Buddhist temple at the center of Chiang Mai, Thailand. (Photo by author, 2012)



Figure 19, Socialize. Photo by author.

Beijing 2014



Figure 20, Everything is Fine. Photo by author.