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Hird, D.

This is a pre-publication version of a book chapter to be published in: Wielander, G. and Hird, D. (eds.) Chinese Discourses on Happiness, Hong Kong Hong Kong University Press. It is reprinted here with permission.

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Smile Yourself Happy: Zheng Nengliang And The Discursive Construction Of Happy Subjects

Derek Hird

“Happiness is consistently described as the object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as what gives purpose, meaning and order to human life” (Ahmed 2010, 1). This twenty-first century “happiness turn” owes much to the positive psychology movement and its founding figure, Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association, Professor of Psychology, and director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Seligman contends that happiness comes principally from individuals’ cultivation of positive emotions (Seligman 2002, xiii). He aims to restore “the rugged individualism and sense of individual responsibility that used to be [America’s] hallmark,” and asserts that positive thinking can overcome any kind of psychological or social challenge (ibid., 68). However, critics of positive psychology cite poverty, racism, sexism, low social status, and trauma caused by childhood abuse and neglect as examples of socioeconomic, psychological and structural factors that are not easily overcome in the quest for happiness (Ferguson 2007).

According to Barbara Ehrenreich, Seligman’s approach reproduces a victim-blaming narrative that claims that illness, unemployment, poverty and depression are the hallmarks of losers responsible for their own misfortune (Ehrenreich 2009, 115, 146, 168–9, 206), and has its roots in the positive thinking movement spawned by the American Protestant minister and self-help guru Norman Vincent Peale in his 1952 international bestseller book, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (ibid., 92, 102).¹ Yet the ideas behind positive psychology can also be traced back to William James’ advocacy of positive subjective experiences for personal development in the late nineteenth and early

¹ The Introduction in this volume addresses some of the multiple influences upon the current generation of positive psychology advocates.

twentieth centuries, and to the post-war humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow (Froh 2004, 18–19).

Scholars in China and elsewhere have raised concerns that the normative tenets of positive psychology are based on research that insufficiently attends to the diversity of attitudes towards happy lives found around the world and in different sections of society, and to the fluidity of attitudes during an individual's life course (Ren and Ye 2006, 790–91). “Western” cultural and moral values are deemed to be implicitly embedded in positive psychology, acting as underlying assumptions in its conceptualisations of virtue and the good life (Wang and Li 2010, 51). In particular, positive psychology is charged with privileging a set of values principally popular among white, metropolitan, middle-class Americans (Ren and Ye 2006, 791). Psychologists Wang Qian and Li Hui (2010, 50) argue that culturally normative virtues in China, such as *xiaodao* 孝道 (filial piety), compel individuals to consider the happiness of others even before their own. Furthermore, they suggest that in China a certain amount of “negative emotion” (*xiaoji ganqing* 消极情感) is not necessarily considered undesirable. For example, a student who feels guilty about not living up to her/his parents' expectations, and consequently works harder, is generally considered to display virtue (*meide* 美德) and maturity (*chengshu* 成熟) in not wishing to hurt those close to her/him (ibid.). Wang and Li fear that without sufficient attention to local culture, positive psychology becomes twisted, unreflective of sociocultural realities, and ultimately unacceptable to the local population. In other words, they argue for a culturally aware interpretation and implementation of positive psychology.

That the autonomous self is called forth in contemporary positive psychology and happiness discourses is no accident, according to Sam Binkley, as this kind of subjectivity is formed through the “micro-practices of self government” typical of neoliberal modes of governance (2011, 372). In his reading, the construction of happiness as a daily regimen fits the neoliberal agenda to produce independent, resourceful, enterprising subjects:

To govern oneself through the maximization of one's potential for happiness is to govern oneself as a subject of neoliberal enterprise: agency, autonomy, freedom from dependence and external constraint, and the cognitive wherewithal necessary for the pursuit of self-interest are metonymically aligned with the content of happiness itself. (ibid., 391)

While the privatized pursuit of happiness may enable the practitioner to feel happier at least some of the time, the emphasis on individual responsibility for one's emotional state relieves governments and businesses of responsibility for workers' unhappiness, and encourages individuals to contentedly accept the world as it is rather than seek to change external conditions that cause unhappiness. The current pervasiveness of the idea that self-directed inner change is the route to happiness is also exemplified in the happiness-promising, Buddhist-inflected “mindfulness” programmes that Western businesses, governments and health services have enthusiastically co-opted during the last couple of decades.² Such programmes directly serve the interests of big business and governments, according to Matthias Steingass, because they depict the (often unpleasant) socioeconomic relations of capitalism as an inevitability that the individual must adjust to: “Meditation becomes a Trojan Horse to control the mind from within,” as it is “just another tool to enhance individual auto-regulation with an agenda not set by the meditator” (2013, 201).

Positive psychology and mindfulness programmes promise happiness through “neoliberal” self-governing regimens. Yet the propagators of such programmes often have additional objectives: Seligman's positive psychology agenda is deeply steeped in American foundational myths of self-reliance, and is tied to reinvigorating American national character; corporate mindfulness programmes teach employees that they are the source and resolver of their own stress and frustration, not the employers. This individualisation of happiness is deeply attractive to political and business elites beyond

² Significant numbers of young Han professionals in China are also turning to Buddhism as an antidote to their high-pressure jobs (Jigme, this volume).

America with their own objectives. In China, happiness levels have been falling in stark contrast to the marked rise in living standards in the post-Mao reform era. This phenomenon is partly due to the increasingly unequal division of wealth, as a result of which “most income groups find themselves in a more disadvantageous relative position, despite absolute income gains,” giving rise to “frustrated achievers” unhappy about their “relative deprivation” (Brockmann et al. 2009, 389, 391–2). Yet rather than tackle such obvious socioeconomic causes of unhappiness, the Chinese government has responded to this malcontent with its own version of individual-centered positive psychology, which encourages those people marginalized by economic reforms to embrace counseling and learn to “perform happiness” (Yang 2013, 292). China Central Television (CCTV) documentaries on this topic claim the route to happiness requires a smile and cheery demeanor regardless of how miserable one might feel (ibid., 297–8). Unsurprisingly, some commentators have called this “fake happiness” (*wei xingfu* 伪幸福) (ibid., 293).

The Chinese government's promotion of happiness is part of a shift to a “psychologization” mode of governance, according to Jie Yang, which “manag[es] socioeconomic issues in psychological terms, . . . glorifies the psychological well-being of the marginalized and mobilizes their emotions and potentials for political reordering and economic advancement” (2013, 294). The government's goal is twofold, Yang argues: first, to encourage entrepreneurial individual responses to setbacks; and second, to neutralize negative responses to setbacks that could potentially result in self-harm, family conflict, or social unrest (ibid., 298). This individualized approach is aimed at distracting from the government’s unwillingness to address structural issues behind job layoffs and other hardships, and in effect “psychologizes” the consequences of state policies: for example, the negative consequences of state economic restructuring are depicted as primarily psychological problems, such as depression, rather than political and social ones (ibid., 300).

The individual as entrepreneur of her own soul, propelled to find personal solutions to structurally caused problems, is a core element of both Seligman's and the Communist Party of China’s (CPC) varieties of “neoliberal” positive psychology. Nevertheless, despite these resemblances, positive psychology programs around the

world are not necessarily predicated *tout court* on a psyche of “rugged individualism”. Formulations of happiness in China combine “preexisting cultural values, folk ideologies, and expert knowledge” (Yang 2013, 297). In particular, the psychologization mode of governance in China infuses therapeutic psyche-centered practices from the West with long-embedded Chinese health paradigms that favor “embodied and holistic” approaches (ibid., 294).

A good example of how positive psychology and happiness trends in China have charted their own course is the vibrant discourse linking happiness and well-being to *zheng nengliang* 正能量 (“positive energy”), which draws from Western and Chinese cultural resources.³ *Zheng nengliang* was the title chosen for the bestselling Chinese edition (published in 2012) of *Rip It Up*, a British positive psychology self-help book by Richard Wiseman. At the same time, ancient Chinese cosmological notions such as *dao* 道 and *qi* 气 have also shaped the interpretation of this concept. Additionally, *zheng nengliang* as a discursive practice is inseparable from wider processes that connect emotional intelligence and happiness with subject-making and socioeconomic stratification in the reform era. As Sam Binkley (2011, 372) argues, “contemporary formations of happiness [are] implicated in a more general logic of neoliberal subjectification” that facilitates particular “emotional subjectivities.” Similarly, Eva Illouz, has noted how “new hierarchies of emotional well-being” have emerged under contemporary capitalism (2007, 73).

In just a few years, calls to cultivate *zheng nengliang* have become pervasive in popular, academic, and political debates about happiness in China (Liu and Chang 2016, 61). However, there has been little critical analysis of discursive manifestations of *zheng nengliang* or the kinds of subjects associated with it. To help fill this gap, this chapter examines the holistic and embodied dimensions of *zheng nengliang* in popular discourse, and provides a Barthian analysis of how *zheng nengliang* is used to express emotional well-being and socioeconomic stratification in four public service adverts (PSAs): three

³ I retain the Chinese term *zheng nengliang* throughout this chapter, rather than the literal English translation “positive energy,” to convey a sense of its Chinese cultural associations.

on handgrips in Beijing's subway system and one in large poster form at a bus stop shelter. It thus contributes fresh insights into how happiness is promulgated and how happy subjects are constructed in China, and extends the scholarly literature at the intersections of Chinese studies, happiness studies, and media studies.

My aim is not just to explore how analysis of *zheng nengliang* in PSAs can help inform our understanding of the kinds of happy subjects that inhabit Chinese discourse today, but also to contribute to broader discussions on modes of subject-making in China's postsocialist modernity. According to my analysis, the subway adverts speak to a sophisticated, emotionally aware, self-governing subject that uses *zheng nengliang* to cultivate inner happiness, whereas the bus stop shelter advert addresses a relatively unsophisticated and potentially unruly subject who needs firm guidance on how to spread *zheng nengliang* and create happiness among others. I argue that these differences suggest multiple imagined subjects in contemporary happiness initiatives, which include but are not limited to the "neoliberal" self-governing subject.

In the remainder of the paper, I examine *zheng nengliang* in Chinese-language media discourse, then analyse the subway and bus stop shelter PSAs, and finally conclude with reflections on the kinds of happy subjects that they construct.

ZHENG NENGLIANG IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

The term *zheng nengliang* came to prominence on the Chinese Internet in 2012, reaching number fourteen out of twenty in a media experts' poll of the "hottest" internet expressions; at number two was the phrase "are you happy?" (*ni xingfu ma* 你幸福吗?) (Barmé and Goldkorn 2013, 313). The online encyclopaedia Baidu Baike entry for *zheng nengliang* relates the wide use of the term in popular discourse:

Currently, Chinese people stick the *zheng nengliang* label on all positive, healthy, endeavour-encouraging, power-bestowing, hope-filled people and things. It has

already risen to become full of symbolic meaning and deeply intertwined with our feelings, expressing our hopes and expectations. (“Zheng nengliang”)⁴

The entry further states that “positive energy” was originally a term from physics referring to magnetic fields coined by the English physicist Paul Dirac in the 1920s, but only became popularized in its Chinese translation of *zheng nengliang* as the title for *Rip It Up*, Richard Wiseman's positive psychology self-help guide, published in China in August 2012 just a month after its original UK publication.

According to its English-language marketing blurb, Wiseman’s book “. . . turns conventional self-help on its head and demonstrates how simple actions represent the quickest, easiest and most powerful way to instantly change how you think and feel.” In short, it argues: “Forget positive thinking, it’s time for positive action” (“Rip It Up”). The book draws on the 1880s’ argument of William James that one can smile oneself happy or frown oneself sad (Wiseman 2012a), which “turned the conventional view of the human psyche on its head” (Wiseman 2012b, 336). Wiseman argues that physical actions, postures, and surroundings can significantly change an individual's feelings and thoughts; hence, awareness and manipulation of actions and expressions can create a state of happiness. Wiseman “rips up” the idea of thinking oneself happy and instead advocates acting oneself happy—such as smiling and moving about confidently—in order to trick the mind into a happy state.

Wiseman’s approach has similarities to the “fake happiness” practices of the “psychologizing” CCTV documentaries mentioned above, such as in the account that Jie Yang provides of Song Shuru, a woman in her eighties, who is featured in the CCTV series “Secrets of My Happiness” (*Wode xingfu jinnang* 我的幸福日记):

⁴ All translations are my own. The Chinese-language text reads: “
”

[Song] began by describing how faking happiness had helped her to overcome her fear upon being diagnosed with breast cancer during the Cultural Revolution. She forced herself to fake happiness and to try to smile, even though her life was miserable. She had a serious illness. Her husband was far away at a labor camp. Red Guards subjected her to torture. However, her will to live was strong; she sang and played the accordion at night and smiled (secretly, in her heart), willing herself to stay happy and positive. Song discovered that when she felt happy, her tumor became smaller. She then decided to try and improve her physical health by faking happiness, regardless of the circumstances of her life. After several months, her tumor miraculously disappeared. (Yang 2013, 302)

Song and Wiseman both emphasize that faking or acting happiness is vital to achieving true happiness and wellbeing. This embodied understanding of happiness is emphasized in the psychologization mode of governance in China, which is more holistic and corporeal than the psyche-oriented approaches commonplace in mainstream Western positive psychology (Yang 2013, 294).⁵

Embodied and holistic connotations are also more prominent in the Chinese-language version of *Rip It Up* than in the English-language text. According to Baidu Baike, the Chinese-language version compares human bodies to magnetic “energy fields” (*nengliang chang* 能量场) that operate according to the laws of physics in the universe's all-encompassing magnetic field (despite there being no such reference in the English-language edition, nor indeed to the term “positive energy” itself):

People are magnets, the universe is a magnetic field. There is a scientific law in the world called the scientific law of attractive force. Whatever you want from the universe, the universe will give you. So there is a kind of positive, healthy,

⁵ Here I am making an observation about the emphasis on embodiment in faking happiness techniques, not a judgment about whether faking happiness has the potential to realize “true” happiness or its potential consequences on an individual’s capacity to think and express herself critically.

medical texts present *qi* as purely bodily, present-day practitioners and *qigong* manuals depict it as a transformative atmospheric or environmental “universal force” (Chen 2002, 319).

This reform-era revival of historical formulations of the body as a “microcosm of the universe” helps illuminate the notion that *zheng nengliang* resides in the related energy fields of the universe and individual bodies. The correlation was very evident in two phrases that became popular in the Chinese blogosphere during the 2012 London Olympics torch relay, when the Olympic torch became a symbol of *zheng nengliang*. The first phrase called upon people to “ignite *zheng nengliang*, detonate a small universe” (*dianran zheng nengliang, yinbao xiao yuzhou* 点燃 Zheng Nengliang, 引爆小宇宙); and the second phrase delivered the message: “if you ignite *zheng nengliang*, your luck won’t be blocked” (*dianran zheng nengliang, yunqi dangbuzhu* 点燃 Zheng Nengliang, 运气挡不住). These two phrases are inspired by the Chinese edition of a well-known 1980s Japanese manga and anime series, *Saint Seiya*, also known as *Knights of the Zodiac* (*Shengdoushi xingshi* 圣斗士星矢), which subsequently became very popular in China (“Shengdoushi xingshi”). The series’ catchphrases “burn, my small universe!” (*ranshao ba, wode xiao yuzhou!* 燃烧吧，我的小宇宙!) and “small universe, explode!” (*xiao yuzhou baofa!* 小宇宙爆发!) refer to the idea that there is a little universe inside everybody, which, if cultivated, will explosively unleash amazing powers (“Xiao yuzhou baofa”). This example also underlines the significance of East Asian regional circulations of cultural products in the shaping of contemporary popular discursive formations in China (Berry, Liscutin, and Mackintosh 2009).

The extent of the popularity of *zheng nengliang* is demonstrated on the *Zheng nengliang Filling Station* (*zheng nengliang jiayou zhan* Zheng Nengliang 加油站) website, which features a vast range of *zheng nengliang*-associated quotations, articles, books, films, songs, videos and more.⁷ The concept is deployed by a variety of individuals and organisations. Many popular TV reality shows are permeated with *zheng nengliang* in the themes they promulgate, the attitude and aims of the participants, and the slant the programme makers produce through captions and audio-visual editing. One typical example is the CCTV

⁷ The *Zheng Nengliang Filling Station* website address is: <http://www.upsbus.com>

reality/variety show “Infinite Challenge” (□□□□□□ *Liaobuqi de tiaozhan*) (Liu and Chang 2016, 61–4). An example of NGO use of *zheng nengliang* comes in a Chinese LGBT organization’s video, which describes the increasing number of gay films made in China as a manifestation of *zheng nengliang*.⁸ In religious circles, Dayuan fashi (□□□□), a leading Buddhist monk in Guangdong, claims in his popular talks for students and entrepreneurs that there is a scientific basis for the production of *zheng nengliang* through the Buddhist practice of “right mindfulness” (*zhengnian* □□) (Li 2013). Business studies experts, too, are keen to advocate the merits of *zheng nengliang* in fostering a more productive workforce: the leadership guru Liu Jian's 2012 book *Cultivating employees’ zheng nengliang* (*peiyang zheng nengliang gong* □□□□□□□□) mixes Western management theory, Daoism, Buddhism, and the classical Chinese philosophical, historical and literary works associated with “national studies” (*guoxue* □□) (“Peiyang zheng nengliang”).

The rise of *zheng nengliang* in cultural, religious and business spheres has coincided with Xi Jinping's elevation to the top offices of state in China, commencing in November 2012 with his confirmation as CPC General Secretary at its 18th National Congress. Xi has harnessed *zheng nengliang* for his policy aims at global, national and local levels. In December 2012, Xi called for China and the US to bring more *zheng nengliang* into their relationship-building (“More 'positive energy'”). In January 2013, following an announcement during the Eighteenth Congress that the CPC aimed to spread more *zheng nengliang* online, the head of Beijing's propaganda office urged Beijing’s “2.06 million propaganda workers” to advocate *zheng nengliang* in their online posts, reportedly leaving some bloggers “bemused and angry” (Phillips 2013). In November 2013, Xi urged China’s citizens to use *zheng nengliang* to help implement reforms aimed at achieving the CPC goal of a “moderately well-off society” (*xiaokang shehui* □□□□) (“Xi Jinping”). In February 2014, he expressed his desire to “make cyberspace become clear and bright” (*rang wangluo kongjian qinglangqilai* □□□□□□□□□□), and in October of

⁸ The LGBT organisation is Tongzhi Yi Fanren □□□□ (Queer Comrades). The video “10 Great Chinese Mainland Gay Films” (*Shibu dalu nan nan tongzhi dianying* □□□□□□□□□□) is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ux5zpOp0rpg>.

of *zheng nengliang* campaigns. To analyse these adverts, I draw from Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to text and image in advertising.

Barthes's now classic reading of a Panzani advertisement shows how texts and images work in tandem to convey both literal and connoted messages. Barthes chose to analyze advertising for three reasons: its signification is intentional and emphatic; its signifieds, which must be presented clearly, are determined by attributes of the product; and the signs in the image, which refer back to the signifieds, are fully formed for an optimum reading (Barthes 2004, 152–3). These conditions are also present in public service advertising, despite the intangibility of the “product.” Barthes identifies three key messages in the Panzani advert: the “linguistic message” of the text, which includes a literal denoted aspect and a non-explicit connoted aspect; the coded, connoted “symbolic message” of the signs in the image; and the non-coded, denoted “literal message” of the identifiable objects in the image, which is the support for the symbolic message (ibid., 153–4). He also introduces the concept of “anchorage,” which refers to how the text guides the reader to pre-selected signifieds of the image while avoiding others, and “relay,” a possible function of the linguistic message that occurs when the text provides additional information not found in the image (ibid., 156–7). Although relay most commonly occurs in films and comic strips to advance the plot, it is also used to convey the details of an intended message when readers may not have time to take in the connotations of an image.

Zheng nengliang in the subway

All three subway handgrip designs share one side in common (Figure 1), on which rests the slogan “*zheng nengliang* every day” (*meitian zheng nengliang* □□□□□) in large, white, sans serif characters in strokes of equal thickness on a predominantly blue, sky-like background on which float wispy clouds. In the bottom right corner in a small grey speech bubble sits the telephone number for the subway advertising company and the words “subway handgrip investment hotline” (*ditie lashou zhaoshang rexian* □□□□□□□□) in the same typeface as the main slogan but in smaller font size. Small yellow, green, and pink hearts appear to the left of the telephone number. The inclusion of the

advertising company's telephone number indicates a commercial motivation to attract advertising business (and expectation that decision-making professionals will read the ad) that is not a feature of "pure" PSAs.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the handgrip images and texts solely seek to promote *zheng nengliang*, and as such it is the PSA function that I focus on here.

<insert Figure 1 here>

The principal linguistic message reads literally as "every day positive energy," and all that is needed is knowledge of the Chinese language to understand this. For readers familiar with popular media culture, the term also connotes holistic self-help discursive practices such as those discussed above, which may include adopting a happy demeanour, and which draw from Western psychotherapeutic and Chinese cosmological traditions. The blue sky with its wispy clouds conjures up notions of calmness and clarity, timelessness, perhaps even hope, ambition and creativity. Although the concept of "blue-sky thinking" is not commonly used in Chinese, transnationally oriented professionals with English-language and Western cultural knowledge may understand this as signified in this instance. The hearts, suggestive of love and empathy, link the agency phone number with the sky and the main linguistic message. The large, strong, bold strokes of the characters in the phrase "*zheng nengliang* every day" connote strength of mind, and the phrase itself directs the reader to the beautiful blue sky's abiding presence, and in doing so anchors this very positive, eternal image with the notion of *zheng nengliang*.

On the other side of the first handgrip design (Figure 2) there is a blue-sky background with a shining sun, a few clouds, and a paragraph of text on a white, cloud-shaped background. Small blue, pink and yellow hearts dot the cloud shape. The title of the text, "Live a bit more gracefully" (*huode youyaxie* 活得优雅), is presented in large, sky-blue, brush-style, semi-cursive characters. The main text, in sky-blue, calligraphic regular script, reads as follows:

¹⁰ I thank Giovanna Puppini for pointing out that non-commerciality is a common precondition when defining a PSA.

Perhaps your life is not at all prosperous; perhaps your work is far from good enough; perhaps right now you are in a difficult position . . . whatever the reason, when you walk out of your house please make sure you wear a smile on your face (*yiding yao rang ziji mian dai weixiao* 一定要让自己面带微笑), and face life with a calm and composed manner (*congrong-ziruode mian dui shenghuo* 从容自如地面对生活). As long as you genuinely keep this up (*zhenzheng chengqilai* 真诚坚持), no matter what, other people will not be able to wear you down (*yabukua ni* 压不垮你).¹¹

<insert Figure 2 here>

Self-help pop psychology mingles with a slight tone of moral injunction in this text, which acknowledges that the reader is likely to be in an unpleasant work or financial situation, and prescribes both bodily (“wear a smile”) and psychological (“calm and composed manner”) strategies for dealing with it. The goal of such “fake happiness” practices is couched in terms of individual benefit—one is not “worn down” in the face of hostility from others. The connoted message is that if you are unhappy, it is through your own failure to perform happiness and maintain a sense of calm; or to put it another way, each individual is responsible for their own mental well-being, regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in. The combining of bodily and psychological strategies connotes holistic harmony. The symbolic imagery is almost identical to the other side of the handgrip and needs no further comment, save in one respect: lying behind the regular-style brush strokes of the body of the text and the semi-cursive brush strokes of the title is the notion of calligraphy as an art form practiced by self-cultivating Confucian gentlemen. In this tradition, well-formed and aesthetically pleasing brush strokes express the composed and cultivated disposition of the calligrapher. What's more, the act of putting brush to paper is conceived in cosmological terms: *yin* and *yang*

¹¹ The texts of all three messages also appear, with slight variations, on innumerable websites, blogs, forums etc., without attribution.

relationships are realized with each brush stroke, starting from the very first touch of black ink on blank paper—the latter representing the “undifferentiated oneness” of the pristine universe—until the work is completed and reconciled harmoniously with the *dao* (Fong 1992, 122). The calligraphic typefaces’ evocation of cosmological, philosophical and aesthetic traditions reinforces the holism of the linguistic message, through an affective and intellectual connectivity with a reader sensitive to these traditions.

The second handgrip image (Figure 3) consists of a green grassy hill, a large expanse of blue sky, some white fluffy clouds, a rainbow, a wind turbine and a couple of colourful hot-air balloons. As with the first design, it delivers its linguistic message in sky-blue text on a white, cloud-shaped background, dotted with little blue, pink and yellow hearts. The title of the text, again in brush-style, semi-cursive characters, reads “Optimism is an attitude” (*leguan shi yizhong taidu* 乐观是一种态度). In brush-style regular script as before, the body of the text gives the following advice:

Don’t tire yourself out, don’t get so busy that you exhaust yourself; when you feel vexed find a friend and meet up, when you feel like sleeping just topple over (*daoxiaqu* 倒下) and go to sleep; a placid mind (*xintai pinghe* 心态平和) is always the most beautiful, one should be happy (*kuaile*) every day.

<insert Figure 3 here>

Although the title of this message advocates a positive psychological disposition, its actual solutions to vexation and tiredness are bodily: social interaction with a friend eases vexation, sleeping helps solve tiredness. No deep explorations of the psyche are required. The living-in-the-here-and-now dimension of going for a friendly chat and toppling into bed connotes a Daoist-like response to tiredness and vexation in its existential immediacy and alignment with natural rhythms. A “placid mind” state (*xintai-pinghe*) is a long-established Daoist prerequisite in “life cultivation” (*yang sheng* 养身) practices such as qigong and taijiquan, and also lies at the core of Buddhist meditation and neo-Confucian self-cultivation techniques. The concluding phrase of the message

suggests that happiness (*kuaile*) is both a normative feeling and the effect of bodily self-management practices. The injunction to be happy every day links the feeling of happiness with the opposite side's slogan “*zheng nengliang* every day”; in this way the reader is guided towards associating *zheng nengliang* with an ever-present feeling of happiness.

The green hill, blue sky and wispy clouds are reminiscent of the famous Microsoft Windows XP desktop background image of the Napa Valley, an association easily made by the computer-savvy white-collar commuters on the subway. This lends the image an air of the good life in California, affluent, relaxed, and hi-tech. The rainbow reinforces the beauty of the scene, the hot-air balloons convey a sense of freedom and escape from earthly woes, and the wind turbine signifies an aspiration for the clear skies and clean air that Beijingers can currently only dream of. The text does not anchor particular signs in the image, although the reference to the beauty of the placid mind perhaps evokes the beauty of the image, but in Barthes's sense of relay it adds information to the image, giving the reader clearer instructions to achieving *zheng nengliang* than the image alone is able to do.

The imagery and colouring of the third handgrip message (Figure 4) differs somewhat from the first two. The visual focus, on the right hand side, is the golden brown and yellow head of a sunflower, half of its petals bathed in sunlight, with a fuzzy background of sunflowers in the same warm colours. The linguistic message sits to the left in the familiar cloud-like shape, although this time the cloud is brown. As before, a few little blue, pink and yellow hearts dot the cloud shape. The overall effect is one of warmth and cosiness. The title, in the familiar semi-cursive calligraphy, this time coloured yellow, reads “Hello happy times” (*meihao de shiguang ni hao* □□□□□□),¹² below which sits the text, coloured white, and in calligraphic regular script as before:

¹² Dictionary entries translate *meihao* variously as happy, lovely, fine and glorious. Because the handgrip messages prescribe practical steps to feeling good about oneself, “happy” seems as appropriate a translation as any here.

From today onwards, be a simple person (*zuo yige jiandan de ren* 做一个简单的人). Be practical and pragmatic (*tashi wushi* 踏实), don't indulge in fantasies (*bu chenni huanxiang* 别幻想), and don't worry about imaginary troubles (*bu yongren-zirao* 别用人为之烦恼). You should be happy, cheerful, tenacious and warm (*yao kuaile, yao kailang, yao jianren, yao wenuan* 要快乐, 要开朗, 要坚韧, 要温暖). You should be sincere, calm, generous and broad-minded (*yao chengken, yao tanran, yao kangkai, yao kuanrong* 要诚恳, 要坦然, 要慷慨, 要宽容). Always be full of hope about life, and face difficult situations and hardships with a smile (*dui kunjing yu monan, weixiao miandui* 对困境与磨难, 微笑面对). You should have dreams (*mengxiang* 梦想), even if distant ones.

<insert Figure 4 here>

This handgrip's linguistic message advocates a large set of positive dispositions and the body-centred practice of smiling as the recipe for “happy times.” Complex psychological introspection is played down in favour of being “simple”, “happy” and dismissing one's troubles as “imaginary.” The dispositions often include an embodied factor: for example, the phrase *tashi wushi* (“practical and pragmatic”) emphasizes the concrete over the abstract, *kailang* (cheerful) suggests a happy expression and an upbeat manner of speech, *jianren* (“tenacious”) a physical hardiness, *wenuan* (“warm”) an air of geniality, *tanran* (“calm”) a state of stillness, and *kangkai* (“generous”) the act of giving. The final sentence lifts the reader out of the present and into his or her future dreams, a sign of the linkage of dreams and happiness in contemporary discourse (for more on this see Inwood's chapter in this volume). Reading between the lines, the message is that worrying, complaining, protesting, and feeling upset are negative emotions and behaviours that should be dispelled. As with the previous handgrips' texts, this text prescribes an embodied, holistic formula for happiness that places responsibility and effort squarely on the shoulders of the individual reader. The sunflower connotes actively seeking out warmth and brightness in one's life, just as growing sunflowers turn

towards the sun. The text implies that the reader can emulate this natural tendency of sunflowers by being a “simple person” without a care in the world, simply smiling warmly and nurturing dreams (but not fantasies!) of better things to come. In this way, text and image convey the meaning of *zheng nengliang*.

To summarize the three handgrips: the blue skies convey a sense of timeless calm, relaxation, freedom from worries, and clarity of thought; the hearts connote love and tenderness; the calligraphy and emphasis on nature draw the reader towards enduring cosmologies and self-cultivation practices that emphasize holistic harmony between person and environment. Underlying all of the above is the message that the individual is responsible for and capable of managing her emotions; and since happiness is a normative emotional state she should nurture her happiness through bodily and psychological self-management. Structural conditions—political, economic, social, environmental and so on—are not acknowledged as the cause of unhappiness, as is the case with Seligman's positive psychology and the CPC's fake happiness practices; rather, it is the individual alone who has the power to smile herself happy.

Zheng nengliang at a bus stop

I encountered a rather different rendering of *zheng nengliang* in an advert (Figure 5) across the back of a large bus stop shelter in the north-west corner of Beijing's third ring road. This always-busy bus stop is near a large supermarket, cinema, and several streets of restaurants and small shops. On the left-hand side of this wide advert sits a large pink heart, streaked through with white; on the right-hand side two large red figures with pink crosses for hearts leap in the air amid numerous small red and pink hearts. The background is white. Across the pink heart in tall black characters a slogan reads: “Offer compassion [literally ‘loving heart’]; transmit *zheng nengliang*” (*fengxian aixin chuandi zheng nengliang* □□□□ □□□□□). The characters are in a sans serif typeface, and are machine-made looking with thin, angular, strokes of equal width, yet are softened considerably in the first half of the slogan by little hearts and curved linking lines. Stylized electric pulses, as if on an electrocardiographic heart monitor, connect yet also form a boundary between the slogan's two parts, and reappear in red in the character

□, and a red cross is highlighted within the character □. A secondary slogan underneath in smaller, yet bolder, black, sans serif, regular script characters, with no stylizations, reads: “Being respectful and courteous makes our city happier” (*zunjing, lirang, rang women de chengshi geng meihao* □□, □□, □□□□□□□□).

<insert Figure 5 here>

Terms like respect and courtesy are frequently used in state-sponsored civility campaigns together with *wenming* □□ (“civilized”) in phrases such as “be a civilized and courteous Chinese person” (*zuo wenming youli de Zhongguo ren* □□□□□□□□).¹³ This kind of language is pervasive on the national civility website and its counterparts at province, city and district level.¹⁴ In this interpretation of *zheng nengliang*, offering a “loving heart” is defined as being courteous and respectful; it calls upon the reader to modify the way in which she interacts with others, so that the city can be a happier place for all. Concisely stated moral injunctions aimed at society’s happiness in the bus shelter advert replace the subway handgrip messages’ kindly, empathetic guides to individual corporeal and psychological strategies for individual happiness amid the myriad stresses of life. The bus shelter message does not acknowledge that the reader herself may be stressed or indeed may wish for personal happiness; rather, it implies that the reader is the cause of unhappiness in others.

The electric pulse signs, cross symbol and heart crosses of the jumping figures likely allude to the positive energy charges associated with the term *zheng nengliang* in the study of magnetic energy fields in physics. The leaping human figures evoke vitality and a happiness achieved together with others. The hearts, as in the subway adverts, link this erstwhile scientific term with compassionate, empathetic relations between humans,

¹³ See e.g. http://archive.wenming.cn/lyxx/2010-08/16/content_20629476.htm Date of access?

¹⁴ The national civility website is at <http://www.wenming.cn>; the Beijing equivalent can be accessed at <http://www.bjwmb.gov.cn>. Date of access?

and reinforce the term *aixin* in the linguistic message, which itself acts as anchorage to the heart images in that it directs the reader's attention towards them. The secondary slogan acts as a form of relay in that it provides additional information not found in the image—be courteous and respectful—and thus delivers a blunt, unambiguous message for the benefit of the reader with little time to decode the image, unclear about its symbolism, or unsure of the meaning of *zheng nengliang*.

Reading the subway and bus shelter messages together, one is tempted to surmise that one of the stresses the emotionally self-governing subjects of the subway messages have to stoically bear as they go about their business in the city is the uncouth public behaviour of the subject in the bus shelter message. The subway handgrip subject emerges as a self-regulating and thoughtful model individual with feelings; the bus shelter poster subject as thoughtless, unruly and in need of firm, top-down moral directives. Whereas the subway messages help the reader find ways to stay sane and serviceable as a professional employee; the bus shelter message endeavours to effect a society-wide improvement in civility between citizens.

Although both the subway and the bus shelter adverts speak to aspects of China's socioeconomic development project and its disciplinary ambitions, they aim at the distinctive “needs” of differently imagined types of subject: on the one hand self-development, and on the other hand a civilizing process. The subway adverts assume the civility of the reader, but the bus shelter advert assumes the need for the reader to be civilized. Premised on the assumption of a linear civilizing process, the subjects that the adverts call forth are imagined to be at different stages of development: the bus shelter advert assumes a not-yet-modern-enough citizen in need of the appropriate manners for a developed society; the subway adverts speak to a postmodern subject, capable of drawing from eclectic traditions of diverse origins to better manage her emotions.

ZHENG NENGLIANG AND MIDDLE-CLASS EMOTIONAL HABITUS

Subway advertising in Beijing is mainly seen by young, educated, middle class, urban residents, and evokes different scales of community belonging, from the local to the transnational (Lewis 2003, 262–5). Commercial adverts in particular “appeal to the idea

of a transnational citizen: a transnational consumer citizen” (Lewis 2012, 778). Whereas the bus shelter *zheng nengliang* advert aligns with the many public service adverts in China that “make overt appeals to local government development interests and issues” (Lewis 2003, 263), the subtle cosmopolitanism of the subway *zheng nengliang* adverts has an affinity with the commercial adverts that evoke a transnational community of urbane but stressed-out white-collar professionals seeking strategies to remain physically and mentally healthy enough to climb the corporate ladder. Compared to the bus shelter advert, the subway adverts are more sophisticated in their tenor and more radical in their implicit abrogation of government and business responsibility for the well-being of citizens and employees. The class undertone of the adverts highlights the role of public service advertising in the discursive production of national and global classed identities.

Contemporary sociocultural stratification processes involve the construction of distinctive emotional selves, posits Eva Illouz: “there are now new hierarchies of emotional well-being, understood as the capacity to achieve socially and historically situated forms of happiness and well-being” (2007, 73). Due to the circumstances of their jobs, Illouz suggests, today's middle classes develop an “emotional habitus” and “emotional intelligence” that privilege them in the economic marketplace, and better equip them to achieve what is considered to represent well-being and happiness:

Emotional intelligence reflects particularly well the emotional style and dispositions of the new middle classes which are located in intermediary positions, that is, which both control and are controlled, whose professions demand a careful management of the self, who are tightly dependent on collaborative work, and who must use their self in a both a creative and a productive way. (ibid., 66)

Emotional intelligence can be viewed as a kind of social capital, since it helps build the relationship networks that help people make more money, gain promotion, and so on; yet it is also acts as cultural capital because it facilitates relatively highly valued styles of behaviour (ibid., 66–7). The self-cultivation and controlled display of emotions advocated in the subway *zheng nengliang* adverts are attainable and relevant for aspiring

white-collar workers, whose emotional intelligence is already honed and receptive.

From the perspective of the construction of class, moreover, the subway adverts should not just be seen as a response to the needs of pressed-upon corporate employees, but also as part of a panoply of discursive materials that train—or “psychologize”—a middle-class habitus or subjectivity to manifest well-mannered compliance with government and business requirements. In the words of Michel Foucault, “one of the prime effects of power [is] that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals” (1980, 98). In similar vein, Jie Yang argues that psychologization is “a process through which psychology as an array of practical modes of understanding and acting penetrates people’s social imagination of who they are or what they might be” (2013, 301). In this sense, the psychologization of the middle classes involves its own distinctive “fake happiness” practices, which aim not only to encourage individualized responses to setbacks and neutralize potentially damaging ones, but also help to effect a model of successful middle-class emotional subjectivity that combines grace, sensitivity, warmth and placidity of mind. Such coaxing to cultivate a personalized *zheng nengliang* reflects and instils a mode of emotional self-governance that distinguishes the aspiring middle classes from other social groups.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown the influence of multiple traditions in the evolution of *zheng nengliang*, including Martin Seligman's positive psychology revolution, CPC-promulgated “psychologization” and “fake happiness” practices, the magnetic energy fields of physics, William James-inspired action-centered happiness therapy, the circulation of *qi*, and the notion of the body as a microcosm of the universe. This assemblage of elements mixes together the idea of the self-governing neoliberal self with an embodied and holistic worldview that does not focus exclusively on the psyche. In

¹⁵ On this point, see also the discussion of *suzhi* in Wielander, this volume.

religion, popular culture, civil society, the media, the business world and government policy, *zheng nengliang* is held out as a pathway to happiness, harmony and stability.

The subway *zheng nengliang* adverts address weary white-collar commuters with soothing and appealing texts and images, and convey the message that personal happiness lies a few simple steps away, completely within the control of every individual. Their wording acknowledges the pressures the reader faces, and guides her through the physical and psychological measures she needs to take to be happy, such as wearing a smile, staying calm, resting at will, cultivating a tranquil mind, being pragmatic, cheerful, warm, generous, hopeful, and nourishing a dream or two. The flowing calligraphic brush strokes of the characters lull the eye. The underlying message of the texts assures the reader that she and only she can bring herself holistic happiness. Clean blue skies, fluffy white clouds, green grassy hills, colourful rainbows, soaring hot-air balloons and yellow-brown sunflowers provide the idyllic images upon which the texts sit. The images reinforce this message of well-being with seductive pastoral scenes that signify timeless, joyful calm and freedom. The self-help style of the texts echoes positive psychology's focus on individual responsibility, yet the frequent mention of bodily actions and the use of calligraphy suggest a coordinated mind-body solution that brings to mind historical Chinese self-cultivation practices. That this prescribed route to happiness is an individual one is left in no doubt; nowhere mentioned is the responsibility of government and businesses to address unhappiness-causing societal structural issues.

A stark contrast in text and imagery presents itself in the bus shelter *zheng nengliang* advert. An electric current seems to run through the main slogans and the leaping figures, “transmitting” *zheng nengliang* across the city. The secondary slogan's abrupt command to be respectful and courteous seems curiously old-fashioned compared to the subway messages' gentler tenor. No dreamy pastoral idyll backgrounds the text: there is no need for it, nor for a personal tone. The happiness of the imagined reader of the bus shelter advert is not at issue; but her public behaviour is. She is a directed subject, not a self-governing one. She is told succinctly to be polite to others, not caressed by self-fashioning body-mind guidance. Her good manners will lead to a kind of communal happiness, the leaping figures seem to signify. Whereas the bus shelter advert's multiple

hearts reinforce the main slogan's call to offer up a loving heart to others; the small number of hearts in the subway adverts would seem to signify self-love, as that is the focus of the texts they adorn. In contrast with the bus shelter advert, the subway adverts thus reflect and help fashion an emotionally self-governing middle-class subjectivity, transnationally oriented yet locally situated, a Chinese intervention in the hierarchies of well-being that Illouz has identified as core to neoliberal capitalism. *Zheng nengliang* here serves as a stratifying tool for the development of a class-specific emotional habitus.

Much research remains to be done on *zheng nengliang*, its manifestations in popular media and everyday life, and how it varies across gender, class, age, religious, regional and other boundaries. One might ask: What individual and social costs does the practice of *zheng nengliang* entail? And more specifically: What is lost and what is gained through developing emotionally placid habitus? This paper's research could be extended by ethnographic investigation, on, for example, how notions of *suzhi* 素质 (personal "quality") might affect interpretations of the two contrasting styles of messages (Kipnis 2007). The reach and distinctive journeys of *zheng nengliang* across China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Sinophone populations elsewhere require careful mapping, as the middle classes in different locales seek to avoid stress and find happiness in ways that may seem comparable, but upon closer inspections differ in certain respects. Critics of *zheng nengliang* should be taken seriously.¹⁶ At stake is nothing less than understanding how *zheng nengliang* and wider psychologization processes are used to manipulate how people think, act, and understand themselves.

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¹⁶ See for example the call for more *fu nengliang* 负能量 ("negative energy") at <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/42590177>.

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