

The Affective Medium and Ideal Person  
in Pedagogies of 'Soft Skills'  
in Contemporary China

Gil Hizi

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Department of Anthropology  
School of Social and Political Sciences  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
The University of Sydney  
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## Declaration

*I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted in the past in substance for any degree, that it is the result of my own independent research, and that all authorities and sources consulted are acknowledged in the Bibliography.*

Gil Hizi

## Abstract

In this dissertation I explore the role of affect in practices of self-improvement in contemporary urban China. I conducted participant observation in workshops for young adults in the city of Jinan, focusing on interpersonal ‘soft’ skills, such as ‘communication,’ ‘emotional expression,’ and public speaking. These highly interactive workshops urged participants to express themselves as emotional, assertive, inspirational, and above all – autonomous – individuals. This ideal of personhood is inspired by state-promoted reforms in the education system and the rise of psychotherapy across China, highlighting new moral imperatives of self-reliance and emotional well-being in the expanding Chinese market economy.

My analysis focuses on the discrepancy between participants’ ideals of self-improvement, as practiced in workshops, and their wider social engagements. While participants conceived of soft skills as capacities that could potentially be employed anywhere, they nevertheless experienced and emphasised impediments to extending their practices outside workshops. They saw their everyday social circles as prioritising hierarchical relations, social roles, and financial stability, all suppressing the ideals of individual autonomy prominent in workshops.

Drawing on theories of affect, hope, and the concept of ‘heterotopia,’ I describe how workshops dislocated participants from their existing social realities to produce momentary experiences of self-overcoming. Through affectively intensive exercises, participants identified with their ideal person, imagined themselves mastering social relations, and envisioned a future society governed by the virtues of soft skills. I consider affect, in these

practices, not as a means for subjects' comprehensive self-transformations, but rather as an experience that charges individuals with ephemeral optimism amidst socioeconomic uncertainties. In contemporary market-driven China, I argue, such deployment of affect is increasingly evident in educational activities, entertainment media, and state campaigns. These practices respond to and reinforce an existing schism between the expansion of new ideals of personhood and individuals' limited capacities to realise them.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

### Introduction

*Three field sites in a northern Chinese city named Jinan: a training school for university students in various interpersonal skills ('Champion Training'), a public speaking club ('Super Speakers'), and a psychology centre that runs workshops in communication and emotional expression ('Heart's Secret'). Participants, mostly young adults, are encouraged by instructors and other participants to share personal experiences and life mottos. They are also invited to speak with emotion and assertion, allowing them to practice expression 'skills.' In climactic affective moments in workshops, participants imagine applying these skills with family members, friends, and workplace interlocutors. They also construe these modes of expression with positive and moral personal characteristics such as individual autonomy and innovation. They imagine extending these virtues to their social circles and to Chinese society at large.*

This above statement epitomises my field observations. While the majority of young adults in China do not attend these particular workshops, I suggest that elements of these discourses and practices have recently circulated across different social settings, including educational institutions, workplace activities, popular media, and even political discourse. The mastery of interpersonal and expressive skills, which I call 'soft skills.' has become a widespread ideal extending across socioeconomic classes and geographic locations in China. My research initially sought to discover the links between these practices and wider socioeconomic changes. With time, my fieldwork made me sceptical about soft skills as

deterministic or comprehensive processes by which workshops produce new subjects in tandem with wider society. I found that soft skills practices not only cannot be easily applied outside of workshops, but the moral imaginary at the centre of workshop practices is also in dissonance with participants' everyday experiences. Although workshop agendas respond to wider social processes, such as the rise of socioeconomic self-reliance or the expansion of individualistic values, workshops also highlight a tension with contemporary Chinese society, by positioning soft skills as antithetical to local norms of social interaction.

I argue that practices of soft skills affectively affiliate individuals to an ideal, and charge them with optimism about their future. In this dissertation I delineate the characteristics of this ideal person: autonomous, emotionally-expressive, and market-oriented. To this description I add an analysis of the pursuit of this ideal through a pedagogy that highlights moral, affective, and temporal gaps between the workshop space and the outside world. More than facilitating a unilinear trajectory of 'self-transformation,' the practice of soft skills produces an ephemeral experience of self-improvement amidst a social reality where individuals cannot achieve substantial change in either their personal capacities or their socioeconomic prospects.

In the following sections of the introduction I present the historical backdrop, theoretical perspectives and methodology of my research. I begin by introducing the three field sites, followed by a discussion of changing conceptions of personhood in contemporary China. I also discuss how my perspective extends some of the current dominant approaches to the study of new forms of personhood in China. I then introduce my theoretical perspective, emphasising affect and temporality in the practice of soft skills. Finally, I outline the urban setting of Jinan along with my research methods.

## Urban field sites: workshops for soft skills

In the following section I introduce the three programs for workshops where I conducted my fieldwork. These three sites differ in participant profiles and curricula, yet all share an interest in soft skills which manifests in their vocabularies, interactive dynamics, as well as some of their specific exercises.

### *Champion Training*

*Champion Training* is an extracurricular training school that focuses on improving university students' emotional and interpersonal skills. It is run by and caters to undergraduate students. A team of 12-14 students in years 2-4 of their studies at a prestigious university in Jinan opened this small enterprise through an entrepreneurship incubator established at their university.<sup>1</sup> Team members work as instructors, marketing agents, and accountants.<sup>2</sup> They were coordinated by Li Chen, a 24-year-old student who had ambitious business aspirations. Li had attended numerous workshops in psychology, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), multi-level marketing (MLM), and public speaking, and combined different exercises from these various experiences into *Champion Training's* curricula. He and his team members were also inspired by the teaching of Liu Xingqi, a well-known young entrepreneur who established a large business for student training in Hunan. Liu's teaching focuses on students' soft skills as key instruments for socioeconomic competence and well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> This centre, sponsored by a large Chinese enterprise, replicated a model of 'business incubators,' providing the conditions for students to launch enterprises. In practice, this centre provided mainly a working space (200 sqm shared by nine 'teams'), internet connection, and publicity.

<sup>2</sup> Each team member also earned 1500-2000 CNY/month, approximately AU\$300-400, the equivalent of a working-class salary.



*Champion Training's* teaching philosophy was notably inspired by discourses related to educational reforms in China, known as 'education for quality' (*suzhi jiaoyu*). Following a 1999 policy paper issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (1999), new educational agendas were set forth with the aim to foster a generation of more autonomous, well-rounded, creative, and emotionally expressive individuals (Kuan, 2015; Naftali, 2014; Woronov, 2003). The state understood these qualities as essential to form a modern market-driven society (Anagnost, 2004; Woronov, 2003). At the same time, *suzhi jiaoyu* critiqued Chinese educational practices that prioritised 'hard education' (*yingshi jiaoyu*), such as exam-oriented memorisation and rigid teacher-pupil hierarchies. In practice, due to a widespread belief in the meritocracy of exams (Kipnis, 2011, p. 92), practical educational imperatives to forcefully discipline children (Wu, 2016, p. 14), and the difficulty of measuring intangible 'quality' (Woronov, 2008),<sup>3</sup> the implementation of *suzhi jiaoyu* has been problematic. Educators and households acknowledge that *suzhi jiaoyu* is yet to become a predominant influence in classroom pedagogies.

Notwithstanding the circumscribed implementation of educational reforms, the imaginary of *suzhi jiaoyu* resonates in values and practices across China today. *Champion Training* instructors drew on the ambiguous notion of *suzhi jiaoyu* to reconfigure certain 'skills' that reflect the value of the individual in the new economy. They lamented that young adults in China lack soft skills and are therefore destined to become docile people with little social

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<sup>3</sup> *Suzhi jiaoyu* developed from discourses on 'population quality' (*renkou suzhi*) that gained currency in the late 1980s. The concept of *suzhi* indicated a state-endorsed prioritisation of 'quality' over 'quantity' of citizens, in correlation with birth restrictions (*jihua shengyu*) (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005). In the 1990s, the term indicated the value of the person as an active participant in China's capitalist development (Sigley, 2009, p. 553).

resilience or entrepreneurial spirit, and moreover, to be unhappy. Although *Champion Training* instructors were themselves university students at a prestigious university, they nonetheless conceived of a path of self-improvement that does not rely primarily on academic credentials.

*Champion Training* therefore facilitated activities that intended to counterbalance hard education. Their main product was a one-week training camp for students, which was run 5-7 times annually. For 1000 CNY (approximately AU\$200), students from many campuses across Jinan and wider Shandong province stayed in a Jinan hostel and partook in 12-hour days of interactive exercises. Activities were held in a classroom rented by *Champion Training* in an office building, and outdoors in a city square or in a university running field. Exercises included improvised public speaking, approaching strangers on the street, cultivating team trust through physical challenges, as well as segments of singing and 'crazy dancing' (*kuangwu*).

Most trainees were first-year students. Although instructors incessantly evoked the job market in their teaching, they rarely offered tangible instructions for job seekers. Instead, exercises cultivated a range of skills for open-ended purposes, urging trainees to become more resilient, outgoing, and charismatic. In fact, notwithstanding the fact that many student trainees considered the camp as potentially useful for their future careers, they often told me they were just as interested in improving their social standings at their new university campuses.

Most trainees' engagement with *Champion Training* concluded following the one-week camp. Of a camp of 17-20 trainees, 3-4 would return for a second camp. In between camps, *Champion Training* also ran short activities, such as lectures on entrepreneurship, and

trainee reunions. Instructors emphasised the importance of persisting in self-improvement through on-going activities, even if they also construed their camp as a potentially life-changing experience for trainees.

### *Super Speakers*

Unlike *Champion Training*, which was based in a university, *Super Speakers* was a public speaking club run and comprised by members. The club was established in 2012 by a group of friends in their mid-20s who were familiar with an international network of public speaking clubs that already had member clubs in Qingdao (eastern Shandong). *Super Speakers* was Jinan's first public speaking club to emulate the methodology of this network. In 2015 the club had 40-45 members, each of whom paid a semi-annual fee of 500 CNY (approximately AU\$100). Most members were either individuals in their late 20s-early 30s, or Master's students in their early to mid-20s. In each club activity, held every Thursday evening, 13-25 participants (among whom 2-5 were guests and the rest members) would gather in a designated area at a local café. They followed an agenda that included several pre-prepared 5-7-minute speeches by members and a session of improvised speeches on a specific topic. Following instruction by senior members and guidance from the club's manual, speakers emphasised interaction with the audience, sharing personal stories, and conveying inspirational messages.

'The three weapons for conquering the world are atomic bombs, sales, and public speaking' (*zhengfu shijie san da liqi shi yuanzidan, xiaoshou, yanjiang*) - a *Super Speakers* member said

to his trainees.<sup>4 5</sup> While informants did not view public speaking only in remunerative terms, this saying indicates the imagined power of speech. This view is inspired by TED.com, public speaking guidebooks, and a new genre of public speaking entertainment shows on Chinese TV.<sup>6</sup> Parallel to this understanding, affective public speaking has also become a more predominant educational method in China. This is evident in school activities where students of different ages deliver speeches about their ‘dreams’ or ‘China Dream’ (for examples see China News, 2013; Tsinghua University, 2013; Yinsha.com, 2017), as well as in language learning programs that prioritise oral expression and inspirational speech.<sup>7</sup>

While highlighting public speaking skills, *Super Speakers*’ members regarded their self-improvement as not limited to mere ‘speech.’ During club activities members undertook different roles in addition to delivering speeches, such as hosting the sessions, time-keeping, and presenting the club to guests. The most important role was being an evaluator. In evaluation sessions, senior members offered detailed feedback on other members’ speeches. Both new and senior members considered this unbiased feedback as a mode of

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<sup>4</sup> This is a common saying in China with unknown origins. In other versions ‘money’ substitutes ‘sales.’

<sup>5</sup> A 2014 popular Chinese guidebook for public speaking is titled ‘Public speaking creates miracles: speech is more powerful than atomic bombs’ (*yanshuo chuanguzao qiji: yanshuo bi yuanzidan geng you weili*) (Wang, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Public speaking talent contests are a new genre of reality show that appeared on TV in 2012. ‘Super Speaker’ (*chaoji yanshuo jia*) on Hunan Satellite TV, ‘I am Speaker’ (*wo shi yanshuo jia*) on Beijing Satellite, and ‘Wonderful China’ (*jingcai zhongguo shuo*) on Shandong Satellite, are shows in which speakers and judges celebrate rhetorical performances. In two activities I attended in *Champion Training*, instructors screened and analysed speeches of the winner of the second season of ‘I am Speakers,’ Liu Yuanyuan.

<sup>7</sup> Large national enterprises in extracurricular English training such as ‘New Oriental’ (*xindongfang*) and ‘New Channel English’ (*xinhangdao*) prioritise public speaking and oral expression in their teaching. The CEO of New Channel English, Hu Min, has even published a popular book titled ‘Learn English with Obama’ (*gen aobama xue yingyu*) in which he incites learners to adopt Barack Obama’s rhetorical charm (Hu, 2009).

productive communication that counteracted the rigid, hierarchical and ‘face’-oriented interactions members experienced outside the club.<sup>8</sup> Evaluation sessions strengthened the links between public speaking, communication, and ‘self-improvement.’

Overall, due to the focus on self-improvement through mutual feedback and following a manual, members construed this club as a ‘workshop’ (*gongzuofang*) or ‘training’ (*peixun*) rather than a hobby. For student members, the club offered a space for self-development (*ziwo fazhan*) that added to other activities they undertook (volunteering, internships, training courses) with an eye to their future careers. For other members the club offered a place for joyful ‘growth’ (*chengzhang*) and a moral methodology that supplemented what they saw as the dull routines of their daytime jobs.

#### *Heart’s Secret*

*Heart’s Secret* was a psychology club that offered various workshops and events to members, including 3-4 ‘salons’ (*shalong*), 3-4 day workshops, weekly classes, training courses for members who wanted to become professional psychological counsellors, and counsellor supervision meetings. Throughout 2015 the club had 50-60 members. Members dominated the more professional activities, while in salons, workshops, and courses, 35-55% of participants were guests.<sup>9</sup> I attended several salons, workshops and classes during the year, and gloss them together as ‘workshops.’

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<sup>8</sup> By ‘face’ (*mianzi*) informants normally referred to culturally-informed interactions where individuals refrain from expressing their emotions, and where social roles rigidly prescribe a proper behaviour. ‘Face’ renders a dissonance between the person’s inner ‘self’ and social engagements.

<sup>9</sup> An annual membership fee of 1200-1400 CNY allowed members to attend salons free of charge and receive discount for longer activities, such as 3-4 day workshops (1700-2200 CNY for members, 2500-3000 CNY for non-members), courses of 8-12 weekly sessions on a specific topic or therapeutic school (600-800 CNY), training courses for future counsellors (10000-12000 CNY for 100-120 hours of classroom teaching).

Instructors in all *Heart's Secret* activities were licensed counsellors, some of whom also attended other club activities as students during the same period. Instructors occasionally drew on specific psychological schools, such as the theories of Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Irvin Yalom, and Virginia Satir (as well as occasional references to Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung), while keeping the teaching relevant for novice participants. Workshops carried titles such as 'finding happiness,' 'understanding our unconscious,' 'communication skills,' and 'self-narration.' Even when specific therapeutic methods were mentioned (such as in a course on psychoanalysis or a salon on hypnoses), instructors used these titles as a proxy for discussing self-realisation and interpersonal skills more widely. By this they reflected a pedagogic preference for positive psychology at the expense of exploring the unconscious in China (Wielander, 2016; Zhang, 2017a).

*Heart's Secret* was part of an expansive psychotherapeutic scene in urban China. Through the opening of China to international academic collaborations in the 1980s, psychology has experienced a significant revival (Chang et al., 2005). Yet the most significant moment in the development and shaping of the Chinese therapeutic practice took place in 2002, when a National Exam for Psychological Counsellors (*xinli zixunshi zhiye zige renzheng kaoshi*) was launched by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. Through this exam, individuals without any academic background in psychology may obtain a license as a counsellor following a 3-4-month training course. Tens of thousands of counsellors are now licensed

each year (Huang, 2013; Zhang, 2007), leading to a 'psy fever' (Zhang, 2014, p. 287) or 'psycho-boom' (Kleinman, 2010, p. 1074).<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, psychology has not expanded as a profession parallel to the number of counsellors. Studies indicate that most licensed counsellors study psychology for personal reasons: managing familial or workplace relationships, improving one's emotional expression, and overcoming emotional distress (Hizi, 2017; Tang & Fang, 2009; Zhang, 2017a).<sup>11</sup> Such was the case with the vast majority of licensed counsellors in *Heart's Secret*, who comprised 60-65% of club members. The most prominent effect of these new institutions has therefore been to popularise psychotherapeutic knowledge throughout Chinese society. Whereas some psychology symposiums in large cities remain exclusive to academics or are very expensive, innumerable accessible workshops and training programs have spread to different urban hubs.

Psychology in China is thus practiced mostly outside of counselling rooms, such as in the workshops I attended. In these workshops participants were encouraged to share intimate stories and prioritise expressing their emotions in front of the classroom. Exercises in smaller groups further practiced self- and mutual-praising and active listening. These activities aimed at synchronising participants with affective features that are supposedly downplayed in everyday interactions. Instructors and senior members emphasised the importance of 'feelings' (*ganshou*) over 'thoughts' (*xiangfa*) and reiterated that 'moods'

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<sup>10</sup> As of late 2017, the examination system has been reformed, making it more selective and biased towards clinical practice. At this stage it is difficult to predict how this reform will impact the psychotherapeutic industry.

<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, state workers in professions such as nursing, university advisors, and policemen are frequently sent by their employers to undergo psychology training in order to manage their emotions and improve their communication skills in their workplace (Hizi, 2017; Zhang, 2017b).

(*qingxu*) determine our relationships more so than rational and conscious factors. Overall, workshop facilitators wished to enhance participants' self-awareness while employing emotions to cultivate interpersonal 'skills' that could be applied in relationships outside workshops.

The age range of participants in *Heart's Secret's* activities was wider than my two other field sites. 90% of participants were aged 25-45, and most of them were married. Furthermore, 60% of members and 75% of guests were women. Although male and female members were equally enthusiastic about soft skills and psychology, the latter felt greater challenges, stemming from social expectations that they manage relationships both in and outside the household. At the same time, through mastering soft skills and gaining potential access to a new profession, these women participants wished to orient their self-improvement beyond their existing social responsibilities.

I conclude this section with a summary of some of the key shared features in the pedagogies of *Champion Training*, *Super Speakers*, and *Heart's Secret*:

- All workshops were established in 2012-2015.
- All workshops were privately run and were not sponsored in any way by the state.
- The majority of participants were from the lower middle- and upper-working-classes. Even if workshops involved a significant expense, sometimes costing up to 40% of a participant's monthly household income, they were seldom absolutely beyond participants' financial abilities.
- Workshop participants did not express their attendance at workshops as solely responding to workplace demands or to their immediate career plans.



- Workshop facilitators had all previously been enthusiastic learners of the practices they were teaching and promoting, and hence believed in the efficacy and morality of their pedagogies.
- Workshops promoted egalitarian interaction, and invited all participants to set the tone for the proceedings, and at times also the content, of activities.

## Background – New conceptions of the ‘person’ in contemporary China

### Economic reforms and the morality of the person in China

The era of economic reforms in China that commenced in 1978 signified a critical transformative moment in the social landscape. The gradual privatisation of the economy and China’s opening up to foreign influences and investment have affected the Chinese individual in terms of social responsibility, self-perception, and aspirations. More recently, state-promoted reforms have also introduced new ideas about civil morality and well-being.

The Chinese economic reforms, initiated by former Communist Party secretary Deng Xiaoping, began with a decollectivisation of state-run industries and continued with policies that promoted small-scale enterprises, trade, and foreign investment. By the mid-1990s, the *danwei* system, the socialist work unit system that supplied individuals with welfare benefits, accommodation, as well as imposed restrictions on spatial and job mobility and spouse selection, was largely abandoned (Bray, 2005). During this period, state discourse and campaigns promoted entrepreneurship and the positive value of ‘becoming rich’ (Hsu, 2007; Jankowiak, 2004). For the past two decades, outside the social support of remaining state-run enterprises, Chinese individuals have faced new burdens of decision-making and pressures to seize market opportunities. This has generated greater movement between jobs (Hsu, 2005; Ong, 2008, p. 14; Woronov, 2015) and higher emphasis on decision-making,

‘self-development’ and time-management among young adults (Hoffman, 2010; Hsu, 2005; Ong, 2008, p. 16; Sum, 2016).

As individuals face an overwhelming set of new choices, consumption has become a fierce social pursuit that reflects upon – and constitutes - individual identities. Through the growth of the Chinese Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since the mid-1990s (Trading Economics, 2017a), and significant growth in GDP per capita (Trading Economics, 2017b), Chinese society recently became the top consumer country across the globe (Barnett, 2013).

Consumption in China, as in most market-oriented societies, brings together material demands with the formation of social identities. In the dynamic process of socioeconomic class formation in China, individuals manifest a middle-class or higher-class status through consumption, even prior to reaching corresponding conditions in terms of income, housing, or profession, as demonstrated in a survey by Li Chunling (2004) of China’s Academy of Social Sciences.<sup>12</sup> According to Pun Ngai (2003, p. 486), a desire ‘to become new subjects’ underlies consumption activities in China. Consumer identities are animated by aspirations for class differentiation and recognition in Chinese society, as well as desires to engage with products and services that symbolise the modern, foreign Other (see Farquhar, 2001; Rofel, 2007; Yan, 2008; Zhang, 2012).

Material pursuits and consumption practices in China clearly inform new social values in China. Nonetheless, in the new millennium, state-promoted ideas of social morality and well-being aim at supplementing blind materialistic pursuits. Many of my informants in Jinan, for example, contested Deng Xiaoping’s infamous saying ‘it does not matter whether

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<sup>12</sup> Li discovered that while 35% of Chinese can be defined as ‘middle-class’ judging by their consumption habits, only 24.6% can be classified as middle-class by their income, and only 15.9% as such by their professions.

a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice,' which was associated in the 1980s with a stark prioritisation of economic productivity over moral virtues (Pye, 1993, p. 440). For my informants, Chinese society has reached a development stage where it must elevate beyond material concerns and attend to individuals' morality. The Chinese state has promoted a similar message, through different campaigns that target the 'moral crisis' supposedly brought upon by market-oriented self-interest (Saich, 2007, p. 35). These campaigns, such as former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Jiang Zemin's 1997 'Socialist Spiritual Civilisation' (*shehui zhuyi jingshen wenming*), former Chairman Hu Jintao's 2006 'Eight Honours and Eight Shames' (*ba rong ba chi*), and the more recent 'Core Socialist Values' (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan*) promoted by current Chairman Xi Jinping, evoke moral virtues from ancient Chinese philosophies, and promote social order while validating the CCP as the representative of Chinese culture (Landsberger, 2011). Along with new state discourses and campaigns that promote well-being and 'happiness' (Wielander, 2016; Yang, 2013), political actors are conceptualising a morality that exceeds material considerations. Questions of well-being and morality have subsequently joined the quest for material prosperity in Chinese individuals' pursuits. For example, when my informant Jia Chunbai, a 36-year-old woman, undertook an oral examination as part of her state-run exam for becoming a licensed psychologist, she was asked 'what do you think is the meaning of life (*shenghuo de yiyi*)?' Jia answered: 'doing what one likes, pursuing self-realisation (*ziwo shixian*), not limiting one's existence to work, obligations, and material concerns.' Without disregarding Jia's professional knowledge and capacities, this question and her answer resonated with innumerable statements I encountered in the Chinese press and popular media, as well as with chats I had with Chinese friends. Individuals, even those who are struggling to get by, increasingly conceptualise themselves through ideas of well-being and

aspirations. They are nowadays equipped with a new suite of discourses, practices, and products for cultivating their personhood, yet they simultaneously face challenges in pursuing such personhood amidst conflicting demands of their social worlds. As for Jia Chunbai, her examiner was pleased with her answer, and certified her license as a counsellor.

Studies of the New Person in Contemporary China

The processes I describe above resonate with numerous anthropological accounts from recent years that link socioeconomic changes and individual subjectivities in China. I introduce two key theoretical perspectives that suggest the rise of a new person: one which highlights a socially-disembedded individualistic person, and the other a self-governing person. These two perspectives vary in their theoretical inspirations, yet both highlight a new increasingly autonomous mode of being that characterises the Chinese individual.

Anthropologists acknowledge that the extensive privatisation of the Chinese economy has produced socially disembedded citizens who are embracing individualistic values. Under these conditions the virtue of 'self-sacrifice' for the collective has been replaced by priorities of 'self-development,' 'success,' and personal desires (Rofel, 2007, pp. 56, 58; Yan, 2011, p. 47; Yan, 2013, p. 271). Yan Yunxiang, who has studied the individualisation of Chinese society, argues that a new 'striving self' has become a dominant mode of being (Yan, 2013). As Chinese society has become largely privatised, social actors lack a supreme moral authority, and in turn self-interest has become the root and endpoint of individuals' ethical endeavours (Yan, 2011, pp. 51, 61). This echoes the notion of a reflexive and socially disembedded self as proposed by Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992). But Yan notes that unlike Western liberal democracies, Chinese social actors are not purely 'liberal'

individuals, as the CCP denies persons of 'natural rights' (Yan, 2010, pp. 508-509; Yan, 2013, p. 285). The trajectory of individualisation as a dominant moral quest that penetrates into every domain in individuals' pursuits, aspirations, and family structures remains, nonetheless, a pivotal part of Yan's analysis.

Several scholars have expanded Yan's argument by depicting the rise of the individualistic actor in different social settings, as well as pointing out the limits of individualisation in China. For example, Mette Halskov Hansen's (2015, p. 16) work on high schools in rural Zhejiang proposes the term 'authoritarian individualism' to reflect the ways the state has promoted the rise of the 'individual' in some social domains while restricting it in others. She points out that individuals are obliged to be obedient to the Chinese state; individualisation is therefore directed towards other social spheres such as consumption and career aspirations (Hansen, 2015, p. 88). Hansen echoes aspects of Arthur Kleinman's (2011) concept of the 'divided self,' by which Chinese individuals manoeuvre between pragmatically cooperating with authoritarian institutions and practices, while simultaneously preserving an authentic moral selfhood in their utmost private realms. While Hansen emphasises individuals' expressions of their desires and aspirations, Kleinman delves into an unresolvable existential tension, which he argues characterises the experience of most Chinese individuals.

Several anthropologists who are similarly concerned with these trends ground them in studies of the ways that the neoliberal state produces new subjectivities. Following Foucault's concept of governmentality, many scholars argue that neoliberal subjectivities are characterised by internalising state discursive practices about the centrality of the market, and the ways individuals apply this discourse in their social worlds. In China today,

they argue, individuals are responsible for their own welfare, and as a result they are increasingly preoccupied with their capacities to sustain or improve their quality of life. Ann Anagnost (2013, p. 12) argues that this kind of neoliberal subjectivity is generated in China through an 'ethos of "empowering" individuals as risk-bearing subjects' in domains 'where market agency is deemed superior to government control and regulation.'

Many anthropologists have used the concept of governmentality to examine the proliferation of new neoliberal subjectivities across different locations, sectors, and social classes in China. For example, studies have looked at the ways this subjectivity manifests among self-responsible tourists who are cultivating middle-class tastes (Ren, 2010); middle-class queer groups that foster a cosmopolitan and a consumption-driven subjectivity (Rofel, 2007); university graduates who responsibly exercise occupational 'choice' (Hoffman, 2010); rural migrant workers who seek to transform their 'backward' consciousness (Yan, 2003), or to improving their personal value through consumption practices (Ngai, 2003); laid-off workers who pursue psychotherapeutic training in order to transform their destinies (Yang, 2015); and young rural dwellers who seek to improve their livelihood (Hansen & Pang, 2008). What is common among the above social actors, according to anthropologists, is that Chinese individuals increasingly downplay the structural socioeconomic factors that underlie the challenges they meet, instead recognising their own personal capacities as central factors determining their social mobility and well-being.

Overall, these broad arguments suggest that a new type of person has triumphed in contemporary Chinese society, a self-governing individual who is responsible for making the primary decisions in his or her life. While these scholars often acknowledge the culturally contradictory and multi-faceted social worlds of their informants, the self-governing or

individualistic person remains the dominant social actor in their accounts. For example, Aihwa Ong and Zhang Li (2008), in their introduction to their edited volume 'Privatizing China,' argue that they do not consider neoliberalism as a unified project, but their volume nonetheless highlights a social process in which neoliberalism is a mobile set of practices that malleably and resiliently diffuse into different social settings. For example, 'neoliberal forms of self-management are [...] actually helping to sustain socialist rule' (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 7). Although this volume describes various cultural settings in China, the self-governing imperative seems equally dominant throughout society. In the individualisation thesis, Yan Yunxiang acknowledges that 'individuals must strike a balance between conflicting values and also between different behaviour patterns in practice' (Yan, 2013, p. 278). The weight of Yan's ethnographic examples, nevertheless, supports the predominance of individualistic self-interest. When different value systems enter the picture, they do so superficially, as 'personal interests by way of old collective ethics' (Yan, 2013, p. 281). Yan's main message highlights a trajectory that overshadows socialist practices, familial obligations, and culturally informed social networks.

Research problem

My study recognises the changes recorded by the above ethnographic works but does not consider this ideal of an individualistic 'new person' to be comprehensively sweeping across Chinese society, or exclusively underlying individuals' pursuits. On the one hand, workshops for soft skills focused on the cultivation of a new person who manifests individual autonomy, therefore reinforcing Yan's perspective. Informants considered the practice of soft skills as an ultimate form of self-improvement since it focused on personalities, optimally making individuals more resilient and resourceful in their social worlds, similar to

the ways described by scholars who focus on the production of neoliberal subjects. On the other hand, workshop participants, while heralding individualistic and market-oriented personhood inside the workshops, understood themselves as embedded within a different moral economy in the outside world that valorises 'face' rather than sincere emotional revelations, social networking (*guanxi*) rather than independent choices, familial roles rather than personal self-realisation, and occupational hierarchies rather than egalitarian interactions. In terms of linguistic registers, emotional expression, and bodily language, I also observed a difference in informants' behaviour between workshops and the outside world, although not all informants were equally assertive or emotionally liberated in workshops.

Two issues lie at the heart of my research perspective. First, my informants could not easily extend and materialise their self-improvement endeavours in their everyday social and occupational circles. Moreover, informants also conceived of their everyday settings as impeding their commitments to self-improvement. Second, workshops instructors and participants deliberately produced a setting (which I call a 'heterotopia,' discussed below) that they construed as morally distinct from their everyday social worlds. Their vision of self-improvement hence maintained a constant tension with informants' social and occupational circles.

My research thus seeks to supplement previous analyses of new concepts of the person in China with additional considerations. Individualistic values notably affected informants' worldviews and self-perception, and informants' language in workshop celebrated



individual autonomy, as I discuss in Chapter 4.<sup>13</sup> However, I focus on the dissonance between informants' uncompromised ideals of autonomy and how they lived and perceived their everyday modes of being.

I suggest that while critical ethnography must identify the ways widespread social processes influence social actors, it is equally important to reflect upon gaps (both objective gaps and those perceived by informants) between different social settings. Rather than 'producing' a subject that can then apply soft skills practices in the world, workshop pedagogies in China specifically detach individuals from their existing social realities. Workshops activated short-lived experiences in which informants affiliated themselves with an ideal that allowed them to denounce challenges to self-improvement. Through this pedagogic procedure workshops both responded to and reinforced the discrepancy between expansive ideals of personhood and individuals' abilities to realise them.

In the following section I introduce the theoretical perspectives that guided my analysis of this process.

## Theoretical framework

### Soft skills in the market economy

I begin this theoretical overview with the object of my study, 'soft skills.' I draw on critical accounts on the concept of 'soft skills,' as well as accounts that analyse 'communication'

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<sup>13</sup> My field observations do not reinforce Andrew Kipnis' (2007; 2008; 2012) argument that individualism and neoliberal values are of limited influence in China, stressing instead the role of the authoritarian state in shaping individual subjectivities, the on-going impact of industrial modernisation rather than a neoliberal model, and the impact of hierarchical educational practices. I cannot disregard the ultra-individualistic terminology that I heard in workshops as indicating the symbolic and affective significance of new ideas of the person.

and interpersonal capacities. Although within the Jinan workshops soft skills pertained to the cultivation of the person and were not directed unequivocally at the job market, new concepts of labour as based upon personal character and expressive interpersonal abilities still informed the imaginaries of self-improvement in my field sites.

‘Soft skills’ is a term that I chose for generalising the capacities objectified in workshops. This term (*ruanshi nengli* in Chinese) was seldom used in workshops, which instead highlighted more specific skills with relation to different activities, such as ‘communication skills’ (*goutong nengli*), ‘expression skills’ (*biaoda nengli*), and ‘public speaking’ (*koucai*). I did not witness any systematic ordering of these terms, and the definitions often overlapped. Because of the contrast that workshops presented between their practiced ‘soft’ skills and ‘hard abilities’ or ‘knowledge,’ and informants’ association of their practice with values expanding through the market economy, I define workshops in terms of ‘soft skills.’

In recent years, the study and practice of soft skills has proliferated within theories of capitalism and curricula of management, business, and education (for examples see Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Joseph et al., 2010; Kumar & Hsiao, 2007; Robles, 2012), as well as in workplace training and self-help guides (Isacke, 2013; Riggio, 2013; Sonmez, 2015; Tulgan, 2015; Wentz, 2012). These texts acknowledge the rise of the notion of soft skills in contemporary capitalism, but promote the training of such skills rather than examining their underlying rationale.

From a more critical perspective, the development of soft skills reflects the expansion of market ‘productivity’ to individuals’ personalities and everyday gestures in post-Fordist economies. Linguistic anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli (2008) analyses the ways everyday

social expressions have become 'skills' that carry use-value in the workplace. In this process, 'communication,' 'leadership,' and 'presentation skills' have become objectified in the US capitalist workplace and in job-seekers' training. Workers learn to identify themselves in terms of such skills, as Urciuoli (2008, p. 217) explains:

Soft-skills discourses are largely about persuading workers that these skills are what they are made of: Soft skills become objectified as workers learn to regard themselves and their educations (including expensive liberal-arts education) in this way. [...] Skills that can be counted, rated, measured, and so forth, can also come up short, and whose fault is that but one's own?

Workers are encouraged to identify themselves as composed of soft skills, while these skills are at the same time conceptualised as learnable and commensurable. More than focusing just on the nature of soft skills, Urciuoli emphasises that individuals need to conceive and market themselves in terms of an expansive array of skills. Ilana Gershon (2017) expands Urciuoli's argument by understanding neoliberalism in terms of job-seekers' imperative to market themselves through an array of 'skills.' Accordingly, an individual manages him- or herself as a 'brand,' highlighting 'unique' traits that are often intangible within the work routine.

This construction and objectification of certain capacities as 'skills' leads to the standardisation of interpersonal expressions for the sake of economic production. This is Deborah Cameron's (2000) focus in her study of the regulation of 'talk' and 'communication' in the UK capitalist workplace. Cameron describes scripts and prescriptions for 'correct' verbal expression that impose a 'styling' on workers, particularly in the service sector. Interpersonal capacities are thus subsumed within capitalist production.

In a broader perspective, 'soft skills' relate to the concept of 'immaterial labour' as developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2005, p. 108). They divide immaterial labour into 'intellectual labour' that produces 'ideas,' and 'affective labour' - more relevant to my study - which refers to interpersonal skills. Affective labour locates production 'everywhere,' blurring divisions between the public and private, or between the workplace and the personal (Hardt & Negri, 2005, pp. 111, 202; Virtanen, 2004, p. 225). Akseli Virtanen follows this line of thought, suggesting that labour, rather than depending on a 'solitary accomplishment of a particular task, product or objective,' is increasingly achieved through 'interaction and linguistic performances' (Virtanen, 2004, p. 225). Through 'general human faculties,' i.e., productive capacities that are embedded in individual character, the individual worker can mobilise his or her capacities for various remunerative ends (Virtanen, 2004, p. 227)

The above accounts resonate with the imaginary of soft skills in the workshops I attended. Instructors conceptualised soft skills as capacities that could be optimally applied in various situations, like Virtanen's 'general faculties.' Through soft skills, an individual could potentially – and ideally - affect others and master relationships. The key to successful development of soft skills is understanding that one 'owns' his or her abilities, and does not succumb to external influences.

From a phenomenological perspective, the fact that soft skills pertain to everyday 'general faculties,' rather than to (professional) abilities that must be studied at length, allowed workshop participants to experience immediate potentials for self-improvement. Since workshops facilitated an interactive dynamic, itself constituted by soft skills, in which every participant was urged to speak out, express emotions, and affect others, informants

regarded soft skills as a source for possible actions. In order to understand this process I describe the production of affect in workshops and its theoretical significance.

Intersubjective affect

Here I outline the experience of affect in group interactions, and then further discuss the implications of affect as a mode of governance in new economies. My understanding of affect draws on the Spinozian tradition as expanded by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987; 2004), and further developed by Brian Massumi (1995; 2002). Through their scholarship I define affect as an intersubjective 'intensity' that prompts individuals to orient their actions and imaginations toward virtual possibilities.

Affect, following Spinoza's 'affectus,' pertains to a dynamic by which the body is both affecting and affected by its environment (Spinoza, 2006, pp. 62, 122). Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. xvi) define affect as a 'prepersonal intensity' parallel to 'an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act.' Affect hence relates to potential for action that bypasses conscious self-awareness. Furthermore, since affect implies an 'encounter' between bodies (1987, p. xvi), a capacity born through interaction, in social gatherings affect is intersubjective by definition.

In my study I draw on anthropologist Daromir Rudnyckyj (2006, p. 118) and geographer Ben Anderson (2009, p. 77), to further depict affect as an intersubjective force. I define workshops for soft skills as an 'intersubjective affective medium,' a high-intensity social space where participants both affect and are affected by each other. I borrow the term 'medium' from Rudnyckyj (Richard & Rudnyckyj, 2009; 2006, p. 120), who studies training programs in Indonesia that combine Islamic piety with capitalist ideologies. However, unlike him I treat 'medium' as a social 'milieu' and 'ambience' rather than a 'means' for the

transformation of individuals into new subjects, as I elaborate later. I also prefer 'medium' over the more expansive term 'affective atmospheres,' that may include the wider physical environment or broader public sentiments during a certain period of time rather than a live group interaction as I observed in workshops (Anderson, 2009; Solomon, 2017).

In the affective medium of group interactions, participants' ability to affect and be affected by others tends to increase with time. When affective intensities are enhanced, as described by Rudnyckj (2011) in group weeping, or as I encountered in numerous exercises that invited enthusiastic interactions, the body shifts from one state to another. Affective intensities therefore induce an experience of 'becoming,' which for Deleuze and Guattari (2004, p. 26), signifies a process of continuous reconfiguration in the person without reaching an endpoint (or without becoming a fixed 'subject' in Deleuze's and Guattari's terms).<sup>14</sup>

In my work I draw on this idea of 'becoming' to describe workshop participants' experience of 'virtual' imaginaries and capacities for action. My use of the term 'virtual' draws on Brian Massumi (1995, p. 91) who associates affective intensities with a person's orientation towards 'the realm of potential,' bodily and mental states beyond one's actual position. When experiencing affective intensity, in other words, the person feels an openness towards undertaking new actions and tends to avoid passivity. I supplement this idea with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2012) conception of human perception as a bodily orientation towards action. The perceiving person is oriented towards the 'possible' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 139-140), or to 'a passage from what I have to what I aim at' (2012, p. 401). It is

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<sup>14</sup> My application of becoming pertains to people. For Deleuze and Guattari 'becoming' may extend to organisms, objects, and social processes.

this perception of 'affordances' for action that corresponds to an orientation towards the virtual.

In the affective medium of workshops, when participants observe a charismatic speaker they recognise their own 'general faculties' that can be similarly employed to become affective speakers themselves. The combination of affective intensities, interactive expressions and the accessibility of 'soft skills' as 'general faculties' produces imaginaries of possibilities for action both inside and outside the workshops. It allows individuals to experience themselves as self-improving and socially competent.

Affect and capitalism

Several scholars argue that contemporary capitalist systems are contingent on affect. This, I suggest, is evident in China, where affect carries new meanings in an era wherein individuals do not adhere to the ideology of the CCP with the same totality as they did in the past.

Eva Illouz, a sociologist whose work juxtaposes capitalist values, therapeutic culture, and conceptions of selfhood in Western societies, offers a general overview of this process (2007, p. 5):

Emotional capitalism is a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behaviour and in which emotional life - especially that of the middle classes - follows the logic of economic relations and exchange.

Illouz paints a general picture by which capitalism is fuelled by emotional reactions, even if she is not considering the unique nature of affect in distinction from emotions, as I discuss below.

While social relationships are increasingly conceptualised through economic discourses, market activities are increasingly mediated through affect. According to Massumi, capitalism 'hijacks affect in order to intensify profit potential' (2002, p. 224). Successful marketing is increasingly premised in producing consumers' affective reactions to commodities, constructing the commodity as pertaining to people's identities and relationships.

Geographer Nigel Thrift (2008, p. 182) adds that 'intense autonomic bodily reactions' determine the behaviours of citizens in capitalist societies, both in their engagement with commodities and with the wider urban environment.

Is affect indeed dominant in capitalist regimes in particular? Chinese citizens were arguably as passionate towards their Chairman and the prospects of the revolution in Maoist China, for example, as they are towards their more personal pursuits today. However, today affect is deployed by state and market actors without necessarily translating into conscious ideological positions. State-promoted practices that produce affect in China lead individuals to take a more proactive stance vis-à-vis the economic system, rather than towards political ideologies.

In the following chapters, I discuss two wide-scale, state-promoted discourses that produce and circulate affect. First is the concept of 'positive energy' (*zheng nengliang*) which has been prevalent in Chinese popular entertainment, education, and political discourse since 2012. Through this concept, China's leadership aims to shift citizens' attention away from negative social phenomena and to focus on more optimistic prospects (Le Han, 2016; Zhao,



2016). *Zheng nengliang* can refer to inspirational entertainment performances and hopeful stories about ordinary people in the press, for example. Furthermore, nowadays this term defines interactive and affective social settings and as such is widely applied in Chinese education (Cai, 2014; Xiong, 2013). As I discuss in Chapter 2, I observed in my field sites that it is a term by which participants in the affective medium define and anticipate their experiences. Within the workshops *zheng nengliang* signified desired sensations of enchantment and optimism, rather than simply being a by-product of or channel for knowledge transmission.

A second fundamental state discourse centres on 'dreams.' Xi Jinping launched the 'China Dream' (*zhong guomeng*) discourse in late 2012, and since then the state has facilitated activities in schools, media productions, and public spaces in which citizens proclaim their own 'China Dream.' At the same time, as I further explore in Chapter 7, this discourse has also led to a proliferation of the language of individual dreams and aspirations. In more and more social and educational settings, including workshops for soft skills, individuals identify and express themselves by articulating their dreams. In these events, speakers express themselves with poignancy, aiming to affect others and themselves.

The above discursive practices guide the organisation of activities and direct participants to experience these activities in positive ways. At the same time, these activities do not limit participants' imaginaries to clear endpoints, in terms of socioeconomic goals or political outcomes. Overall, these practices reflect an era where citizens' support for the political and economic system is maintained less through ideological campaigns and increasingly through affective stimulations.

## Affect and governance

In some anthropological literature, even when affect is acknowledged as an important feature in contemporary society, it generally remains a second-degree theory insofar it is described as a substance that is meaningful only when converted to subjective positions, or when it is an instrument for pre-determined political and economic agendas. I instead propose that the virtual and open-ended qualities of affect are critical for understanding how it influences the experiences of social actors, and indirectly sustains their perseverance in their daily social roles and tasks.

First I engage with theorists that conflate affect with discrete emotions and individual subjectivity. Brian Ott (2017), who defined 'affect' in the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication, describes two branches of affect, one, following Spinoza and Deleuze (and which I subscribe to) as an 'intensive force,' and another, following Silvan Tomkins, as an 'elemental state.' Tomkins (1962) conceptualises affect as comprised of neural responses to environmental stimuli, and sees the outcome in nine primary emotions. According to Ott, scholars who locate affect in basic emotional states include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) and Teresa Brennan (2004).

Several of the theorists who do follow Spinoza and Deleuze in acknowledging key differences between affect and emotion, nonetheless suggest that affect can be studied only through a consideration of emotions. Sianne Ngai (2005, p. 27), for example, recognises that affect is less structured than emotion. For the sake of empirical analysis, she recommends defining a 'modal' difference between them rather than treating them as conceptually distinct terms. Through such approach, analysts can consider subtle transitions between affect and emotion. Daniel White (2011), an anthropologist who studies the

construction and promotion of the discourse of 'soft power' in Japan, follows Ngai's proposal. He identifies a work of power in the 'affect-emotion gap,' i.e., in directing individuals to experience and interpret affect as specific emotions (White, 2011, pp. 18-20). Unlike affect, which is inherently non-discernible, emotions for White offer a narrative that can mobilise public sentiments. In his study, through the transition from affect to emotion the Japanese state can induce citizens to feel both anxiety and hope about the prospects of the nation.

Another perspective that favours an even greater ethnographic focus on individuals' subjective meanings at the expense of affect is introduced by Emily Martin (2013). Martin disapproves of what she views as affect theorists' dismissal of human intention and language: 'Why is there resistance to allowing the meaning of human acts to rest on social understanding all the way down?' (Martin, 2013, p. S156). For Martin, action and intention are by definition a product of a coalescence of body and mind. Therefore, she sees no empirical or ethical value in a focus on pre-subjective human responses. Ultimately, Martin promotes an approach that puts social activity and the individual actor at the centre of ethnographic inquiry, maintaining that subconscious responses can be recognised through the study of subjectivities.

My findings suggest, in contrast to the propositions of Martin and White, that while affect is orchestrated by workshops in line with market-driven changes, it is the open-ended nature of affect that allows participants to sense an alluring horizon of possibilities. Affect does not need to become an explanatory narrative, as White suggests, to produce meaningful outcomes. *Zheng nengliang*, for example, indicates positive affect without prescribing discrete emotions or specific imaginaries. Although my case study supports Yael Navaro-

Yashin's (2012, pp. 163-171) argument that affect is always shaped by cultural imaginaries rather than standing externally to linguistic signification or local context, my findings also indicate that affect must remain somewhat unstructured in order to produce virtual experiences. Affect's virtual 'realm of potential' does not go against social activity, as Martin would suggest, but rather is produced by important sociopolitical processes.

My second related argument is that affect should not be reduced to an 'instrument' for other, theoretically established modes of governance. An example of this is the work of Yang Jie (2013; 2014; 2015), who studies psychotherapeutic programs for unemployed workers in China. In her edited book 'The Political Economy of Affect and Emotion in East Asia' Yang writes that:

Instead of seeing affect as pure potentiality or intensity [...], I focus on affect as harnessed for the service of politics and economy, taking up approaches that are more suited for ethnographic analysis (Yang, 2014, p. 10).

Yang indicates a tension between affect as potentiality and political power. Her studies suggest, more specifically, that affect is a channel that reinforces neoliberal apparatuses in line with Foucault's concept of biopolitics. Psychology equates to discursive practices that produce subjectivities that actively follow the political agendas of the state.

Rudnyckyj (2011) offers a similar trajectory. He is more sensitive than Yang to the unique qualities of affect – unlike emotions - as not a 'completely determined' substance (2011, p. 70). His main framework nonetheless indicates a salient trajectory at work in Indonesia. He proposes the term 'governing through affect' to describe the formation of religiously pious subjects for the new economy through affective training sessions (Rudnyckyj, 2011).

'Intersubjective affective enactments,' consequently, 'served as a central means' for inculcating new virtues (2011, p. 64).

Workshops for soft skills did not make participants more adaptive to the Chinese economy nor did it lead participants to believe they could easily design their fates. The affective medium rather served the political and economic spheres insofar as it led individuals to experience potentialities for self-improvement amidst an uncertain reality. Affect was not a means but rather an outcome of practices, temporarily alleviating individuals' anxieties about their socioeconomic prospects.

Moral heterotopias of self-improvement

I consider the affective medium as a bounded space that contrasts the experience of most everyday pursuits. I now correlate this medium with the moral imaginary celebrated in workshops. I do this through the concept of heterotopia. Workshop heterotopias dislocated informants from their common everyday experiences in terms of affective intensity, moral imaginary, and temporal orientation.

Heterotopia is a term introduced by Michel Foucault (1986), defining physical spaces in modern societies that both deviate from and serve the values and institutions that govern the social world. It is an expansive term that covers disciplinary institutions, spaces of subcultures, and ritual sites. Museums, fairgrounds, 'microcosmic' gardens, and Jesuit colonial villages are among Foucault's examples. A common attribute of heterotopias is that they manifest 'enacted utopias,' i.e. they are sites that provide a sense of a fantastic or ideal reality (1986, p. 24). They are not actual utopias since they are, in fact, informed and shaped by other spaces. It is rather through emulating and distorting features of other spaces that

heterotopias can produce a seemingly distinct space, which social actors may perceive as a utopia.

While Foucault emphasises physical sites, the concept of heterotopia has been applied also to practices that bring forth a distinct imaginary such as online media and educational practices (Garratt & Piper, 2010; Jacobs, 2004; Paulston, 1999; Sandberg et al., 2016). I

argue that soft skills workshops are also heterotopias. They respond to existing social values – the importance of self-reliance, the morality of individual autonomy, the appreciation of soft skills in popular media and educational reforms – and enhance them to create an ideal that supposedly rarely exists in Chinese society. Peter Johnson (2006, p. 87), whose scholarship is dedicated to heterotopias, argues that heterotopic sites ‘light up an imaginary spatial field, a set of relations that are not separate from dominant structures and ideology, but go against the grain.’

Through the affective medium, the moral imaginary of workshops as heterotopia is realised. Informants construed workshops as a space inhabited by autonomous individuals, and characterised by egalitarian interactions and sincere communication. Through the experience of a social space that goes ‘against the grain’ of what informants defined as immoral social actions and actors outside of the workshops (such as narrow-minded fellow students, hierarchical and conservative state officials, and over-demanding parents), informants formed a moral distinction between workshop heterotopias and the outside world. Informants criticised seemingly immoral phenomena, though they did not conceive of themselves as separated from the quotidian world where these practices took place.

Another aspect of heterotopias is their possibility to offer a temporal break from ordinary reality. For examples, museums ‘accumulate’ time and fairgrounds bring forth ‘transitory’

time (Foucault, 1986, p. 26). In my study, workshop instructors and participants occasionally associated the morality of workshops with a moral future society. This society would be characterised by interpersonal interactions that prioritise individual autonomy, emotionality, and direct communication. This link between workshop practices and the future derives from informants' hope about a positive telos of social development, while it also prompted several informants to regard themselves as responsible for promoting such values and practices by spreading soft skills throughout wider Chinese society. Soft skills therefore were construed as both characteristic of an ideal person and as a potential instrument for constituting a new society.

The ideal person of soft skills and personhood in China

As aforementioned, workshops heralded an image of an ideal person who manifests autonomy, open-mindedness, soft skills, and is committed to on-going self-improvement. Informants also constructed this ideal as an antithesis to socially widespread ideas of personhood.

Informants were well aware and often unhappy that personhood in China depends on normative social roles such as occupational prestige, marriage and parenthood by a certain age, and maintenance of social networks. In general, personhood in Chinese society at present is still contingent on a socio-normative life-course. Informants thus believed that contemporary China was closely aligned to seminal anthropological accounts that ground personhood in the fulfilment of social roles (Fortes, 1971; Geertz, 1966; Poole, 1982). Moreover, Chinese philosophical and political thought conceptualise the fulfilment of social roles not only as the accomplishment of an individual, but as the building blocks of the social order. For example, the Five Confucian Relationships indicate a reflection of micro social

interactions in the wider relations between the emperor and citizens, as well as in the harmony between humans and natural forces (see Ames, 2011, p. 157). Roger Ames (2011, p. 42) contends that personal identity in ancient China was defined through correlative action, as personal conduct was meaningfully located in larger natural and social processes. The individual who attended to his or her socially prescribed roles was thus also agentially reproducing the social and cosmological order.

The ideal person defined in the workshops offered a counter image to this cultural imaginary. The ideal of absolute autonomy did not represent informants' behaviour, but rather offered them a form of sociocultural critique and an opportunity to experience an alternative reality. In their actual lives no informant I met intentionally disavowed heteronormative views of marriage, practices of filial piety (*xiao*) or gift giving (*song li*) to superiors at school or the workplace. The ideal person was hence performed in a manner that was affectively stimulating during workshops, allowing participants to imagine a society that would embrace this person as the standard for norms of personhood.

Hope and temporality in the practice of soft skills

I argue that workshops produced optimism through their affective medium and heterotopias. Now I turn to discuss this optimism with regards to scholarly conceptions of 'hope' and temporality. These accounts allow me to explain informants' attempts to commit to self-improvement despite the unbridgeable gaps between workshop heterotopias and their everyday pursuits.

Philosopher Gabriel Marcel proposed a phenomenology of hope, affirming the transcendence of hopeful sentiments above a person's existing situation. Hope, he argued, reflects a 'non-acceptance' (Marcel, 1951, p. 38). It does not indicate a mode of 'revolt,' but



rather dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. In hope, the individual refuses to delve into a limiting sense of 'inner determinism' (1951, p. 41). Moreover, hope often appears in relation to 'despair.' A person may strengthen one's hope particularly when he or she senses a tendency for despair (1951, p. 48). Hope therefore brings forth imagined possibilities for a distinctly different unfolding. Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1995), who offers a theory of hope with regards to revolutionary political action, similarly emphasises the alternative reality that hopeful visions can bring forth. He condemns 'flat empiricists' who refrain from imagining possibilities for radically different realities (1995, p. 222). Block does not favour a complete disregard of objective factors, but sees hope as pivotal in the constitution of new, even utopian, worlds.

How are utopian qualities of hope accommodated by the temporal orientation of individuals in urban China? Liu Xin (2002; 2012) considers this question by offering a stark distinction between future orientations in Maoist China and today. He contends that in the revolutionary era, individuals believed that their present actions were contributing to a radically improved (socialist) future. Today, however, the value of the person is located in quantifiable, exterior categories such as wealth and status symbols (2012, p. 87). As a result, social actors can only envision improvement in their lives through existing forms of measurement (such as income or expenditures) and relative comparisons to wealthier individuals or social groups. Liu argues that as a result, Individuals have narrow imaginaries of the future, and even in their everyday lives cannot sustain long-term plans or cognitive memories (Liu, 2002, p. 178). Megan Steffen (2017), who studies business activities in the city of Zhengzhou, adds to Liu's account the widespread notion of 'unpredictability' that leads individuals to immerse in presentism without sensing that their actions could yield long-term outcomes.

My findings suggest that informants do not neglect the importance of future orientation or of cultivating the qualitative qualities of the person. Their heterotopian imaginaries in workshops demonstrate this. Nevertheless, outside workshops informants could not easily sustain a distinction between their behaviour and that of the more impulsive and presentist society they were immersed in. Although informants tried to promote a different existential-moral position to that described by Liu and Steffen, they often failed to achieve this due to immediate socioeconomic imperatives and the inherent impossibility of their ideals of autonomy.

Another aspect of hope relevant to informants' attempts to avoid disorientation and presentist action is the manner by which hope for a future outcome guides a person's actions in the present. Both Hirokazu Miyazaki (2003) and Morten Pedersen (2012) explain this attribute. For Miyazaki, through undertaking a task at present with an eye on a future endpoint, individuals can immerse in their tasks, enhancing their 'prospective momentum' (Miyazaki, 2003, pp. 22-23). For Pedersen (2012, p. 6), endpoints set forth a 'work of hope,' by which individuals can navigate more mindfully in their various tasks and perceive themselves as 'whole persons.'

My informants, however, could not produce tangible links between their self-improvement and long-term outcomes, i.e., they could not realise workshops' heterotopian imaginaries in their social and occupational circles. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, any attempt to achieve their ideal through everyday pursuits led to overwhelming perplexity. As a result, informants often turned to pursue small short-term accomplishments. Through this they repeatedly produced a sense of self-worth and in turn a renewed openness for the possibilities of the future. But this priority of affective experiences rather than future planning brought

informants back to a more short-sighted presentist action, maintaining the gap between heterotopias and the everyday.

Paradoxes, affect, modernity

Numerous paradoxes in individuals' actions emerge from my descriptions above. The gap between workshop heterotopias and the outside world and the ambiguous attitudes of individuals towards the social realities brought upon by economic reforms evoke irresolvable questions: How could informants celebrate individual autonomy in workshops that stressed social cohesion? How could informants find *unique* moral value in their practices when innumerable individuals throughout urban China engage in the same kinds of self-improvement activities? How could informants use workshops to cultivate skills for becoming successful, when they simultaneously saw the outside world as antithetical to these skills? How can seemingly egalitarian and democratic skills be effective in a society dominated by political and economic hierarchies? How could informants regard soft skills both as ubiquitous everyday capacities and as capacities that are still dormant in Chinese society? Why do informants embrace the enthusiasm of the affective medium while at other times they lamented their lack of in-depth and long-term self-cultivation?

The following chapters explore these paradoxes. I suggest that the affective experience of momentary competence fostered a sense of possibilities in workshops that led individuals to suspend any sense of contradiction in their ideals and actions. Even though these paradoxes restricted individuals' abilities to literally 'improve' themselves, I cannot suggest that more promising options would await them had they chosen a different mode of action. Most Chinese individuals' abilities to transform their lives in terms of socioeconomic mobility, launching a successful enterprise, denouncing familial responsibilities, and bypassing social

hierarchies is highly limited. Optimistic moments, such as those produced in workshops, may seem from the outside as delusional visions, but for participants they were rewarding occasions that cannot be easily discounted.

## Setting and methods

Jinan – an ‘improving’ city

My fieldwork took place in Jinan, the capital of Shandong province. Shandong lies on China’s east coast, and has a long shoreline on the Yellow Sea. Shandong’s northern point is located approximately 280 km to the south of Beijing and further away from the north eastern provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. It is nonetheless considered by the widespread division as ‘northern,’ due to its location to the north of the Yangtze and Huai Rivers.

Shandong is one of China’s most populated and industrial provinces. Although it is only the 19<sup>th</sup> biggest province, covering 157,000 square km (China National Radio, 2016), it ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> in population size, with 98.5 million inhabitants according to data for 2015 (China Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Jinan’s status in Shandong and in China is equivocal. On the one hand, Jinan is a provincial capital that lies at the centre of Shandong. As a result, most provincial governmental institutions are located in the city. Campuses of the biggest universities of the province are also based in Jinan, including Shandong University and Shandong Normal University.

Hundreds of thousands of non-local students reside in Jinan at any given moment, most of them arriving from other regions in Shandong. Yet Jinan ranks third in GDP in Shandong (following Qingdao and Yantai) (askci - *zhongshang chanye yanjiuyuan*, 2017), so its economic status lags behind its administrative status. Often I heard individuals in Jinan commenting that in terms of job opportunities in the market economy, one is better off in

the coastal Shandong city of Qingdao, let alone Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, as well as several other urban hubs in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces to the south of Shandong.

Along with economic development, Jinan suffers from one of the biggest ills of the reform era – air pollution. Jinan is traditionally known as the ‘city of springs,’ due to natural underground currents that generate pools, canals, and fresh drinking water. Yet air pollution hinders the possibility of enjoying the urban landscape. Jinan was ranked in 2015 as the 16<sup>th</sup> most polluted city in China, with an average PM2.5 level of 91 ( $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ ),<sup>15</sup> 9.4% higher than Beijing (Xuexila, 2015). Although in 2013 the Chinese Ministry of Environmental Protection declared a ‘war on pollution’ and set new standards to reduce coal consumption, significant change has yet to arrive. During December and January 2015, the daily level of pollution was rarely below 200, including periods of 3-4 weeks without sunshine. My informants were highly preoccupied by this situation, commenting that pollution has worsened in recent years. They also expressed their concern on social media. In group chats of *Super Speakers*, for example, individuals shared photos of dense smog. If any of them was travelling elsewhere in China, they attached photos to report to their friends in Jinan whether blue skies were visible at their destinations.

Although clear skies and sunshine occasionally appear for several consecutive days, they are elusive for most Jinan residents. Blue skies are therefore a kind of dream sight that symbolise the more optimistic possibilities of the economic reforms, while pollution and dirt

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<sup>15</sup> A measure of small pollutants with diameter 2.5  $\mu\text{m}$  or less. The figure in measurement stands for the weight in microgram of these small pollutants per one cubic meter. The World Health Organization guideline for average annual PM 2.5 is 10 ( $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ ) (World Health Organization, 2016).

engender disenchantment. As an example of the latter, university students in Jinan are often surprised by the contrast between Jinan's actual scenery and its pastoral depiction in a famous poem they had learned in high school. Lao She's (1899-1966) poem 'Winter in Jinan' describes a wonderful snowy scenery, extending from the vast Daming Lake in the north of the city to the ridge of the Thousand Buddha Mountain in the south. The reality, as students parody, is a city filled with smoke, in which snow seldom accumulates, and when it does it is covered with dirt. Even if many individuals try to maintain optimism, suggesting that pollution is only temporary until China achieves more balanced and sustainable development, their immediate responses to pollution reveals uncertainties concerning the prospects of their living conditions.

A final notable characteristic of the city and its surrounding regions is its Confucian roots. Shandong was historically divided into two states, Qi and Lu, which were dominant political forces during the Spring & Autumn and the Warring States periods (722-221 B.C.E.). Jinan is located in the centre of Shandong, not far from the border of the two ancient states. It is a three-hour drive from Qufu and Zoucheng, cities of ancient Lu, the hometowns of Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) and Mencius (372-289 B.C.E.), the influential philosophers and founders of longstanding Confucian doctrines. In these cities, heritage sights dedicated to the sages still draw numerous visitors and scholars. In Jinan, sayings of Confucius and Mencius have been widely incorporated in the urban landscape, such as in public municipal signs and placards in public transport. Although not all Jinan residents are fluent in Confucianism to the same degree, locals identify their local society as more 'Confucian,' 'traditional' (*chuantong*), and 'conservative' (*baoshou*) compared to people elsewhere in China. According to this rhetoric, local residents are primarily concerned with 'face' and fulfilling familial and social roles. This view corresponds to widespread stereotypes that northern Chinese tend to be more

conservative, family-oriented and less business-driven compared to their southern compatriots. Residents' self-depiction, however, is not only negative, for they also regard themselves as typically honest (*laoshi*) and kind (*houdao*).

This self-essentialisation operates in different ways with regards to projects of self-improvement. It is a discourse that leads residents to conceive of themselves as more entangled in the shackles of tradition than their compatriots in other regions. Some find positive elements in this, particularly when evoking a historical Confucian heritage, yet informants' dominant views construed local norms and interpersonal practices as a hindrance to expanding practices of soft skills. In informants' imaginaries, ancient culture manifests in different practices that downplay emotional expression and the assertion of individual autonomy. This rhetoric associates self-improvement with modernity, while depicting seemingly traditional practices as stagnant and backwards.

In conclusion, Jinan is a rapidly-developing urban hub, yet one that many residents construe as inferior in relation to Qingdao, large cities in the south of China, Beijing, and Shanghai. Although the imaginary of self-improvement positions the individual at the centre, informants also associate their self-improvement with social development.

## Methods

I conducted participant observations in three different programs for soft skills workshops, and extended interactions with workshop participants outside of workshops. My fieldwork took place between early February 2015 and late March 2016, 54 weeks altogether (between August and September 2015 I was away from China for four weeks due to visa complications). In Jinan I was affiliated with the Department of Anthropology at Shandong University, first as a 'visiting scholar' and after September as a graduate student. My

involvement with the department throughout my fieldwork included three guest lectures, a presentation of my research findings in December 2015, and several meetings with students and anthropologists, particularly with the scholars who facilitated my invitation to Shandong, Brian Harmon and Chris Tan.

I resided in a studio apartment that I rented between two central campuses of Shandong University. I was in walking distance from the main base of *Champion Training* and a 25-30-min bus ride from my two other field sites. This location was also convenient for meeting student informants who studied in the area (most whom lived in university dorms) and other informants who resided or worked in Jinan's city centre.

After arriving in Jinan, it took 3-4 weeks before I established a fieldwork routine. In mid-February 2015, student trainees of *Champion Training* starting chatting with me coincidentally, as part of their activity of approaching strangers to talk. I followed them back to their training venue and participated in their activities thereafter. A few days later, one of the participants recommended that I also attend *Super Speakers*, a club that *Champion Training* instructors esteemed, although they rarely found time to attend its activities. My access to *Heart's Secret* was more straightforward. Yongling (pseudonym), whom I knew from my past research on Jinan's psychological clinics, had recently established a new psychology club and invited me to join its activities, which luckily commenced in February 2015. By late February I was attending each field site 1-3 times per week, a frequency that I maintained throughout my fieldwork.

### *Interviews*

Much of my interaction with informants took place through informal conversations during and after workshops. After mid-March 2015 I also initiated one-on-one meetings with



informants, beginning with those who seemed interested to share their experiences with me, or who were key figures in activities. I had at least two interviews with 17 instructors and participants from *Champion Training*, 23 members of *Super Speakers*, and 20 instructors and members from *Heart's Secret*. In our first meetings, conversations were conducted as semi-structured interviews. Informants knew that I wanted to meet them to socialise as well as to inquire about their self-improvement and workshop participation. Initially I asked questions about their background, their history in workshops, the value they found in workshops, their objectives, and other activities they pursued.

After 3-4 meetings, conversations with informants who continued to meet me were much more casual, although I normally came prepared to discuss an issue or two that I hoped they could help me clarify. I had relationships like this with 17 informants. With each, a different type of dynamic and conversation developed. For example, I met some informants for lunch at the same restaurant every 2-3 weeks, and two student informants and I got together for a variety of activities (hikes, restaurants, bars), and one informant invited me to visit him in his flat every month to discuss social and political affairs. Other activities included visiting two informants' hometowns in rural Shandong, and spending Chinese New Year at the home of another informant in southern Shandong. With these 17 informants, and a few others, I also kept up frequent communication on WeChat, a popular Chinese social media app. With some informants WeChat communication was used as a tool solely for setting appointments, while a few others (mostly women) shared personal issues through online chats.

### *Written material*

In my study I rely on additional material to interviews and workshop participation. This material includes written information produced by each of the three field sites: workshop brochures, workshop posters, workshop curricula, workshop manuals (*Super Speakers*), and a list of workshop mottos (*Champion Training*). I also consulted books, manuals, and articles that workshop participants drew on and referenced as part of their self-improvement practices. These included self-help guides by Liu Xingqi, the founder of the 'Soft Power' student training in Hunan, and guidebooks on entrepreneurship and public speaking by Ma Yun (Jack Ma), founder of the Alibaba E-Commerce group. Documents associated with several government policies and campaigns were also relevant for contextualising my research. These included the 1998 China Education Law, China's 13<sup>th</sup> 5-Year Plan (socioeconomic state initiatives for 2016-2020), Xi Jinping's speeches, policies concerning the China Dream, policies that promote entrepreneurship, and policies for the promotion of mental health services (such as the 2012 Mental Health Law).

Online social media was also an important medium for communication in my fieldwork. In addition to individual WeChat interactions with informants, I was part of group chats set up by the three workshops. In WeChat individuals also uploaded posts about their experiences, activities, moods, and opinions. Throughout my stay in Jinan I saved and documented hundreds of such posts. Through them I learned about informants' values and interests. When possible, I used this information in subsequent one-on-one conversations with informants. This allowed me to comprehend the relation between informants' online expression and their everyday concerns.

*White foreign researcher*

My identity as a white foreigner in the field naturally did not pass unnoticed, and certainly affected my relationship with most informants. For some workshop organisers, having a foreign 'friend' participate generated symbolic capital. In late February 2015, when *Heart's Secret* launched an official club brochure, I saw my face in four of twelve photos included in the brochure. Having a foreign face, an organiser admitted to me later, reflected a level of professionalism and prestige in the local imaginary. In another example, in a *Champion Training* activity in December 2015, a young instructor named Gao Rui recalled in front of trainees her first encounter when she (along with other trainees) approached me in the university campus. She presented my participation in her training activity, ten months later, as evidence for our friendship, which, according to her presentation, was a result of her boldness. The story of our first encounter became a pedagogic tool for urging trainees to step outside of their social circles. I was quite surprised. In fact, I was the one usually chasing after her to learn about her workshops, due to her hectically busy schedule. Yet having a foreign friend was still symbolically associated with non-mundane social circles and achievements, even prior to learning about my personality or life experience.

As a foreign researcher I often unintentionally elicited particular discourses and imaginaries from informants. On one occasion, an informant friend met me before an activity with a shining face, telling me about an innovation and start-up symposium he attended in Beijing. He assumed that as a foreigner I would be 'open-minded' and share his excitement. Some of the information he conveyed seemed completely foreign to me. I did not wish to curb his enthusiasm, yet I also did not want to mislead him by pretending to have particular interest in that symposium. On another occasion, when meeting a member *Heart's Secret* in a large antique market at Jinan's Heroes Hill (*yingxiong shan*), a place I frequented on

weekends, she told me that she was happily surprised that I enjoyed such a messy (*luan*) place. She assumed that since I attended many workshops – all ‘civilised’ (*wenming*) sites – I would shun a city market. In that case she was happy that she could socialise with me in a different environment and I was glad to gradually discover interests of hers that had been underemphasised in our previous conversations.

The above experiences led me to pay greater attention to the discursive realm I developed with informants, with regards to my identity and my topic of interest. I recalled Mark Hobard’s warning that as anthropologists,

We tend to focus on keywords and occasions that our performed theories tell us are paradigmatic, not on the complexities of translating or figuring how to address the radically contingent nature of the conditions of possibility of social practices and their consequences (Hobart, 1996, p. 9).

Not only was I predisposed to pay attention to ‘keywords’ related to self-improvement and soft skills (ideas of individualism, autonomy, entrepreneurship, innovation), I am aware that I also induced such expressions by the virtue of my foreign presence. In my ethnographic work, I continued to acknowledge these keywords as reflecting important ideas and values. At the same time, through extending my interactions with informants from conversations in workshops to meeting outside of workshops, to different activities, and to observing their conversations in various situations and social settings, I learned that their everyday concerns were far more multifaceted.

## Chapters Outline

In the following chapters I describe and explicate practices of self-improvement via soft skills with regards to affect, temporality, and the ideal person. The thesis is divided into three parts:

**Chapters 2 and 3** focus on informants' affective experiences in workshops and how these are contrasted with everyday social settings. **Chapter 2 – 'Zheng Nengliang and Pedagogies of Affect'** delineates workshops' 'intersubjective affective medium.' I relate this pedagogic feature with the expanding discursive practices of *zheng nengliang*. Through theories of affect, I explain this medium as enhancing individuals' capacities to act. It is a mode of governance that relies on charging individuals with open-ended optimism. **Chapter 3 – 'Becoming a Role Model'** reflects the relation between soft skills, affect, and the changing values of the person in contemporary China. I explore the affective medium from the perspective of participants, describing how the imagined accessibility of soft skills as 'general faculties' produced affordances for action. Through becoming a speaker and role model, a position culturally charged in Chinese educational practices, informants also imagined asserting value outside workshops and traversing socioeconomic hierarchies.

**Chapters 4 and 5** look at workshops' moral imaginaries. In **Chapter 4 – 'The Pedagogic Ideal of Individual Autonomy'** I describe the moral attributes of the person that informants associated with workshops and clubs for soft skills. I discuss the concept of 'heterotopia,' depicting informants' ideal of individual autonomy, through which they attempted to moralise themselves as distinct from the wider society. In **Chapter 5 – 'Socially Innovative Self-Improvers'** I extend the idea of heterotopia into informants' imaginaries of a future dominated by the ideal person and soft skills. Through attempts to disseminate soft skills in

wider Chinese society, informants aspired to close the gaps between the heterotopias of the workshops and their real worlds. Soft skills for informants were both a catalyst in and objective of their imagined telos of social development.

**Chapters 6 and 7** pay greater attention to pursuits of self-improvement and self-realisation outside workshops. **Chapter 6 – ‘Hope and Perplexity in the Presentism of Self-**

**Improvement’** examines informants’ various projects of self-improvement and their temporal orientation. I delineate informants’ challenges in sustaining coherent plans for self-improvement and in avoiding a presentist mode of action. In **Chapter 7 – ‘Dreams of Extraordinary Self-Realisation’** I describe the expression of ‘dreams,’ as an instrument for the self-production of optimism in workshops and in the wider society. Through the China Dream state campaign, individuals of different social sectors perceive and express themselves through dreams that allude to extraordinary experiences. Dreams are associated with self-realisation insofar as they deviate from mainstream social engagements and life paths.

In the **Conclusion** I bring together affect, gaps, and paradoxes to discuss the ambiguous meanings of pedagogies of soft skills in terms of their potential implementations in informants’ lives and how the incoherencies inherent in the practice reproduce individuals’ impetus for self-improvement. This phenomenon, I suggest, represents dynamic social settings that manifest a discrepancy between expansive ideals of personhood and social actors’ ability to realise them.

## Chapter 2 - *Zheng Nengliang* and Pedagogies of Affect

### Introduction

In one of the exercises in an evening session of *Champion Training*, instructor and school director Li Chen demanded that all participants let go of the fixed images they had of themselves. He asked each person in the room to name personality traits that he or she customarily defined themselves in terms of, and to imagine these labels affixed to their foreheads. He assumed that these traits were preventing the participants from acknowledging their full potential. Participants cooperated and gradually increased the volume of their voices as they named characteristics they associated with themselves: 'lazy' (*lan*), 'weak' (*ruo*), 'ill-tempered' (*piqi bu hao*). Through Li's encouragement they also named traits that seemed more neutral but were nonetheless allegedly limiting their potential, such as 'modest' (*qianxu*), 'serious' (*renzhen*), and 'frivolous' (*qingtiao*). With their hands they lifted each label from their forehead and threw it up in the air. After several minutes, Li Chen asked everybody to chant out loud several times: 'there's nothing that I cannot do/achieve!' (*wusuo buneng*).

I participated in another group shouting of '*wusuo buneng*' several weeks later in *Heart's Secret*. Although participants were older than their student-aged counterparts in *Champion Training*, their cheers were just as loud. Teacher Rao was giving a short workshop on 'hypnoses' that, rather than revealing hypnotic techniques, urged participants to acknowledge their subconscious forces and channel them when experiencing difficulties. Following an exercise where he demonstrated how three participants could lift a heavyweight participant, which served as a lively metaphor for his message, at his request

'*wusuo buneng*' was chanted by all participants. This message was 'full of *zheng nengliang* (positive energy),' said Rao, and indeed participants were joyfully reiterating it, soaking in the 'positive energy' of the scene.

This hopeful and aspirational message of *wusuo buneng* was mute outside workshops. When I met informants for one-on-one conversations they never spoke with such motivational tones. They also commented that it is common sense that every Chinese person is strongly limited by objective impediments, be they associated with one's personality, social connections, or socioeconomic background. They did not see their repetition of ambitious slogans as belittling such limitations. Rather, they regarded *zheng nengliang* workshops as moments that offered inspiration, hope, and a positive view of one's capabilities. These moments served as a distraction from more pertinent limitations.

In this chapter I move between describing *zheng nengliang*, a widespread pedagogic principle and a desired feeling or attitude in contemporary urban China, and analysing affect as a pedagogic experience. The 'pedagogy of affect' I am presenting is one which charges individuals with a momentary sense of enthusiasm, enchantment, and optimism. Affect takes predominance in a period in Chinese history as a collective ideological consciousness is eroding, and maintaining optimism is increasingly imperative as individuals sense great uncertainty regarding their future prospects.

*Zheng nengliang* is a term that has circulated in the last five years through entertainment media, educational activities, and political discourses, all aiming at shifting individuals' attention to the *positive* in their lives. A significant characteristic of *zheng nengliang* is its association with group pedagogic activities, distinguishing it from its Anglophone counterpart, 'positive energy.' As Eva Illouz (1997, pp. 40-41) records, therapeutic



discourses of 'positive energy' and 'emotional energy' in the US allude to the self-presentation and emotional competence of individuals. Manifesting emotional capabilities such as empathy and self-control indicate an emotional 'capital' that makes a person more prone to succeed as a manager in the US market environment. While workshops of soft skills in China likewise herald an image of a socioeconomically competent person, *zheng nengliang* primarily refers to a pedagogic activity and interpersonal dynamics, rather than an individual's characteristics. This prioritisation of learning through group practice echoes political educational practices from the revolutionary Maoist era, evident today in a context where ideologies are to a significant degree superseded by more momentary pleasures and individualistic idioms.

I define and analyse the pedagogies of affect through the concept of 'intersubjective affective medium,' which indicates a social setting where individuals are both affecting and affected by each other (see Spinoza, 2006, p. 122). This medium is characterised not by the dominance of specific discrete emotions as it is by affective intensities. I draw on Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. xvi) to identify affect as sensual intensities, which induce transformations in one's bodily movement and orientation. Intensities, according to these authors, are an 'augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act.' In the affective medium, the more participants interacted and constituted affect-affected dynamics, the more they further increased their own and others' 'capacity to act.' As a result, informants experienced these intensities as laden with hopeful possibilities, even if their behaviour was fundamentally dictated by the workshops' instructions.

By highlighting affect as 'intensity,' I point out the ephemeral nature of the affective medium and of the optimism it generates. The sensations and imaginaries produced in the

group exercises were by definition not easily translatable to informants' pursuits outside workshops. This phenomenon is theoretically significant to the anthropology of affect at two levels, which I elaborate in this chapter. First, I argue that affect is more than an instrument in the service of other discursive objectives. I engage with the work of Daromir Rudnyckyj (Richard & Rudnyckyj, 2009; Rudnyckyj, 2006; 2011) who studies state-sponsored training activities in Jakarta that combine Qur'anic teaching, popular psychology, and management training. This pedagogy prepares trainees to become more competent in the market economy by cultivating attitudes consonant with neoliberal self-reliance and Islamic self-control. Applying the idea of 'governing through affect' (2011), Rudnyckyj approaches affect as a pedagogical instrument that serves a telos of subject production and the wholesome transformation of the self. Based on my findings in China, the affective medium produces optimistic reactions but does not cultivate new subjectivities beyond the intersubjective workshop experience. Nor do participants prioritise, in practice, a long-term process of self-transformation. The enthusiasm of the affective medium deviates significantly from trajectories and plans that could be sustained in informants' day-to-day lives.

Second, I suggest that *the* open-ended nature of affect, rather than the experience and language of discrete emotions, induces informants' optimism. I argue this in response to Daniel White's concept of the 'affect-emotion-gap' (2011). According to White, affect is only perceived by social actors and leads to meaningful action when affective experiences are named and articulated through specific emotions, normally in the service of powerful institutions. It is the nature of affect as preconceptual, non-subjective, and non-perceived (Anderson, 2009; Massumi, 1995; White, 2011) that is manipulated through discourse in the process White depicts. I suggest that while the discourse of *zheng nengliang* names affect in

positive terms and by this directs individuals to experience the affective medium in certain ways, it encompasses an array of sensations rather than shifting individuals' attention to specific emotions. It is paradoxically the inability to fully capture affect in a coherent narrative that sustains the intensities of the affective medium and enhances enchantment and optimism.

Discursive practices of *zheng nengliang* organise activities in which individuals can immerse themselves in a short-lived experience of enthusiasm and optimism. These practices induce conformity insofar as they urge individuals to find positive potentials in their existing socioeconomic realities. Yet this conformity is brought about through experiences in which individuals sense that they exceed and depart from their ordinary states of being. Affect distracts and momentarily overcomes the obstacles to self-improvement while also increasingly informing contemporary practices of self-improvement.

### The rise of *zheng nengliang*

How does affect, an element fundamental to all human interactions, reflect timely social changes and moral values at a specific moment of time? Interestingly, parallel to the rise of affect as a pivotal component in contemporary market-dominated societies, where commercial activity is prioritised over ideology (Illouz, 2008; Massumi, 2002; McFall, Cochoy & Deville, 2017; Richard & Rudnykyj, 2009; Thrift, 2004), affect has become a key ingredient in political, economic, and educational activities. According to Nigel Thrift (2008, p. 182), citizens' political behaviours in contemporary capitalist societies 'are partly conditioned by intense autonomic bodily reactions that do not simply reproduce the trace of a political intention and cannot wholly be recuperated within an ideological regime of truth.' As a geographer, Thrift often focuses on urban space as stimulating affective

responses. Yet he also notes that commodities are ‘designed to produce affective cues,’ becoming increasingly pivotal in the everyday experience and emotional fulfilment of social actors (Thrift, 2005, p. 7). Massumi (Zournazi & Massumi, 2002, p. 224) paints a similar picture when describing capitalist apparatuses as ‘intensifying’ and ‘diversifying’ affect. Economic and political actors orchestrate the continuous generation of profit value, as capitalism ‘hijacks affect in order to intensify profit potential’ (2002, p. 224). The fact that commodities and consumption are increasingly constitutive of relationships and personalities further facilitates this process (2002, p. 226).

While affective experiences propel market interactions, affect also sustains the market indirectly as individuals foster an optimistic mind-set amidst socioeconomic uncertainties. I demonstrate this process through the term *zheng nengliang*. Discursive practices of *zheng nengliang* reflect the erosion of overarching political ideologies and individuals’ prioritisation of short-lived affective experiences over a commitment to overarching political ideologies.

*Zheng nengliang*, literally meaning ‘positive energy,’ emerged in August 2012 in Chinese popular media and the internet. ‘Positive energy’ echoes foreign discourses from the realms of new age and positive psychology, and in China this term is specifically traced to a translated US American self-help book titled ‘Rip it Up: The Radical New Approach to Changing Your Life’ (Wiseman, 2013; Song, 2013, p. 110). But since then, *zheng nengliang* has taken on a life of its own, becoming a term applicable in the realms of entertainment, education, management, and even politics. It ‘went viral’ in Chinese online social media during the London Olympics, when groups of netizens initiated a campaign to ‘ignite *zheng nengliang*’ (*fachu zheng nengliang*), which meant declaring unconditional and expressive

support for the Chinese national team (Du, 2014). Another key moment in the circulation of the term was a speech by Xi Jinping in December 2012, where he commented on his meeting with Jimmy Carter, former US president: ‘Both China and the US should be courageous, bravely innovative, accumulating positive energy’ (Oriental Morning Post, 2012). Xi Jinping has repeatedly evoked this term since. For example, in the 4th National Models of Morality Awards (*quan guo daode mofan ji timing jiang*), a state-run event that celebrates individuals that display selfless acts for their communities or the nation, he described exemplars as people who ‘spread [*chuanbo*] *zheng nengliang*’ (Xi, 2013b).

*Zheng nengliang* has expansive meanings. The definition for *zheng nengliang* in Baidu, China’s largest internet search engine and an operator of an online encyclopaedia, indicates the term’s broadness:

*Zheng nengliang* refers to a type of healthy optimism, proactive motivations and emotions. It is a socially proactive behaviour. At present, Chinese attach the *zheng nengliang* label to any person or thing which is positive, healthy, inspiring, motivating and hopeful. This term has already risen to become a rich symbol, deeply tied to our emotions, as well as expressing our desires and expectations (Baidu Baike, 2012).<sup>16</sup>

This term is thus both a signifier and a catalyser for various positive and enthusiastic sentiments. *Zheng nengliang* is in general associated with uplifting and motivational messages, shifting individuals’ attention from negative to positive thoughts. Elaine Zhao (2016) and Eileen Le Han (2016) report that the CCP has recently guided media organs in

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<sup>16</sup> All translations of primary sources are my own, unless stated otherwise.

China to produce *zheng nengliang* content, increasingly focusing on happy stories and inspiring people rather than social problems. This has been stated by the recently-formed Cyberspace Administration of China, and has been further articulated in messages Xi Jinping addressed to artists (Zhao, 2016, p. 5452). *Zheng nengliang* is thus deployed to enhance a positive vision among citizens that extends from their personal lives to their social setting and to the nation. From this perspective, *zheng nengliang* emphasises sociopolitical conformity.

*Zheng nengliang* has also become a focus of Chinese educators in the past five years. It indicates a classroom practice that both generates optimism and invites students' engagement. Scholars of education Cai Wenjuan (2014) and Xiong Zhigang (2013) consider *zheng nengliang* as a positive shift towards a pedagogy that focuses on students' happiness, on interactive participation, and on more egalitarian teacher-student relations. These features reflect the idea that 'our education does not exist for the sake of high grades, but should rather serve the happy growth of pupils' (Cai, 2014, p. 156). The term thus taps into debates on educational methods in China and invites the production of spaces in which the teacher is a mere facilitator who cheers and approves students' involvement (Xiong, 2013). As Teresa Kuan (2014; 2015) demonstrates, Chinese school teachers who comply with educational reforms in China tend to prioritise learning environments that enhance pupils' affective stimulations in various ways. Through expanding children's sensory experiences, they are encouraged to relate to others, as well as endure challenging situations (2014, p. 72). This is a form of 'governance,' according to Kuan, but one that extends from subjectivity

to subconscious stimulations (or the ‘pre-individual’), as well as one that was in some ways already practiced in ancient China (2014, pp. 68, 78).<sup>17</sup>

### *Zheng nengliang* and group interactions

Practices associated with *zheng nengliang*, I suggest, involve elements of ‘positive thinking’ that reflect an expansion of therapeutic discursive practices. Yet these practices are notably centred in pedagogic and group interactions, corresponding to the Baidu definition of a ‘socially proactive behaviour.’ Such is the case in workshops for soft skills.

The importance of social interaction as constitutive of *zheng nengliang* resonates with the importance of group dynamics in political indoctrination in post-1949 China. As Franz Schurmann (1966, p. 51) indicates, group pressure was, for Mao, a key aspect of ‘thought reform’ in producing class consciousness among pupils, workers, villagers and other social groups in the early years of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Not only did political leaders aspire to form a collective political identity among citizens, the way to achieve this was premised on group dynamics. Oral communication and expression became prioritised over written texts in order to enhance the interactive and emotional impact of revolutionary ideas as well as to reverse the established social hierarchy (Anagnost, 1997b, p. 31). As Donald Munro (1971, p. 633) suggests, this type of group-oriented pedagogy offered less ‘leeway’ for the individual to navigate through his or her education compared to more traditional practices of self-cultivation (*xiuyang*). Furthermore, interactive learning emphasised the importance of *practice* in shaping thought and in facilitating individuals’ internalisation of socialist virtues. While the revolutionary communist doctrine served as a

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<sup>17</sup> Kuan does not limit such affective dynamics to personal interaction, but also to pupils’ interaction with nature and cultural heritage sites.

supreme 'truth,' it was a lived practice that encompassed introspection, oral performance of one's affiliation to new values, and group commitment, all which were the precursor of 'thought' (Schurmann, 1966, p. 29).

In today's China these revolutionary settings are no longer present. In state-run activities, there is no emphasis on maintaining a unified class-consciousness or mobilising the masses to transform social structures. Even in settings where slogans of collective action are celebrated, they are less prescriptive for the ideological mobilisation of participants.

Nonetheless, affective group interactions remain pivotal in these patriotic activities. For example, Xu Xi (2017), who studies short compulsory military training for university entrants in China, shows the changing meaning of these nationalistic drills. She describes how the vocabulary of patriotism and self-sacrifice sets the tone for military training, yet student trainees interpret military drills in terms of their own personal growth. The socially cohesive group drills that involve physical hardship, group chanting and motivational content, according to Xu Xi, are reconfigured through students' personal objectives, be they at the level of personality building, physical strengthening, or social connections.

In addition to compulsory activities, at times young Chinese individuals choose group interactions in order to channel their personal emotions. Chun-Yi Sum (2017) shows this in her study of Chinese university students who volunteer in rural primary schools. While volunteerism reflects ideas of authentic selfhood, this authenticity is asserted to the highest degree in suffering and tears, which are induced through group interactions. 'Prioritizing of self and individuality is not [interpreted as] immoral but rather coincides with authentic expressions of emotional release within the communal context,' writes Sum (2017, p. 424).



The above examples demonstrate the continuous importance of group dynamics in affective pedagogic activities in China, which extends from state-run activities to privatised workshops. In Chapter 4 I will further examine the paradox of individual expression in the context of group cohesion. Here I stress that *zheng nengliang* indicates an extension of affective group interactions while revealing the decline of an ideology-based group identity. These types of social and pedagogic settings are mushrooming both within and outside the jurisdiction of the state, while the circulation of concepts such as *zheng nengliang* or 'dreams' (see Chapter 7) still largely depends on state propaganda. At this stage, I turn to develop a more comprehensive description of the qualities of *zheng nengliang* in workshops for soft skills.

#### The intersubjective affective medium

In soft skills workshops *zheng nengliang* has become a synonym for the enhancement of affective intensity. For most workshop facilitators, affective moments served the pedagogic purpose of fostering optimism and zealous participation, which in turn reflected back as positive feedback on the workshop.

Workshops were first and foremost premised on interactive participation. No period of passive learning was required before a participant, even one who had just entered the classroom for the first time, could express themselves in front of the group. On the contrary, anyone who was reluctant to speak, share, or cheer on others, was deemed by instructors and senior members to be socially incompetent and occasionally also as disrespectful towards the group. This was most evident in *Champion Training*, where instructors in the one-week camps urged young trainees to question their previous social dispositions and rapidly overcome any emotional restraint. But the principles of this pedagogy were strongly

evident in my other two field sites as well. For example, when members of *Super Speakers* presented the club to new visitors (in opening words at the beginning of each weekly activity), they recommended that everyone cheer the speakers on stage and that each visitor should take the opportunity to come up onto the stage during improvised speech sessions. In *Heart's Secret* activities, from casual three-hour salons to several day workshops, instructors and senior member strongly encouraged new attendees to open up and share their personal stories with high emotive tones. Additional interactive exercises further enhanced the affective medium.

Self-praising exercise

Interactive activities in *Heart's Secret* and *Champion Training* were not limited to speaking per se, but involved bodily movement and a wholehearted accentuation of expression and responses. The following example illustrates this. During a four-day workshop in communication skills in *Heart's Secret*, participants were divided into groups of four. In preparation for one of the exercises, each person was asked to write a list of his or her positive characteristics. Participants could write down positive qualities that group members had ascribed to them earlier in the workshop (in a specific exercise that was designated for this), or add characteristics that they used to describe themselves. Once they had finished writing this list, each group member stood on a chair, shouting his or her list of positive qualities, while the other three walked around the chair in a circle, roaring 'so am I!' (*wo yeshi*). One would shout, for example, 'X [participant's own name] is loving (*he'ai*), generous (*dafang*) and a person with inner depth (*you neihan*)!' and the others would answer 'So am I!' Then the next person would step up and proclaim: 'Y is a warm-hearted (*rexin*), sincere (*chengshi*), and friendly (*youshan*) person (de ren)!' and the other three would shout 'so am I!' This exercise lasted only 7-8 minutes, yet the classroom was quickly overtaken by a

thunderous shouts of joy. Each group tried to out-shout the other groups, and each self-praising person attempted to bolster their words with the most motivational body posture and shout. The other three group members below became increasingly light-legged as the activity advanced, often skipping, one hand lifting in a cheer for every 'so am I!'

In this exercise a participant's self-praise invited other participants' self-praise. This contagious practice allowed each participant to enhance his or her self-expression while contributing to the excitement of the larger group. The circulation of affect was also reflected in the verbal interaction in which one's self-praising adjectives were appropriated by the others, through the ritual of shouting 'so am I!' By the end of the exercise it was difficult to recall which person was characterised by which quality. This drill combined a pleasurable sense of self-assertion, yet one that was activated via the group, as every expression of one's 'unique' characteristics dissolved in the roars of the others.

### The qualities of the intersubjective affective medium

I identify the social space in the workshops as an intersubjective affective medium, i.e., a socially interactive space in which the ambience is constituted by all participants who respond to each other with affective expressions. Rudnyckyj (2006, p. 118) recognises affect as located in relations that are 'practiced *between* individuals,' in contrast to emotions, which reside within individual subjectivities. The affective medium is therefore constituted through intersubjective interaction and the intensified affective registers. In the self-praising exercise, this was illustrated in the interplay between self-expression, response, and group affiliation. A more systematic understanding of the phenomenological and theoretical meaning of this medium invites a definition of affect, such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. xvi):

*L'affect* (Spinoza's *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. *L'affection* (Spinoza's *affectio*) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include 'mental' or ideal bodies).

This definition highlights the intersubjective and contagious nature of affect. Once a body is 'affected' it is also prone to move towards affecting others, and vice versa. A sense of openness towards mutually produced sensations and actions emerges. In the self-praising exercise, for example, each participant shout incited more enthusiastic cheers by others. Similarly, when a speaker in *Super Speakers* delivered an inspirational speech, it induced a response from the audience (who were already inclined to cheer), creating more desire on behalf of most participants to occupy the stage themselves (see Chapter 3), as well as leading speakers to express themselves with greater poignancy.

In this process of affecting and being affected, a person experiences change in his or her orientation towards the world, or in Massumi's (2002, p. 213) terms a 'change in capacity.' The most immediate and evident shift is becoming more invested in a scene, more inclined to affect others, and more open to be affected. This capacity is further conceived by Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Greg (2010, p. 2) as a 'force':

Affect is in many ways synonymous with force or forces of encounter. The term 'force', however, can be a bit of a misnomer, since affect need not be especially forceful (although sometimes, as in ... trauma, it is). In fact, it is quite likely that

affect more often transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the miniscule or molecular events of the unnoticed.

Affect is a force, but may be a subtle one. Seigworth's and Gregg's elaboration correctly indicates that affective encounters do not have to manifest in loud social gatherings, and may involve instead almost unnoticeable encounters, such as a subtle touch, a sound of a twitting bird, or a memorable scent. In workshops for soft skills, notwithstanding, affect becomes relatively palpable to all participants. The transitions and change in 'force' are largely evident and are coordinated by workshop facilitators. Yet Seigworth's and Gregg's point is still important for my analysis as it highlights that affective interactions extend from the most apparent –sobbing, laughter, inspirational speech – to more minor responses: the trembling legs of excited participants who are prepared to speak up, a doleful gaze from a speaker towards the audience during a sad touching speech, or the drops of sweat of skipping participants as they are shouting 'so am I!'. Subtle responses synchronise with affective registers, as well as indicate the challenge to manipulate affect in a fully predictable manner.

### *Zheng nengliang* as affect beyond emotion

Affect, in the scholarly literature, is not synonymous with 'emotion.' Most anthropologists studying affect accept, to some degree, Brian Massumi's suggestion that emotions are more prone to follow a narrative or sociocultural labelling than affect (Massumi, 1995, pp. 85, 90). This understanding is also in line with Seigworth's and Gregg's recognition of affect as a 'force' located in subtleties that often escape conscious awareness. As Ben Anderson (2009, p. 77) contends, 'affective atmospheres,' a general terms for spaces of affective intensity, which include what I term 'intersubjective affective mediums,' occur 'beyond, around, and

alongside the formation of subjectivity' and exist 'between presence and absence.' As such, affect also tends to escape reflexivity (Anderson, 2012, p. 31), resonating with Deleuze's and Guattari's definition of affect as 'prepersonal.' Affect therefore is not necessarily a feeling that enters into reflection or develops into a discrete emotion. Affect can instead lead the body to a movement or response, bypassing contemplation.

This notwithstanding, some scholars acknowledge the difficulty in defining affect, capturing an entity or a 'force' that cannot be easily identified linguistically and theoretically. Sianne Ngai (2005) explores this challenge. She suggests recognising a 'modal,' rather than 'formal' difference between affect and emotion (2005, p. 26). In other words, Ngai sees affect and emotion on a spectrum of feelings with different levels of subjective narration, rather than as two distinct phenomena. Through her analysis, certain labels of 'emotions' (fear, happiness, sadness) may also convey affect. Daniel White (2011) accepts both Massumi's and Ngai's standpoints and attempts to resolve this analytic challenge by pointing out moments and processes in which a feeling becomes recognised and consciously enhanced through a narrative, i.e. when 'affect' becomes 'emotion.'

In my analysis, the difference between affect and emotion is analytically important. I agree with Ngai that affect is not fully unstructured. My findings clearly indicate that affect is deployed and organised in specific manners in contemporary China. Yet it is the openness of affect and the fact that it is not narrowed to specific emotions that makes it favourable for pedagogies that induce participants' immersion in workshops. In other words, enhancing affective intensity, rather than prescribing of narrativised emotions was pivotal in workshops. I next illustrate further how *zheng nengliang* is activated in workshops without being limited to discrete emotions.

Speeches of *zheng nengliang*

*Super Speakers*, as mentioned, was successful in producing an affective medium through speakers' performances and their interaction with other participants. The emphasis on cheering speakers, making jokes during speeches and speaking with confidence on stage, led many participants to ascribe *zheng nengliang* to these activities. Specific speeches were also occasionally associated with *zheng nengliang*. For example, when Dorothy, a 24-yr-old master's student in English literature, practiced with me her speech titled 'Be Yourself,' she commented that she intended to deliver a motivational speech. 'You know, it is about *zheng nengliang*,' she said, slightly ashamed to invoke in my ears a contemporary cliché but also accepting it as a pivotal ingredient in speeches nowadays. Dorothy's speech advocated doing things one truly loves, rather than limiting oneself to the expectations of others. The messages she proclaimed on stage included accepting the fact that she enjoyed eating sweets despite her hope to lose weight, and that she would make choices in life that would not always please her parents. For the younger ears in the audience such content, when conveyed charismatically, was an uplifting motivational message. Responses to this speech included smiles, amusement, sympathy, as well as noticeable moments of inspiration. Dorothy's speech was cheerful and happy, conveying *zheng nengliang*, but was not limited to disseminating happiness per se.

Another speech, much less cheerful, was delivered by Hui An, a 30-year-old physician. She told the story of a dying child she treated in the hospital where she worked. Hui An recounted her first encounter with the child, their friendship, and the agony and helplessness she felt once he released his last breath. Developing her speech into an emotional climax that wet the eyes of most participants, Hui An concluded by expressing

her commitment to serve as a dedicated doctor. ‘Many times when I felt I couldn’t persist and wanted to give up my dream [being a doctor], Xiao Ling’s [the child’s name] image appeared in front of me, made me want to become a better doctor. I think we should cherish the people close to us, cherish people who love us, cherish our dreams (*zhenxi ziji de mengxiang*).’ The combination of the vividly-narrated story and the uplifting message led a senior member to compliment her speech for the *zheng nengliang* it had transmitted (*chuandi*), when he awarded her the title of the ‘best speech’ at the end of the session.

*Zheng nengliang*, by inviting an affective experience laden with excitement regarding one’s own capacity vis-à-vis the group, conveys much more than the term ‘emotionally touching’ in English (*gandong* in Chinese). It is also not delimited by specific emotions. The tears that the audience shed in Hui An’s speech and the smiling laughing faces in Dorothy’s speeches both equally displayed *zheng nengliang*. *Zheng nengliang* produces a form of excitement that can involve different emotions. It is often translated as ‘optimism,’ to considering new options of conduct, or in regarding one’s life with a new light – all products of the ‘augmentation’ of the body’s capacity to act, as described by Deleuze and Guattari.

Moments of *zheng nengliang* therefore produce a ‘force’ that induces a change in participants. When Dorothy attributed *zheng nengliang* to her speech, she meant that it could lead to a shift in the way individuals in the audience felt about their own lives. In a similar vein, the exercises of self-praising or removing fixed negative labels were affective as they led participants to imagine new potentials for expression and behaviour. While nobody took a statement as ‘there’s nothing I cannot do’ literally, it still allowed a shift in mind-set and a thrilling engagement with new possibilities. The fact that participants with different levels of experience in workshops could, once they expressed ‘correct’ attitude, equally



immerse in the medium, indicates that on-going skill cultivation was often not the fundamental outcome of these activities. Participants did comment, when asked, that they wished to persist in long-term self-improvement, but in practice the affective medium led them to prioritise short-lived experiences in which they imagined themselves exceeding their ordinary mode of existence.

Excitement and optimism therefore characterise the affective medium. This is further developed by Jane Bennet's (2001) essay on 'enchantment.' Bennett, a political theorist who studies affect, counters the Weberian notion of modern society as disenchanting. She highlights moments of affective enchantment, which she considers a catalyst for ethical political engagement. Her account overlooks that manner by which affect can be manipulated by powerful political and economic actors (see Navaro-Yashin, 2012, pp. 19-20, for a similar critique). However, in light of her conceptualisation of enchantment through affect, I borrow her phenomenological insights, such as the following:

Occasions during which one's critical faculties are suspended and one is caught up in a moment can produce a kind of enjoyment – a sense of adequacy or fullness – that temporally eclipses the anxiety endemic to critical awareness of the world's often tragic complexity (2001, p. 10).

Since the joy Bennet describes reflects an experience of 'fullness,' and I would add, a sense of social competence, the medium also invites a favourable imaginary of one's engagement with the world:

Enchantment is a feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence; it is to be under the momentary impression that the natural and cultural worlds offer gifts, and in doing so, reminds us that it is good to be alive (2001, p. 156).

Affective intensity, when conceptualised positively, is congruent with enchantment and optimism. As Sara Ahmed (2004, p. 183) adds, when the 'surfaces of the world' 'make an impression, as they become seen-able and feel-able as surfaces,' an individual tends to feel 'wonder.' In such moments optimism is not so much a consequence of discursive expressions as it is a comprehensive orientation of the body towards positive potentials located within one's present existence. It is a 'fullness' of life, or as Massumi phrases, a 'sense of aliveness:'

When the continuity of affective escape is put into words, it tends to take on positive connotations. For it is nothing less than the *perception of one's own vitality*, one's sense of aliveness, of changeability [...]. One's 'sense of aliveness' is a continuous non-conscious self-perception [...]. It is the perception of this *self-perception*, its naming and making conscious, that allows affect to be effectively analysed (Massumi, 2002, p. 36, emphasis in original).

Affective intensity tends to obtain positive valence once perceived and articulated, according to Massumi. Affective interactions are above all enhanced engagement and immersion in a situation, hence 'aliveness.' For Michael Hardt (2015, p. 219), the equation is simple: the more one is affected, the more one's 'sphere of interactions' is enlarged, and in turn one has 'more potential to experience joyful encounters.' Affective intensity and interactions are therefore charged with a sense of openness of the person to new possibilities, an experience of momentary optimism.

In addition to the experience of affect, the above quote by Massumi touches upon the consequences of naming and perceiving affect. At this point I wish to return to the issue of

the articulation of affect through the discourse of *zheng nengliang* in China and how it shapes pedagogic interactions and the propensities they induce in workshop participants.

### Articulated affect

The idiom of *zheng nengliang* contextualises affect in contemporary social settings, mostly evident in the realms of pedagogy and entertainment. It serves to organise activities and the coordination of relevant exercises.

I return to the paradox I mentioned earlier, this time not from the position of theory but rather from the position of social actors: how does affect, a largely preconceptual entity, become known, discussed and intentionally produced? For Daniel White (2011), the key is transforming 'affect' to 'emotion.' White studies Japanese state bureaucrats who are responsible for policies of cultural production in order to develop Japan's 'soft power.' He depicts how these bureaucrats channel and convert various open-ended affects into discourses on the collective anxiety and hope of Japanese citizens concerning the future of their nation. The state thus seeks to make social actors perceive their fluid feelings as specific emotions oriented towards collective and nationalist concerns. White sees this gap between subconscious and narrativised feelings, or between 'what we feel and what we think about what we feel' (2011, p. 20) as a transition orchestrated by powerful institutions. It is a process pivotal to the self-understanding of social actors. The consequences of this productive 'affect-emotion gap' are largely evident elsewhere, as White acutely notes, in psychoanalytic discourses that offer emotional-moral definition to certain feelings and in the advertisement industry that, amidst viewers' complex feelings, 'tells' people 'what they want' (2011, p. 20).

By contrast, the discourse of *zheng nengliang* demonstrates a non-determined articulation of affect. It does not 'tell' people precisely what they feel nor does it narrow their affective experience to a specific domain of expectations (family, career, friendships, or nation).

Rather than closing the affect-emotion gap by introducing a clear narrative, it keeps the gap open, albeit charged with positive connotations. Even in soft skills workshops, narratives can range from self-overcoming ('there's nothing I cannot do'), self-acceptance ('be yourself') and appreciation of social relations ('cherish the people close to us').

What the discourse of *zheng nengliang* does, I suggest, is organise pedagogic activities in a manner that both directs participants to produce and absorb the affective medium and to realise its contrast with their everyday existence. The articulation of *zheng nengliang* makes affect transparent to participants rather than merely an unconscious side-effect of activities, as well as inducing a type of experience. According to Ben Anderson (2014), an 'affective atmosphere' is both a cause and an effect of affects. In other words, as Ty Solomon (2017), a political scientist who theorises affect with relation to political protests, explains, these atmospheres, which combine affects, discourses, and materiality, indicate to participants 'what it is like [...] to experience such events.' The concept of *zheng nengliang*, I suggest, accentuates such unspoken 'instructions' of how to experience certain events. *Zheng nengliang* and related activities induce an inclination among social actors in China to immerse themselves in affective mediums through distinct bodily actions and modes of expression.

On the one hand, workshops manipulate affect to invite a much-commented upon experience, but on the other hand aim to maintain a level of enchantment and novelty. This pedagogy of affect therefore maintains a tension: how can workshops invite participants

into an extraordinary experience, while at the same time activities of *zheng nengliang* have become a common practice and even a cliché? Workshops for soft skills, and wider activities that spark *zheng nengliang*, evidently maintain a tension between inducing enchantment and directing participants to participate, contribute, and experience this medium in habitual ways. The principle of *zheng nengliang* must therefore guide activities without being overly prescriptive.

### *Zheng nengliang* as a mode of governance

In the above sections I have tried to delineate a process in which affect has become objectified and manipulated by workshop pedagogies. The fact that affect is not reified into a coherent discursive narrative links to the problematics of treating affect as a means for a prescribed process of self-transformation. *Zheng nengliang* and optimism have rather become a desired outcome of workshops in themselves.

I wish to clarify this argument with regards to Rudnyckyj's understanding of affect. For him, affect is a pedagogic tool for economic reform (2011, p. 67). While he suggests that affect is never 'completely determined' he nonetheless sees affect as the cultivation of new subjectivities, leading participants to become self-reliant and proactive in the unfolding neoliberal state. Furthermore, he suggests, 'intersubjective affective enactments [...] served as a central means through which reformers sought to inculcate religious virtues' (2011, p. 64). Such virtues allegedly induced a mode of 'self-control' conceptualised by teachers as conducive both for capitalism and for religious piety. I depart from Rudnyckyj's analysis not simply due to my informants' difficulties in fully realising a trajectory of self-transformation. I principally see the affective medium and economic reforms as stimulating enchantment and optimism precisely because of to the impossibility of self-transformation or the

‘inculcation’ of virtues. Ultimately, through *zheng nengliang* individuals charged themselves with optimism without subverting the current structures that govern their everyday practices, be they the family, workplace, educational institutions, or the state.

Interestingly, informants themselves occasionally reflected on *zheng nengliang* as counterproductive for their moral or knowledge cultivation. A good example was provided by Li Dajun, a 35-year-old psychology aficionado and a former member of *Heart’s Secret*. Dajun’s fondness for psychology did not lead him to pursue professional training. He rather opted for broadening his knowledge and curiosity. He was excited to combine psychology with his interests in history, politics, and the biological sciences, contemplating how emotions can shape human development. Through reading psychology books he also wished to understand the cognitive development of his son and his behavioural patterns. Overall, Dajun was highly drawn to psychology as a discipline, but at the same time he found himself more and more disappointed by the *Heart’s Secret* workshops. He did not understand why many instructors prioritised motivational content and ‘empty slogans’ (*kouhao*) over teaching theory or recounting psychological experiments. In other words, he prioritised ‘science’ and ‘knowledge’ over *zheng nengliang*. When I asked him explicitly about his view of *zheng nengliang*, he stated:

It [*zheng nengliang*] doesn’t really contribute to a better understanding of psychology or of humans, does it? It seems that people enjoy attending activities in order to forget for a few hours the real issues and the problems they are facing in their lives. This is not my motivation. I do not attend workshops to feel better about myself. Or maybe you could say that I get my *zheng nengliang* when I learn new

knowledge. I realised recently that reading books and watching lectures online give me more pleasure than attending these workshops.

Dajun offers a stark contrast to the experience of other participants. Although he never remained fully passive during workshops exercises, I noticed he impatiently awaited more formal lectures by instructors. In the summer of 2015, four months after becoming a member and after attending about a dozen of activities, Dajun withdrew from the club.

Dajun's critical view reveals a tension between the workshops' alleged promotion of universal knowledge and their more immediate attempts to induce *zheng nengliang*. It also indicates that for most participants, unlike Dajun, a pedagogy of affect triggers a momentary experience that eclipses a demand for knowledge acquisition or long-term self-cultivation.

The overall outcome of activities of *zheng nengliang* may contribute to reinforcing the current state of affairs and aligning citizens, directly or indirectly, with the state-driven economic reforms. Yang Jie (2015), who studies psychological training for laid-off workers in Beijing, offers one of the only anthropological references to *zheng nengliang*. She suggests that *zheng nengliang*, as instructed by psychologists and social workers, allows victims of China's economic reforms to focus on their resourceful emotional capacities and realise their 'potential' (*qianli*) (2015, p. 7). The general process is about 'the production of subjectivities by rebuilding their identities around an emotional core that belies the socioeconomic dislocation experience' (2015, p. 205). The working-class individuals Yang met learn to focus on positive thinking and self-reliant initiatives, rather than anguishing about their fates. By this, Yang aligns her analysis with critiques of therapeutic culture for its disregard of the socioeconomic and the political in favour of a self-centred orientation (Füredi, 2004; Illouz, 2008; Moskowitz, 2001).

What I wish to introduce through my findings is not a subversive social process. As far as I could judge, activities of *zheng nengliang* ultimately lead, in most cases, to recharging individuals with a conviction in their abilities to achieve well-being or improve their livelihoods vis-à-vis existing socioeconomic conditions. It also cultivated resilience in the face of unforeseen futures. I suggest, nonetheless, that the current literature requires further exploration of practices of affect and hope as stimulating perseverance in the face of conflicting social demands rather than the shaping of the person in accordance to discursive trajectories of subject production. In individuals' experiences, affect is not facilitating adaptation to wider socioeconomic transformations. As Gabriel Marcel, whose theory of hope I draw on in my later chapters indicates, hope is a positive 'non-acceptance' (1951, p. 38). It moves beyond one's present state of being even if it does not necessary lead to subversive action. If *zheng nengliang* induces conformity, it does so insofar as individuals continuously affectively imagine moving beyond the limitations of their socioeconomic worlds. Rather than adopting a subject position that 'belies' one's socioeconomic difficulties, affective mediums allow individuals to find moments of vital optimism amidst socioeconomic uncertainties, or in Bennet's terms, to connect 'in an affirmative way to existence.'

## Conclusion

This chapter introduced a fundamental element in soft skills workshops and practices of self-improvement in contemporary China. Before delving in the following chapters into the meaning of soft skills and the profile of the ideal person pursued by my informants, this chapter contextualised workshops' affective mediums as a social phenomenon that extends throughout various pedagogic settings in today's China. Although many of the practitioners



who attend and facilitate workshops do hold ideological worldviews and long-term aspirations, I suggest that the immediate emphasis of these pedagogies is affect, optimism and a temporary sense of potentialities for action.

The proliferation of activities of *zheng nengliang* in China today indicates that an increasing number of institutions prioritise facilitating affective mediums. It also indicates that the satisfaction such activities produce can only be ephemeral, and hence must be activated in high frequency across different social realms. While my focus is on pedagogic activities, it is more than possible that the affective boost of momentary optimism vis-à-vis one's present social existence is pivotal in various commercial and entertainment activities in market-oriented China, and well beyond.

## Chapter 3 - Becoming a Role Model

### Introduction

Following an intense evening exercise on the fifth day of *Champion Training's* one-week camp, instructor Peng delivered a 20-minute emotional monologue. He referred to the group exercise that had just concluded, in which two representatives from each team had to bear physical punishment (mostly push-ups) for every round their team lost in a number-counting game. Peng urged us to realise the importance of gratitude and mutual sacrifice. At one point he cried, saying that he felt great pain seeing the trainees undertake the punishment, particularly a female student who came from his hometown in Henan province. Peng's speech paved the way for a night of participants' emotional and tearful monologues. One after the other, they talked about warm sentiments towards their team members and the entire group, invoked the joy of the previous few days, and expressed sadness about approaching the end of the camp.

The listening participants were anticipating their own turn to occupy the stage. Their facial expressions responded to the speakers' expressions with laughter, smiles, and tears. Their bodies were at the same time vigilantly oriented towards their upcoming presentations. 18-year-old Mingwei, a skinny and fragile looking student from a university in Linyi, east Shandong, exemplified this attitude. His legs shook, sweat poured from his forehead to his cheeks, and his hands rubbed each other. He was nervous and excited about his upcoming monologue. The moment a speaker indicated that he or she might be finishing their speech, Mingwei lifted his hand up high, eagerly volunteering to go next. When his turn finally arrived, he stuttered when recalling his thoughts during the exercise. Yet after several

moments, Mingwei paused, looked at the participants, and emphasised that he had been deeply moved (*you ganchu*) during the exercise. He also emphasised twice that he had cried (*wo liu lei*) during the activity. This confession, in line with the behaviour and disclosures by previous speakers, enabled him to speak with greater poignancy, which in turn led him to express his warm feelings towards each of the participants and towards the group as a whole.

In this chapter, I look at the role of soft skills in constituting workshops' affective medium and participants' imaginaries of self-improvement. Since soft skills allude at once to affective expressions, to capacities of everyday usage, as well as to skills of market value, through practicing these skills participants experienced potentialities to enhance their social competence. This was particularly evident in participants' transitions from watching speakers to occupying the stage, as demonstrated by the example above. Through the affective medium and the pedagogic dynamics of these exercises, Mingwei recognised an impetus and affordances to become an emotional and inspiring speaker. This transition, as this chapter explores, also epitomised for instructors and informants individuals' possibilities to improve their social and economic positioning in the outside world.

The interactive participation and rapid transitions between speakers signified a pedagogic emphasis on egalitarian social interactions. Workshop coordinators were proud of the lack of rigid hierarchies among their participants. Yet at the same time, workshop dynamics often positioned instructors and speakers as role models. I discuss this tension by illuminating the importance of role modelling as a pedagogic instrument in China. Various scholars indicate the centrality of role modelling in Chinese education and political campaigns from imperial China up to the present (Ames, 2011; Bakken, 2000; Reed, 1995;

Sheridan, 1968; Wu, 2016). According to Borge Bakken (2000), learning through exemplars extends in China as both a pedagogic method widely applied in the educational system and a mode of governance that characterises the encounter between citizens and the state. Accordingly, citizens ritualistically perform 'the exemplar norm' through mimicking state-promoted role models. The outcome perpetuates social hierarchies. Workshops for soft skills offer a site where Bakken's description is subverted since hierarchical relations are notably contested. At the same time, informants frequently assessed the validity of workshop pedagogies by scrutinising the competence and authority of role models (be they instructors or senior members). Participants also asserted their own capacities by acting as role models to others. Overall, while the interactive dynamics in the practice of soft skills produced a relatively egalitarian space, they could not undo the cultural importance of modelling, nor informants' awareness of the hierarchies that set the tone in Chinese society.

The egalitarian imaginary associated with soft skills is premised on their imagined social and economic value. In this chapter I draw on scholars who conceptualise soft skills, communication, and affective labour as essential in post-Fordist economies (Cameron, 2000; Hardt & Negri, 2005; Urciuoli, 2008; Virtanen, 2004). According to these accounts, workers have become comprised of productive capacities, or 'general human faculties' (Virtanen, 2004, p. 227), and as a result minute everyday gestures have economic significance. Although workshops in Jinan did not limit the application of soft skills to job-related pursuits, they similarly heralded a vision of the person as a fountain of value-generating capacities. According to the workshop facilitators, participants' mastery of soft skills during workshops indicated positive prospects in their social and occupational circles.

From a phenomenological perspective, the practice of soft skills in the affective medium of the workshops activated participants' experience of their affordances for action both inside and outside of the workshops. Here I employ Massumi's (1995) concept of 'virtualism' to describe a process by which affective intensities induce individuals' orientation towards virtual scenarios. In workshops' affective medium, participants prepared to take the position of the speaker and role model, hence their virtual experience was enhanced. Merleau-Ponty's (2012) work offers a phenomenological description congruent with this notion of virtualism. He illuminates the perceiving body's orientation towards possible action. By witnessing a speaker's self-expression, participants realised 'certain gestural communication through the sedimentation and possibilities of my own [their] body schema' (2012, p. xliv). In other words, participants were constantly experiencing possibilities for their own action, through employing emotional performances and communicational gestures.

I suggest, therefore, that soft skills, as accessible capacities ubiquitous in everyday interactions, are optimal for participants' imaginaries of his or her affordances for self-improvement and even socioeconomic mobility. This imaginary extended from becoming a role model in workshops to social and occupational pursuits outside of workshops. Through soft skills, informants experimented in asserting charisma and expertise, attempting to manifest their value and market themselves in new ways. Later in this chapter I introduce an informant who recognised the importance of expressive performances in asserting expertise, and employed soft skills to present himself as a psychology master. His story indicates a desire within and also a burden upon individuals in China to invent and perform themselves as sources of value in the expanding market economy.

In this chapter, I present another aspect of *zheng nengliang* and explore the sense of optimism that characterise workshops for soft skills. By focusing on individuals' transitions and aspirations to become role models in workshops and further achieve success outside of workshops, I delineate the impetus to self-assertion and self-improvement. Notably, however, while informants' imaginaries extended to possible achievement outside of the workshops, these imaginaries were activated by the affective medium and the interactive space. Outside workshops, this virtual imaginary and the affordances of soft skills were much more elusive.

### Non-hierarchical workshops

The pedagogy of soft skills in Jinan workshops emphasised non-hierarchical interactions. By celebrating communicational and expressive gestures, workshops invited all participants to express themselves. Workshop facilitators also explicitly identified their pedagogic philosophy as antagonistic to rigid hierarchies. At the same time, role modelling, a longstanding feature of Chinese pedagogy, was a key aspect of workshops. Through role modelling participants could assert their skills and gain others' appreciation. Workshops thus manifested a tension between performing role modelling in order to inspire participants and their philosophy that aimed at undermining hierarchical relations altogether.

In China role modelling has been a predominant mode of knowledge transmission and a practice that has reinforced social hierarchies. Since the early days of imperial China, pedagogic practices have been premised on hierarchical relations as individuals were required to learn proper conduct and knowledge from exemplars such as parents, teachers, ministers, and emperors (Reed, 1995, p. 99). During the Maoist years, the state promoted

models that represented self-sacrifice and commitment to the communist revolution. These models circulated through popular media and educational campaigns, becoming prescriptive for the entire Chinese population (Sheridan, 1968). Today emulating models remains pivotal in the Chinese educational system, state symposiums, and state-affiliated press. For example, Wu Jinting (2016), who studies the impact of educational reforms in rural schools in China, shows that state initiatives which advocate 'egalitarian' methods do not abolish role modelling, since learning through exemplars is 'intertwine[d] in the cultural, social and political systems of reasoning that underlie Chinese society' (2016, p. 2).

Role modelling is therefore a culturally embedded practice with important political implications in China. Borge Bakken (2000) offers an expansive account on the various manifestations and implication of this practice. He coins the term 'exemplarism' to convey an apparatus through which the Chinese state coordinates social norms. Bakken regards modelling as performative rituals in which individuals overtly emulate their teachers or other exemplars prescribed by state institutions. Through modelling, a 'common standard' is produced, assisting the state's aims to achieve 'regulation and control' (2000, p. 8).

According to this analysis, modelling in China is a coercive practice in which citizens emulate exemplars, regardless to whether they morally accept the ideology presented by the model.

The outcome of modelling is thus the reinforcement of hierarchies.

The cultural inclination towards modelling was evident in workshops for soft skills. Language and gestures of modelling were evident in all of the workshops that I attended. New attendees, for example, when introducing themselves, would express their intention to learn from other participants. They would utter phrases such as 'I come to you fellow members in order to learn' (*xiang nimeng xuexi*) or 'please teach and guide me' (*qing duo*

*zhijiao*). These expressions are standardised tokens of reverence that frame others as teacher and guides.

Yet while participants expressively regarded other participants as potential models, they also adhered to a pedagogy that directed them to downplay hierarchies and to strive to become influential themselves. Workshop coordinators tried to produce an egalitarian space in which participants could impact social interactions and group dynamics. *Heart's Secret* directors even stated that their club was 'custom made' (*siren dingzhi*) and that all participants were 'hosts' (*zhuren*). This meant that each participant could possibly direct the pedagogy and even take the role of a workshop instructor. In practice, very few workshop members actually run workshops. The level of seniority and friendship with workshop directors often increased participants' influence.<sup>18</sup> However, the relative accessibility of the stage and the opportunity to speak out still allowed some of the more confident participants to stand out prior to achieving seniority or social recognition by other members. In fact, most workshop facilitators strongly urged new participants to maximise their self-expression.

This accessibility and ubiquity of performances of modelling meant that role models in workshop activities were normally interchangeable. Both the position of the speaker and the qualities associated with specific participants were unfixed. In *Super Speakers*, when members spoke eloquently and charismatically while delivering speeches, or when they

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<sup>18</sup> These non-spoken hierarchies were normally more apparent outside of the workshop sessions. For example on WeChat chat groups of the workshops some senior member's voices were more dominant than others. In *Super Speakers*, a group of 4-5 senior male members designed most activities. Their influence was particularly evident in club recreational activities, where they would manage the proceedings from beginning to end, and would also position themselves at the centre of most conversations.



offered convincing feedback to others, they incited their peers' appreciation. Yet in most activities, no individual was elevated by the others as a substantial role model. One speaker could stand out during one meeting, but could be less admired during the next (on some occasions, a guest would be discovered to be more charismatic than some of the senior members), although some participants were clearly more skilled on stage than others. In the other two field sites, instructors ran the activities and were overtly appreciated and admired by the participants; their authority, however, remained limited to the timeframe of the activity that they ran. In *Heart's Secret*, because most of the instructors also attended other workshops as participants (and like most of the members, held licenses in counselling), they did not become on-going models, but were rather respected as teachers only when they spoke on stage. A similar pattern was evident in *Champion Training*. As the instructors were themselves young students, they offered a source of identification for the trainees, though they did not have sufficient credentials or life experience to become elevated exemplars. An exception was the director of the school and occasional instructor, Li Chen, a 24-year-old man who, in addition to his charisma, was admired for establishing the school and showed signs of becoming a successful entrepreneur.

The non-hierarchical imaginary of workshops meant that many participants were enthusiastic in speaking out and gaining recognition from each other. This was evident in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, and will be further demonstrated in additional examples later. Yet while participants were often optimistic about their ability to express themselves and to choose their own models, at times they were also puzzled about the lack of elevated models. Since exemplars are ideally a source of moral inspiration, the lack of evident hierarchies and absence of individuals of notable exemplary qualities meant that informants often lacked guides who they could look up to. This led to questions about the

validity of the teaching offered by workshops. In *Super Speakers*, several young members openly lamented in one-on-one conversations with me that the club did not host individuals who were successful in the job market and who could provide meaningful guidance, as opposed to the 'feel good' or 'chicken soup for the soul' (*xinling jitang*) messages that were normally circulated in the speeches (see more Chapter 6). In *Heart's Secret*, the deficiency of local models was evident when members expressed their anticipation to host more experienced and well-known teachers from Beijing and Shanghai and attending workshops in other cities. When asked, they politely rejected the possibility that local psychologists and instructors could be considered as their 'role model' (*bang yang*).

This frustration about the absence of clearly defined models relates to a cultural inclination to learn from models, as well from the fact that in the broader socioeconomic realms informants could not ignore the existence of hierarchy and inequality. The egalitarian workshop interactions could not undo the marginality of Jinan compared to first tier cities. For other informants, the celebration of soft skills was not sufficient unless it produced tangible value in the job market. As a result, the lack of successful exemplars in workshops led some participants to doubt the quality of the teaching. Overall, however, as indicated in the previous chapter and elaborated in the next, in the affective medium most informants tended to suspend such doubts, though these reservations remained in the backdrop of their wider aspirations and interpretation of self-improvement through workshops.

### Soft skills and value making

Informants' impetus to assert themselves and potentially become role models in workshops, in-line with their non-hierarchical agendas, was inseparable from the pedagogic focus on soft skills. By targeting various soft skills, workshop facilitators led participants to see

accessible everyday gestures as containing potential social and economic value. This conception of soft skills increased the impetus of informants to affect others during workshops and to imagine an extension between their affectivity to possible outcomes in their social and occupational circles.

As I discussed in the Introduction, the term 'soft skills' was not the focal point of workshops, yet instructors and participants highlighted capacities that were linked to interpersonal relations. These included 'communication skills' (*goutong li*), 'self-expression' (*biaoda nengli*), 'public speaking' (*koucai*), 'leadership' (*lingdaoli*), and 'interpersonal skills' (*renji guanxi nengli*) more generally. There was no systematic ordering of these skills in workshops, but these abilities were mentioned frequently in all three field sites. In my theoretical analysis, I therefore relate these skills to relevant elements in the literature on 'soft skills' and communicational capacities analysed by the literature on 'immaterial labour.'

Scholars situate soft skills in the context of post-Fordist economies. Accordingly, in the service and information sectors, workers' immaterial affective capacities have increasingly become understood as productive values. Interpersonal expressions have been 'standardised' (Cameron, 2000), 'commodified,' and 'fetishised' (Urciuoli, 2008). As Bonnie Urciuoli (2008, p. 223) emphasises, capacities that have previously been an 'open-ended social activity' are now laden with productive value. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2005, p. 187) identify a similar process which they term the 'expropriation of the common.' Accordingly, common denominators of social life, such as communicational gestures and the formation of relationships are subordinated to market production. Following this line of

thought, Akseli Virtanen (2004) uses the term 'general human faculties' to describe the accessible and innate nature of the skills that nowadays hold productive potential.

The above literature describes a general shift in the meaning of labour from professional tasks to social relations, communication, and performances. Within this schema, the perceived competencies of workers therefore lie fundamentally in their personalities (Virtanen, 2004, p. 225) and attitudes (Hardt & Negri, 2005, p. 108; Urciuoli, 2008, p. 223).

From the workers' perspectives, this process could lead to an imaginary of greater agency as everyday gestures become productive and workers see themselves as 'bare potentiality' (Virtanen, 2004, p. 227). Yet the continuous subordination of these gestures for the service of the enterprise also leads to exploitation and oppression of workers' expression, as the above scholars indicate.

Within the Jinan workshops, the link between the pedagogy and the job market was not as straightforward as what is generally described in anthropological accounts of soft skills or theories of immaterial labour. Informants occasionally wondered whether mastering soft skills would lead to job success in the Chinese environment that is still governed by socialist hierarchies and 'face.' Yet workshops nonetheless focused on 'general faculties,' personality, and attitude as indicating a person's value. Even in *Heart's Secret*, which, unlike the two other field sites alluded to a knowledge discipline (psychology), instructors often urged participants to prioritise 'talking from the heart' (*cong xinli shuo*) and expressing accurate sensibilities over mastery of knowledge, intellectual thinking, or technical skills. Through workshops, informants' soft skills therefore became recognised as potentially valuable in social interactions. As discussed in the subsequent chapters, the morality of soft

skills in China is not limited to success in the job market, yet the person who masters soft skills is nonetheless supposedly inclined to excel in every social and occupational setting.

In this chapter I offer insights into individuals' experiences of their engagement with soft skills. In the affective medium of the workshops, the accessibility of soft skills allows participants to assert their value. By constituting the medium through interactive expression, participants recognised the impact of their performative and communicative gestures. Young Mingwei sensed that through a proactive attitude and occupying the stage, he could contribute to the affective medium. By speaking emotionally and reflecting upon his feelings he could further become the centre of his peers' attention. Workshop dynamics therefore endowed participants with a sense of democratic social capital, while also urging participants to evaluate themselves through their expressive acts.

Conceptualising interpersonal expressions as valuable 'skills' enhanced the affective medium. It encouraged and pressured participants to see their performance of these skills as significant for their self-improvement and hence led them to express themselves ever more assertively. Next, I elaborate upon this process phenomenologically.

### Role modelling and virtual affordances

The intersubjective affective medium combined with the imagined value of soft skills induced participants' self-expression in workshops. Here I look at participants' transitions from observing speakers to occupying the stage themselves, or 'becoming' models for others. I theorise this movement through the virtual qualities of the affective medium and the affordances of soft skills.

Although the position of the speaker shifted frequently between participants, the person on stage was always the focal point of participants' attention. The 'stage' I am describing

ranged from standing or sitting at the front of the classroom (in some exercises in *Champion Training* and *Heart's Secret*, and all segments in *Super Speakers*), standing with a microphone (in some exercises in *Champion Training* and *Heart's Secret*), or speaking poignantly from one's seat (in some *Heart's Secret* sessions). As the description of Mingwei indicates, participants were oriented towards taking on this position even when listening to others. Mingwei anticipated occupying the stage and turning himself into the centre of attention. He vividly manifested a process of 'becoming,' of inexhaustible reconfigurations and alterations, in which a person (as well as other entities) is oriented towards a 'subject' (Deleuze, 2004, p. 26).

Becoming indicates a movement from the 'actual' to the 'virtual.' Philosopher Patrice Haynes (2013, p. 17) explains that the 'virtual' for Deleuze is the affective registers, or existence as dynamically inclined to transitions governed by such registers. The 'actual,' on the other hand, is the palpable present reality devoid of affect, devoid of the sense of potentialities of the body's capacity to act. In Bergson and Deleuze, the 'virtual' is immanent in each and every experience, it is real, coexisting with the 'actual' (see Grosz, 1998, p. 50), yet as the intensity of affect increases so does the experience of virtual becoming. This is further expounded by Massumi (1995, p. 96):

Affect is the virtual as point of view, provided the visual metaphor is used guardedly. For affect is synaesthetic, implying a participation of the senses in each other: the measure of a living thing's potential interactions is its ability to transform the effects of one sensory mode into those of another [...]. The autonomy of affect is its participation in the virtual. Its autonomy is its openness. [...] Emotion is the intensest (most contracted) expression of that capture and of the fact that something has

always and again escaped. Something remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any particular, functionally anchored perspective. That is why all emotion is more or less disorienting, and why it is classically described as being outside of oneself, at the very point at which one is most intimately and unshareably in contact with oneself and one's vitality.

When affective registers are enhanced, the virtual becomes more dominant, and, in contrast, when one's attention is directed to the palpable technicality of a situation and its objective limitations, the actual is amplified.

The virtual thus produces a bodily inclination towards action. When participants fixed their attention on a speaker, their potential action was oriented towards inhabiting the speaker's position and adopting her or his style of expression. By looking at a model (even if it is only a temporary model), observers saw themselves as the model, or as the object of other's attention. It is a process that Massumi terms 'movement vision,' in which when witnessing an object:

The objectness of the object is attenuated as the subject, *seeing itself as others see it*, comes to occupy the object's place as its own. Simultaneously occupying its place and the object's, the subject departs from itself. [...] The subject overlays itself on the object in a super position of reciprocal functions. The gap left by the subject's self-departure is filled not by a new subject or object but by a process encompassing their disjunction in a tide of change (Massumi, 2002, pp. 50-51).

Movement, or transitions, are induced by affect as subjects and objects switch positions and as a subject envisions and prepares to becoming the object of others' attention. Workshops for soft skills are an optimal ground for these virtual experiences due to their interactive

dynamics and the importance they attribute to interpersonal expression. Participants recognise soft skills as accessible capacities that can potentially be performed and mastered instantaneously. By understanding the performance of a speaker and phenomenologically recognising soft skills as 'general faculties' that can allow them to become role models, participants thus sense the possible actions, or affordances, that are accessible to them via soft skills.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's focus on the body and its attunement with external responses can assist in clarifying this experience. Following Merleau-Ponty, I contend that participants experienced workshop exercises in terms of what they can 'do' in the given situation, rather than forming abstract or non-contextualised knowledge:

The gesture is in front of me like a question, it indicates to me specific sensible points in the world and invites me to join it there. Communication is accomplished when my behaviour finds in this pathway its own pathway. I confirm the other person, and the other person confirms me (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 191).

This attention to possibilities characterises interpersonal interactions in general. As Donald Landes interprets Merleau-Ponty, 'the other person's body is not an object for me; it is a behaviour whose sense I understand from within, virtually, allowing for a certain gestural communication through the sedimentation and possibilities of my own body schema' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. xliv). This phenomenology is largely congruent with James Gibson's (1950) concept of affordances, as Thomas Fuchs and Hanne De Jaegher (2009, p. 475) explain, in which the environment is always perceived in terms of 'affording a range of possible actions.'



Recognising affordances for action is therefore an orientation of the body towards the non-actual. As Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 401) suggests: 'It is neither true that my existence possesses itself, not that it is foreign to itself, because it is an act or doing, and because an act is a passage from what *I have to what I aim at.*' James Steeves, a philosopher who claims that a theory of imagination can derive from this phenomenological theory, argues that Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception is premised on a 'virtual body,' which is 'a virtual dimension of possibility' and 'a body that a person can imagine assuming and from which he can view the world from a different perspective' (Steeves, 2004, pp. 6-7). Mingwei and his peers exemplified this process as they watched workshop models. When listening to monologues by instructor Peng and fellow trainees, they were sitting on the edge of their seats, affectively and physically moved. Their body expression, from their shaking legs, their straight body posture facing the speaker, eyes staring at him or her, their bottoms sliding gradually towards the edge of their chairs, and their folded arms waiting to shoot upwards the moment instructor Peng would ask 'who wants to speak next?'- all indicate a heightened orientation towards changing positions and undertaking the affordances of soft skills in becoming the role model. This process was by no means purely 'voluntary' when considering the intense pressure by instructors and the group that nobody remains silent or inactive. Yet the affective medium largely succeeded in implicating participants in the virtual experience, thus instilling them with an intention to occupy the stage.

Virtual affordances notably emanate from reflexes to perceptual phenomena and habitual action (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 153; Steeves, 2004, p. 22). In other words, the perception of what can be 'done' stems from previous experiences and bodily tendencies. It is here that the centrality of soft skills, rendering abilities that people use in their everyday lives, opens up affordances for action. When one witnesses an inspiring speaker, one does not witness

technical capacities alien to him or herself, such as running a marathon, fixing a motorcycle, or singing an aria. Participants can rather imagine themselves becoming the model and extending their inspiration beyond the workshops in front of colleagues, family members or university teachers. Soft skills therefore play a central role in animating hopeful imaginaries for self-improvement.

### Between a horizon for unlimited success and static helplessness

The transition from a novice participant to a role model was metonymic of participants' commitment to self-improvement and their potential socioeconomic prospects. This was emphasised by the instructors of *Champion Training* more than in any other field site.

Although *Champion Training's* trainees were undergraduate students who were often preoccupied by adjusting to university life, instructors urged trainees to associate their attitudes in workshops with their long-term prospects in 'society' and the job market.

The sense of affordances in workshop through soft skills and occupying the stage was thus crucial for participants' confidence and optimism about their prospects in the outside world.

Conversely, when a participant experienced the affective medium without an ability to access the stage, this sense of potential would be suppressed. Gao Rui, a 20-year-old instructor of *Champion Training* who was accustomed to speaking out frequently in workshops (and usually with notable charm), met such an obstacle when attending a grand convention of Amway marketing. Below are some reflections that she shared with

*Champion Training* trainees several days following the event:

I attended a symposium of 10,000 people, a symposium of Amway (*an li*). There were 10,000 people at an awards ceremony, awarding some outstanding individuals.

When I was sitting there, I was deeply moved (*tebie you ganchu*). More than 10,000

people in the site while the same 10-20 people were speaking on stage. I, one of 10,000, watched the brilliance (*jingcai*) of others. When we watch TV dramas or attend music concerts, you always sit in the corner (*jiaoluo na yijiao*), observing the brilliance of others. This brilliance never belongs to you. I had a strong feeling, feeling like a tiny ant among 10,000 people.

Gao Rui highlighted here a dissonance between the vibrant activity (10,000 people, feeling 'deeply moved') and her frustrating inability to express herself. The event was affective but it remained an emotionally touching experience 'in the dark' rather than a transition that could culminate under the spotlights. She experienced a break between her capacity to be affected and her capacity to affect. She pointed out a thin line between being socially insignificant and radiating 'brilliance.'

Gao Rui wished that she and her trainees could overcome this dissonance through self-improvement and willingness to express and assert themselves. When further analysing her experience she tried to recharge herself with motivation, aspiring one day to become one of the ten to twenty individuals who would capture a grand stage. This was also the message she advocated to her trainees: she encouraged them to overcome passivity and put themselves in the spotlight, both literally and metaphorically. Failing to do so could leave them in a helpless position, 'feeling like a tiny ant.' Although a problematic 'attitude' was not what prevented Gao Rui from taking the stage at the Amway symposium, she nonetheless re-narrated the event as a motivational example.

The desired objective of the mastery of soft skills that Gao Rui and other instructors expressed included imagery of stardom and success in the job market. They were inspired by Liu Xingqi, a Hunan-based entrepreneur who runs a large training school to develop

students' soft skills. Liu associates soft skills with an endless potential of capacities, allowing individuals to move beyond professional or technical knowledge to running enterprises:

Most people drift between knowledge and technical abilities and would never experience the pleasure of having those qualities [soft skills, individuals' 'soft power' in Liu's terminology]: many people can study English, but only few can open an English school; many people can learn to cook, but few can run a food chain; many people can fix cars, but few can manufacture a new vehicle brand (Liu, 2013, p. 40).

According to Liu, what separates narrow-tasked employees from managers lies in one's personality and soft skills. Liu's words indicate an expanding view that knowledge in itself does not suffice in the contemporary socioeconomic climate. Soft skills, in contrast, embody a wide horizon of possibilities that can most meaningfully manifest, according to him, in entrepreneurialism.

According to instructors, the affordances for becoming an influential speaker and role model in workshops were emblematic of the outside world. Through the affective medium most participants indeed imagined the potential application of soft skills beyond the walls of the workshops, and some even extended such imaginaries to ambitious occupational success.

### The 'double duty' of soft skills

Soft skills, when practiced as a form of self-improvement, particularly when this is done in an affective medium, allow individuals to sense their productive value. This is particularly alluring in the context of the expanding market economy. In China, where market expansion is accompanied by changing regimes of value, individuals seek to employ soft skills to assert competence vis-à-vis their social and occupational circles, as well as to invent their personal

value by marketing themselves in new ways. This is exemplified in the ethnographic example below.

Liu Aisong's double duty

Liu Aisong, 33, was a newly married man who joined *Heart's Secret* in February 2015 and was immediately captivated by the psychological mode of teaching. By summer 2015, he had completed his Level 3 (the minimal level) counselling license, following a training course and group therapy at *Heart's Secret*. Although he held a blue-collar technical job, he seemed determined to pursue a career in psychology. In March 2016, he had even begun practicing counselling at *Heart's Secret*, surpassing some of his ex-classmates who wished to undergo additional training before offering therapy. Yet Aisong's ambitions were not limited to a small counselling room, but he rather imagined himself as a master teacher (*dashi*), a goal he shared with peers in *Heart's Secret*. The more time he spent at *Heart's Secret*, the more he felt the liberty to analyse other participants' problems and offered his own philosophies, also adding personal 'zest' with humorous remarks and friendly gestures towards his fellow club members. In a performative articulation of expertise and guidance, he emphasised the importance of 'speaking from the heart' and prioritising 'feelings' (*ganshou*) over 'thought' (*xiangfa*). Once he announced more systematically his key concepts for self-growth (*chengzhang*), which included *jiena* (to accept, to contain) and *tupo* (overcome, breakthrough). *Heart's Secret* instructors had already often mentioned these concepts, but Aisong presented them as a set of principles forming his own unique philosophy. In late 2015 Aisong has also joined several meetings at a public speaking club in order to further cultivate his pedagogic and expressive abilities.

When the workshops allowed time for extensive monologues, Aisong seized opportunities to discuss his own personality and shared his past experiences as a shy adolescent with a rich inner world. More than once, he mentioned a journal that he wrote during middle school. He recalled ideas he expressed then, from which he still found much wisdom, and even some resemblance to the philosophy of Lao Zi, the great Daoist sage. In the second half of 2015, Aisong also changed his apparel and appearance. He began wearing traditional buttoned Chinese suits and Buddhist bracelets (which he often took off and rubbed in his palm), and held a Chinese fan in his hand, which he related to his appreciation of Chinese traditional culture. Gel and a hairband kept his hair neatly in order, and he meticulously examined his face with his phone during the breaks between the workshop sessions. By fashioning his appearance and presenting himself as imbued with therapeutic wisdom, Aisong's behaviour, following Erwin Goffman (1959, p. 47), was similar to performers who 'may even attempt to give the impression that their present poise and proficiency are something they have always had and that they have never had to fumble their way through a learning period.' Although soft skills in workshops tend to be associated with innate personality traits (see Chapter 4), they are manifest through performances. In other words, Aisong was assuming that a certain style of expression and appearance could allow him to perform the role of the model convincingly. By exhibiting expertise via soft skills, Aisong hoped that his profile as a *dashi* would seem natural to colleagues and clients.<sup>19</sup>

Aisong's endeavours reflect an expanding market economy that celebrates self-employment and brings forth shifting meanings of expertise. He operated in social conditions that

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<sup>19</sup> The ability to transform from a person with no knowledge of psychology to a counsellor is, of course, unique to the professional setting of psychological counselling in China (see Huang, 2013).

somewhat resemble practices recorded in post-Socialist Russia. As Jennifer Patico (2009) describes St. Petersburg in the early new millennium, individuals in the private economy sensed a demand and opportunity to market themselves in new ways, moralising their professional activities and the market economy more broadly. Patico (2009, pp. 218-219) observes that meanings 'are not set,' 'but managed,' in this period of rapid socioeconomic transformations. Describing a woman who decided to title herself as a 'consultant,' Patico identifies such an act as an example for 'spinning the market,' in which individuals are claiming and constructing their own symbolic capital (2009, p. 216). The process I am describing about Liu Aisong is similar. It involved aligning himself with new forms of expertise, such as psychology and soft skills, while asserting himself as a messenger and expert.

Aisong's act of 'spinning the market' reaffirms the values of psychology and soft skills. Soft skills here are both a tool for asserting his expertise, as well as being symbolically associated with shifting meanings of expertise and new niche markets. This shift is parallel to a shift from emulating role models of unquestionable ideological authority to performing expertise for others. This echoes Nigel Thrift's (2005, p. 17) depiction of capitalism as manifesting 'a kind of unholy vitality, a kind of double duty, to possess but also to create, to accumulate but also to overflow, to organise but also to improvise.' There is little mediation between the consumption and production of role models or expertise, as individuals are tempted and urged to produce their own value. According to Thrift's analysis of Western professional and managerial personnel, social actors immersed in capitalist systems do not always act towards achieving clear ends. Rather, they are 'harnessing unruly creative energies,' in a climate where interactions are laden with commercial value (2005, pp. 17-18, 91). The productive potential of the individual is therefore highly linked to his or her

communicational and affective expression. Soft skills could lead, accordingly, to open-ended positive effects beyond one's immediate tasks and objectives.

Aisong's zealous participation in workshops and in performative self-marketing were in contrast to his occupational stability. Unlike the visions of scholars of soft skills and immaterial labour, Aisong's affinity to soft skills was not a response to direct demands of an enterprise. Yet, being both fascinated by and anxious regarding the potentialities of the market, Aisong was motivated to experiment with new modes of self-assertion while heralding new values. Workshops promoted such endeavours and created a medium that stimulates participants to envision themselves as unlimited potential. In practice, workshops temporarily boosted these imaginaries, before informants returned their more complex socioeconomic realities.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I considered soft skills as both a substance that constitutes the affective medium, and a pedagogic practice that connects participants' modelling performances in workshops and their socioeconomic competence and future prospects. Through soft skills and their affordances, active participation in workshops animated in participants a vision of their possible achievements in the outside world. Discursive practices of soft skills thus activate the virtual qualities of affective mediums and the bodily perceptions of affordances for action. In a market economy where individuals are increasingly reliant on marketing themselves as accomplished and resourceful individuals (in terms of expertise, innovation, and inspiration), soft skills are experienced as essential in asserting and negotiating the value of the person.



My analysis may contribute to the phenomenology of self-improvement. Rather than looking at projects for self-improvement solely in terms of socioeconomic imperatives, discursive subject-formation or norms of cultural capital, I suggest that individuals' commitments to self-improvement should be understood through the affective experience of affordances for action. Through the ability to see oneself in the position of the role model, the master teacher, or the successful entrepreneur, individuals can maintain hope for approaching meaningful achievements through their pedagogic practices. As Chapter 2 concluded, this hope cannot easily be sustained outside of the workshops, but it is nonetheless characteristic of the experience of self-improvement, particularly in social settings and affective mediums.

In this chapter I began focusing on workshop participants' ideas of personhood through the performative and imagined transformative capacities of soft skills. Yet informants' ideals of personhood were at the same time premised on seemingly innate moral qualities. This is the topic of the next two chapters.

## Chapter 4 - The Pedagogic Ideal of Individual Autonomy

### Introduction

At the end of one November weekly session of *Super Speakers* that I attended, I lingered at the café venue for a few minutes to chat with Jacob, a shy 28-year-old man who had attended the club for the second time. I introduced him to Anxia, an enthusiastic student member of the club, who asked him for his impressions of the club so far. 'So open-minded! It's so refreshing, such a relief to engage with people here!' he exclaimed. Although Jacob was new to the club and had yet to converse one-on-one with members other than myself, he already conceived of the club as a unique and dynamic social space. Later, Anxia and I left Jacob and joined Max, one of the founders of the club, on a city bus ride back to their homes. The two continued to discuss the club's character along the way. 'The main reason that I persist in this club,' Max opened, 'is the different worldviews (*butong de guandian*) we have [different to the wider society]. In my job as a manager in construction I supervise all sorts of people. That mode of myself (*zhege zhuangtai de wo*) is very rude (*culu*). In the club I can act differently, we have a cleaner environment (*ganjing de huanjing*) and mutual respect.'

This dialogue construed the club not only as a pedagogic and interactive space, but also as a site embodying a unique set of values. Informants such as Max, Anxia, and Jacob emphasised the specific moralities of the club, even if each had different personal motivations to practice public speaking. Other members of *Super Speakers*, who unlike Max and Anxia had multiple engagements and priorities that prevented them from attending

workshops on a weekly basis,<sup>20</sup> nonetheless also spoke of the club with great appreciation.

Most participants of *Champion Training* and *Heart's Secret* expressed a similar opinion.

In this chapter, I record informants' interpretations of the morality of workshops and their corresponding notions of what constitutes a moral person. I focus on the ideal of individual autonomy which is central to these discourses. Informants associated their practice with fostering a personality that could exist and act as independent from social influences and demands. This ideal was fundamental to informants' ideas of self-improvement, but in reality it was highly unattainable, for two reasons. First, the ideal of autonomy does not accurately reflect a group practice wherein individuals unitedly conform to pedagogic instruction and a 'club.' Second, and pivotal to understanding individuals' phenomenological and epistemological perspectives, informants deployed their ideals of autonomy in contrast to their existing everyday social realities.

The overarching concept in this chapter is 'heterotopia,' which extends the idea of the affective medium and captures the moral imaginary of workshops. Workshops are heterotopias in that they are spaces that emanate from dominant structures and ideologies (Johnson, 2006, p. 87), but ultimately reconfigure them to produce an experience of a socially unique space. Workshops bring forth an idealised version of society, an 'enacted utopia' (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). By this, workshops also activated participants' imaginaries of

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<sup>20</sup> In *Super Speakers*, for example, only 25-55% of attendees in any given weekly session (which usually hosted 13-25 participants) would attend the subsequent meeting. Only a core group of senior members and new enthusiastic members would attend 2-3 meetings consecutively. Most of the 40-45 members would attend 1 in every 3 meetings on average. This, in addition to the more unpredictable attendance of guests made the social composition of each activity contingent and distinct. In *Heart's Secret* the variations in attendance were even greater, excluding small advanced training groups for senior members.

the ideal person and allowed participants to affiliate themselves with a seemingly morally unique pedagogic space.

This concept was introduced by Michel Foucault (1986) in a short 1967 lecture. In short, heterotopias are physical sites that draw on real locations and practices, but offer modified versions of them. For Foucault, this concept indicates the importance of emplacement in modern society in the organisation and classification of groups, practices or cultural knowledge. Yet unlike some of Foucault's theoretical concepts, heterotopia does not indicate a clear mechanism of governance. Sites of heterotopia may have a disciplinary function ('heterotopias of deviation' (1986, p. 25)) but may also bring about subcultures and 'spaces of illusion' (1986, p. 25) that offer a space to manifest alternative values and practices. Heterotopias indicate sites that respond to and display particular social norms and values. They are not utopias since they are comprised of real elements of social space and are always in relationship with other spaces (1986, p. 24; see also Johnson, 2006, p. 84), although individuals may experience them as utopias.

The concept of heterotopia can capture the conflation between the specific moralities and the affective medium of workshops (as described in previous chapters), which together produce imaginaries of an ideal person. Workshops draw on values and imperatives emerging in the everyday (self-reliance, career self-development) and amplify them while associating them with a moral ideal. Through these heterotopias, participants expressed their moral distinction from greater Chinese society as they celebrated their group morality and criticised widespread social norms. Yet through this rhetorical distinction, informants paradoxically both separated themselves from and implicated themselves in the problems they were depicting. Max, for example, did not present himself as a morally transformed or

elevated person, but rather as someone who could become a better person through the workshop interactions. Even informants who were more proud of their cultivated qualities never saw themselves as immune to the social practices they were criticising.

The primary quality that features in informants' rhetoric of distinction is individual autonomy, which also encompasses related attributes such as open-mindedness, non-conformity, and innovation. For informants, autonomy has become the quality by which they evaluate the morality of people and of interpersonal practices. This centrality of autonomy reflects the expansion of individualistic values in contemporary China (Hansen, 2015; Yan, 2010; 2011). It is nonetheless important to identify the gap between the performative ideals of autonomy and informants' everyday practices. Interestingly, informants persisted in presenting a non-compromising ideal, even if, or because, it could not prevail outside of the heterotopian space. Autonomy is thus charged as an imaginary ideal that always extends beyond the actual social world. In Chapter 5 I will continue to discuss this ideal when presenting informants' imaginaries of a moral future society.

Through the ideal of autonomy informants celebrated their 'self' (*ziwo*), while disapproving of more quotidian perceptions of personhood. Informants located personhood in Chinese society in the fulfilment of social roles (child, parent, husband, wife, student, employee) in which the individual is deeply embedded in social relationships. The relation between fulfilling social roles and becoming a fully realised person in society is of course not unique to China, as the seminal ethnographies by Meyer Fortes (1971), Clifford Geertz (1966) and Fitz J.P. Poole (1982) have established. Nonetheless, in Chinese philosophical and political thought this process is notably accentuated by a cosmological vision that associates the fulfilment of social roles and the realisation of key social relationships with the maintenance

of social order. Even the more recently popular idea of 'self' was initially deployed by reformers in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China to mobilise people for a project of nation-building, rather than conveying individuals as self-determining entities (Wang, 2000). Acknowledging these dominant ideas, informants regarded the 'self' as suppressed, by default, by social pressures and relationships. For informants, expressing the 'self' was therefore correlated with the imaginary of an ideal person. In other words, although informants' ideas of 'self' emanated from the privatisation of society and retreat of traditional structures, as in Anthony Giddens' (1991) vision of the 'reflexive self' of modernity, they also employ the 'self' to wilfully defy, in rhetoric and imagination, their local social structures.

This chapter continues to examine the discontinuity that workshop pedagogies and participants produced between workshops and everyday practices. The ideal of the autonomous person is both an extension of emerging discursive practices and socioeconomic conditions in China, acting as a performative rhetoric that animates workshop heterotopias and guides informants' social critiques. By engaging with this ideal via heterotopian practices, informants perceived themselves as exceeding their mundane existence.

### Self-improvement via club affiliation

I begin by exploring the workshops as social spaces. In this dissertation I refer to my three field sites first and foremost as 'workshops,' rather than social 'clubs,' since they did not consist of a fixed composition of participants, largely due to offering one-time sessions (particularly in *Champion Training*), and since activities emphasised learning and self-improvement. This notwithstanding, many participants did foster and sustain an on-going sense of workshops as some form of club constituted by individuals of shared interests.

*Super Speakers* and *Heart's Secret* were also referred to as 'clubs' (*julebu*). In *Super Speakers*, members ran club activities and membership was encouraged for those who wished to regularly attend. In *Heart's Secret*, membership was also encouraged, although members were more present at some activities than others. In courses and workshops running over several days, members comprised 80-90% of overall participants, while in one-day 'salons' members constituted as little as half of attendees. *Champion Training*, in contrast, was not considered as a club. However, the intensity of the one-week training camp produced the most overt sense of group cohesion and connection, even if most participants did not return to the school's activities after completing the camp.

The sense of belonging to a club was fostered and maintained through various rituals and activities beyond the pedagogic exercises. In *Super Speakers* and *Heart's Secret*, organisers would introduce their group and its background at the beginning or end of activities. This included promotion of future activities, reference to online information and expression of the club's values. The value statements articulated the importance of self-improvement, of offering a club where individuals could 'follow their dreams,' an emphasis on equality and custom-made activities (at *Heart's Secret* only), and more widely, bringing together 'like-minded' (*zhitong daohe*) people.

Group photos were one of the rituals that enhanced the sense of affiliation to the groups and their pedagogies. In each of the three field sites, participants never left the classroom before taking part in such a group photo that exhibited a banner with the name of the workshop. Although for organisers these photos served as an instrument for online promotion, this was also a rewarding experience for many of the participants. It allowed members to sustain their association with their club, while for guests it was a pleasurable

souvenir. The impact of such photo sessions was notably short-lived for most participants, but it nonetheless provided lasting evidence of one's participation and learning.

Of even greater importance to the constitution of the 'clubs' were Wechat chat groups, in which only club members could participate. In these chat groups members would share interesting articles or links, photos from activities (beyond the group photos that were posted on each group's official webpage), and plans for future events. The latter focused on pedagogic activities but would occasionally also include suggestions for recreational gatherings. Interestingly, these group chats were also active during workshops. While participating in workshop activities, members would simultaneously communicate with other members online, both those present and absent from the workshops. In interactive exercises they often put their phones away, but in less energetic segments they maintained an online dimension of the club additional to the interactive medium. These online interactions enhanced a sense of an on-going social group among members.

The online engagement also revealed participants' foci on their individual accomplishments vis-à-vis their club affiliation. The following posts, which three participants uploaded onto their personal Wechat profile after concluding an activity, are typical examples of this:

The commander teacher Fu, class of 3L communication, allowed us all to have a stronger *model of ourselves (ziji moshi)*, and more perception of our moods and behaviour. Now we can *head towards a truer self (jia zhenshi de ziji)*. - Feng Lu, a 40-year-old member of *Heart's Secret*, uploaded during a 3-day workshop, November 27, 2015.

A place where dreams take off. I thank each peer. [...] Every stage in our growth demands a corresponding exercise. [...] Search for opportunities, seize opportunities,



cherish opportunities – this is the eternal purpose (*yongheng de zhuti*) of each independent individual (*duli ge ti*). - Cai Xia, a 41-year-old member of *Heart's Secret*, May 22, 2015.

[I] had a very meaningful night at *Super Speakers* tonight and won 'best speaker.' I hope this club continues to grow. – Roy, a 20-year-old member of *Super Speakers*, March 12, 2016.

These posts convey, at once, the sense of a warm and amicable club atmosphere ('I thank each peer,' 'meaningful night'), a unified practice ('stronger model of ourselves'), and a sense of achievement ('best speaker,' 'head towards a truer self'). Interestingly, while expressing their workshop experiences and celebrating self-centred virtues, these posts also indicated a sense of co-dependence. The ideological and pedagogic language used in the workshops was central to how participants spoke about their club, their fellow members and their personal achievements. Participants were therefore both expressing their individuality and adhering to a homogenous social space.

These Wechat posts indicate that group impact was not downplayed but remained essential to participants' understandings of self-improvement. This articulation of individual autonomy via group affiliation is a paradox only because of the impossibility of the ideal of autonomy. As William Mazzarella (2010, p. 718) states in his criticism of accounts that conceptualise the 'crowd' as inhibiting contingent action and individual expression, crowds and their social dynamics are 'also the means by which social institutions and even the much-fetishized upstanding individual becomes possible.' The concept of individual autonomy is therefore constructed and circulated through crowds and social practices.

Understanding this ideal as a central notion of soft skills practices, I examine it in further detail below.

### The ideal of individual autonomy

Reform era China has been characterised by a rise of individualistic values, particularly among younger generations. Yan Yunxiang (2010; 2011; 2013) recognises this process in the extensive privatisation of Chinese society combined with the decline of supreme moral authorities and collective action. The dominant social entity in today's China has become the 'striving self' that is governed by self-interest (Yan, 2011; 2013). Mette Hansen (2015) also describes this trajectory. She describes Chinese youth's widespread expressions of individual desires and aspirations within the educational system. Hansen, nonetheless, identifies a limit to individualisation, particularly in the conformity of individuals to the CCP leadership. Her term 'authoritarian individualism' aims to capture the boundaries within which the individual can pursue their personal desires without resisting the political system.

In this chapter I similarly observe the expansion of individualistic values in China, though I identify individual autonomy as a performed ideal rather than a dominant mode of self-perception. As the previous section indicates, the terminology of individual autonomy does not mean that individuals denied the value of social affiliation and conformity within the 'clubs.' As the following sections describe, informants emphasised impediments to the expression of autonomy in their social worlds. In workshops, on the other hand, informants brought forth imaginaries of unconditional autonomy, thus activating and sustaining unrealistic ideals. Following Yan and Hansen, I argue that autonomy is a fundamental signifier of morality in contemporary China, yet it remains charged, I suggest, with imaginaries exterior to existing social realities.

During my first one-week camp with *Champion Training* in early March 2015 I met Shili, a third-year student studying politics at a university in Jinan, whose hometown was in Zaozhuang in southern Shandong. Shili was attending the camp for the second time and had already initiated communication with director Li Chen about joining the team of young entrepreneurs that ran *Champion Training*. Shili's first words to me during our lunch break were 'Gao Le [my Chinese name], you probably realise that the people you meet here are not like most people in China. Trainees and team members are all open-minded (*kaifang*) people who don't care about "face" (*mian zi*).' Shili, like other devoted participants in *Champion Training* and my other two field sites associated 'open-mindedness,' non-conformism, innovation, and sincerity with their workshops' pedagogy. For Shili, who was committed to self-improvement regimes such as attending workshops for young entrepreneurs, writing a journal, and reading biographies, the club's pedagogy and group interactions moralised his endeavours.

Shili contrasted *Champion Training* and its values with his everyday social and familial circles. He was frustrated that his family were not enthusiastic about his entrepreneurial ambitions, as they hoped that he would choose a path that would guarantee occupational stability. Since his parents were relatively affluent (earning a monthly income of 12,000-15,000 CNY), they did not pressure him to change his ways, but certainly did not endorse them. Shili also lamented his perceived gap between his values and those of his university classmates. During my year in Jinan I met him at his university campus several times, where he always pointed out this problem. He saw students around him as 'sheep.' According to him, they were mechanically studying for exams, ignoring their own autonomy and not striving for uniqueness. They were also swallowing every word from their teachers with submission, while he was the one daring to 'say no' (*shuo bu*). Even when we were relaxing

together in a campus courtyard, Shili's smiling expression contrasted with his overt discontent with the surrounding environment:

Look at all these students, all they care about is passing the exam. In *Champion Training*, people look more ahead, think about finding a job, or about entrepreneurship. Students here in this campus are already graduating, but they still think only about their coming exams. They don't ask themselves 'what have I invented' (*wo famingle shenme dongxi*) or 'what business I have established' (*wo chuangle shenme gongsi*).

Shili's ideas of non-conformity were tied to a positive image of entrepreneurship. In contrast, most of my other informants were less committed to or optimistic about becoming entrepreneurs. However they similarly indicated a moral gap between the morality of workshops and the uninspiring momentum of their everyday social and occupational settings.

Another committed self-improver was Hu Ling, a 29-year-old man from a less affluent background than Shili. Hu Ling, a member of *Super Speakers* since 2011, was among the group of senior members (which included Max, mentioned above) who saw themselves as the backbone of the club and its values. He regarded the club as a place that gathered individuals who were willing to challenge what they saw in their social circles as narrow-minded conformity to social norms. Hu Ling did not claim to successfully manifest this non-conformity in his every word and deed, though he insisted that he was forever aspiring to 'improve' himself. Joining *Super Speakers* was a turning point in his life. His engagement with other members, who seemed to offer alternative values to what he identified among his work colleagues and relatives, inspired him to assert his individuality. Throughout his

commitment to self-improvement, Hu Ling also reflected upon his level of autonomy. Once he shared with me his thoughts about his ability to ‘take initiative’ (*zhudong*):

I had a discussion with Zuxi (another senior member in *Super Speakers*). We said that there are three types of people [in relation to taking initiatives]: The first type has a strong sense of initiative (*zhudongxing bijiao qiang*). When looking for a place to eat, this person will ask around and check out places. The second type will follow the decision of others (*genzhe bieren jueding*); he will experience things through the initiative of others. The third type – even if you recommend it to them, even if you put a dish in front of their face, they will never taste it.

Hu Ling admitted that he was still the ‘second type,’ indicating the difficulty that he experienced to become truly autonomous, and the additional self ‘improvement’ that he should undertake.

The ideals of autonomy held by informants such as Shili and Hu Ling could be harnessed as inspiration for their real-life pursuits and aspirations, including their engagement with knowledge, becoming a person of initiative and possibly committing to entrepreneurial undertakings. For other informants the extension from the workshop to the outside world was more elusive. Yet Shili and Hu Ling shared with most informants an association of autonomy with their club’s or team’s morality. Shili and Hu Ling indicated in their reflective analyses that they relied on the group to activate their convictions toward this moral virtue of autonomy, and that maintaining such virtue in the outside world required tremendous endurance.

## A heterotopian pedagogic space

For Shili and Hu Ling, the club and its workshop sessions were experienced as enhancing some of the values and gestures they encountered outside of workshops. Informants were responding to new economic and professional imperatives of self-marketing, expressing themselves as individuals and becoming self-reliant. Workshops highlighted these imperatives while at the same time denying other social practices such as conformity to exams, social hierarchies, and 'face.' In other words, workshops 'create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled' (Foucault, 1986, p. 27). As geographer Kevin Hetherington (1997, p. viii) adds, building upon Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia:'

Heterotopias organise a bit of the social world in a different way to that which surrounds them. That alternative ordering makes them out as Other and allows them to be seen as an example of an alternative way of doing things.

I construe workshops for soft skills and their interpersonal dynamics as heterotopias, wherein individual autonomy became an ideal and a characteristic of the pedagogic social space in distinction to the outside world. According to Foucault (1986, p. 24), a heterotopia is an 'enacted utopia.' It is a site that can either represent or invert existing spaces, or both. The concept of heterotopia can also be applied to practices and interactions that do not indicate a physically bounded 'site,' such as video games (McNamee, 2000), online media (Jacobs, 2004), and educational programs (Garratt & Piper, 2010; Paulston, 1999; Sandberg et al., 2016). Foucault's overview of possible heterotopias indicates that they can expand from sites of disciplinary power (as in prisons and mental health institutions) to sites of counterculture and resistance. This concept therefore does not convey a single trajectory of

expansion or suppression of social norms. What connects all heterotopias is that they offer a distorting image of the outside world: they transpose people to different gestures, dispositions, temporalities and imaginaries, yet they constantly draw on real-life conditions. They enhance, condense, and reassemble the social and physical order that characterises more ordinary spaces. For example, botanic and zoological gardens concentrate a range of species that would normally not appear in one site (1986, pp. 25-26). In other cases heterotopias can offer 'compensation' for values and needs that are not present in other social sites (1986, p. 27).

Workshops constructed an ideal and homogenous image of social interactions and personality that in the everyday coexisted with other values and responsibilities. Through content that celebrated, at large, individual autonomy and facilitated the affective medium, workshops marked themselves as distinct, or as 'Other,' from society while facilitating cohesive group practice. Furthermore, by juxtaposing autonomy with a warm supportive group dynamic, workshops added an affective value to the idea of autonomy even if, in fact, the imperative of self-reliance in their everyday pursuits was not as rewarding or pleasurable. Following Peter Johnson (2006, p. 87), workshops are heterotopias as they 'light up an imaginary spatial field, a set of relations that are not separate from dominant structures and ideology, but go against the grain.'

In workshop heterotopias, participants and instructors produce a moral and affective gap from the real world while also trying to make participants more competent vis-à-vis the existing social reality. This is a form of distinction that relies on reflective and expressive evaluations of common sociocultural phenomena. Participants are at once associated with

the moral qualities of the workshop and immersed in the so-called problematic practices of the everyday, as the next section further illuminates.

### Against three figures speak self-improvers

Informants' celebrations of individual autonomy involved imagining an alternative, heterotopian society that contrasts and depreciates quotidian Chinese social practices. On some occasions, informants associated their critiques specifically with local culture. After over a year of fieldwork, I noticed repeated profiles and characterisations of people and behaviours that my informants would critique as representative of local sociocultural deficiencies. These characterisations can be condensed into three primary figures that I call the 'credentialed student,' the 'stagnant government official' and the 'scolding mother.' I add these discourses to Shili and Hu Ling's social critiques, since they highlight how informants were implicated in the very practices and norms that they wished to overcome. These discourses further position the cause, effect, and evidence of this problematic in the suppression of individual autonomy.

#### The credentialed student

Li Ting, a *Champion Training* instructor and third-year undergraduate student in project management, was an extremely ambitious young woman. In addition to her work in *Champion Training*, she undertook various internships in large enterprises whenever she had a school break. She had little regard for students who did not share her ambitions and was particularly discontent with the lifestyles, attitudes and objectives of postgraduate students. She once explained:

Many postgraduates have no awareness. These are students who spent their undergraduate years watching television in the dorms and reading books. No careful



planning (*guihua bu xinxi*), wasting their time (*langfei shijian*)... By the time they were in Year Four [the final year of undergraduate studies], they had no other option but to take the exam for postgraduate studies (*kaoyan*). Many postgraduates I have met here seem to me like freshmen students in terms of their level of maturity. Many of them were also encouraged to continue studying by their parents, lacking independent thinking (*mei duli sixiang*).

Just like Shili, who described his classmates as a conformist herd, Li Ting saw academic studies as a haven for non-resourceful souls. She discerned postgraduate studies as a marker of incompetence and an avoidance of the real world, rather than a choice on its own terms. This avoidance is strongly linked, in Li's interpretation, with a tendency to comply with others' expectations.

This negative image of postgraduate students should be understood in the context of Chinese youths' anxieties about their prospects in the job market. Since the expansion of university enrolment in China following the 1998 Education Law (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 1998), the prestige of university diplomas have declined while graduate unemployment has risen.<sup>21</sup> Although the number of entrants in postgraduate programs is on the rise, postgraduate studies have become, for some groups, a symbol of self-negation and avoidance of competition. Li and her peers in *Champion Training* associated postgraduate degrees with a common prioritisation of stability and

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<sup>21</sup> The number of student enrolments continues to increase today. In Shandong province, for example, in 2015 the number of new students in higher education rose by 24% compared to the number of graduates (Shandong Provincial Education Department, 2016), indicating a development over four years. Postgraduate enrolment is similarly increasing (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2015). According to Bai Limin (2006, 142), postgraduate degrees are sought by students who seek to avoid the intense competition among university graduates for white-collar jobs.

conformity. They believed that ‘doing what one loves’ drives more bold initiatives in the professional world. Returning to Liu Xingqi’s appreciation of entrepreneurship (see Chapter 3), a person who sets himself free in the private economy is one who can rely on his or her personality and soft skills (Liu, 2013b, p. 214). Liu adds that this kind of exemplary person relies on ‘actual abilities’ rather than ‘flashes one’s diplomas to fool people’ (*liangchu wenping jiu neng huzhuren*) (2013b, p. 214).

Clearly, these views convey anxiety concerning competitive employment conditions as much as they offer moral prescription. Interestingly, these anxieties are translated to an appreciation and idealisation of individual autonomy. *Champion Training* members in fact did not follow their own critique to the fullest. They were still careful to finish their degrees, realising that ‘flashing their diploma’ is still a prerequisite in job interviews notwithstanding Liu Xingqi’s recommendations. However, they still wished to associate their self-improvement practices with an imagined ideal.

The stagnant government official

Following an evening session of *Super Speakers*, I took a bus ride with three male members, ages twenty-seven to thirty. Sitting in the rear of the bus, they shared with me their preferences for work in the private economy. One of them shared an allegory about a crane. The crane, representing civil servants, stands sedentarily in a pond. It does not lack food or comfort, but such convenience also makes the crane feel increasingly numb and stagnated. Without noticing, the crane gradually becomes covered in mud, unable to move, and ultimately awaits its death. According to this allegory, spiritual and professional stagnancy is a hazard even – perhaps particularly – when one is enjoying stability.

For my informants, state officials epitomise dubious interpersonal practices that suppress autonomy. Shili, for example, saw civil servants as relying on connections, in what he termed as a 'culture of reliance' (*kao wenhua*), in which one's occupational success does not depend on one's own merits. He also criticised the hierarchical nature of the state sector: 'people will always flatter and follow their superiors, and moreover 'do not speak what is in their hearts.' Shili added that civil servants prioritise practices of gift giving to superiors (*songli*), and cultivating social networks (*guanxi*). A person of sincerity, dynamism, and self-reliance is thus the counter-image of the state official.

Another disparager of the state sector was Yan Xia, a 24-year-old member of *Super Speakers*. As a woman committed to self-improvement, she considered the state sector as limiting personal growth. 'I wouldn't want to be put in a box,' she said. 'I prefer to work harder [in the private economy], but have room to develop myself (*fazhan ziji*); that would be more meaningful (*you yiyi*).' Yan Xia's boyfriend at the time (and current husband) was in fact a recently appointed state official. Yan Xia was supportive of his choice and did not denounce the occupational stability he achieved, however she nonetheless rejected such a prospect for herself.

To informants, state official increasingly represents a stagnant and archaic institution. These perceptions stem from the fact that state cadres are no longer associated with common ideology and supreme morality as they were in the past (Hsu, 2007; Pieke, 1995).

Informants' perceptions of cadres were also framed within the prism of individual autonomy and self-improvement. Akin to the postgraduate student trapped inside the campus walls, the civil servant is embedded in a local Chinese system of cultural practices associated with social hierarchies and interdependence. My informants also believed that the state sector

does not permit workers to advance through their own skills and personality.<sup>22</sup> Although informants' ideals of autonomy were prescribed by discursive practices endorsed by the state (psychology, consumerism, entrepreneurship), informants nonetheless made divisions between the moral economies of the state and of the private market.

In practice, informants of working and lower middle-class backgrounds did not rule out the possibility of working in the state sector. Several participants in *Heart's Secret* workshops were state employees, while student participants in *Champion Training* could not ignore the pride and financial reward that they would bring to their households were they to become state officials. One student who grew up in rural Shandong aspired to become an entrepreneur, but also admitted: 'If I will become an official, people in my village will send gifts to my family and this will please my parents and improve our financial situation.' The disregard of the civil service was hence for many individuals a moral stance that could not always align with more practical and family-oriented priorities.

The scolding mother

The final figure that I present emphasises the problematics of certain modes of interpersonal expression that supposedly govern Chinese social relations, namely inside the household. The 'scolding mother' is a woman who harshly disciplines her child to adopt appropriate behaviour and achieve educational success. She allegedly ignores the child's healthy growth into a 'complete' and well-rounded individual.

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<sup>22</sup> According to this view, the state stands in an opposite pole to entrepreneurship in terms of its suppression of meritocracy. In practice, as John Osburg (2013) shows, businesspersons in China are entangled in social networks that include state actors. As a result, they lament the fact that they cannot attain this meritocratic ideal.

The scolding mother conforms to local tendencies to prioritise 'hard education' without considering alternatives. According to Liu Xingqi (2013b, p. 213), the common parental preaching 'you must study hard!' (*ni yao haohao dushu*) can make children terribly unhappy. Liu amplifies his argument, stating that 'many people study hard but are not happy, and can even become murderers (*biantai sharen*).' Here Liu alludes to a shocking incident in which a high school student from Zhejiang province murdered his mother in response to the pressure she exerted on him (see Kuan, 2015, pp. 66-67). Informants, from students in *Champion Training* to parents in *Heart's Secret*, were sympathetic to the emotional challenges faced by Chinese youth, and envisioned less pressured conditions as ideal for children's growth.

Several self-improvement practitioners were particularly concerned with the lack of independence experienced by Chinese children and youth. A 22-year-old *Champion Training* instructor named Chaoxing was irritated by her mother's expectations concerning her place of residence and romantic choices. She often expressed her hopeful imaginary of youth who leave home at age 18 and become fully independent. Chaoxing liked what she believed to be the US-style of parenting, in which parents and children live their lives separately, relating to each other through friendship between individuals rather than a contract of mutual demands. Being unappreciative of Confucian values of filial piety (*xiao*), Chaoxing was hoping to untie the knots of interdependence and allow each party to exist, aspire, and make choices as 'individuals.'

The scolding mother was construed among soft skills practitioners as an immoral and ineffective model of parenting. A senior member of *Super Speakers* named Muling, when introducing the club's values to guests, emphasised the constructive, sincere, and emphatic

evaluation that senior members offer when giving feedback on speeches. 'In China, we are accustomed to ineffective criticism. Like, when mothers shout at their child: 'why did you do this and this and this' [imitating a mother who scolds the child in staccato shouts while pointing a finger]. This is not very helpful.' A similarly derogatory imitation of mothers was given by Jiang Cheng, a psychologist and instructor of *Heart's Secret* in one of his workshops. The trajectory he narrated was one in which a child who is too preoccupied with pleasing his or her parents neglects their own personality and aspirations. Participants who were mothers expressed support for this message. They wished to improve their 'communication' styles in order to promote their children's well-being. Some of them admitted, however that they could not easily apply this mantra, since discipline is still crucial for success in the Chinese educational system. As Teresa Kuan (2015, p. 86) points out in her study of motherhood in the context of China's educational reforms, while middle-class mothers increasingly appreciate non-disciplinary educational methods, they nonetheless must 'balance two incommensurable goods: protect the child's happiness or ensure survival?'.<sup>23</sup> Mothers in *Heart's Secret* moved between these two perspectives, and at times conceived of soft skills, specifically new communicational styles, as an alternative channel for persuading their child to adopt 'proper' behaviour.

The figures of the credentialed student, stagnant official and scolding mother position soft skills pedagogies as potential remedies and temporary refuge from perceived Chinese cultural ills. Whether it is the entrepreneurial spirit promulgated by *Champion Training*, the sincere evaluation sessions of *Super Speakers*, or the stress *Heart's Secret* participants put

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<sup>23</sup> Kuan's (2011; 2015) accounts show that popular advice for parenthood is largely directed at women, since mothers carry most burden of child-raising, and since they are depicted as requiring better emotional management.

on raising independent children, informants interpreted their workshops as offering alternative possibilities for social interactions and images of personhood. But this overt distinction, taking place within a heterotopian pedagogic setting, indicated informants' inherent inability to extract themselves from these quotidian practices. Informants were still invested in academic exams, finding secure jobs, and disciplining their children. Some of them also openly admitted that they could not achieve their ideals in the foreseeable future. This was a matter of pragmatics but also of acculturation, as Shili from *Champion Training* admitted after harshly criticising Chinese cultural characteristics:

Although I am quite different from most people, sometimes unconsciously (*bu zhi bu jue*) I may also behave this way [referring to tendencies to rely on family and friends and to search for the approval of teachers and parents]. These habits have become 'hidden regulations' (*qian guize*).

Informants, as actors immersed in the local culture, were by definition 'tainted' by the very immoral qualities that they were critiquing.

Workshop participants together constituted a heterotopia wherein individual autonomy was celebrated, while simultaneously acknowledging their embeddedness in the quotidian practices they were criticising. In this way they did not engage in 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures,' which Piere Bourdieu ascribes to the subconscious reproduction of a social habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). Instead, they fostered forms of distinction that were highly expressive, reflective, and repeatedly produced appreciation for themselves and their workshops. They could not possess or internalise the qualities they admired, yet they immersed themselves in affective interactions and moral discourses that stimulated their

senses of moral self-worth. Next I return to the workshop setting to discuss how performances of selfhood were inherently charged with the ideal of individual autonomy.

### Selfhood as autonomy

At this point, I juxtapose my informants' celebrations of 'self' and their ideals of individual autonomy. In the Wechat posts that I noted earlier, the language of 'self' was very pronounced. Participants spoke about their achievements and expectations by emphasising their 'self.' This language was also prevalent and standardised during workshops. For example, at the beginning of workshops, when participants introduced themselves (a common routine in *Champion Training* and *Heart's Secret* for all attendees and for newcomers in *Super Speakers*), they emphasised their goals of 'becoming a better self' (*zuo geng hao de ziji*) or 'understand myself' (*liaojie ziji*).<sup>24</sup> Although these self-centred statements were expressed along with statements of gratitude towards other participants and acknowledging affiliation to the group, they were still meaningful in terms of adopting workshops' 'correct' linguistic styles and imaginaries.

I suggest that participants expressed a selfhood that was charged with an ideal of a person stripped of social roles. For example, mothers in *Heart's Secret* enjoyed following the instruction to let go of their self-perceptions as mothers, wives, daughters, or employees and instead to cherish their more genuine 'self.' For many women, attending the club was already an act of initiative and independence, even if some participants also wished to improve their communication skills and resilience in their social roles. Similarly, student trainees in *Champion Training* followed instructors to ask 'who am I?' (*wo shi shei*), an

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<sup>24</sup> These self-centred expressions resonate with findings by Sonya Pritzker (2016) and Zhang Li (2017) in psychotherapeutic workshops elsewhere in China.



existential inquiry from the school of Carl Rogers.<sup>25</sup> The idea was to invoke in them a consideration of what they want in life, and what matters to them beyond the seemingly mechanistic momentum of satisfying parental expectation and following the crowd.

Selfhood here renders an internal essence independent of social entanglements, and free of the so-called negative effects of demanding parents or institutions that inhibit autonomy.

For workshop participants, the affirmation of the 'self' was therefore not only a focus on an 'internal' essence but was an invocation of an ideal that resembles what Charles Taylor (1992), looking at the meaning of the 'self' in Western liberal democracies, terms as 'self-determining freedom.' Accordingly, the self 'doesn't recognize any boundaries, anything given that *I have to* respect in my exercise of self-determining choice' (1992, p. 68).

Nevertheless, unlike scholars such as Taylor or Anthony Giddens (1991) who describe the rise of this concept of self as a project of meaning-making that responds to the deterioration of traditional social structures, for my informants it was an imaginary that came alive as they wilfully defied existing social constraints. It was an alternative ideal prompted through the heterotopian workshop spaces. The 'self' is of increasing importance in contemporary China, though interestingly the fact that it is not a salient ontological category does not curtail its association with autonomy. The 'self' is rather the ground for imagining and performing an ideal of social disembeddedness.

The meaning and agency of the person in Chinese culture has been strongly linked with social roles. Through fulfilling one's responsibilities within the Five Confucian relationships

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<sup>25</sup> From Rogers' (2012) 'On becoming a Person': 'I have pointed out that each individual appears to be asking a double question: "Who am I?" and "How may I become myself?" I have stated that in a favourable psychological climate a process of becoming takes place; that here the individual drops one after another of the defensive masks with which he has faced life; that he experiences fully the hidden aspects of himself [...].'

(*wulun*: ruler-ruled, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, friend-friend), individuals did not only sustain the wellbeing of their social circles, but also produced the harmonic order of society. This logic is well delineated in the Great Learning, one of the four Confucian classics chosen by the influential neo-Confucian reformer of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Zhu Xi:

When things had been classified in organic categories, knowledge moved toward fulfilment; given the extreme knowable points, the inarticulate thoughts were defined with precision [...]. Having attained the precise verbal definition [...], they then stabilized their hearts, they disciplined themselves; having attained self-discipline, they set their own houses in order; having order in their own homes, they brought good government to their own states; and when their states were well governed, the empire was brought into equilibrium (Pound, 1952, pp. 32-33).

Learning, self-cultivation, social roles, becoming a 'person' and social structure are all interconnected within this model, and accordingly, each individual is agentially reproducing the order.

This cosmological imaginary was not a predominant concern of my informants, nor were they satisfied with a life devoted to sustaining the social order via pre-existing roles. Yet being a 'person' in China remains entwined with the correct fulfilment of roles such as a son or daughter, a student, a married spouse or an employee. Most informants respected parents when it came to choose their profession or spouse, and some even lived with their parents after marriage. In the Lunar New Year holidays, they participated in ancestral rituals, often in the village of their grandparents. University students, while more independent in terms of engagement in extracurricular activities compared in the past, still

treated their teachers with great reverence. They commonly expressed this by giving gifts and assisting teachers with different pedagogic tasks.

Workshops presented an ideal opposition to this longstanding emphasis on hierarchical social roles. The rise of the individual actor and the concept of 'self' was a central discursive topic in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the translated writings of European philosophers, political theorists and psychologists. As Wang Hui (2000) explores, although the topic of *ziwo* (self) was applied to reconfigure social hierarchies, it was continuously absorbed by a new collectivist orientation of modernising and liberating the nation. The person who was subordinated to property owners or senior family members had to adopt a new self-awareness, reconstituting his or her identity apart from traditional hierarchies. The individual self became a significant social category in this process, yet it remained a building block of a larger sociopolitical process. This was also the case under Maoism, when individual identity was increasingly defined by social class and when the agency of the individual was located in its contribution to a collective revolution.

Individuals in China recognise the discrepancies between the self as socially or politically embedded and as an autonomous entity. Zhang Li (2017), in her study of training courses for future psychology counsellors in southwest China notices two ideas of self, one inward looking and the other socially oriented. Zhang construes a dialectical process of 'disentangling' and 're-embedding' that characterises the notion of self-realisation in the training course. She records a trainee who longed for a 'disentangled self' while accepting the fact that he was nonetheless inevitably bound to social networks (2017a, p. 8). Zhang (2017, p. 9) explains that this dialectical tension is a culturally-informed duality between the 'inner' and 'outer' orientation of the Chinese self, which 'constitute a dialogic relationship

that strengthens one another' (see Munro, 1969, p. 95, for a further explanation of this dualism).

In workshops for soft skills, the equilibrium that Zhang describes was destabilised by participants' aspirations to embody a 'disentangled,' or disembedded self. When 'self' was expressed within workshops its meaning was synonymous with autonomy. What characterised workshops was their expressive disavowal of a 'dialogic relationship' in favour of an imagined possibility of a more holistic essence of individual autonomy. Rather than positioning a dialectics within the self, a dialectics exist in informants' experiences between a practiced or performed ideal and actual social conditions. In workshops the ideal was rhetorically magnified.

The foundation of the ideal autonomous person who manifests a disembedded self, was therefore an affective ideal rather than an ontological status within workshops. It was positioned as an imaginary objective of self-improvement. Self-change and the assertion of one's autonomy were thus not conflicting endeavours. The relationship between the uniqueness and malleability of the self takes a different form to social contexts in which selfhood is more socioculturally grounded. In their study of the meaning of 'communication' in US culture, Tamar Katriel and Gerry Philipsen (1981) recognise that appreciation of good 'communication' tends to affirm the individual as 'unique.' However, if communication channels such uniqueness, it cannot become a contingent interpersonal interaction of cooperation, and cannot truly influence the parties involved. The authors notice a contradiction between two axioms of 'unique' and 'malleable' self, which as Eva Moskowitz (2001, p. 218) shows also stands out in psychological prescriptions for self-realisation. In the US as in China, the idea of a unique self literally downplays social constraints, as Charles

Taylor's philosophy shows. In China, compared to the US, this ideal is expressed more performatively and reflectively to counterbalance the socially embedded self. As a result, Chinese informants did not perceive of self-improvement and self-overcoming as antithetical to their expressions of autonomy. Autonomy, for them, needs to be achieved through continuous movement against the current, rather than by impromptu self-expression.

Ultimately, the celebration of selfhood in workshops manifested paradoxes which became particularly apparent when informants tried to extend their ideals to the outside world. Yet the affective engagement with the ideal often suspended informants' deliberations over these paradoxes. Informants overall found no reason to give up their ideal when some social spaces, such as the heterotopias of workshops, allowed it to flourish.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I juxtaposed the morality of self-improvement and soft skills with workshops' affective medium, depicting workshops as heterotopias that produce intriguing imaginaries. Workshops supplemented their affective intensities with a heterotopian imaginary of individual autonomy. The fact that participants could affectively express the ideal of autonomy via soft skills allowed them to sense that they were bringing this ideal to life, even when immersed in group practices.

In a period in China when more and more individuals are pondering the morality of society and the person, the moral individual is increasingly defined as someone who not only adapts to new socioeconomic conditions, but who can also transcend common social practices. The morality of the person – which I define through individual autonomy – is hence inherently in tension with quotidian practices. As Brian Harmon (2014), who studies feasting rituals in the

city of Luzhou, argues, although 'symbolic individualism' has become hegemonic in reform-era China, in practice other forms of personhood are practiced in social gatherings, making individualisation 'a dream.' Individualism is socially appreciated while in practice it is often elusive and suppressed. Workshops for soft skills offer a site where such 'ideals' becomes vivid, simultaneously pronouncing the individualised 'self' as a meaningful social category, and affectively realising it. In this heterotopia individuals can therefore experience an idealised version of contemporary socioeconomic reforms. This heterotopia is also a site that opens a window towards new temporalities, as the next chapter explores.

## Chapter 5 - Social Innovative Self-Improvers

### Introduction

In summer 2015 I met Hu Ling, the senior member in *Super Speakers* I mentioned in Chapter 4. Typically we met in a university campus café. During each encounter he expanded on a project of his. He planned to establish an afternoon training school for children in his village in western Shandong. He was planning to survey parents in his village and wanted to brainstorm his options with me, an anthropologist. His aim was to introduce soft skills to the new generation, and was particularly interested to do so in his home village, where he believed people lacked creativity and grew up into conservative lifestyles. Although he was not pleased with the social morality and interpersonal practices in Jinan either, he preferred to focus on his village, where his project would implement his self-improvement values with an agenda of social development. Yet his aim to infuse supposedly global values of self-improvement and personhood directly into his village, leaping over the village's more gradual social change vis-à-vis regional and provincial influences, also overwhelmed him at times. He once told me in a moment of frustration: 'ai ya [an expression of exclamation], how can I alone change the rural lifestyle (*nongcun de shenghuo fangshi*), it's too difficult!' No less than the sincerity of his declaration, I was fascinated by his on-going commitment to conceptualise his project as socially transformative.

This chapter is about informants' imaginaries of the future. By making links between their individual projects and wider social modernisation, informants interpreted their self-improvement as essential for both their own future and for the development of the nation. For informants, soft skills served as an instrument to reform society and a moral attribute

that reflected the value of the person. Through taking on projects that would spread soft skills, informants attempted to close the gap between their bounded heterotopian experience in workshops and what they saw as immoral Chinese society.

In Chapter 4 I conceptualised workshops for soft skills as heterotopias that present an ideal manifestation of values and practices that have recently emerged in China. Another characteristic of this heterotopia is its relation to the future. As Foucault (1986, p. 26) suggests, one of the possible characteristics of heterotopias is their temporal break from ordinary social experience, which he terms 'heterochronicity.' By engaging with the ideal person, workshops opened a window to an imagined future society dominated by soft skills and individual autonomy. While in the previous chapters I emphasised the gap that workshops produced between their heterotopian space or their affective medium and everyday social practices, here I illustrate that informants tried, at times, to close this gap by directing their efforts to the future. They imagined a future when their self-improvement could achieve optimal results due to the maturing of society, the expansion of economic reforms, and the emergence of a new generation. Yet realising this utopia and overcoming the uncertainties of the present also demanded continuous effort and innovation.

Informants' aspirations to transform society relied on a telos of modernisation, one supported by discourses that renounced local sociocultural attributes. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese politicians and intellectuals have been examining features of the Chinese identity that supposedly hinder development. The imagined modern individual, as Ann Anagnost (1997a; 1997b) asserts, signified a rejection of local norms and of major sectors of society (mostly rural society). These discourses generated a problematic of how to transform society while transcending local sociocultural features. Similarly, for informants



such as Hu Ling, turning to develop his village created an impasse: transplanting his ideal of a modern person (and modern practices) into rural society while remaining antagonistic to its norms and structural conditions. Even when informants directed their efforts to train children, who to them represent a purer and future-oriented segment of society, they met major challenges, since parents were most concerned about their children's immediate adaptation to the existing social reality.

Soft skills were, in informants' eyes, a globally valid pedagogy that could benefit every social actor, including youngsters in an impoverished village. Soft skills, which are 'general faculties' accessible in the everyday, could accordingly facilitate social change. Furthermore, as these skills pertain to personhood, they could potentially promote a new set of norms, characterised by individual autonomy and egalitarian social interactions. At the same time, pedagogies of soft skills in themselves signified for informants a modern and moral practice. By successfully promoting soft skills outside workshops, Hu Ling could therefore materialise and moralise his self-improvement, while carrying out a vision of social development.

By considering informants' hopes for a future, more moral society, I emphasise their attempts to promote a reality qualitatively different to contemporary Chinese modernity. I wish to extend Liu Xin's (2002; 2012) idea that in market-oriented China, individuals lack a meaningful future orientation. According to Liu, people's actions perpetuate the capitalist categories that evaluate them, such as wealth or socioeconomic status. This analysis echoes neo-Marxist criticism of modern 'reason,' as proposed by Max Horkheimer (1941) and Herbert Marcuse (1941). In light of the fact that my informants' values and practices were derivative of the market economy and since informants did not blame capitalism for sociocultural ills, my data is in line with Liu's analysis. But I contend that informants tried to

extend a utopian imaginary, activated in workshops, to a vision of future social development. In fact, informants' discourses suggest that they would agree with Liu's criticism of widespread mechanistic and narrow-minded practices, even if their diagnoses were different from his. Their imaginaries thus conveyed an indirect critique of the outcomes of Chinese modernity, as well as an attempt to transcend market-oriented practices.

### Changing a village through a global practice

#### Hu Ling's village project

A few weeks before concluding my fieldwork in Jinan, Hu Ling, who usually resided and worked in Jinan, invited me to a Sunday visit to his village in Liaocheng County, approximately 200 km west of Jinan. He saw this as a good opportunity to further promote his village self-improvement project and discuss it with me and two city friends. One of the friends drove the four of us in his private car. Once we arrived at his small and relatively impoverished village, we parked the car in a poplar grove and Hu Ling walked us to his home. His brother's two sons ran quietly to greet us. Following them came Hu Ling's 23-year-old sister and his parents. They attended us alertly but did not offer any formal greeting and merely exchanged eye contact and minor smiles.

The main highlight of our visit was not the reunion with Hu Ling's family members, but rather an empty 60 square metre plot of land, a family property, on which Hu Ling envisioned running the training school for the village's kids. The teaching in the school would be based on the teaching of Design for Change (DFC), an international program that focuses on creativity, emotionality, and imagination. I did not encounter this program in my three field sites, yet Hu Ling insisted it fostered individual autonomy through soft skills much

like the pedagogy of *Super Speakers*. Hu Ling had volunteered in DFC in Jinan and was aiming to introduce it to his sister, who would be in charge of the new school. As a substitute teacher in the village, who earned approximately 1100 CNY/month (about AU\$220), a quarter of what Hu Ling made in technical assistance in Jinan, she could benefit from this opportunity. As for finance, Hu Ling would fund the construction of the learning centre, and he hoped that the tuition parents would pay could cover the everyday expenses once the school was up and running.

Educating children through soft skills was for Hu Ling linked to his vision of a moral society. With a touch of condescension, he told his family that he would introduce ‘superb educational methods from China and overseas’ (*guonei guowai feichang bang de jiaoyu fangshi*), methods that ‘local teachers surely have never heard about’ (*bendi de laoshi kending mei ting shuo guo*). Later he told me that he believed the values of creativity, emotional expression, and critical thinking could help transform local youngsters’ ways of thinking. This could, in turn, cultivate more open-minded (*kaifang*) individuals, bring about new modes of relationships, and even foster new sensitivities to style and architecture. Hu Ling’s plan of transforming society through children’s education resonates with agendas in recent reforms for education for quality (Woronov, 2003) and even earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Anagnost, 1997a). The fact that these discourses and reforms did not take effect in his village (and failed to completely transform the education system in China more broadly), did not hamper Hu Ling’s ambition to take on the role of village reformer.

After lunch, Hu Ling (a healthy, neat-looking man who never smoked and rarely drank), walked with a cigarette packet through the village. He offered cigarettes to homeowners and construction workers in order to learn more about the architecture of the village.

Although he detested the buildings in the village for their grey and monotonous style, he still had to ground his aspirations in local practice. His village persona was also evident in his familial responsibilities. Before departing back to Jinan he was pressured to attend a matchmaking meal set up for his sister and a young man from a village nearby. Hu Ling favoured free choice when pursuing romantic love, but ended up examining the potential groom in a lively male gathering with his father, neighbours, and the groom's uncle, where sorghum liquor was excessively consumed. He seemed to enjoy himself.

Hu Ling's wished that his impoverished village incorporates more 'advanced' pedagogic curricula. But Hu Ling's agenda extended beyond narrowing urban-village gaps. He envisioned connecting the village to a seemingly global imaginary of soft skills, one that, according to him, was rare even in the most developed Chinese cities. In some moments, when overwhelmed by the challenge of actualising his project, he asked for the assistance of a teacher in Jinan's public education system, and understood he could not expect to transform his village all at once. Nonetheless, the guiding principle for his project was an instructional method that derived from a supposedly globally valid practice, and hence could be applied anywhere. Choosing his village was favouring his home, but also validating soft skills and their underlying value as enhancing human potential regardless of space and time.

Soft skills as a practice of self-improvement were optimal for imagining new interpersonal relations and the expansion of individual autonomy. As soft skills are a ubiquitous resource in everyday interactions, they were seen by informants as effective channels for social change, while they also represented the objective of such change. As Eva Illouz (2008, p. 14) suggests, soft skills (specifically 'communication' skills), offer 'a new way of thinking about

the relationship of self to others, imagining its potentialities and implementing them in practice.’ Following her participation in workshops for Emotional Intelligence in Israel, which fostered an array of emotional and communicational skills, Illouz (2008, p. 220) concludes that such workshops epitomise a ‘global emotional habitus:’

These workshops, I argue, have the main purpose of instilling new emotional dispositions, or skills required to navigate the volatile conditions of late modernity, to move along long chains of social networks, and to meet the demands of global connectionist capitalism.

Soft skills are conceived by practitioners in Israel and China as allowing the individual to navigate through seemingly global standards. Illouz’s argument echoes Judith Farquhar’s (2001, p. 116) depiction of self-help books (and particularly self-healing guides), in China, as aiding ‘readers who steer their personal lives with, against, or along the edge of the global human mainstream.’ Soft skills similarly offer potential transformation and affiliation with an imagined global standard.

Individuals’ engagement with soft skills does not necessarily facilitate their access to a global middle-class or managerial class as Illouz’s trajectory indicates. James Ferguson (1999), although not speaking about ‘soft skills’ in particular, stresses that ‘cosmopolitan styles’ coexist in urban Zambia with ‘local styles’ as pragmatic signifiers of the person vis-à-vis local society rather than as a form of connection to the outside world (1999, p. 212). These different styles manifest in apparel, status symbols and manner of speech. A ‘cosmopolitan’ person would emphasise disembeddedness from their home village and emphasise mobility and aspirations, while the ‘localist’ would adopt a behaviour that would improve their networks within the village, and in turn their levels of social support.

According to Ferguson, these two styles ultimately do not reflect an innate identity or a meaningful affiliation to a social group. There is nothing inherently less local in the 'cosmopolitan' persons than in their 'localist' counterparts. Each style is above all a strategic self-presentation aimed at improving a person's livelihood.

Based on my findings I recognise that my informants' association with global practices or 'styles' was directed at improving their social and occupational positioning in their existing socioeconomic environment, echoing Ferguson's findings. At the same time, informants' imaginary of self-improvement was also connected to a vision of social development.

Informants' self-improvement positioned them, in their eyes, as social innovators who could promote social change, unlike Ferguson's informants in Zambia or informants interviewed by Illouz in Israel or the US. Furthermore, concerning the fact that soft skills alone offer little tangible ability to separate oneself from others in China (see Chapter 4), or to achieve socioeconomic mobility, the vision of social development morally validated their pursuit of self-improvement.

Ultimately, Hu Ling's project was exemplary of a dialectics of self-change and social development characteristic of self-improvement in China. Although most urban Chinese believe that incorporating science and technology or emulating wealthier countries can alleviate domestic problems (Bakken, 2000, p. 53; Fong, 2004, p. 638), self-improvement via soft skills connects and further moralises development at the level of the individual.

A 'developmental ethos' in the practice of soft skills

Informants' ideas of social innovation drew on an imagined telos of modernity. This telos is informed by social discourses on 'development' in China, which seek to transform traditional Chinese culture. Informants experience this telos as both necessary and laden

with uncertainty, prompting them to take an active role in this process, rather than passively await change.

The correlation between self-improvement, transformed social values, and social progress is thus historically charged and continuously potent in the Chinese sociopolitical imaginary. As Ann Anagnost (1997a) argues, the rise of the modern individual actor in China is always a source of contention within the nation. Looking into discourses on the ideal of the individualistic child in China of the early the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Anagnost concludes that this imagined modern subject 'constitutes both a liberation and a loss that must be compensated for in the illusion of the coherent ego and the unified nation-state' (1997a, p. 212). In other words, the individual by definition rejects parts of him or herself. Only by affiliating to a prominent local entity that promotes transformation on a macro level, such as the nation, may the individual reconstitute their self-coherence. While my study does not focus on the formation of the modern Chinese nation per se, Anagnost's analysis indicates the problematics of self-improvement ideologies that highlight individual autonomy. It also suggests that the ideal of modernity has underlain ideas of self-improvement in China since the Republican Era (1912-1949).

The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century introduced a new ethos of modernisation in China. Reformers sought the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation partly by seeing Chinese cultural characteristics as a hindrance to progress. The revolutionary May Fourth Movement, a nationwide upheaval that grew in response to the 1919 Versailles treaty and sought to awaken the masses and promote political and cultural reformations, represented such a trend. Lu Xun, the most famous Chinese writer of that era (who was later endorsed by Mao Zedong), aimed to inspire introspection in his readers, predicting that 'when the individual is

exalted to develop his full capacity, the country will be strengthened and will arise' (Spence, 1982, p. 68). Later, in Maoist China, the state's agenda prioritised reforming social structures, and an attention to essentialist cultural attributes was evident. The leadership denounced longstanding systems and the values of Feudalism, Confucianism, and popular religion, and cultivated instead the image of the new communist labourer. In the subsequent Reform Era, a period of 'cultural self-examination' (*wenhua fansi*) preceded discourses and policies aimed at 'population quality' (*renkou suzhi*) – the examination of the material and immaterial traits of individuals and groups as an indicator of their suitability for China's economic development.<sup>26</sup>

Today's impetus towards self-improvement is a contemporary manifestation of this historical process, reproducing an imagined telos of progress towards modernity, albeit a paradoxical one. Soft skills and the ideal person, constructed through soft skills pedagogies, stand for the future of Chinese society. Shili, the young student entrepreneur mentioned in Chapter 4, expressed deep discontent about widespread social values. But he was nonetheless confident that in the future his values would gain currency throughout society: 'Along with China's economic development, more people will realise that they need to behave differently. As China plays a bigger role in the international community, people will have to change their ideas.' Informants such as Shili believed in a teleological unfolding, but this imaginary intertwined with a problematic rejection of the present.

Teleological ideas are therefore both an endpoint and an impetus for self-improvement. Andrew Jones (2011, p. 3), exploring attitudes of Chinese reformists and literary figures in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, considers 'development' as 'a way of knowing, narrating, and

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<sup>26</sup> See Anagnost (1997b) for a narration on the evolution of 'cultural self-examination' in the reform era.



attempting to manage processes of radical historical change.’ The engine for this ethos is the ideal of modernity. According to Jones (2011, p. 3), in modern Chinese history the concept of ‘development’ reflects a gap between a sense of an ‘inevitable historical unfolding’ and as ‘a descriptor for the transitive and purposive activity of active historical agents.’ In other words, ‘development’ stretches between a teleological vision of modernity and initiatives that produce contingent results. Hu Ling, for example, was at once, in his view, advancing a necessary historical unfolding, and acting as a pioneer who wished to design a novel reality.

Informants continuously wished for their practices to spread in their social circles and in turn prompt the development of Jinan. Even those who were not as aspirational as Hu Ling participated in their workshops and clubs with a sensitivity to social progress. The mushrooming of psychology clinics and clubs, for example, signified for psychology practitioners a possible positive transformation of their ‘conservative’ social circles to accept new ideas of personhood and interpersonal communication. For senior members of *Super Speakers*, the expansion of their club through recruiting more members also extended from their own sense of pride to putting Jinan more firmly on the map of contemporary self-improvement practices. When I asked senior members what would be the advantage of attracting new members and in turn dividing their beloved club into new branches, they indicated unequivocally that an expansion of clubs would make Jinan more central in the national network of public speaking clubs. ‘This would lead to an expansion of similar practices in Jinan,’ Laiqi, a former club president, told me, eyes sparkling. This would, in other words, further bind the self-improvement of the person within a wider macro process.

Informants therefore both enjoyed and anticipated the fruits of 'development' by finding new activities for self-improvement, and felt discontent about seemingly stagnant features in the sociocultural realities. Their focus shifted from concern about the development of their local region compared to more prosperous cities in China, to a frustration about problematic sociocultural practices (represented by the three figures discussed in Chapter 4) that should be washed away by tides of global ideas of personhood. They both demanded further expansion of socioeconomic reforms and the concomitant import of new pedagogies, indicating their dissatisfaction with the current outcomes of Chinese modernity.

### Temporal utopias and market reproduction

I now wish to discuss to what extent informants' temporal orientation reflected their commitment to socioeconomic reforms, and to what extent it attempted to achieve an ontological break from Chinese modernity. Informants did not criticise capitalism per se. They rather anticipated the expansion of reforms, both in terms of their geographic extension and their enhancement of new values of personhood. But their perspectives, I argue, may also serve as a critique of the outcomes of Chinese modernity and an attempt to envision a qualitatively different future.

Informants, on the one hand, reflected a tendency of individuals in the age of the market economy to advance individually by practices tending to reproduce social structures and their underlying conceptions. Neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School developed this line of thought, emphasising how the 20<sup>th</sup> century sociopolitical apparatus in Europe and North America brought about disenchantment combined with endless false consciousness.

Modern 'reason' lay at the heart of much of their critique. For Herbert Marcuse (1941, p. 145), reason is an activity which perpetuates the social world, ultimately leading to

'submissiveness.' Under these conditions, even when individuals unite they remain immersed in the objective of 'self-preservation' (1941, p. 150). Max Horkheimer (1941) similarly linked reason to pragmatic subordination to society. He further looked at the deceptive nature of this reason. Although reason seems to reflect a universality that promotes the 'autonomy of the subject,' this is merely illusory (1941, p. 36). Ideologies ultimately are about 'what men are like' rather than 'what they believe,' further perpetuating conformity in the disguise of worldviews (1941, p. 47). Horkheimer explored this false consciousness in his seminal work with Theodor Adorno (1997). While individuals in the time they were writing in the late 1940s continued to embrace notions of 'enlightenment,' the two argued that 'enlightenment is realised and reaches its term when the nearest practical ends reveal themselves as the most distant goal now attained' (1997, p. 42). In other words, the language and imaginary of enlightenment is hijacked by immediate goals and objectives strongly entrenched in the current state of affairs.

Similar interpretations of social reality are employed by scholars of contemporary China. Liu Xin (2012), strongly influenced by the above essays, sees the current market-driven era as the annihilation of the qualitative value of the person. The value of people is today located in premade quantitative categories 'external' to them, such as wealth, professional status and statistical measurements (2012, p. 87). This leads to a narrow temporal orientation. He contends that the tendency of individuals to judge themselves and their social realm according to existing categories makes their future relatively meaningless. Their future orientation is narrowed to 'a mimicking reaction to the Other possibilities of modern development' (2012, p. 108).

This target of imagined development can be identified in more wealthy individuals or nations. Ideologically, 'what ought to be has become merged into what is' (2012, p. 120), i.e., the future is not seen to provide a moral alternative to the present. For Liu, this differs significantly from the temporal experience in revolutionary Maoist China, when people perceived their actions as contributing to an ontologically different future. Today, Chinese individuals' mode of action and perception lead them to further immerse themselves in the social demands of the present (Liu, 2002, p. 156). As I discuss in Chapter 6, this also leads to difficulties people have in planning their everyday micro-pursuits.

I agree with Liu's main argument, but I suggest that my informants' thinking and experiences do indicate an attempt to achieve an ontological break from the present. This was most evident in workshops' heterotopias. Workshops not only brought forth an alternative ideal of a person, but also a correlative vision of a future society. One of the possible characteristics of heterotopias, according to Foucault (1986, p. 26), is the different temporal experience they bring forth, 'a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.' This attribute of 'heterochronicity' can manifest in museums that 'accumulate' time and in fairgrounds that highlight 'transitory' time (Foucault, 1986, p. 26).

Workshop heterotopias induced hope for a meaningfully different future. It was a hope that, following Marcel, we might say 'tends inevitably to transcend the particular objects to which it at first seems to be attached' (1951, p. 32), and rejects a threatening 'inner determinism' (1951, p. 41). Hope thus moves beyond the immediate possibilities of the present. Ernst Bloch (1995) offers a similar conception of hope with regards to political activism. He called for prioritising the 'really possible' over the 'objectively possible,' the latter being 'scientifically expected' while the former depends on possibly emerging

conditions (1995, p. 196). Hope reflects an acknowledgement that ‘new conditions – though mediated with the existing ones – arise from the entry of a new real,’ in an ‘unclosed capacity of becoming’ (1995, p. 196). According to Bloch empirical evidence does not and should not suffice in rejecting utopian visions. Although Bloch suggested that a complete rejection of objective factors, as reflected by the ‘effusive enthusiast’ was as problematic as being a ‘flat empiricist,’ the weight of his argument lay in defining and promoting hope as transcending actual conditions.

An affective space that produces heterotopian imaginaries is optimal for moving beyond the reproduction of the present. I do not suggest that the autonomous person of soft skills is a revolutionary subject, but informants’ hopes were charged with utopian possibilities: equal opportunities for self-improvement across society, meritocratic social order, and egalitarian social interactions. In this vision, furthermore, the unique qualities of the person were cultivated and expressed, unlike in the case described by Liu Xin.

Informants attempted to offer a moral version of modernity when evaluating quotidian social practices. These discourses not only criticised so-called Chinese cultural tendencies (as in the discourses of the ‘three figures’), but also highlighted different social behaviours amidst modernisation. This is exemplified by Hu Ling’s following statement on attitudes of self-improvement:

*Super Speakers* is a unique method for self-improvement (*ziwo tisheng de fangfa*), making one become better (*rang wo bian de geng hao*). There are other platforms (*pingtai*) that can bring about such outcome, including psychology clubs, but according to my observations, they do not prevail in the long run. Jinan is quite backward (*tu*). Most people are unwilling to accept new ideas (*xin xiangfa*), are even

unwilling to understand TED! This includes university students, who prefer to sleep, watch TV, and play games. When I saw students attending *Super Speakers*, I thought maybe values are changing, but later I realised they are only a tiny portion of students. Even though youngsters nowadays have advanced internet and technologies, they don't use them to the fullest. As for the men in our club (referring to those in their late 20s and early 30s), they are not as obsessed with jobs, marriage, and owning apartments as most people in society. If you want to learn about typical young people in Jinan, then you won't find them in *Super Speakers*, hehe.

Hu Ling's evaluation resonates with his ideas on autonomy and on taking initiatives (Chapter 4), while it also points to different manners by which individuals engage with modernity. He moves from talking about the value of workshops to examining everyday social behaviours. For him, watching TV and playing games was morally different to exploring 'technologies' or accepting 'new ideas,' and owning an apartment was seen as a thoughtless act by virtue of social conformity, rather than an expression of autonomy.

Ultimately, Hu Ling did not cast blame here on state-driven reforms, but rather on people's attitudes. As such he ignored the structural forces that induce the behaviours he criticised. However, he and other informants tried to offer a qualitative moral distinction between attitudes of self-improvement and more quotidian tendencies, which observers such as Liu Xin would, by contrast, regard as congruent. Eventually, outside workshop heterotopias, my informants' distinction between these two versions of modernity was not easily sustainable. Informants did not manage to extend the ideal person to their social realms. Yet rather than concluding that they demonstrated that 'what ought to be has become merged into what

is,' I want to point out their attempt to offer an alternative version. From a non-functional perspective, their discourses and imaginaries are important, even if they mostly show the limitation of social critique in contemporary China.

Dissatisfaction with the outcomes of economic reforms, as expressed by informants, usually entailed positioning themselves as more moral (or having propensities to become more moral), compared to most social actors. In their ideas around the training of children, informants such as Hu Ling also considered their own self-improvement in the current socioeconomic conditions as less complete compared to the possibilities of self-improvement in the next generation. I discuss this next.

### Realising self-improvement through children

The temporality that guided and accompanied informants' engagement in self-improvement projects became even more evident to me when I heard aspirations – like Hu Ling's - to expand their learning by training the next generation. These plans to cultivate children's personalities and social dispositions brought together a developmental ethos with a hopeful future for the local society. I propose that through these agendas informants also reflected on the difficulty in pursuing comprehensive self-improvement in their present society. Children represented both the potential of a hopeful future society and an alternative avenue for practicing self-improvement.

Although most informants had jobs or career plans which were completely external to the practice of soft skills, I discovered that informants from all three of my field sites held an ultimate objective of establishing training programs for children. Here are four examples, which I add to the story of Hu Ling.

Jia Chunbai, 36, dance teacher, licensed psychologist (counsellor level 2), and a member of *Heart's Secret*, aspired to combine psychology with education in a future training school. She targeted ages 0-3, before a child's thinking patterns (*siwei moshi*), including memory ability, are fixed, according to her understanding. Chunbai believed, following the philosophy of Karl Witte, that children have great untapped potential. Unlike parents who strictly discipline their children, her technique, which she had already applied with her 4-year-old daughter, was democratic, stimulating motivation in the child through engagement with the things she likes.

Yang Liang, 30, a licensed psychology counsellor, former member of *Heart's Secret*, and a member of *Super Speakers*, was not a parent, but like Chunbai saw the importance of childhood in the cultivation of personhood. He had yet to set a clear plan for training children but expressed the following: 'The way a person evaluates his life depends on two factors: one is how he spends his last years, and two is the personality and values that they develop in an early age. So I definitely want my future career to focus on one of the two stages [elder care or training for children].' Late in 2015, Yang Liang and several friends mused on launching a centre for workshops for university students in soft skills that would also operate as a recruitment agent for enterprises in the private economy. He admitted that he still preferred to train children, but believed that addressing students would have more of a market demand. As of August 2017, he had not managed to get local enterprises to invest in or hire his recruitment services.

The next two examples are less specific about the cognitive development of youngsters, but similarly see children as fertile ground for effective training and for promoting social change. Gao Rui, the *Champion Training* instructor I introduced in Chapters 1 and 3, hoped to shift



from training students to launching her own enterprise for children in ages 5-12, also in soft skills. She believed this was the optimal age for self-cultivation (*xiuyang*), an important age for shaping a personality. Interestingly, while Gao Rui often criticised student trainees for lacking maturity and boldness, she also regarded youth as less cynical and more apt to spread a new morality compared to adults. She frequently motivated her trainees to persist in improving themselves for the sake of their ability to step into 'society,' yet she was simultaneously aspiring to reform social norms altogether.

Finally, Tao Wenya, 24, an MA student in English interpreting, and a member of *Super Speakers*, also wished to extend the pedagogy of workshops to children. She did not have any experience as a trainer, but nonetheless aspired to establish a public speaking summer camp for children. She wanted to base her pedagogy on the *Super Speakers'* values of self-improvement, mutual support, and constructive evaluation. She had already tried to market a one-week program, along with classmate and fellow *Super Speakers'* member Chun Tao, but did not manage to recruit clientele. Parents she spoke with were sceptical of her credentials and were not convinced that her initiative would foster skills essential for success in the Chinese educational system. Wenya plans to try again in the future.

The above statements of interest link self-improvement to social change. Clearly, these ideas took place in a marketised setting and as such involved plans for launching an enterprise, recognising a niche market, and profit-making. Just like Liu Aisong, the aspiring psychology aficionado from Chapter 3, the four informants above hoped to gain profit and prestige from the new social impetus for self-improvement through soft skills. However, their enthusiasm when laying out their agendas was inseparable from the morality that they ascribed to soft skills pedagogies and the importance of fostering certain qualities in

youngsters. During my fieldwork I asked two dozen informants about their views concerning sending small children to a hypothetical training institution that would cultivate soft skills like communication, leadership and emotional management. I found that even informants who on other occasions criticised parents for putting pressure and high expectations on children, particularly in terms of studies and extracurricular training, were all very supportive of establishing these kinds of pedagogic programs. Hu Ling explained his view:

Children are by no means a white page when they when they come into the world, their imagination is by no means emerging out of thin air. If we can give them an opportunity to come in contact with society (*jiechu shehui*), a platform to improve the self (*tisheng ziwo*), they are likely to develop better.

While Hu Ling was not satisfied with the current society with which children would 'come in contact,' he nonetheless wished to promote children's development and hoped to achieve a more competent and moral generation. Soft skills represented for him an alternative to the educational discipline experienced by Chinese youngsters nowadays, yet at the same time he envisioned imposing new extracurricular demands on children.

Children offer a hopeful vision for a future society in China, but this future, according to widespread views, should come about through careful fostering. My informants did not wish to await this future passively. This approach extended from policy-makers to teachers, parents, and even younger self-improvers. Focusing on the educational policies of 'education for quality' (*suzhi jiaoyu*), Terry Woronov (2003, p. 15) identifies children's *suzhi* (quality) as 'directly linked to the imagination of China's future under conditions of economic reform, and the new kinds of subject which need to be produced for this future.'

Children are both supposed to malleably adopt new personalities and be the generation that will set the tone for the future values of the citizenry. This imaginary highlights the importance of children for national reforms in China more generally. In Anagnost's (1997a) terms, children signified 'transcendence' above seemingly problematic national-cultural traits in the post-imperial nation of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the child symbolises a carefree state of mind, it is the nature of childhood that makes regimentation necessary, paradoxically undermining 'the very notion of childhood' (1997a, p. 196). The child thus reflects a tension between open-ended possibilities and social engineering directed for remedying specific social problems, the latter manifested at the levels of the state, school, or family. The child becomes indirectly responsible for remedying specific sociocultural problems. This demands transcendence above while being socialised into present society.

More than being a vehicle of change, the child represents the positive potentialities of society. For Anagnost (1997a, p. 19), the 'indeterminacy of children mirrors that of the "people" as a reservoir of untapped national vitality.' According to this vision, the child can distil the positive elements in society, filtering out the non-modern (see 1997a, p. 200). Just as the workshop heterotopia offered an ideal version of social interactions and personhood, which at the same time opened a window on a possible future, so does the child, a non-tainted social entity, become a site for hope. The convoluted reality that restricts the practice of soft skills and individual autonomy could be transformed, through children, into a homogenous moral environment where the ideal person might set the tone.

Informants' plans for training children reflected not only a macro social vision but also their dissatisfaction at their own individual possibilities for self-improvement. Informants wished to achieve a more holistic self-transformation, one in which their workshop experience

could dominate their state of being. In Chapter 4 I argued that informants' form of moral distinction were expressive and short-lived, rather than producing a Bourdieuan 'habitus,' here I point to the way informants' lamented this limitation of their practices. Children offered a hopeful vision for a more complete, effective, and long-lasting process of self-improvement. In other words, informants wished to realise a thorough 'self-cultivation,' which in Confucian philosophy signifies the 'mutual nourishment of inner morality and social norms' (Tu, 1979, p. 25). Children could ideally bring forth harmony between informants' self-improvement ambitions and emerging social norms.

This ideal of holistic self-cultivation is described elsewhere in Saba Mahmood's (2001) account of Islamic piety in contemporary Egypt. Mahmood depicts young women of the Islamic Brotherhood movement, who follow a pedagogy that aims, through the disciplinary repetition of bodily gestures, to transform learners' physical tendencies, intentions, and motivations. This religious pedagogy is 'geared precisely towards making prescribed behaviour natural to one's dispositions' (2001, p. 844). Through time, dedication, and commitment, individuals can achieve holistic self-cultivation in an on-going process. My informants similarly wished to make their practice of soft skills 'natural' to their own dispositions, an 'embodied morality' (Zigon, 2011, p. 10), or 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977).<sup>27</sup> They hoped that their different social circles would support, mirror, and echo their practices. Although workshop pedagogies in China produced affective and moral gaps from

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<sup>27</sup> I do not imply that Mahmood's idea of self-cultivation is congruent with Bourdieu's habitus. In fact, one of Mahmood's (2011, p. 161) seminal contributions is her preference for an Aristotelian idea of habitus, in which disciplinary action, rather than predisposed and subconscious tendencies (as in Bourdieu's model), underlie self-cultivation. My emphasis here is on the outcome of this process, while the accounts by Mahmood, Bourdieu, and Zigon, reveal a thorough cultivation of the person and of interpersonal behaviours compared to my informants' endeavours at self-improvement.

everyday society, informants also lamented these divisions and their inability to sustain a more holistic 'improvement,' extending throughout their different social circles.

Turning to children therefore indicated informants' hopes that their practices could take a stronger hold in people's lives by beginning earlier in life and extending to a possible future. Not only do children represent a potentially alternative future, the fact that most informants' plans were indistinctly oriented towards an unforeseeable future (even Hu Ling has yet to establish his training school as of early 2018) further enhanced this utopian vision. Currently it is difficult to convince Chinese parents to prioritise cultivating children's personality over more immediate orientation towards success in the Chinese educational system, as Tao Wenya's failed attempt to run a camp for public speaking illustrates. In this respect, my informants' plans signify attempts to mitigate the uncertainties of the present and future, as well as their anticipation for the development of new social conditions.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that hope for the future is both entrenched in pervasive ideologies of social progress, and is an elusive vision that requires continuous discursive and imaginative bypassing of the impasses of the present. The way the workshops functioned as heterotopias enabled the regeneration of hope, while agentive projects of social development, such as those pursued by Hu Ling, further sought to regenerate hope by linking personal self-improvement to China's macro development. Children in this process represented both a site for development and a future in which development could manifest. Teleological ideas of modernity inform the hopeful imaginaries of the future among my informants and greater portions of society. While for my informants this telos includes the

expansion of soft skills, for other social actors it extends to other social features. Most of my Jinan friends, for example, constructed a positive image of the future in line with the municipal campaign to construct a 'national civilised city' (*quanguo wenming chengshi*).<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, 'civility,' 'politeness,' and 'environmental protection' were supposed to become prominent attributes of the local society. This vision allowed individuals to accept state initiatives that did not produce tangible positive outcomes in their lives, notwithstanding the scepticism that would frequently threaten their hope.

Informants' discourses reveal how Chinese individuals perceive their self-governance as more than a reinforcement of their present conditions. Constructing and engaging with an ideal – a moral person and a future society – fuels and guides their undertaking of self-improvement. Combined with the pleasure of the affective medium, this moral imaginary transcends the present while recharging informants with proactive and positive attitudes in the present.

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<sup>28</sup> This honour, granted every 2-4 years since 2005 by the state's Central Steering Committee for Spiritual Civilisation (*zhongyang jingshen wenming jianshe zhidao weiyuanhui*), is based on an array of standards such as green areas, pollution, transportation regulations, and citizens' overall satisfaction. Jinan achieved this award in November 2017 after failing in previous attempts (Central Steering Committee for Spiritual Civilisation, 2012).

## Chapter 6 - Hope and Perplexity in the Presentism of Self-Improvement

### Introduction

In March 2016, Tao Wenya seemed surprisingly gloomy when I met her for the last time before concluding my fieldwork. Wenya, a 24-year-old Master's student, was an enthusiastic member of *Super Speakers* and one of my closest informant friends in Jinan. She was usually cheerful when I saw her, regardless of the success or failure of her tasks at the time. In our last meeting, her smile could not hide the gravity of her recent disappointment, which stemmed from an experience of disenchantment.

You probably notice that I am not in great shape (*bu zai zhuangtai*), so I will just tell you why: You remember that I went on a one-month internship as an [English] interpreter in a factory in Zibo [an industrial city in central Shandong]? [...]. It made me realise the huge difference between student life and work life. As a student I am treated with dignity (*timian*) everywhere I go, but in the factory I was treated like a factory worker. Workers' routines are very dull (*kuzao*); it is very difficult (*xinku*). They work hard, for a low salary, suffer from the pollution in the area. When Joe [her boyfriend] was lonely in Jamaica [where he worked as an interpreter], I told him to be happier, make friends, have a better attitude. Now I understand it's not so simple; I see how the environment can affect people.

Later I asked Wenya how that experience impacted her ideas of her future. She responded:

It was a reality check for me. Being a student feels like a way to avoid this kind of difficult routine. Now I know I must develop certain abilities (*benshi*) before I

graduate, so I can be in a better position when looking for jobs. I must try harder (*wo yao duo nuli*).

Wenya was spiritually deflated, comprehending that the excitement of her multiple tasks and projects as a student could easily turn into an arduous lifestyle when she graduates and the stakes are higher. But her conclusion, even a few hours after her return from her factory experience, was to persist in improving herself, and by this hopefully avoid a dull and difficult existence. Moving forward to her next challenge was her only way to sustain vital engagement in her existing tasks.

In this chapter I look at informants' projects of self-improvement and their relations to their practices of soft skills by considering the temporal and existential experiences of the impetus of self-improvement in contemporary urban China. I depict self-improvement as directed at alleviating perplexity (*mimang*) and anxiety about a person's value and future prospects. My informants pursued self-improvement in order to maintain purpose and a sense of openness towards the future, instead of dwelling in meaningless presentist action or finding themselves in a position devoid of any room for 'improvement.' However, by directing their actions towards micro-accomplishments and optimism without a delineation of long-term achievable plans, individuals tended to reproduce the uncertainty that initially stimulated their engagement in self-improvement.

As noted throughout this thesis, Chinese individuals have experienced an increased impetus for self-improvement in recent years. Since state institutions are no longer allocating jobs and supplying welfare, individuals must both ensure their socioeconomic prosperity and constantly evaluate their capabilities for achieving this. As Ann Anagnost (2013, p. 45) contends, young workers in neoliberal East Asian economies are highly unclear about their



future value, which in turn induces their imperative to improve their job-related performances. As Caorline Hsu (2005) and Lisa Hoffman (2010) add, youth in China are increasingly perceiving their life-courses in terms of 'self-development' (*ziwo fazhan*) which pertains to choices of jobs (Hoffman, 2010), high transition between jobs (Hsu, 2005), and time-management (Sum, 2016). Furthermore, as Terry Woronov (2015, p. 116) describes, Chinese individuals' job pursuits have become increasingly contingent on self-presentation and individual character, making the imperative and considerations of self-development ever more expansive and confusing.

In this chapter, I observe self-improvement agendas that reflect the above processes. I focus on 'self-improvement' projects that encompass but are not limited to career self-development. In the Chinese language there is no single term that captures 'self-improvement' as in English. *Ziwo tisheng* (*ziwo* meaning 'self' and *tisheng* meaning 'promote,' 'hoist' or 'elevate') is the most direct translation, frequently used in therapeutic circles and expressed by some of my informants when trying to conceptualise a wide spectrum of activities.<sup>29</sup> But informants normally talked in more personalised terms of 'improving my abilities' (*tigao ziji de nengli*) or 'develop myself' (*fazhan ziji*). They used different terms for self-improvement were used interchangeably. I do not suggest that jogging in the park and undertaking an internship are of equal significance for one's future. Informants clearly prioritised training for a new job, for example, over any other engagement. However, a wide range of informants' self-improvement activities were neither clearly career-oriented nor a 'hobby' (*aihao*). Overall, 'self-improvement'

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<sup>29</sup> Among psychology counsellors in China this term is sometimes used in association with Carl Rogers and his idea of 'self-enhancement' (see Dong, 2005).

represented activities that maintain purposefulness (*mudixing*) and a sense of openness to further 'improvement' and future possibilities, in or outside the job market.

More than merely reflecting a discursive construction of a new subject in the changing economy, self-improvement projects respond to individuals' struggles to pursue meaningful trajectories of progress in their lives. Individuals met challenges not only in realising future goals, but also in experiencing on-going self-improvement. Since Chinese urban society is largely characterised by presentist action in which actors do not see much causality between their tasks and future outcomes (Liu, 2002; Steffen, 2017), my informants' efforts were often first and foremost directed to sustaining a sense of coherent and future-oriented action.

In this chapter hope manifests as a feeling that emanates from a sense of purpose, which arises when perplexity is momentarily suppressed. Hope is the feeling that one is not defeated by the unpredictability, dullness, or glass ceilings of their 'environment,' in Wanya's terms. This echoes Gabriel Marcel's (1951, p. 48) proposal that feelings of hope arise particularly when a person feels he or she could be overtaken by despair. Workshop instructors, and some participants, were fully aware of the existential value of hope. They cultivated hope by promoting the expression of future goals, which was important to maintain purpose in present. By this, they reflected Hirokazo Miyazaki's (2003) and Morten Pedersen's (2012) ethnographic accounts on the importance of future goals in sustaining a person's sense of vital purpose and present 'momentum.'

This chapter adds another dimension to informants' temporal orientation. In Chapter 3 I discussed the virtual opportunities in workshops' affective mediums, extending from immediate affordances in workshops to those in the outside world. In Chapter 5 I presented

workshops as heterotopian spaces that enliven imaginaries of a utopian future society governed by individual autonomy and innovation. In this chapter I introduce the impetuses and challenges to sustain optimism outside workshops. Workshops for soft skills promoted self-improvement and future-oriented goals, and promoted these as fundamental characteristics of a competent person. Yet workshops could not assist informants to clearly link their present actions to future outcomes. Later in this chapter I present the practice of ‘100-day-challenges,’ in which individuals repeat the same self-improvement task for 100 days. Some informants who had critiqued the workshops’ empty mottos of ‘feel good,’ ‘chicken soup for the soul’ (*xinling jitang*) content devoid of useful guidance, found these 100-day-challenges a more practical and valuable method of self-improvement. However, while 100-day-challenges fostered persistence and optimism in their own right, they also distracted informants’ attention from long-term goals. The result, as Wenya’s story indicates, is rapid and drastic movements between projects, in line with the presentism that characterises the Chinese urban environment.

### Projects of self-improvement

#### Wenya’s Summer

Summer 2015 was very active for Tao Wenya. Her activities and projects included being interviewed and rejected for a highly selective volunteering job, going to the gym daily in order to lose weight, attending activities of *Super Speakers*, trying to establish and run a 10-day summer camp in public speaking for children, volunteering at an international history conference, and attending a 10-day training of International Civil Servants (please see Table 1 for a recap of her activities and their outcomes). These activities were in addition to her routine responsibilities as a first-year Master’s student in English Interpretation in a

prestigious university in Shandong. Her activities, while stemming from her position as a future job-seeker also reflected her attempts to remain open to future opportunities rather than facing a future as a factory worker devoid of self-improvement.

**Table 1 – Wenya’s 2015 Summer**

Time	Activity	Expected value	Overall evaluation	Memorable event	Long-term outcome
Late May	<b>Interview for a volunteering job</b> in a big economy conference to be held in Dalian (north-eastern Liaoning Province) in September.	To experience volunteering in a large event, ‘developing some skills.’	The interview went okay, she enjoyed her stay.	<b>The first time Wenya travelled alone</b> (a weekend trip); the first time she flew on a plane.	She <b>was not given the job</b> , and was not even notified by the conference organisers. She therefore did not return for the conference.
May-July	<b>100-day challenge</b> of physical exercise.	Lose weight, persist ( <i>jianchi</i> ).	Finished the challenge. Did not exercise daily but did maintain high	-	Her appreciation of <i>100-day challenges</i> as a mode of

			frequency throughout the summer.		self-improvement, planning her next challenges.
June	Hosted and served as an <b>interpreter for a delegation from South Australia</b> that attended her university campus.	Practice her interpretation skills, gain experience.	There was little need of interpretation in this event, ' <b>a bit pointless.</b> '	Had a nice conversation with an Australian professor of medicine.	-
July	Went with her classmate, and fellow <i>Super Speakers</i> member Chuntao to promote and <b>establish a 10-day summer</b>	<b>Fostering Super Speakers' values</b> of sincere evaluation and leadership in the younger	She and her classmates received calls from only two parents. <b>The project was aborted.</b> Assumes that parents care	-	Perhaps will try again next summer, after a better preparation. Overall a rough experience.

	<p><b>camp for children in public speaking</b>, Linyi (east Shandong), see Chapter 5.</p>	<p>generation, wants to see if there is a market for such activity, earning money (1388 RMB per participant).</p>	<p>about having a babysitter and 'hard education' (<i>yingshi jiaoyu</i>) and do not recognise the value of this camp. She felt discouraged, and that it is difficult to deal with people 'in society' (<i>shehui shang</i>).</p>		
Aug.	<p><b>Volunteered at an international history conference at Shandong University.</b></p>	<p>Practice her interpretation skills, gain experience.</p>	<p>She <b>did not have a lot of interpretation opportunities</b>, her tasks were mostly directing attendees to</p>	<p>One Indian scholar was very kind to her, offered her a cake.</p>	-

			the conference venues; was not impressed with the level of organisation.		
Aug.	Participated in a <b>10-day training for International Civil Servants</b> in Hangzhou (600 km south of Jinan), run by UN China.	Learning about possible channels to work in the UN.	The training did not grant her a certificate, but she met talented students from Peking and Tsinghua Universities.	She was <b>selected among the top 30% of the class</b> as students who might be called for relevant internships in China.	<b>Was not invited to any internships;</b> Working for the UN is still <b>one of her greatest ambitions.</b>
Sep.	Went with three classmates to a <b>short interpretation job for a construction</b>	Work experience, earning money.	A horrific experience: were asked to work as secretaries and pretend they were company	The escape and the fear that the Beijing employer	The event has become a distant memory. Wenya was no longer concerned

	<p><b>project</b> of a Beijing company and the local government in Linyi (recommended by her university teacher).</p>		<p>workers; on their first day of work, they <b>discovered that the Beijing company was a fraud.</b> They escaped Linyi and returned to Jinan in the middle of the night.</p>	<p>might search for them.</p>	<p>about being tracked down by the employer.</p>
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Wenya’s summer seemed to me like a roller-coaster, with many ups and downs involving high expectations yet questionable rewards. Not only did Wenya not get the results she was hoping for, she also could not delineate how these activities added up to meaningful outcomes. Nevertheless, when we met over dinner or for a stroll in the night market near her university campus, she was almost always in high spirits. She was not shy of criticising herself and others when her projects failed, but she was constantly looking forward to her next challenge. She considered her life-stage as a 24-year-old student as a time to ‘exercise myself’ (*duo duanlian ziji*) and ‘a stage of self-improvement’ (*ziwo tisheng de jieduan*). She told me that in light of the fact that her university program offered few chances for extracurricular self-development (which is characteristic of universities in China, as reported in Cockain, 2016), she must ‘persist’ (*jianchi*), ‘stay motivated’ and find opportunities on her



own. Following years of schooling where her efforts were directed towards important exams that measure the value of the person, she reached a life-stage that brought forth new burdens and opportunities (see Cockain, 2011, p. 113, for an argument on the high level of coherence and purpose in Chinese high school life compared to universities and 'society'). Wenya felt the pressure both to prepare for the job market, and to experiment with different self-improvement approaches and experiences, two related but not always congruent undertakings.

In her practices and aspirations, Wenya downplayed the significance she placed on occupational stability. She grew up in Dongying, a city in northeast Shandong. Her father was a school teacher, and her mother was a part-time worker in the local petroleum industry. Wenya knew that she could probably find a job in this industry as well, through her relatives in local enterprises. She also did not rule out becoming a governmental employee and in winter 2016, she even took the National Exam for Civil Servants. Additionally, as an undergraduate she had already become a Communist Party member thanks to her role as a class leader (*banzhang*). However, Wenya saw this affiliation with the Party as instrumentally advantageous for all job-seekers, rather than reflecting any ideology or occupational commitment.<sup>30</sup> She kept the state sector and her hometown's industries as backup plans.

Wenya preferred working in the private, or global-oriented economy while continuing to develop herself through various projects and experiences. As Caroline Hsu (2005, pp. 547,

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<sup>30</sup> See Hansen (2012) for a description of the role of the *banzhang* in a Chinese rural high school. This role is acknowledged as important for a student resume and future job prospects. This is also the case for university *banzhang*. See Also Yan Xiaojun's (2014, p. 506) on the instrumentality of becoming CCP cadres among university students in terms of their career pathways.

553) shows in her study of young adults in Harbin who take on short-term employment in the private economy (particularly foreign-run businesses), jobs have become part of a person's 'training' and 'self-development' in contemporary urban China. These youths understand the temporary nature of work and construe job transitions as a positive track for working in bigger enterprises and possibly for becoming entrepreneurs. Wenya showed a similar approach when engaging in extracurricular tasks. To the self-entrepreneurial narrative Hsu observed, I would like to add Wenya's attempt to foster joyful openness towards the future. Wenya did not present a coherent trajectory of 'development' or of becoming more competent for future tasks. Her 'exercise' was as much about tasting, experimenting, and keeping herself active. This was possible due to her primary affiliation to a university rather than as a fully self-reliant job-seeker, but was also fundamental to self-improvement more generally, as I demonstrate in this chapter.<sup>31</sup> Wenya pursued new tasks with thoughts about gaining valuable experience for the job market (volunteering in international conferences, internships in large companies), yet was also seeking to remain dynamic to avoid a closed future.

Wenya was therefore committed to the imaginary of open-ended self-improvement. Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 24), analysing the affective force of optimism among subjects in late capitalist precarious settings, discusses individuals' attachments to the promise of a 'better

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<sup>31</sup> Following the expansion of university enrolment in China, set forth by the 1998 China Education Law (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 1998), the problem of graduates' unemployment has intensified (Bai, 2006). University programs increasingly encourage students to undertake internship and volunteering projects, as well as consider entrepreneurship (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2014), and overall become increasingly responsible for their future employment. It is common knowledge that during the fourth and final year of Bachelor's degrees and the third year of Master's degrees, students have no classroom responsibilities and are encouraged to undertake internships, even if this means moving to distant cities. In this way, students act as job-seekers without becoming officially (un)employed.

life:’ ‘The very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place.’ She argues that the joy in pursuing the future objective, rather than the objective itself, is what affectively draws individuals. As Berlant (2011, p. 48) adds, an ‘object of optimism promises to guarantee the endurance of something and above all the protection of the desire that made this object powerful enough.’ The wider implications of such optimism are individuals’ greater participation in the economic system that perpetuates their problematic socioeconomic positions. In China this is evident in self-improvement projects. By sustaining her ‘thriving’ through self-improvement, Wenya was stimulating hope. This modus operandi was affectively converting well-founded anxiety about her future prospects to a positive state of mind.

Workshops for soft skills stimulated participants such as Wenya to pursue self-improvement in different avenues. First, in workshops informants engaged with other aspiring self-improvers. Second, workshops’ interactive exercises allowed participants to express their aspirations and receive positive feedback. Third, through the practice of soft skills self-improvement was conceptualised as cultivating the person as a whole, rather than as dependent on immediate tangible rewards. This focus allowed informants to produce a sense of accomplishment and optimism by activating intent for self-improvement. In other words, sensing oneself as a proactive, dynamic and increasingly autonomous person through self-improvement tasks allowed informants to value themselves, and in turn be more hopeful about their future prospects.

For Wenya, projects of self-improvement were aimed at alleviating uncertainty as well as offering potential imagined alternatives to the despairing scenarios of factory life, even if

these projects could not ensure that Wenya would be able to avoid this future (or a slightly better one as a state employee in her hometown). Gabriel Marcel (1951, p. 48)

conceptualises the relation between 'hope' and 'despair,' the former produced in order to minimise the latter:

It is not that strictly speaking I impute a casual efficacy to the fact of hoping or not hoping. The truth is much rather that I am conscious that when I hope I strengthen, and when I despair, or simply doubt, I weaken or let go of, a certain bond which unites me to the matter in question.

Marcel offers an example of a soldier relentlessly fighting for the liberation of his country despite knowing he would not experience such redemption in his lifetime. In Wenya's case, her dynamism was an existential approach that emanated from a palpable burden of self-reliance as much as an ideology.

By producing optimism through her dynamic state of being, Wenya enhanced her 'bond' to self-improvement and her ideal personhood. Her 'matter in question' was an open-ended future rather than a specific outcome. Although her ultimate aspiration was working for the UN, it was evident to me that she did not set a clear goal but rather enjoyed enhancing a general sense of opportunity and possibility. As Ben Anderson (2006, p. 744) helpfully adds, hopefulness 'emerges from a renewed feeling of possibility' since it can 'disclose a point of contingency within a present space-time.' Accordingly, it is the immersion in the present, rather than a tangible continuum towards the future, that incites hope in individuals. Avoiding a prospect of despair and the perplexity of not being able to design a coherent plan for a future, each activity allowed Wenya to immerse herself in a sense of new possibilities and potential links to future outcomes, over and over again.

## Plans for perplexed souls

While Wenya did not have detailed plans for her activities and projects, some informants emphasised plan-setting and tangible goals as crucial for self-improvement. Plans were considered to enhance purposefulness (*mudixing*), allowing informants to experience themselves as resourceful individuals whose optimistic attitudes do not succumb to external obstacles. Their focus was not so much on the possibility of achieving goals, as it was about sensing mastery their one's existential state.

This pedagogic approach was often demonstrated by the team of instructors in *Champion Training*, who tried to sustain links between various extracurricular engagements and future outcomes, and to further instil such an approach in their trainees. A scene from *Champion Training* elucidates this. During a casual afternoon tea session that invited former trainees and students from campuses nearby to chat with each other and with two young trainers, Gao Rui (whom I mentioned in Chapters 1, 3 and 5) and Lu Hua, aged 20 and 22 respectively. Twelve undergraduate students sat around a table and were asked to introduce themselves. Lu Hua asked them to present in their self-introduction their plans for the future. Some students, who were not as familiar with *Champion Training*, spoke about their academic goals and optional directions for their future careers. Ex-trainees of *Champion Training*, who were aware of the instructors' mind-sets, delineated richer plans in terms of a combination of short and long-term goals, itineraries for self-improvement in various skills, as well as occasionally 'spicing' their aspirations with travel plans and entrepreneurial aspirations. Gao Rui and Lu Hua challenged the students by urging them to question their existing lifestyles and adopt more ambitious attitudes. The twelve students largely accepted these criticisms.

Some of them, particularly ex-trainees of *Champion Training*, even seemed moved by the instructors' speeches.

Gao Rui and Lu Hua took their own and their trainees' specific plans seriously, but their main goal was to make plan-setting a dominant aspect of trainees' self-perception and self-presentation. As Terry Woronov (2015, p. 114) illustrates, young adults who attend job interviews in the Chinese market economy must learn to narrate themselves in terms of 'personal development and accumulation.' This involves both resumes of past experiences in addition to a style of outgoing self-presentation. This was evident in the above scene from *Champion Training*. To the instructors, self-improvement should accordingly become fundamental to one's identity and orientation in the world.

In addition to preparing for the job market or for becoming the right type of employee, I suggest that this pedagogy focused on maintaining an attitude that mitigates perplexity. Gao Rui often openly depicted her trainees and fellow student as '*mimang*' (perplexed, bewildered). In popular discourse in China *mimang* is associated with youth, and is imbued with two corresponding meanings. First, it reflects an inevitable state of mind of young individuals who do not know what the future holds for them. Second, it is also a derogatory description of individuals who do not combat their initial *mimang* condition by engaging in meaningful self-improvement. Being both anxious about the future and carelessly enjoying life would therefore make a student worthy of this adjective. Gao Rui often regarded students who were not preoccupied about their futures and who idly 'hung out' with their friends in their free time as *mimang*. As the image of the 'credentialed student' in Chapter 4 revealed, even postgraduate students may be seen as avoiding reality and hence labelled as *mimang*, regardless of whether they themselves identify with this term. A balance between

purposeful (*mudixing*) action and optimistic future planning seemed for young informants as the only alternative to *mimang*. This combines the conviction of Chinese youth that self-discipline is pivotal for their educational success (Bregnbæk, 2016, p. 108), with the soft skills perspective that highlights emotionally charismatic and cheerful expression.

Liu Xingqi, the founder of a soft skills enterprise for university students in Hunan, whose work is cited in *Champion Training*, promotes the importance of plan-setting for maintaining a positive existential approach. Although Liu's pedagogy, as examples from earlier chapters indicate, frames the job market as the ultimate target of young adults' self-improvement, he also presents purposefulness as valuable in its own right. In one of his books (Liu, 2013c, pp. 140-145) he defined the functions (*zuoyong*) of 'aims' or 'goals' (*mubiao*): 1. **'Keeping focused (*jujiaoxing*):'** realising the purpose of one's everyday actions, which could assist in setting priorities. 2. **'A drive for action (*dongli zuoyong*):'** By setting specific goals to achieve, one is more easily motivated every day. 'Clear goals can allow you to produce a drive' (2013c, p. 143). 3. **'Resisting interference (*kang ganrao zuoyong*):'** When following clear *mubiao*, one can easily discern what one should and should not do, and is immune from others' comments and judgments. According to Liu's theory, *mubiao* must therefore be developed with an aim to sustain an individual's focus, sense of autonomy, and motivation for action.

Goal-setting was not only valued by young individuals who needed to enter the job market. Anxieties about being closed to future possibilities extended to different life stages, even if they were most intense among young job seekers. The next example from *Heart's Secret* illustrates this. In a three-day workshop on interpersonal skills, run by a guest teacher from Beijing, which catered for both psychology aficionados and personnel who worked in sales

and management, the topic of setting *mubiao* (goals) came up in different exercises. For example, teacher Shen asked participants to write down a personal *mubiao* and find peers in the classroom who could advise them regarding steps they needed to undertake in order to approach these goals. Within this exercise I paired with a member I knew, Yang Liang (mentioned in Chapter 5 for his plans to establish workshops for youths) who envisioned running a home for elders, and also a 33-year-old woman who wanted to open her own training school for emotional management in adults. The aim of this activity was two-fold according to teacher Shen: becoming more mindful to setting goals and paying attention to the person ‘we wish to become.’ While pronouncing future possibilities, this exercise in itself was also alluding to the person as a whole and to experiencing one’s being more fully.

Teacher Shen stated that there are five questions that we must ask ourselves at crucial junctures in our lives: What are the opportunities that are opening up for us? How should I correct negative thoughts (*wo gai ruhe xiuzheng fumian xiangfa*)? How can I see this case from different angles? What do I hope to achieve? How should I plan my actions? ‘These are questions with power (*liliang*),’ he said, and we should raise them frequently, even every day. These questions allow us, in the teacher’s eyes, to view our actions in terms of our own initiative (*zhudong*).

Setting plans was, therefore, for both Liu Xingqi and teacher Shen a method to promote a purposeful approach, while enhancing the perception of oneself as a person who does not succumb to their surrounding ‘environment.’ It allows people to feel in charge of their attitudes and states of mind, namely sustaining sense of purpose and optimism. Goal-setting was further enacted in workshops as an exciting moment, laden with virtual



opportunities - an affective moment that could not be easily replicated in individuals' everyday pursuits.

### Hopeful momentums in a presentist society

When I asked informants what their self-improvement routine consisted of, answers ranged from reading, physical exercise, language-learning, and of course, soft skills workshops (see Appendix 2 for a list of informants' self-improvement projects). Informants also included career-related tasks, particularly when such activities took place outside existing work routines, such as volunteering, selling products online, or cultivating a new skill. When I further asked in interviews what elements make an activity a form of self-improvement, the most repeated answers were self-management (*ziwo guanli*), setting goals (*mubiao*), and continuity (*lianxuxing*). Informants never mentioned pleasurable tasks that did not have an objective of self-improvement. When questioned about the importance of goals in their self-improvement tasks, most individuals indicated, normally after a moment of reflection, that preserving a positive and active attitude in the present was more important than achieving a final goal. For informants, self-improvement seemed to be about both responding to the challenge of maintaining self-discipline, and as a force that directed them to persist on a positive track. Even those who were not workshop instructors were aware of their existential imperative to sustain coherence and purpose beyond the actual fulfilment of goals.

As aforementioned, the antithesis of this approach was the closed lifestyle of a factory worker (which stands metaphorically for any stable and monotonous job), as well as more dynamic lifestyles that lack on-going development. Informants wished to avoid running impulsively from one task to another without following a plan, or acting without attention

to the well-rounded cultivation of their personhood. They recognised these tendencies in their social circles (Hu Ling's criticisms of individuals who do not accept new ideas or engage in self-improvement, see Chapter 5, is a good example), and in their own difficulties committing to self-improvement, as much as they would like to.

The challenge of achieving causal developments and predictable outcomes through one's actions is evident elsewhere in urban China. Liu Xin (2002) describes these attitudes in his study of businessmen in the southern Chinese city of Beihai. In Chapter 5 I presented Liu's critique of the limited future-orientation in contemporary Chinese society. Here I engage with another aspect of his thesis, the temporal orientation of everyday activities. Liu's informants did not follow a schedule, and use time as a 'strategy' rather than a linear unfolding (2002, pp. 155-156). The randomness and 'structural rupture' in the economy makes businessmen resort to ideas of 'luck' and to impulsively attending immediate tasks, rather than committing to processual projects (2002, p. 102). Liu argues that the outcome of this state of mind is no less than a suppression of a person's cognitive memory altogether (2002, p. 178). Megan Steffen (2017), studying businesspersons in Zhengzhou in central China (approximately 300 km west from the Yellow Sea and about an equal distance from Jinan to its south-west), offers a similar description, focusing on the 'unpredictability' that characterises business pursuits. For her informants, unpredictability was both an interpretation of specific tasks and an 'ontological' status of their lived market reality (2017, p. 253). Although Steffen, unlike Liu, observes that her informants did maintain 'openness to the future' (2017, p. 255) and what it may bring, they did not actively cultivate such openness nor did they cherish plan-setting.

My informants' prioritisation of planning and purposefulness indicates, I propose, a reflective reaction against unpredictability, more than a contrasting reality to the accounts by Liu and Steffen. Aware that an accumulation of projects did not necessarily lead to significant future outcomes (including the fact that the practice of soft skills in workshop heterotopias does not easily extend to an effective on-going self-cultivation of the person), and that their everyday lives were filled with competing tasks, informants tried to maintain a sense of meaningful action.

Informants were therefore trying to impact their present attitudes through hopefulness, resonating with attributes of hope observed by anthropologists studying different societies. For Miyazaki (2003, pp. 22-23), a future-oriented action, such as planning and preparing for a future scenario, adds a sense of orientation and self-understanding for a person through their present tasks, which he refers to as 'prospective momentum.' It is a process that guides one's attention and actions in the present. The 'work of hope,' adds Pedersen (2012, p. 146), sets endpoints with the aim of 'the (re)production of social momentum as such,' i.e., enhancing one's immersion in their everyday projects. Such endpoints may be starkly unrealisable, but remain crucial for organising present tasks and maintaining vital engagement in the present. While ranging from a focus on a Japanese investor who was meticulously following a financial-career-plan (Miyazaki 2003), to working-class Mongolian dwellers who were engaging in various micro-trade activities (Pederson 2012), the two authors offer a similar emphasis. The differences between their subjects of study lies in the level of cognitive deliberation of their informants (see Pedersen, 2012, p. 146).

By focusing on the moral and existential value of plan-setting, instructors in *Champion Training* and teacher Shen of *Heart's Secret* similarly sought to enhance the sense of

purpose and self-awareness of individuals. Compared to case studies of Miyazaki and Pedersen, workshop instructors were reflective and deliberative in the regeneration of purposefulness and optimism, while downplaying, in practice, questions of how goals should be pursued or how consistent participants were in their aims. The expression of aims and personal persistence was as important as the specific content of a goal or adhering to the same goal over an extended period.

### *Chicken soup* and the practical soul

In this section, I describe a tension in informants' self-improvement agendas between the affective production of optimism and the necessity to undertake proactive actions in one's daily life. Ultimately, both approaches could not quite bring forth a trajectory of long-term self-improvement and progress to informants' pursuits, either in actual practice or in their imaginaries.

As elaborated in earlier chapters, workshops for soft skills produced an affective medium that was optimal for the emergence of hopeful imaginaries concerning the prospects of individual participants and of society at large. Affective speech was also deployed in relation to self-assertion and future-oriented aspirations. However, when moving from the medium to their everyday tasks, or when deliberating during workshops the actual steps that they needed to take in the outside world, informants frequently found some of the messages in workshops impractical. In these cases they reconceptualised motivational messages of *zheng nengliang* as empty slogans or as '*chicken soup for the soul*' (*xinling jitang*).

*Chicken soup for the soul* (which I here forth abbreviate to *chicken soup*), is a series of US American books that combine real life stories and speeches, 'sharing happiness, inspiration and hope' (Chicken Soup for the Soul, 2017). After the first best-seller was published in

1993, the company has published 250 books, and also expanded to the media, educational projects, and even pet food.

Before arriving in China I was not familiar with this term, yet among workshop participants *chicken soup* was a common expression. It referred to 'feel-good' messages that offer a dose of motivation and optimism. Unlike *zheng nengliang*, *chicken soup* emphasises verbal content rather than an intersubjective interaction, although the two may be interchangeable at times. Some informants admitted loving *chicken soup*, enjoying, for example, reading inspirational messages before going to sleep. This attitude was particularly evident among members of *Heart's Secret*, who were appreciative of behaviouristic psychology therapies that focus on positive self-expression as therapeutic. For them, there was no contradiction between *chicken soup* and self-change, even though they did not conceptualise their self-growth merely in terms of *chicken soup*. One of them, Guan-yin, a 41-year-old-member, offered me her interpretation: 'There is really nothing bad about *chicken soup*, it can help keep people in a good mood. The key is not to rely on it as medicine (*yao*) when one has a serious problem.'

Other informants held more ambivalent attitudes towards *chicken soup*, following discourses that emerged in the Chinese online media that posit certain mottos as '*chicken soup*.' In the Chinese press and online media there are two main approaches to *chicken soup*. One argument, representing an '*anti chicken soup*' (*fan xinlin jitang*) position, criticises these messages for ignoring one's real-life conditions and leading people to self-absorption (see Luo 2016). The other dominant voice claims that the '*anti chicken soup*' ideas are a form of 'negative energy' (*fu nengliang*), i.e., even if *chicken soup* offers non-realistic ideas,

it is more morally correct to lead people to believe in the positive outcomes of their efforts, then to denounce such optimism altogether (see Yang 2014).

The field site wherein I heard the most criticism about *chicken soup* was *Super Speakers*. Younger *Super Speakers* members and guests were apt to adopt standardised feel good messages of 'believe in yourself' and 'you are unique.' However, individuals in their late 20s and early 30s, particularly men, were more careful in their choice of words, and even openly criticised *chicken soup* messages, without directing their comments to specific speakers. Guozhe, the 33-year-old club president during a six-month period of my fieldwork, once uttered a speech about *chicken soup*:

*Chicken soup* and '*anti chicken soup*' – which one is correct? Neither is. If we are hungry, would we want to drink soup? Only soup? It could solve our instant craving (*jiechan*), but we would still be hungry, so we would eat substantial food (*liangshi*). And if our spirit is hungry? We need books! Why not instead of spending an hour per day on Weibo [a Chinese online micro-messaging platform] or WeChat, you will read one book? [...] *chicken soup* is good, but it only provides you one idea. If you add all these ideas together, they do not add up to one single book. Books, unlike *chicken soup*, can help shape our worldviews (*jiazhiguan*). *Chicken soup* is for drinking, but chicken meat is for eating! (March 29, 2015).

Guozhe correlated *chicken soup* messages with instant emotional gratification and the short attention span of internet users. He focused on the lack of substantial and wide-ranging insights in *chicken soup* expressions. Ironically, his five-minute speech on the value of reading can also be conceived, when adopting his critical mind-set, as a form of *chicken soup*. The medium and pedagogy in which he operated could not allow people to detach

themselves from immediate affectivity, even if he also cherished more in-depth learning. Other members further focused on various occasions on the lack of meaningful guidance that comprises *chicken soup* utterances. Here are two segments from speeches by Max, 31, another senior member (mentioned in Chapter 4), who was known for his blunt and humorous speeches, and was by far the biggest cynic in the club:

Have you ever been told ‘it’s okay, take it easy, things will be fine, go to sleep and tomorrow the sun will shine’ – those guys are liars! The truth is that life is hard. In this city all you see is pollution. I haven’t seen the sun since November 2. [...] Don’t tell me I am too desperate; my aim is to admit the truth. The first time you speak on stage you’ll be nervous, that’s normal, it’s hard. Admitting that life is hard will help you not run away. It will lead you to solve a problem, step by step. (November 19, 2015).

Have you ever faced failure? Dumped by someone you loved? Lost a job? Friends normally say: ‘don’t worry, you are the best!’ [...] Cut the white lies! Face the truth, I am not the best. I need to work hard. In airports, train stations, TV, we see success guides, telling us ‘you are the best, you are special.’ Is that useful?! Even the president of the US says ‘yes we can.’ These stories tell me to meet myself – I am rich enough to buy a mirror! (May 7, 2015).

Within these speeches Max construes *chicken soup* messages as unconstructive. He was a dedicated member who loved the club’s social ambiance and appreciated the weekly activities as opportunities for self-improvement. His messages, in addition to entertaining his friends and offering something different from other speakers, did not denounce the

group's enthusiasm for self-improvement, but rather tried to remove empty slogans from their practices. He preferred insights that were more practical.

A final take on *chicken soup* that follows a similar line comes from Tao Wenya. Wenya admitted that she tended to enjoy *chicken soup* at times, unlike her more cynical boyfriend who, for this reason, did not wish to become a member of *Super Speakers*. But Wenya also found that empty slogans did not offer her effective guidance. I never heard her ridicule *chicken soup* messages during *Super Speakers'* sessions, but between activities, she offered a more critical perspective: 'Last week Niki [a 22-year-old member] gave a speech about "changing the unchangeable." I didn't really like it. After hearing so many messages like this it has become an empty slogan (*kouhao*). It isn't helpful, it is not convertible to action (*bu fanying dao xingdong*).'*Chicken soup* inherently signified for Wenya limited application. For some informants it was a term that indicated a lazy and ignorant self-indulgence, rather than equipping oneself with a constructive approach to face the outside world.

Furthermore, the more widely *chicken soup* circulated in the popular media as somewhat problematic, the more some individuals developed suspicious attitudes towards messages that were easily discerned as *chicken soup*, even if at times such messages also brought them joy. As an alternative and complementary practice to *chicken soup*, many informants turned to projects that aimed precisely at maintaining a sense of continuity and extending their attitudes from workshops to the outside world, as I describe next.

### *100-day challenges*

During the second half of 2015, Wenya began a series of *100-day-challenges*, which she saw as a practical method for self-improvement unlike *chicken soup*. *100-day-challenge* is a global concept and technique that can be applied in different self-improvement projects,



and must be executed daily for 100 days. During the summer of 2015 I discovered that many informants adopted this technique and pursued challenges such as early morning reading, learning a foreign language, writing a journal for an hour or two daily, waking up at 5 am, practicing a plank position (physical exercise) every morning, and jogging (see more examples in Appendix 2). I usually became familiar with individuals' challenges through their WeChat accounts. Since these challenges demanded self-discipline, persistence, as well as keeping records, many individuals audited themselves and proclaimed their commitments online.

In one of her speeches in *Super Speakers*, Wenya delivered the following message, indicating the value she found in *100-day-challenges*:

We all have New Year's resolutions. In middle school mine was mostly to study well, read books, lose weight and be more beautiful. I had these same resolutions every year during middle school. I managed to enter a 'number 1' high school (*di yi gaozhong*) but my other resolutions were not achieved. In high school, I wanted to get up at 6 am and run to lose weight every day. On the third day, I already felt I deserved a treat. The next day I woke up at 9 am! [...] What is important is *how we implement*. Resolutions are *too abstract*. You need to find your own method. For me it's a *100-day challenge*. You can find someone to supervise you as well. For the coming year, I want to first finish my speech tasks at this club [the first manual book which includes ten speeches], second, I will try to find an internship at the UN, and third to pass my interpretation exam. (January 7, 2016).

Wenya conveyed a picture of repeated failures and self-deception. Her speech glossed over the arduous study path that she pursued very successfully in her school years. Nonetheless,

she expressed a desire for greater persistence, which was difficult to maintain in projects that were outside the immediate requirements of her role as a student. The *100-day-challenge* is a practical call for action. It offers a trajectory and 'drive' (to use Liu Xingqi's understanding) which is less 'abstract' (to use Wenyua's term) than *chicken soup* slogans. It focuses on small daily steps and removes one's immediate attention from unrealistic goals and overwhelming obstacles. If the 'work of hope,' following Pedersen (2012, p. 6), attempts to 'calibrate' the 'inner capacities' of the person with his or her 'outer capacities,' making sense of one's projects in a specific environment, then *100-day-challenges* draw on available conditions (time, facilities) to immediately enhance a sense of hope.

*100-day-challenges*, therefore, offer a practical task combined with an on-going sense of achievement. This positive view of *100-day-challenges* resonates with *Champion Training* instructors' emphasis on practical improvement. In one *Champion Training* class, instructor Chaoxing (mentioned in Chapter 4 for her desire to be more independent from her mother), who also took a couple of *100-day-challenges* later that year, advocated self-improvement in small steps. She reinforced this approach by calculating on the white board  $1.001^{365}$ , in order to indicate how a small daily task of self-improvement could have a meaningful outcome after one year. This rational and quantitative deployment of self-improvement offered a seemingly practical framework, allowing individuals to ensure persistence, and ideally, progress. Nonetheless, Chaoxing did not narrow self-improvement to specific activities nor did she offer examples for trajectories of 'progress.'

Although *100-day-challenges* focused on the immediate steps for inducing purposeful action, they could not offer a solution for long-term aspirations. The immediate attendance to tasks is just as important, in this model, as accumulation of achievements. I do not deny

the skills that informants developed through their projects, but it was notable that their foci were continuously directed at the values of persistence, momentary accomplishments, and self-auditing. Overall, *100-day-challenges* emphasised a practical methodology, but neglected questions of why a specific practice should be chosen and how it would address future concerns and impact one's life in the long-term. These projects normally concluded without any clear follow-up agenda. Once Wenya finished her *100-day* gym agenda she spent a few months considering her next 'challenge.' Another informant, Yang Liang from *Heart's Secret*, moved from an early morning reading challenge to a challenge of avoiding eating snacks at night, two tasks that were unrelated. While both activities may reflect an image of an ideal person that he had developed, they did not set a clear long-term path based on persistence, other than 'persistence' per se. These practices, by definition, set boundaries to certain tasks and their outcomes. The sense of achievement during these tasks stimulates hope, yet the links between this present purposefulness to larger objectives are ever more elusive.

When long-term aspirations are too overwhelming to produce anything but perplexity and anxiety, *100-day-challenges* offer a remedy. At the same time, since these projects do not offer a clear trajectory they do not alleviate perplexity altogether. As a result, informants either withdrew from these 'challenges' after several projects or jumped between projects with even greater fervour in order to recharge themselves with purpose.

## Conclusion

The future orientation of my informants that I presented in this chapter was dependent on their immersion in present action and senses of purpose. As they could not unravel a tangible path to achieving big objectives, but did not wish to renounce the possibility of one

day realising meaningful accomplishments, informants turned to cultivating a state of mind through short-term tasks and plans. Through this approach they believed that they were opening themselves to future possibilities, even if some of them were also aware that they were largely sustaining feelings of purpose rather than directing themselves to notable, tangible results.

Informants' temporal experiences are representative of a rapid-changing Chinese society dominated by uncertainty and unpredictability. As Tanya Jakimow (2014, p. 429) argues, when analysing the future-oriented attitudes of farmers in Indonesia and India who regard risk-taking as an ethical duty in a changing economy, 'being in transit [...] entails an awareness of opportunities and possibilities with a gaze and action directed towards this future. To stand still is to go backwards, giving a sense of urgency in one's pursuit of hopes and desires.' Such sense of 'transit' is also evident in China. Although informants commented, as earlier chapters showed, that many Chinese social actors are socioeconomically stagnant, this discernment also indicated their imperative to remain dynamic. Informants continuously questioned where they stood with regard to other social actors, to changing social values, and to the rest of the world (also see Liu, 2002; Liu, 2012). Their hope was sustainable only through its continuous recharging. It was not a passive metaphysical hope as experienced, for example among Christian believers who regard hope as a default state (see Crapanzano, 2003, p. 6; Zigon, 2009). The lack of such social reliance on metaphysical forces in China means that one cannot lie back and believe that things would naturally develop in one's favour. This adds, of course, to the inherently unpredictable directions of socioeconomic changes, at the level of the country, the region, and the individual person.

Ultimately, just as informants' visions of an ideal society cannot sustain a qualitative distinction from the present forces of economic reform (see Chapter 5), so too their repeated activation of purposefulness tended to manifest the very incoherent and presentist action that they were trying to avoid. Although workshops' heterotopias moralised self-improvement projects, informants' senses of self-value and optimism were strongly contested by the obstacles of their everyday realities. The recharging of purpose and hope were therefore a never ceasing effort.

## Chapter 7 - Dreams of Extraordinary Self-Realisation

### Introduction

In a *Super Speakers* workshop activity about New Year resolutions, host Tom, a 23-year-old university graduate, invited participants to improvise short speeches about their aspirations for the coming year. He emphasised that he wanted us to express our dreams, and clarified: ‘dreams are quite different to goals; dreams are less realistic but more beautiful, for example riding a motorbike around Taiwan Island.’ While many members were highly preoccupied with their careers, studies, and romances, and these concerns were intensified at that time of the year, on stage they expressed aspirations of travelling, adopting new hobbies, and appreciating new experiences – all through the language of ‘dreams.’ When one member began to articulate a more mainstream, work-related ambition, Tom urged her ‘don’t be so narrow!’, encouraging her to tune in with the joyful language and imaginaries of dreams.

In this chapter I focus on ‘dreams’ (*mengxiang*). Recently adopted as a widespread term in China, dreams take root in individuals’ self-perceptions and self-expressions. I propose that the language of ‘dreams’ demonstrates how processes manifested in workshops for soft skills– the production of affective mediums and heterotopian imaginaries as deviating from and exceeding mundane reality – are also circulated through a nationwide discourse and imperative that cuts across social classes and geographic regions. Through the language of dreams, individuals and groups in various social settings produce optimism by envisioning themselves in scenarios beyond their main life paths and everyday engagements.

The discourse of dreams has circulated extensively through the government's 'China Dream' campaign, which was launched in late 2012. For Xi Jinping, the 'China Dream' invokes the rejuvenation of the nation, the elevation of citizens' living conditions, as well as an aggregation of citizens' dreams. As I will discuss below, through this campaign and its propaganda the state has promoted not only a collective awareness of 'dreams,' but also an imperative towards self-realisation through the language of individual dreams. In this chapter I do not attempt to unravel the underlying state agendas of these dream discourses, such as the promotion of apolitical self-interest, or, alternatively, the cultivation of patriotic citizenship. Rather, I pay attention to a major effect of the 'China Dream' campaign that I witnessed through my field sites and informants: the self-generation of hope through affective terminology. I contend that while the CCP has taken a paternalistic position by presenting future goals for the nation, dreams are primarily circulated for affective self-use at the levels of groups and individuals. Congruent with my findings in earlier chapters, hope is produced through affective practices and imaginaries that deviate from the objective socioeconomic realities of social actors.

Dreams in workshops evoked desires and aspirations that for participants reflected the supposed authentic individuality of the person. The expression of dreams was thus associated with individuals' priorities for self-realisation. Since dreams in China allude to the free choices of autonomous individuals, they resonate with Nikolas Rose's (1998; 1999) understanding of ideologies of 'choice' and 'freedom' which have become dominant as part of the constitution of individual selves in neoliberal societies.<sup>32</sup> In considering this parallel I

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<sup>32</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, this approach has been widely employed in the studies of individuality in contemporary China, evident in studies by Anagnost (2004; 2008; 2013), Hansen & Pang (2008), Hoffman

nonetheless emphasise that dreams in China have not become the main underlying force through which informants construe their life pursuits. Dreams are instead expressed with poignancy at some social gatherings and online platforms, while they are muted in most everyday interactions. Moreover, dreams often bring forth imaginaries that deviate from individuals' main tasks or 'objectives' (*lixiang*), as indicated by Tom in the scene described above. Overall, in order to preserve the emancipating sense of dreams, individuals separated 'dreams' from their everyday pursuits, rather than making them a comprehensive agenda that governed their actions.

By perceiving and expressing themselves in terms of dreams, individuals therefore discerned a division between their everyday lives and a seemingly liberated mode of being that exceeded their social roles. This was particularly relevant for individuals whose socioeconomic pressures strongly limited their actual pursuit of dreams. This resembles Kleinman et al's idea of the Chinese 'divided self' (2011, pp. 5, 23-24), which proposes that contemporary Chinese people face an existential rupture between practical socioeconomic imperatives and inner morality. While my informants indeed expressed themselves in terms of a similar divide, I suggest that 'dreams' do not reflect a more authentic mode of being for my informants. Rather, dreams and the impetus for self-realisation are socially constructed as imperatives that stand in tension with main life paths. In informants' experiences, dreams are both unrealisable aspirations that lead to frustration, and a pleasurable practice that maintains visions of hope.

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(2010), Woronov (2003; 2008; 2009), Yan H. (2003), Yang (2015), and Zhang & Ong (2008), to name a few examples.



While ‘aims’ directed at individuals’ real lives maintain purpose and alleviate perplexity (Chapter 6), dreams also offer imaginaries that coexist and break from people’s mundane social realities. It is an affective practice that demands both new sensibilities and performative speech, producing both a sense of the extraordinary while at the same time being part of a nationwide project.

### The language of dreams in workshops

When I was young I was curious about the world. I had a dream to go abroad. But my parents were poor and I wasn’t a great student, so I couldn’t afford it. Later I found an ideal job, and my husband is a doctor, so things improved. People thought we were living a perfect life, but I knew it would be more difficult to make changes. But then my husband found an opportunity to work in Switzerland. [...] Sooner or later the dream would come true. I would have to quit my job for this adventure, but this is what I want.

Rao Yun 28, a lower middle-class woman from Jinan, speech segment in  
*Super Speakers*

My dream is too far away from my finance major. I am hesitant to tell you about it, but I want it to come true. When I was in primary school my parents left for a holiday. I had a special friend – radio. Since then I’ve wanted to run a radio program.

Lin, 24, a middle-class woman from Jinan, speech segment in *Super Speakers*

Why would I want to come and practice my public speaking? Because public speaking can make me happy (*rang ziji kuaile*), can help people change their thinking (*dapo siwei*), can allow me to change the things that are unchangeable in myself!

Love and dreams are this world's best nutrients (*ai he meng shi zhege shijie shang zuihao de yangliao*)!

Zhiyong, 19, an upper working-class man from a village to the east of Jinan, trainee in *Champion Training*

'Dreams' are discussed today in many different domains throughout Chinese society, and the term is used significantly in settings where individuals express themselves as affective and self-improving persons. In workshops for soft skills, instructors often evoked the language of dreams, and participants also frequently expressed dreams spontaneously, anticipating their pertinence to the pedagogic workshop setting. Dreams offered an affective language that could ignite *zheng nengliang* and induce virtual imaginaries.

Workshop facilitators often highlighted the importance of dreams with regards to self-improvement. In *Champion Training* camps, instructors often urged participants to think about their dreams, cherish them, and express them when introducing themselves. Li Chen, the 24-year-old director of *Champion Training*, told trainees that 'people who have dreams' (*you mengxiang de ren*) can achieve remarkable results in life. He also understood himself as a person with dreams, akin to every renowned entrepreneur that he admired. The owners of *Heart's Secret* also associated their enterprise with realising dreams. One of them, Xu Peng, introduced the club at the end of workshops and in a larger symposium on psychology in Jinan as a place that allowed people to approach their dreams. In a reflexive manner that combined self-promotion, marketing, and genuine commitment to the pedagogy of soft skills and psychology, he stated that running this club was about promoting his own dreams and the dreams of others.

In workshops the language of dreams was appealing for participants of different backgrounds. Younger and working-class participants enjoyed experimenting with expressing dreams affectively, emulating speeches and inspirational lectures from entertainment TV and online videos.<sup>33</sup> Dreams similarly evoked aspirations and virtual imaginaries for middle-class and older participants in Jinan workshops. Even for older participants, dreams represented an exciting potential in contrast to what they saw as the uninspiring behaviour in their everyday social and occupational settings. Dreams also reflected for them a mode of expression that was absent for older generations, and until several years ago was even missing in their own self-expression.

While speaking in terms of dreams allowed participants to assert their value as ‘persons who have dreams,’ dreams normally alluded to the unaccomplished. I seldom encountered participants speaking about a dream they had already fulfilled. Participants asserted their value through dreams, but they did not present themselves as fully accomplished individuals who had achieved their dreams. Instead they sought to inspire others while also inciting themselves to experience their being through a horizon of possibilities.

While the language of dreams is widespread, its affect is premised on the fact that it is not employed casually. Dreams tended to be associated with motivational content, personal revelations, and affective speech more generally, expressed in a social or pedagogic gathering. Informants admitted that in one-on-one chats and casual interactions with family members, they rarely expressed their dreams unless asked to do so (I also became aware of this in my conversations with them). On these occasions they tended to speak in more

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<sup>33</sup> See Hansen (2015, p. 145) for a similar observation on student’s experience during a motivational lecture in a rural high school in Zhejiang. I will return to this insight in my Conclusion.

'down-to-earth,' pragmatic terms. Emotional-motivational posts on WeChat, on the other hand, were full of references to dreams, as were toasts in festive gatherings with colleagues and friends. In sum, dream discourses are spreading, but remain indexed to certain types of social interactions.

The expression of dreams and their association with practices that celebrate self-realisation appear to reflect a mode of governance premised on ideologies of freedom and choice.

Nikolas Rose proposes that in neoliberal societies, individuals increasingly perceive their existence through the enhancement of 'freedom.' Using Foucault's concept of governmentality, Rose argues that neoliberalism recognises humans' 'capacity to act' and urges them to 'take responsibility in different fields' (Rose, 1999, pp. 2, 4). Through neoliberal discourse, this mode of governance becomes an ethical stance of individuals who seek to realise themselves as free and autonomous selves (Rose, 1998, pp. 16-17; Rose, 1999, pp. 69, 90). In China, dreams echo this imaginary by allowing individuals to perceive and express themselves in terms of pursuits for self-realisation.

However, the fact that dreams were performatively presented in bounded social settings and were expressed as exceeding individuals' everyday pursuits (a quality that I will further elaborate later), suggests that they did not thoroughly underpin individuals' agendas.

Individuals understood dreams, like individual autonomy (Chapter 4), to be restricted by default by local norms and everyday practices. Through the expression of dreams individuals could temporarily activate ideals of 'freedom' and 'choice.' These ideals are overall becoming more influential in Chinese society, but are kept as imaginaries detached from everyday imperatives that are experienced as less liberating. Dreams did not constitute the

person but rather offered an alternative mode of self-expression detached from individuals' primary aspirations.

The discourses and performative expressions of dreams indicate that dreams are socially constructed ideas and practices. As I discuss below, these dream discourses have developed primarily from a Chinese state campaign.

### The China Dream and the imperative of self-realisation

Dreams may seem to be a globalised term that varies little between societies that endorse individualistic imaginaries. I wish to emphasise, however, that in China today the language of dreams proliferates in culturally distinct ways. It is impossible today to watch Chinese talk shows, game shows, or reality shows without hearing the question 'what is your dream?' (*ni de mengxiang shi shenme?*), and individuals stating 'my dream is' – (*wo de mengxiang shi -*). Commercials also advertise 'dream products,' and CCP Chairman Xi Jinping rarely speaks publicly without mentioning people's dreams and the 'China Dream.' The China Dream is at once a national project and a call for individual dreams. In state-run activities, individual dreams are supposed to mirror the China Dream and accumulate to produce a positive collective outcome.

This prominence of dreams is a recent phenomenon. On November 29, 2012, shortly after being officially appointed as the new General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and President of China, Xi Jinping visited an exhibition titled 'The Road of Revitalisation' (*fuxing zhi lu*), at the National Museum in Beijing. In his official speech at that event, he stated: 'Realising the great revitalisation of the Chinese nation is also the greatest China Dream of our nation in the coming generations' (Xi, 2012). Since then, the term 'China Dream' has circulated widely. In the past three years, Xi Jinping has repeated, elaborated, and refined

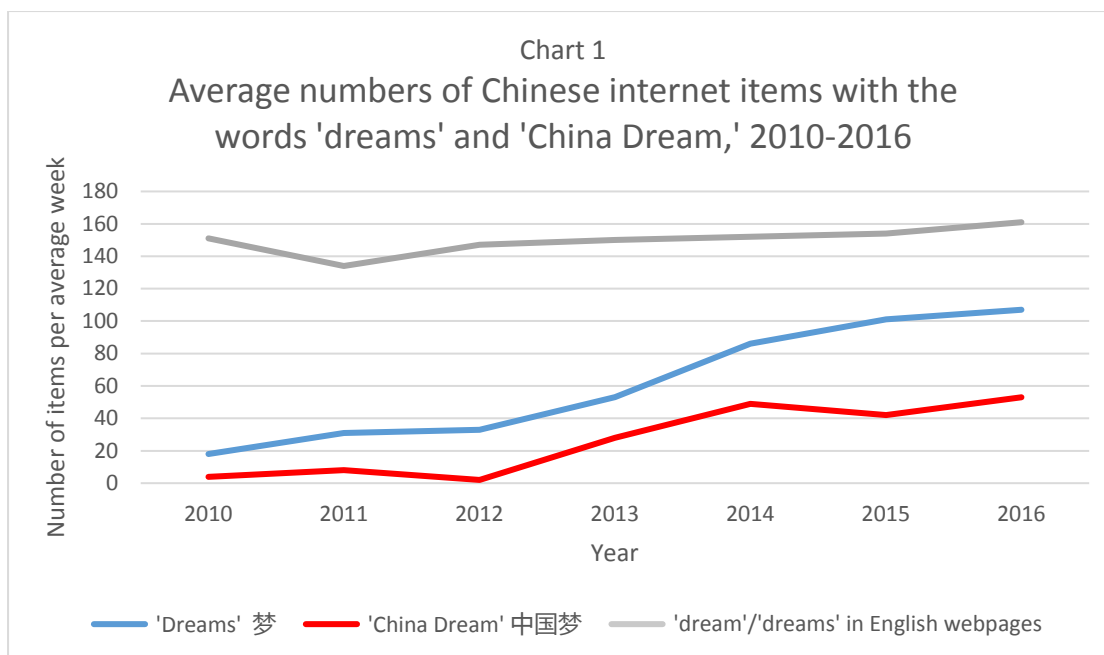
this concept, while CCP policy-makers of the Communist Party continue to interpret the essence of the China Dream.

In official discourses, the China Dream is regularly mentioned in association with the concept of national revitalisation, yet its definition remains broad. The China Dream aims at improving the material conditions of Chinese society, allowing all mainland Chinese to achieve optimal living standards (*xiaokang shehui*) – a main target of the CCP to be realised by 2021 (Gow, 2016; Xi, 2013a, p. 106). While the goal of *xiaokang shehui* originated earlier, emanating from Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, Xi added 'dreams' to this pursuit. At the same time, the China Dream is also about more intangible objectives, such as uplifting the China Spirit (*zhongguo jingshen*) (Xinhua Society, 2013), an invincible national pride that draws on glorified Chinese traditions (*guangrong chuantong*). It is about people's happiness (*xingfu*), but it also urges individuals to endure hard work and to struggle.

In one sense, the China Dream campaign is a propaganda tool that reinforces the CCP's legitimacy by presenting the Party as serving citizens' collective aspirations. Political scientist Wang Zheng (2014a, p. 7), argues that the China Dream 'is like old wine in a new bottle,' i.e., an extension of projects by previous leaders who formulated narratives of China's national rejuvenation under the aegis of the CCP. Since the launching of the China Dream, state organs have applied this concept with this purpose. For example, Liu Yunshan, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, spoke in a forum entitled 'Deepening the Propaganda and Education of the China Dream' in April 2013, in which he called for the integration of the destiny of individuals, national identity, and the Chinese state (Liu, 2013d, p. 9). Propaganda work should "root the China Dream deeply in our young people's hearts' (2013d, p. 14). This can be achieved, for example, by red travel excursions (excursions that

focus on important sites in the history of the CCP and the communist revolution), and patriotic education organised by schools (2013d, p. 14). In the same vein, Liu Chuansheng (2013), a scholar of political education, proposes that China Dream campaigns should direct young people to join the military, or volunteer in Confucius Institutes (Liu, 2013a, p. 12), among other patriotic duties. He also advocated running 'My China Dream' activities in schools and relevant institutions, in which individuals would conceptualise and articulate their aspirations with regards to the collective hopes of the nation (2013a, p. 12).

Yet, from another perspective, the China Dream has also served as a call for the emergence of individual dreams. As Xi (2015) clarified, 'The China Dream is the people's dream' (*zhongguomeng shi renmin de meng*), and moreover the national dream should reflect the aggregation of individuals' aspirations. The China Dream encourages individuals to express and perceive themselves through dreams. A middle school teacher in Jinan told me, for example, that following the China Dream campaign, teachers in her school asked pupils to express their aspirations in terms of dreams. In addition, numerous advertisements associate products with dreams, and an increased number of items and essays on the Chinese internet, narrate individuals' dreams (see Chart 1).



The above graph indicates the rise in the appearance of ‘dreams’ (*meng*) and ‘China Dream’ (*zhongguomeng*) in Chinese language internet items in the last few years. A significant increase is evident after Xi Jinping expressed the idea of the China Dream in late 2012 and the subsequent state campaigns that began in 2013 up to the present. The curves indicate an increase in the usage of ‘dreams’ that parallels, but is not congruent with, the circulation of the ‘China Dream.’ To compare with appearances of ‘dreams’ outside China, the grey curve indicates the number of appearances of ‘dream’/‘dreams’ in English webpages, via Google, which has undergone much smaller fluctuations.

\* I chose three random weeks in each year and calculated the average.

\*\*Results (red and blue curves) were recorded through the Baidu search engine, China’s largest search engine.

\*\*\*Items with similar names are often grouped together in the search results. The actual number of appearances is higher, yet the tendency reflected in the above curve remains.

This state campaign therefore promotes self-realisation at the same time that it celebrates a national narrative. While the latter is largely mute in non-state activities, such as my field sites, in state propaganda these two aspects are complementary. Such is the case in the next example taken from Beijing. A poster was put up by the Beijing Metro company, a



state-run enterprise, on the walls of Beijing metro stations. The poster was titled ‘My China Dream, My Metro Dream’ (*wo de zhongguo meng, wo de ditie meng*). 23 cards with passport-size photos of metro personnel, their names, and their ‘metro dream’ were posted on a red background that included images of the PRC’s flag and the Beijing metro lines.<sup>34</sup> Here are four examples of texts supposedly narrated by the metro workers about their China-metro dream:<sup>35</sup>



Figure 1 – ‘Metro dreams’

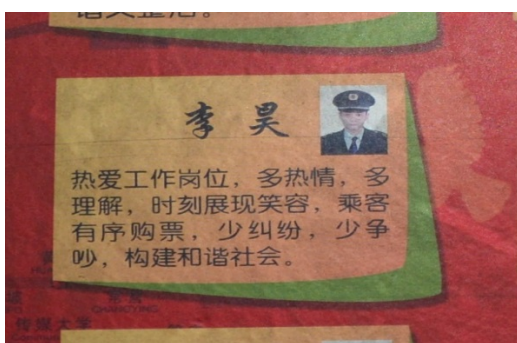


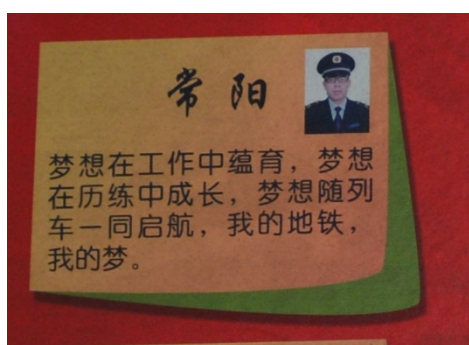
Figure 2 – Li Hao’s ‘metro dream’

<sup>34</sup> Metro stations, like many public venues in China have long been a site for state propaganda and for the introduction of state campaigns.

<sup>35</sup> All photos taken by myself.

Li Hao (m)

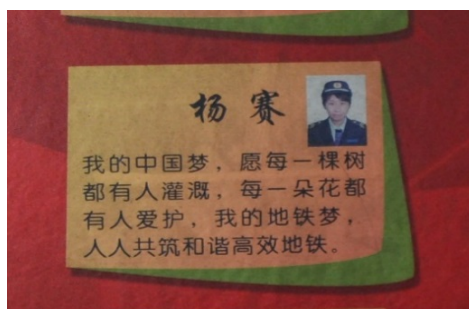
I love my work post, to be more enthusiastic, to be more understanding, to constantly smile; that passengers will buy tickets in order; few disputes, few quarrels, establish a harmonious society (*goujian hexie shehui*).<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 3 – Chang Yang’s ‘metro dream’**

Chang Yang (m)

Dreams are fostered during work, dreams grow through experience and training [...]; my metro, my dream.



**Figure 4 – Yang Sai’s ‘metro dream’**

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<sup>36</sup> The term ‘harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui*), was presented by former CCP Chairman Hu Jintao during the 2005 National People’s Congress as a national goal. Hu presented the term in relation to the objective of alleviating social inequality, in line with the goal of achieving a *xiaokang* society. The term dates back to Confucian writings in ancient China, and connotes social stability and conformity, and above all – avoidance of inner conflicts (see Tomba, 2009, pp. 593-594).

Yang Sai (f)

My China Dream, I hope that each and every tree will be watered by people, that each and every flower will be protected by people; my metro dream, everybody together building a harmonious and efficient metro.



**Figure 5 – Xu Jie's 'metro dream'**

Xu Jie (f)

Serving as a metro worker, I hope to positively forge ahead in my job, press buttons accurately and repetitively, accomplish safe and rapid journeys; to immerse in my work, and present my youthfulness with dedication (*fengxian qingchun*).

These messages bring together different values, from career self-development ('forge ahead in my job'), to social contributions. They include references to emotional fulfillment, job efficiency ('press buttons'), affective labour ('constantly smile') and social order ('few quarrels'). These statements therefore associate the self-realisation of the individual with the prosperous development of the nation. Unlike informants' imaginaries of social development via self-improvement that envision a utopian society (Chapter 5), here self-realisation is construed with emphasis on the current social order under the CCP's supervision. These messages suggest a Confucian cosmology that regards individuals'

fulfillment of social roles as a precondition for social harmony (see Chapter 4), combined with a new concern for emotional fulfillment.

While taming individual dreams to fit the national narrative, the China Dream campaign also promotes ideas of self-realisation. Outside state-run activities, these features of dreams also allow them to move beyond collective agendas, as I will now detail.

### The China Dream and the self-production of hope

The Chinese state's 'dreams' campaign is both an imperative for citizens, and draws on the emancipatory imaginary of dreams. I suggest that the main outcome of this campaign is the circulation of the language and expression of dreams as instruments that produce affect and optimism. Informants, workshop facilitators, as well as coordinators of educational activities and media productions outside my field sites, treat dreams as a proxy for generating hope, amidst a reality that cannot fully secure social actors' future prospects.

In my field sites, the influence of the China Dream campaign was evident in the expression of individual dreams, although informants did not associate their dreams with the broader CCP project. Participants seldom mentioned the China Dream or the Chinese leadership in their imaginary of dreams, even when they associated their practice with a vision of a future society (see Chapter 5). Informants preferred to construe dreams - like soft skills - as a universal human attribute that each person should have and cultivate. Theories of positive psychology, together with self-help guides, served to validate this. Moreover, dreams were often associated with US figures, such as Steve Jobs, Barack Obama and Martin Luther King (his famous saying rather than his political endeavours), although I also heard associations with Mao Zedong and contemporary Chinese celebrities.

Jiang Cheng, a 55-year old psychologist and instructor in *Heart's Secret*, unlike most club members, was normally happy to ponder the links between politics and psychology in his teaching and conversations. He acknowledged the role of the state in the current upsurge of 'dreams:'

Of course there's a link between the China Dream and people's expression of 'dreams.' The Communist Party is putting people's prospects inside the heart of each individual – 'you realise your dream, then we can realise the China Dream' (*ni shixian ziji de meng, ranhou zhongguo de meng ye shixian*). This is how it operates in our subconscious. The leaders are very smart. China is already developed to this stage, this stage demands a dream, every person needs a dream (*mei ge ren xuyao ziji de meng*). Xi Jinping realises people must fulfil their own ambitions. Xi said that the China Dream is the people's dreams, so by this, he indicates that individuals must pursue their own dreams.

According to Jiang, the state campaign responds according to human needs and desires. Jiang was old enough to offer a thoughtful comparison with the expression of dreams in the Mao era, when 'people wore the same, sang the same; this led to an oppression (*yayi*) of dreams and needs.' I note that Jiang's psychotherapeutic agenda led him to construe the difference in terms of oppression and emancipation, rather than in terms of social construction.

As Jiang Cheng indicated, the authority of the Chinese leadership legitimises expressions of self-realisation through the language of dreams, even for those who do not directly identify themselves with the Party-state. The universal attribute of dreams, which is evoked in the

China Dream campaign itself,<sup>37</sup> generalises the discourse of ‘dreams’ while allowing individuals to conceive of their dreams as independent from the state. The expression of dreams by individuals in these circumstances is both an act of self-reliance in accordance with state-driven reforms, and a deviation from the propaganda models of the state that highlight a symbiosis between personal and national achievements.

My intent is not to determine whether my informants’ expression of dreams does or does not manifest the state’s ‘intentions.’ Clearly, the state apparatus promotes both an apolitical expression of self-interest and more explicit conformity to nationalistic agendas.<sup>38</sup> In my field sites, dreams are a mode of expression associated with self-realisation, while in state-run pedagogies they express patriotic agendas. Above all, dreams are an affective practice for individual usage that deviates from, but does not undermine, the more presentist existence that characterises individuals’ everyday lives.

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<sup>37</sup> The Chinese state previously launched the 2008 Beijing Olympics under the slogan ‘one world, one dream’ (*tong yi ge shijie, tong yi ge mengxiang*).

<sup>38</sup> The dilemma about the extent to which the China Dream should be adopted and reconfigured by individual citizens was manifested in debates about the possible vulgarisation (*yongsuhua*) of the China Dream by mainstream media, commercial enterprises and by ordinary people. Gong Fangbin (2013), a scholar at the Chinese National Defence University, emphasises the need to preserve the link between the China Dream and noble (*gaoshang*) nationalist beliefs. He pleads for distinguishing between minor individualistic objectives and the powerful collective dream. In a similar vein, an author named Zhao Lei (2013) demands, in an editorial in the *Hong Ge Hui*, an internet portal identified with the CCP, not to conflate the China Dream with self-interests. ‘Otherwise,’ warns Zhao, it becomes ‘a dream of a random Chinese individual.’ In addition, some observers have shed doubt on the authentic intentions of the China Dream initiatives. Referring to the commercial advertisements that invoke the China Dream, one columnist argued that today, ‘people smoke China Dream, eat China Dream, reside in China Dream and travel to the China Dream, but have no real understanding of the great China Dream’ (Yi 2013).

Overall, through the China Dream campaign the CCP offers citizens a vague object of hope, while prompting individuals to produce their own hopes for the future. This process can be compared to Ghassan Hage's (2003) argument about the role of the state in the 'distribution' of hope. State policies, when providing welfare and a sense of underlying social support to citizens, generate 'an acquired sense of security in facing what the future will bring,' a feeling which Hage conceptualises as 'hope' (2003, p. 26). Hage endows the state with a maternal-like capacity to provide a general sense of hope to its citizens (applying the Kleinian idea of the 'good breast'). On the other hand, when the state retreats from offering this security, such as in the case with a capitalist state that favours international investment over the financial and social safety of its citizens, the distribution of hope is inhibited. This can lead to negative repercussions, transferring hopelessness from dominant social groups to the more marginalised. Ultimately Hage (2003, p. 10) distinguishes between hope as a 'noun' ('sense of security') and hope as a 'verb' ('affective practice'). The latter case refers to when individuals lack security and must find their own resources to generate hope.

The China Dream campaign and Xi Jinping's statements about a *xiaokang* society, position the state as responsible for navigating Chinese society towards a better future. It does not ignore the responsibility of the state in elevating the quality of life of citizens. But it is up to individuals to remain optimistic about the future, which is to say, they must produce this optimism. In light of the impossibility of finding a sense of security amidst their everyday uncertainties, I conclude that in practices of dream-expression, hope becomes a verb, an 'affective practice.' Ultimately the China Dream maintains the state's paternalistic position but distributes linguistic and pedagogic instruments downwards and requires the self-generation of hope.

## Exotic sensibilities in present-day China

The China Dream campaign promotes a discourse of self-realisation with regards to the nation, while at the same time inducing imaginaries beyond ordinary experience. By spotlighting scenarios that are not often perceived in the everyday, dreams offer an aesthetic depiction of a potential future. My next example demonstrates this.

In October 2015 I walked through a photography exhibition titled ‘China Dream, the road of rejuvenation, the spirit of the people – a photography competition of Lixia district [the most central district in Jinan].’ The exhibition was set up in central Jinan, in a small square between the Spring of the Black Tiger (*heihuquan*) and Shimao Plaza (a popular shopping center). It was organised by the Propaganda Office in the Ministry of Culture (see Liu, 2015, for a governmental press item about the exhibition; and Yingxiang Zhongguo, 2015, for a press announcement about the competition). Approximately thirty enlarged photos were hung on fences for the appreciation of pedestrians. One of the organisers, a man by the name of Gong, explained that the photos aimed to promote a positive vision of Jinan and align the city with the positive development of China. Photos included Jinan’s high-rise skyline, Jinan Olympic Park, highway junctions at night, and city monuments. Some photos also captured positive civilian or workers activities, such as soldiers under drill, medical staff providing aid, and married couples planting trees.

More than any other photo, I was drawn to a picture of a nesting songbird (which I identified as a Penduline Tit, a bird that is native to parts of east China, but not to Jinan (BirdLife International, 2018)). The photo (see Figure 6), included no background scenery or indication of the local setting. When I asked Mr. Gong about the selection of this photo, he said:



We in China do not divide things into strict categories, things are more connected. Maybe this type of scenery is common where you come from, but here it still has to do with a dream. If we do things right (*gan de hao*), then scenes of a nesting bird will become common. This photo is about harmony.

For Gong, the link between a nesting bird and development was self-evident. He associated the bird symbolically with an imaginary of modernity, well-being, and improved lifestyles.



**Figure 6 – ‘China Dream photo exhibition’**

This photo and Gong’s interpretation echo the metro workers’ imaginary of social harmony, while at the same time it presents dreams as including an enhanced sensibility to exotic and aesthetic features in individuals’ environments. On the one hand, in polluted industrial Shandong, sightings of nesting birds (except for magpies) are indeed rare for the average person. On the other hand, in order to witness such a dream-like scene, one does not necessarily have to await dramatic socio-environmental changes. Rather, a new awareness, a novel perspective, can stimulate this kind of dream. And even in grey Jinan, where weeks could go by without sunshine, once in a while blue skies do appear. On such days local

residents can visit one of the city's green spots or the forest area to the south of the city, and from certain angles imagine living in a beautiful place resembling a foreign land.

I observed this linkage in workshops as well. In their narratives of dreams, informants often offered an aesthetic and exotic imaginary. Individuals associated dreams with a sunny day at the beach and a hike in a green forest. This reflects a heterotopian sensibility that detects and enhances certain positive features of one's actual reality and presents them as a window for a potential future. It is an affective practice that was prominent in workshops and is extended to social media and its visual representations.

The photo of the songbird represents a perception that accentuates hopeful scenarios.

Interestingly, this photo also demonstrates how imaginaries can coexist with everyday realities, and that the realisation of dreams does not necessarily impinge upon individuals' everyday engagements. Being a person who dreams and expresses dreams is an expanding social imperative, but dreams tend to be inherently exterior to quotidian pursuits. In the next section I focus on this feature of dreams through a story from one informant.

### Ordinary life-paths and extraordinary lifestyles

Chinese individuals, especially those who belong to the majority of the population who cannot easily transform their socioeconomic position, must attempt to enhance their self-realising aspirations while remaining committed to their principle responsibilities. They often pursue this balance by turning to dreams, extraordinary imaginaries that divert from their main life path, like 'riding a motorcycle around Taiwan.' The result is a division between objectives expressive of a person's social responsibilities and more exotic dreams. I suggest that these dreams do not represent an inner division where authentic private aspirations are antagonistic to a person's everyday engagements. Instead, dreams offer an

affective mode of self-perception and self-expression that extends beyond a person's existing social tasks.

Xixi was a 22-year-old student of foreign languages whom I met in *Super Speakers*. A daughter of working-class parents from the industrial town of Zibo three hours east of Jinan, she was a senior student in one of the best universities in Jinan. Her background informed her lifestyle: her high expectations and lack of financial resources prevented her from engaging in leisure and consumption activities that would distract her attention from her studies. She only attended *Super Speakers* twice as a guest. She explained that her busy study routine, as she prepared applications for a Masters program, prevented her from continuing in the club, even if she said she enjoyed the club's cheerful atmosphere. When I met her twice later that year, she again seemed quite preoccupied with academic and personal issues. This mind-set was also the starting point for her analysis of the differences between 'dreams' (*mengxiang*) and 'objectives' (*lixiang*).<sup>39</sup>

*'Mengxiang* usually refers to things that are less realistic (*xianshi*) than *lixiang*. For example, my *mengxiang* is to learn to play guitar, while my *lixiang* is to be accepted into a good Masters program, maybe to go study abroad for a few years, and later to become a Mandarin language teacher for foreigners.'

My follow-up question revealed my surprise: 'But you can find a place to learn guitar five minutes from here, so how can it be less achievable compared to a long study and career path?'

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<sup>39</sup> Linguistically *lixiang* signifies 'reasonable (*li*) thinking (*xiang*),' while *mengxiang* signifies 'dream thinking.'

Xixi: 'Of course it is less achievable! First, I don't have musical talent. Second, playing the guitar is not realistic: my parents would not allow me to do something that distracts me from my studies; plus I am very busy.'

Gao Le: 'And if you would have a choice to fulfill your career (*lixiang*) or to be talented in guitar, which would you choose?'

Xixi answered without hesitating: 'to be a guitar player! Because playing the guitar is a certain lifestyle (*yizhong shenghuo fangshi*).'

Finally, Xixi concluded concerning the differences between *mengxiang* and *lixiang*: 'To my teachers and parents I would, of course, say that my dream is to do well in my studies, but actually a dream should be something more fun. *Lixiang* has a feeling of helplessness (*yizhong wunai de ganjue*).'

Xixi's dream was not unreachable in terms of prerequisites for achievement, but was rather an alternative lifestyle that was by definition more joyful and liberating than her routine. Unlike *Champion Training* personnel such as Gao Rui and Shili (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5), who insisted on incorporating their agendas of self-realisation into their projected careers in the market economy, or Tao Wenya who tried to sustain a feeling of open-endedness in her self-improvement tasks (Chapter 6), Xixi accepted a rigid division between her main obligations and pleasure. By viewing guitar-playing as an improbable dream, Xixi did not so much express an inability to lay her hand on the instrument, as she regarded guitar-playing as a proxy for an alternative lifestyle, laden with recreation and idleness.

Xixi expressed a division in her self-perception and aspirations. Her rhetoric echoed ideas about the divided existential state of Chinese individuals today. In Chapter 4 I discussed

Mette Hansen's (2015) concept of 'authoritarian individualism.' According to Hansen, young Chinese individuals are adopting an individualistic ethos and celebrating their aspirations in extensive social domains, while limiting their self-expression when it comes to 'inevitable fates' such as the rule of the CCP or certain parental expectations (2015, p. 150). Susan Bregnbæk (2016) provides a phenomenological analysis of this issue in her account of elite university students in Beijing. Bregnbæk describes a tension between 'self-realisation' and 'self-sacrifice' in students' ethical pursuits, the latter correlating mostly to filial behaviours towards parents. Students find themselves, she argues, in a clash between living for others and living for oneself, or between 'success' and 'well-being' (2016, pp. 141-142).

Both authors draw on Arthur Kleinman's (2011, p. 5) idea of the 'divided self,' although his existential approach is more congruent with Bregnbæk's framework. According to Kleinman, Chinese individuals must present themselves socially and engage in practices that contradict their inner desires and moral compass. To Kleinman and his co-authors, this divide is mainly a result of the authoritarian political system and the clash of cultural value systems that is taking place in contemporary China. Using a painting of an owl by Huang Yongyu from 1973 (the last years of the Cultural Revolution), as a metaphor for the divided-self, Kleinman and his co-authors (2011, pp. 23-24) elaborate: <sup>40</sup>

One eye is open to the technical, financial, and political realities of the time. It is absorbed not only in cell phone calls, emails, and surfing the internet, but also with protocols, audits, and public messages and performances. It is alive with practical self-interest, but also exquisitely attentive to the local politics of life at home and

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<sup>40</sup> Huang's painting led to controversy in the mid-1970s, suspected for presenting subtle criticism of the revolutionary campaigns at the time (see Wang, 2000, pp. 436, 438-439).

work. It sees things as they are, or as they pretend to be. The other eye is closed [...] so as to distance the person from the immediacy, expediency, and sheer practicality of getting on with life and negotiating the constant flow of threats and opportunities. Protecting the privacy of the person, the closed eye helps her or him consider [...] what really matters. [...] And it can create self-reflective criticism in the service of ethics, aesthetics, and meaning-making. [...]. The closed eye sees things as they might or should be. [...]. The tension between the eyes is unrelieved and irresolvable.

This interpretation captures existential struggles which many Chinese could relate to, and it also insightfully associates the Maoist era with contemporary modes of governance.

However, it sheds little light on contemporary meanings of self-realisation. Although the authors acknowledge that new values are penetrating Chinese society through psychotherapy and consumption practices, they see a divide between pragmatic action and inner morality which they trace to impositions set by the CCP and Confucian ideas (2011, pp. 8-9).

While I value scholarly interpretations that recognise the constrasting social demands that Chinese individuals face, I do not fully subscribe to theories that offer a demarcation of spheres of constraint versus spheres of emancipation. I suggest that in urban China today, the discourse of dreams belongs to discursive practices that construct a divided experience as much as they reflect an existential inner struggle. While Xixi presented a division between inner desires and social imperatives, guitar playing was not a more authentic mode of being for her than her study routine. As I have previously argued, the discourse of dreams in China does not reflect a comprehensive 'governance through freedom,' since it does not lead

individuals to constitute themselves through ‘choice.’ Xixi did not even believe she could ever achieve a state where she could freely make her own choices; she believed her dreams were inherently suppressed by her social responsibilities.

Nonetheless, the concept of dreams alludes to globalised ideas of individual autonomy and self-realisation. In China, dreams are to a great extent associated with non-mundane self-perception and self-presentation. Dreams do not channel ‘what really matters,’ but rather construct gaps and divisions between ordinary and extraordinary experiences. This division, in itself, is not necessarily more disabling (oppressing a so-called authentic selfhood), than enabling – allowing dreamers to imagine exceeding their ordinary engagements. What was most disabling for Xixi, I assume, were socioeconomic pressures, and perhaps other familial factors which I am not aware of, that prompted her commitment to her path of study.<sup>41</sup>

A more cheerful interpretation of the division between dreams and realistic objectives was offered by the psychologist Jiang Cheng. For him, ‘dreams are about breaking away from reality (*tuoli xianshi*), but they must have some foundation, otherwise they are fantasy.’ As a therapist, Jiang was careful not to encourage patients to live in fantasy, but he nonetheless considered dreaming an indicator of good mental health. His own dream was to open a clinic for painting-therapy and a bar for music therapy. Becoming a psychologist for him was already somewhat a ‘departure from reality’ since he began training only in his mid 40s in a

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<sup>41</sup> Notably, Xixi conveyed a division between dreams and objectives with a melancholy tone that was absent among most of my other informants. This may be due to the fact that she reflected on her dreams during a private conversation in response to my questions, rather than as an affective speaker on a workshop stage, as well as to fact that she was less of a zealous self-improver in terms of her extracurricular engagements compared to other informants. Furthermore, she was strongly aware of the socioeconomic limitations that underlay her parental pressure and her inability to enjoy leisure time ‘luxuries.’

newly developing profession. He considered psychology to be a practice that enabled his own self-realisation and provided joyful pleasure he could not find in his former technocratic job. Yet within psychology he still set his mind on new dreams that deviated from mainstream practice.

Dreams offer a widespread discourse that reflects upon the affective qualities of the heterotopian workshops that I have presented in this dissertation. On the one hand, dreams bring forth hope for the future, channeling individuals' desires and moral imaginaries. On the other hand, dreams tend to separate the dreamer from immediate pursuits. For working-class individuals such as Xixi, whether or not she realises her dream is of relatively little importance in terms of her career or family prospects. Yet having a dream and expressing it has become a strong imperative for her and her fellow social actors in urban China.

## Conclusion

Dreams in China are both an expression of personal aspirations and a concept that has expanded enormously through the CCP's campaigns. The state both mobilises individuals to embrace particular discursive practices and prodding individuals to affectively produce hope via personal dreams. The outcome of this expansive discourse, employed by individuals across different social sectors, generates a gap between individuals' imaginaries and their main engagements. Dreams tend to separate hope from the everyday, parallel to the affective mechanism of workshops for soft skills.

I have tried to bring out important aspects and trends in social phenomena associated with affect and self-realisation in China, but I do not intend to convey the impression of a fixed or absolute reality. For example, while I suggest that dreams allude to extraordinary



experiences, at certain times informants also used the term 'dreams' interchangeably with 'objectives' or 'aims.' Dreams are an expansive and somewhat ambiguous term - otherwise Tom (who I quoted at the beginning of this chapter), would not have had to emphasise their exotic nature to begin with. The discourse of 'dreams' is naturally interpreted differently by different people and groups. It remains to be seen how the imperative of 'dreams' and self-realisation develops in the coming years, and whether the gap between dreams and reality will narrow.

## Conclusion: Paradoxes in affective self-improvement

In this dissertation I described soft skills as practices of self-improvement that aspire to an ideal person. My work adds a focus on affect to the ethnographic study of the new person in contemporary Chinese society. Affective experiences, I suggested, are the avenues through which individuals can attempt to realise their ideals and imagine themselves extending their capacities to achieve meaningful change in the trajectory of their lives. Since these affective experiences shifted my informants' attention away from questions of how they will apply the soft skills they were learning, and the limits to the socioeconomic progress they may achieve, the optimism workshops offered was short-lived and did not alleviate the concerns that underlay informants' commitments to self-improvement in the first place. In China today, various discourses and institutions promote and coordinate these affective experiences. Often their main priority, I propose, is less directed at mobilising citizens to adapt to new socioeconomic imperatives as they are for maintaining individuals' optimism and conformity when they find few positive developments in their own social environments. The following sections revisit and integrate the key themes that I discussed throughout the thesis. I focus on the paradoxes in the meanings that individuals attach to soft skills and the role of affect in this problematic. I emphasise the ways that the affective medium combined with self-improvement workshops to produce optimistic imaginaries of social inclusion for individuals who were anxious about their socioeconomic positions relative to both changing conditions in China, and the nation's relationship to the world. In this process, informants morally distinguished between 'globally-valid' soft skills and the local norms of social interaction. Soft skills, as a mode of self-improvement that spotlights personalities and

everyday 'general faculties,' allude both to practical abilities and to a transcendence above pragmatics, positioning informants in a puzzling position. The affective intensities of their practice enabled them to overlook these paradoxes, but ultimately these incoherencies reproduced their on-going impetuses for self-improvement.

My findings on the link between affective experiences, self-improvement, and ideal personhood may, in future research, open channels for comparisons with a range of pedagogic and commercial practices in China and elsewhere. Practices of self-improvement that focus on soft skills and personalities are particularly evident in market-driven societies that demand self-reliance, economic proactivity and political conformity. I suggest that these practices are likely to prioritise affect when individuals sense their limited capacity to alter their fates.

#### Affect, soft skills, and social inclusion in a second-tier city

The optimistic moral imaginary of soft skills often allows people to turn a blind eye to the real outcomes and possibilities of self-improvement agendas. What it offers, instead, are virtual avenues for individuals to participate in captivating social groups and scenarios. In my fieldwork, I found that social actors opted to attend affective activities that allowed them to experience themselves as valuable even when (and because) they were aware that these activities could not substantively change their social or economic situations.

As residents of Jinan, my informants found themselves in a confusing position in relation to the outside world. Jinan is a provincial capital and an expanding economic hub, while at the same time it is not at the forefront of economic development or globalisation in China. Jinan and the surrounding region has a rich history dating back to the emergence of Confucianism (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE), and the development of Chinese Buddhism (5<sup>th</sup> century AD), among many

cultural milestones. Informants appreciated this heritage and endorsed local holidays and traditions. However, these practices did not replace their interest in affiliating themselves with moral economies that transcend the local. They anticipated the local job market to expand and the city to attract foreign investment, and associated economic development with hopeful prospects of improved air quality and expanded practices of soft skills.

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that practices of soft skills, particularly when incorporating foreign methodologies (psychology, Design for Change, TED.com), or embracing seemingly globally valid styles of expression (see Chapter 5), allow individuals to affectively affiliate with their ideals. By expressing their dreams, for example, informants drew upon linguistic and performative registers that they associate with the glittering stages of entertainment TV (see Chapter 7). What is at stake is not an ability to achieve cultural capital for the sake of socioeconomic transformation, but rather more temporary participation in otherwise inaccessible social groups. This type of experience may not be unique to China. For example, Amalia Sa'ar (2016) observes a similar process in courses for microbusiness for low-income women in Israel. Although most course participants were aware that it was unlikely that they would become entrepreneurs, they nonetheless appreciated the opportunity to adopt a reflexive emotional language that is normally 'monopolized by higher classes... without being ridiculed for misusing it' (Sa'ar, 2016, pp. 180, 183). For those women, emotional expression produced an imagined social mobility which actual structural conditions did not permit. I did not ever witness working-class participants being ridiculed within workshops for misusing the language and affective registers associated with self-realisation. Indeed, over time there are more and more settings where individuals can experiment with soft skills and emotional expression.

Nevertheless, combined with *zheng nengliang*, individuals still experienced these practices as unique opportunities for self-overcoming and social inclusion.

There is a paradoxical situation, therefore, where many Chinese individuals can access practices of soft skills, while at the same time participants perceive of these pedagogic settings as extraordinary. Mette Hansen (2015) shows that even in an impoverished rural high school in Zhejiang, students enjoy affective activities that lead them to feel relevant and connected to more central social stages. There she attended a motivational activity facilitated by a guest speaker where students expressed gratitude towards parents, shared their dreams, and experimented in performative hugging. Hansen concludes that this event in 'its form, style, and choice of language had more in common with popular talk shows and dating programs on TV than with classroom teaching' (2015, p. 145).

Hugging, an important ingredient in the motivational activity described by Hansen, is also my final example of the alternative social reality produced by workshops' affective medium. I echo Hansen's description of the performative and TV-like nature of the workshops' affective self-improvement practices. I further emphasise that hugging, as a pedagogic exercise, was not deployed as an instrument for transforming the self but rather as an imaginary access to alluring social settings.<sup>42</sup> Outside workshops, hugging is not a common everyday gesture in urban China. While it is commonly enacted on entertainment TV, particularly among young celebrity idols, it does not occur in everyday interactions. In Jinan, I very rarely witnessed hugging between adults or youth, including my informants.

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<sup>42</sup> My findings counter Lyn Jeffery's (2001) description of hugging in multi-level marketing training in Beijing in the mid-1990s. According to Jeffery, hugging was conducted in training with precision and discipline for the purpose of modifying the body to induce proactivity, individual responsibility, and risk taking (2001, pp. 164-165).

At the same time, hugging was enacted as a moral and extraordinary experience in practices of soft skills. In workshops, and even in some conversations outside workshops, informants associated the avoidance of hugging in Chinese society with ‘conservative’ (*baoshou*) attitudes of people who have yet to realise the virtues of this bodily interaction. In *Champion Training* camps instructors associated hugging with team building and emotional release. They directed participants to hug each other during and after intense activities. In *Heart’s Secret*, I witnessed three different role-playing scenarios between one participant and another who played her or his parent, which culminated with an emotional hug in front of all participants. These moments often led to tears from the participants and observers. One of the instructors described hugging as ‘letting go, truly expressing to your mother the emotions that you feel and could not express all these years.’

Hugging, like the motivational lecture described by Hansen, allowed individuals to affiliate themselves with more glamorous and wealthy social groups. It may have some therapeutic function for the participant who imagined hugging his or her parents, but above all it was a performative act that incorporated unusual bodily registers, even when participants were aware that they could not, or would not, extend the practice outside workshops. I was surprised to see that even ex-members of *Champion Training* who repeatedly hugged each other during the one-week camp did not continue to do so afterwards.<sup>43</sup> Hugging was an affective practice, and as such, even in workshops it was exercised only at moments of emotional climax. It was practiced as an affective crescendo, rather than habituated into

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<sup>43</sup> Throughout my stay in Jinan, only one informant friend continued to hug me outside workshops when we greeted each other before our dinners and walks.

participants' daily lives, triggered only at certain moments and directing participants to acknowledge the unique affective medium of their workshops.

The example of hugging illustrates my argument that globalised practices of self-improvement that focus on social actors' personalities have gained currency in China – and worldwide – not only by *symbolising* progress and modernity, but also through learners' affective experiences. Through the pedagogy of soft skills, my informants experienced new ways of being in different groups, and experimented with bodily and linguistic registers incongruent with their everyday dispositions. These practices produced a heterotopian imaginary that incited a sense of affiliation and social inclusion. For informants, practices such as hugging offered a simulation of a moral social world that was simultaneously ideal yet not *their* social world.

#### The paradoxical morality of soft skills in Chinese society

These abovementioned imaginaries extended to the perceived morality of soft skills. For informants, soft skills were premised on supposable global features of humankind which were inherently in tension with local Chinese quotidian practices. As part of their desires to move beyond their current statuses, my informants sought to discount the importance of social hierarchies, reject socially-prescribed roles, change norms of interpersonal behaviour, and counter the presentist mind-sets that characterise urban Chinese life. This echoes discourses that have proliferated in China since the May Fourth movement, which link self-improvement, cultural introspection, and social development (see Chapter 5). Today these discourses exist within market-driven ideologies. They bring into play an important contradiction: learning soft skills had to be both valuable in informants' current realities and simultaneously antagonistic to them.

A good example of this perceived tension between soft skills and social norms was apparent when I asked informants about the relationship between soft skills and *guanxi* social relations. *Guanxi* refers to interdependent relationships in China, including reciprocity in gifts or favours, commitments between people of a common background (family background, hometown, work unit), and relationships of mutual remunerative interest (see Yang, 1994, pp. 126, 131). By definition, *guanxi* relationships are situational practices contingent on 'particular' encounters, rather than 'subject to abstract norms' (Yang, 1994, p. 196). *Guanxi*, informants said, was prevalent in their social worlds. However, the association of *guanxi* with local norms, rather than with seemingly globally-valid practices, led them to sustain a moral distinction between *guanxi* and soft skills. Even if soft skills were supposed to be 'general faculties' of everyday usage optimal for interpersonal relations, and *guanxi* similarly depended on interpersonal skills, informants never stated an intention to employ soft skills for improving their *guanxi*. They preferred to preserve a symbolic association between soft skills and an ideal person who does not conform to local and present practices, as well as a person who does not succumb to the particularistic norms of interdependence that characterise *guanxi*.

Clearly, informants could not fully denounce imagined possibilities to apply soft skills in their social world. In order to justify their practice for themselves and in front of others, they maintained a conviction in the efficacy of soft skills. Virtual imaginaries in workshops, for example, alluded to informants' possibilities of applying their practice in their social worlds, even if they were just as drawn by the pleasure of *zheng nengliang*. Furthermore, informants frequently arrived in workshops preoccupied with problems in their immediate social worlds, including relations with their families and co-workers.



This notwithstanding, informants continuously constructed their practices as morally distant from pragmatic and presentist considerations. Otherwise, they would undermine their affiliation to the image of a moral person constructed in workshops, and their abilities to regard themselves as pioneer practitioners of a moral pedagogy. These paradoxes in informants' experiences and interpretations of soft skills are summarised in the table below:

**Table 2 – The Moral Divide in the Construction of Soft Skills in China**

<b>Qualities and ideals associated with soft skills</b>	<b>Actual conditions to which soft skills must adapt and above which soft skills must transcend</b>
Extraordinary imaginaries	Mundane experiences
Global practices and human tendencies	Local society, situational practices and 'Chinese' norms
Autonomy	Interdependence
Future	Present

This table highlights the divide between soft skills as experienced in workshops and the outside world. The practices of soft skills are therefore in a state of constant failure, since participants cannot demonstrate effective application in their 'real lives.' However, these same practices are also in constant self-validation, as the inapplicability of soft skills in people's daily lives reaffirms their symbolic value as not limited to local situational practices. On two occasions I witnessed informants debating what they saw as the problem that soft skills are undervalued in China; they argued about whether this indicated that local society was in urgent demand for soft skills (and relevant workshops) or whether they should be

patient and wait for society to become less 'conservative' first.<sup>44</sup> They did not reach a conclusion. The significance of soft skills for individuals who wished to improve themselves vis-à-vis their existing social environment remained puzzling. This led some informants to abandon their practice, but often it sustained their sense of incompetency and drew them to even further assert their value through additional and on-going self-improvement practices.

### Paradoxes and the on-going impetus for self-improvement

In this dissertation I argue that affective experiences reinforce the paradoxes present in self-improvement projects. Workshops allowed participants to realise their ideal person in a manner that distracted them from their on-going everyday challenges. While informants enjoyed moments of *zheng nengliang*, the lack of tangible outcomes perpetuated their uncertainties about their personal value. In turn, they had to re-fuel themselves with optimism and with a sense of accomplishment, conceiving themselves as forever requiring further self-improvement.

My focus on affect in fueling individuals' attachments to self-improvement supplements the role of discursive apparatuses that cast individuals as responsible for constantly improving their lives in every aspect. Globalised discourses of self-improvement tend to construct 'improvement' as a never-ending project, reinforcing the perception of the person as insufficiently competent. Such is the case, for example, with psychotherapeutic discursive practices, as analysed by Illouz (2008) and Füredi (2004). The former suggests that 'the very

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<sup>44</sup> In one of the conversations that took place between two instructors of *Champion Training*, one of them struggled to emphasise the potential application of soft skills in China while maintaining that soft skills are a global practice of equal relevance anywhere.

injunction to strive for higher levels of health and self-realisation produces narratives of suffering' (Illouz, 2008, p. 176). Through psychotherapy individuals are made responsible for solving their own suffering through emotional management, yet this commitment highlights imperfections: the psychology client or consumer is increasingly aware of his or her emotional 'dysfunctions' and thus aspires further self-improvement. Frank Furedi (2004) offers a similar thesis, condemning psychological discourses for promoting politically indifferent and vulnerable individuals. Through therapy, Furedi argues, individuals cultivate a sense of helplessness (2004, p. 6), becoming increasingly dependent on psychology experts and therapy.

In this dissertation I have focused on this underlying logic of discourses of self-improvement as they manifest in contemporary China. My informants clearly saw themselves as incomplete: their dreams were always yet to be fulfilled, their true 'selves' – supposedly dormant – had to be unearthed and emphasised, and they were always subject to the shackles of Chinese culture. At the same time, they were drawn to the affective intensities of their practices. Rather than simply delving into disempowering vulnerabilities (as in Furedi) or running in place (as Illouz's description suggests), informants moved between joy and anxiety, immediate self-overcoming and confused implementation. The perpetuation of the impetus of self-improvement was partially due to the paradoxes in their practice (autonomy versus group conformity, the moral divide presented above), and partly due to priority of affect which constantly shifted their attention away from questions of implementation and tangible progress.

My study ultimately describes a mode of self-improvement that pertains to an ambitious project of becoming an ideal person, while also denouncing a dedicated pursuit of such

project in tangible terms. My informants were keenly aware of the challenges individuals face in contemporary Chinese society, and simultaneously ignored them for the sake of a momentary sense of achievement. It is a practice that brought together hopelessness and hopefulness, reflecting individuals' inherent lack of 'security in facing of what the future will bring' (Hage, 2003, p. 26), and their appreciation of opportunities to experience themselves through positive affects.

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## Appendix 1 – Key Informants

Name & Age	Career, studies and familial status	Background	History in workshop	Value in workshop	Mottos	Aspirations
<i>Champion Training</i>						
Li Ting (f), 21	Undergraduate student in project management at a prestigious university,	City of Rizhao, lower middle-class family. Was an average student most of her childhood, improved tremendously in high-school	Member of <i>Champion Training</i> (left in summer 2015), instructor and advertiser	Part of many activities she does to exercise herself and engage in the private economy, fostering a set of skills for a global job market	'Each mountain is higher than the previous one' ( <i>yi shan bi yi shan gao</i> ), setting new goals according to new achievements; 'There's motivation only when there's pressure' ( <i>you yali cai you dongli</i> )	Work in a big city for a few years, develop within a big international enterprise, perhaps run her own business; return to live in her hometown eventually.
Gao Rui (f), 20	Undergraduate student in accounting,	City of Zhangqiu, upper working-class family; entered her studies as a self-funding ( <i>zikao</i> ) student	Worked in two extracurricular training schools before being captured by <i>Champion Training</i> ; recently began working as an intern in Liu Xingqi's training	Overcoming oneself, being able to engage with people of different walks of life, being able to choose one's own path	' <i>chugui</i> ' – 'betray' – wishes to reject her socially prescribed roles as a wife in a traditional familial structure with little self-development	Continue to work with Liu Xingqi, experiment in entrepreneurship, and ultimately run her own training schools in soft skills for children

			school in Changsha			
Shilli (m), 22	Undergraduate student in politics at an average-level university	City of Zaozhuang, middle-class family	Attended two camps as a trainee, continued as a part-time team member	Skills and dispositions that contradict the insincere 'face'-dominated Chinese society	'free and unrestrained' ( <i>ziyou zizai</i> ), 'in our era, if you don't market yourself nobody will know you'	Running an enterprise that would combine his interests and a business potential, encountering 'like-minded' ( <i>zhitong daohe</i> ) and gifted individuals
Chaoxing (f), 22	Senior student in product design at a prestigious university	Jinan, lower middle-class	One of the main instructors in camps	Skills that cultivate independence and discipline for self-improvement	'Are you working hard to be successful ( <i>weichenggong er nuli</i> ), or are you working hard for the sake of working hard?'	Pursuing a career in design, achieving a more healthy and satisfying relationship with her mother, living away from her parents' home
Li Chen (m), 24	Senior student in Law at a prestigious university	A village in Western Shandong, working-class	The founder of the school. Engaged in training for youngsters when he was in high-school already	Skills that allow one to improve, pursue one's dreams, and live a more fulfilling life.	'Either you are outstanding, or you are kicked out' ( <i>yaome chuzhong, yaome chuju</i> )	Continuing to run enterprises for training in soft skills, extending the service to high-schools and private enterprises

Ling Mei (f), 19	Student in Law at a prestigious university	Outskirts of Jinan, higher working-class, high result in the College Entrance Exam	Heard about it from a friend, joined the one-week camp	Some exercises are helpful but overall made new friendships, particularly one dear friend (Zhenxu)		Opening a 'quiet café'
Zhenxu (f), 20	Studies I.T. in a small university in the city of Yantai	Rizhao, higher working-class	A childhood friend of Li Ting who recommended she joins	It is important for everyone to foster interpersonal skills, not easily applied in her social milieu	'It's always good to learn new things'	Finish her studies, find a good job, find a loving boyfriend
<i>Super Speakers</i>						
Tao Wenya (f), 24	Master's Student in English interpretation	Dongying, middle-class, parents work in the state sector	Was recommended to join by a classmate	Appreciates the communication and evaluation style of the club, finds it productive to self-growth	'Exercising myself' ( <i>duanlian ziji</i> ), wants that all children 'believe in love'	Wants to advance in the global private economy, would love to work for the UN
Yan Xia (f), 24	Graduated from a Master's program, engaged, began	Yantai in eastern Shandong, lower middle-class	A friend took her to a club activity	<i>Super Speakers</i> is 'like a family' for her, a club that made her smile when she	'It's important to believe in love,' 'It's important that husband and wife are at the same intellectual	Have a happy family with her spouse while continuing to develop herself

	teaching English in a private training school			was in a period of depression	and occupational level'	
Dorothy (f), 24	Master's student in linguistics	Weihai in eastern Shandong, middle-class	Attended a special promotion event of the club at her university	Challenging herself and meeting interesting people	'It is important to undergo different experiences during one's youth'	Marry her boyfriend and embrace a more stable lifestyle
Hu Ling (m), 29	Works in technical assistance	Village in Liaocheng county, working-class	Heard about this club in 2013 in a period wherein he decided to improve himself in several avenues	Taking initiative, critical thinking, not succumbing to mundane practices and mind-sets	'Developing new modes of thinking ( <i>xin de siwei</i> )'	Run a training school for students in his village, continue improving himself while spreading practices of soft skills
Jerry (m), 52	Real-estate agent, resides in Toronto, returned for a long stay in Jinan, married and has a son	Jinan, upper middle-class	Attended a parallel club in Toronto	Appreciates the friendly atmosphere fostered by the club and its optimistic perspective	'Make people hopeful, wise, and happy'	
Max (m), 31	Manager in construction, single	Jinan, middle-class	Established the club with friends in 2012, was president in the past	The club offers more gentle and (morally) 'clean' interpersonal	'Life is hard'	

				interactions compared to his everyday encounters		
Guozhi (m), 33	Engineer, single	Jinan, middle-class	Established the club with friends in 2012; the most influential person in the club to date	The club cultivates open-mindedness	'Your body or your mind should often be on the road [travelling]'	
Yuming (f), 30	Works for an airline, married	Heze in southern Shandong, middle-class	Bumped into a club activity while sitting in the café where activities are held	The club offers a mode of self-improvement and challenge she was lacking in her stable job	'be like water'	Find peace of mind in front of social pressures (such as the demand that she and her husband have kids)
Liu Shu (f), 38	Works in banking, married (no children)	Jinan, upper middle-class	Read about the club online	Wants to foster a more respectful and thoughtful way to express her ideas and criticism towards others	'I like things to be simple'	
Xixi (f), 22	Student of Chinese language	Weifang, working-class	Was recommended to try the club by a classmate	Meeting interesting people, enjoying a new platform for self-expression		Enter a good Master's Program and become a teacher of Chinese for foreigners; master playing the guitar

Chuntao (f), 25	Master's Student in English interpretati on, started working in a small private enterprise	Tengzhou in southern Shandong, middle-class	Went to the club with her friend Wenya	Engaging in inspiring activities that represent globally- oriented cities	'learning keeps one's mental strength'	Advancing in her career, buying a flat in Jinan with her boyfriend
<i>Heart's Secret</i>						
Guo Feng (f), 33	Works in marketing, divorced	Jinan, lower middle-class, did not attend university	Attended several short workshops in summer 2015, read about the club online	Wanted to feel better about herself and learn from the mistakes that lead to her divorce	'it's good to set plans for oneself'	Achieving a higher salary, finding a husband, opening a store and liberating herself both financially and spiritually
Guan-yin (f), 41	White collar worker in a state-run enterprise, married, has a son	Jinan, middle- class, lives with her family and her parents-in-law	Learned psychology since her late 20s, has a counselling license, knew one of the club's directors	Wanted to feel more connected to her desires and aspirations	'Everything is empty ( <i>xukong</i> ),' 'not being crazy is a type of craziness'	Feeling more liberated in her life despite disliking her job and feeling oppressed by her husband and his mother



Changying (f), 32	Works in online marketing and occasionally in counselling, single (started her first serious relationship in many years in mid-2017)	Jinan, middle-class, lives with her parents, studied in Canada for three years in her early 20s	Learned psychology since 2012, knew some of the club's members	Wants to improve her communication abilities, particularly with her mother	'Children should hate their parents a lit bit,' 'all children love their parents, not all parents truly love their children,' 'everything we do is for ourselves,' 'who is normal and who is crazy?'	Living as she wishes and not compromising her happiness and freedom
Jia Chunbai (f), 36	Dance teacher, licensed level-2 psychology counsellor; married, has a 4-year-old daughter	Jinan, higher middle-class	Learned psychology for several years, has a background in children's education	Wants to enhance her well-being and considers psychology as a possible profession	Success depends less on learning and more on concentration capacities ( <i>zhuanzhuli</i> )	To establish training activities for infants that combine psychology and educational methods; to work as a counsellor for foreigners
Yao Jun (f), 25	Owns a store selling soft drinks, single	Tai'an, lower middle-class	Completed a M.A. in psychology at a local university	Wants to continue to understand herself and to be exposed to psychotherapeutic practices	'I am not picky about people, I am picky about my emotions ( <i>wei mo ge ganqing tiaoti</i> )'	To find a balance between material and spiritual needs
Weihui (m), 34	Works in micro media for a local	Laiwu, lower middle-class, parents are	Learned psychology for several years,	Wants to deepen his	'The power of thankfulness'	Through psychology he wants to raise people's awareness

	media group, practices counselling part-time	middle school teachers, studied art in university	has an advanced (level 2) license; read about the club online	knowledge of psychology		to social problems and promote socialist ideologies. In 2017 he and several friends established an online network of psychology aficionados.
Li Dajun (m), 35	Works in a state-run publishing house, married, has a baby son	Jining (Shandong), lower middle-class	Interested in psychology, his work colleague is one of the club directors	Interested to learn more about psychological theories	'Knowledge and theories are my <i>zheng nengliang</i> '	Through scientific knowledge to improve his understanding of humans and provide his child optimal conditions for growth
Liu Aisong (m), 33	Works in technical assistance, married	Jinan, lower middle-class	Attended a salon by chance, was captured by the teaching	Feels new ways of self-expression and communication through psychological knowledge	'The one who knows oneself can understand things, the one who can regulate oneself can succeed' ( <i>neng zhi ji zhe ke mingshi, neng zhi ji zhe ke chengshi</i> )	Become a psychology master teacher ( <i>dashi</i> )
Yang Liang (m), 30	Does casual work in middle schools, trying to run a training school for youth	Jinan, lower middle-class, parents own a store for Buddhist merchandise	Studied psychology since his undergraduate degree, worked at <i>Heart's</i>	Psychology as key knowledge for self-growth combined with Buddhist wisdom	'Giving up judgement is a key for self-growth'	To teach psychology to psychology teachers, to work with children or elders

	together with friends, single		<i>Secret</i> for several months			
Jiang Cheng (m), 55	Psychologist and instructor in <i>Heart's Secret</i> , married, has a son	Jinan, lower middle-class, worked as a translator and teacher of Russian language until turning to psychology in 2009	Knew one of the club directors and was invited to teach	Psychological knowledge is knowledge of oneself and everything that impacts a person emotionally	'We are all sick' (everyone has emotional problems)	To develop his teaching, to reach new audiences, to open a bar for music therapy

## Appendix 2 - Informants' self-improvement activities

*The following list by no means covers all of the relevant activities pursued by my informants.*

*This list naturally prioritises activities and projects that informants wilfully shared, monitored, and promoted in conversations and on their online profiles.*

### **100-day challenges (activities practiced daily)**

- Chaoxing, *Champion Training* – practicing a plank position (physical exercise)
- Chaoxing, *Champion Training* – waking up at 5 am
- Nick, *Super Speakers* – waking up at 4:30am and writing thoughts
- Shili, *Champion Training* – reading a book every night and writing his impression of it
- Shili, *Champion Training* – push-ups
- Yang Liang, *Heart's Secret* – abstaining from eating night snacks
- Yang Liang, *Heart's Secret* – 15-min of relaxation before going to sleep
- Yang Liang, *Heart's Secret* – morning reading
- Li Ting, *Champion Training* – practicing new English vocabulary
- Li Chen, *Champion Training* – reading writing and learning without using his computer or smartphone 6-8 am.
- Tao Wenya, *Super Speakers* – gym exercises
- Yan Xia, *Super Speakers* – an online journal of gratitude, stating a good experience that she had daily

### **Jogging**

- Wenya, *Super Speakers*- running in the gym several times a week
- Guozhi, *Super Speakers*- run half a marathon in Tai'an (central Shandong)

- Kath, *Super Speakers* – running 10 km outdoors in evenings
- Ruth, *Super Speakers* – running outdoors in evenings
- Chaoxing, *Champion Training* – practicing to run half a marathon
- Changying, *Heart's Secret* – jogging every morning in an outdoor university stadium

### **Hobbies with aspirations of improvement**

- Gao Rui, *Champion Training* – dance courses (modern, hip-hop)
- Yuming, *Super Speakers* – photography
- Yuming, *Super Speakers* – scuba diving
- Jerry, *Super Speakers*- cycling
- Ruth, *Super Speakers* – yoga
- Changying, *Heart's Secret* – photography
- Shili, *Champion Training* – extreme skating, cycling
- Lila, *Heart's Secret* – massage workshop
- Guan-yin, *Heart's Secret* – drawing, painting
- Ling Mei, *Champion Training* - drawing
- Guo Feng, *Heart's Secret* – course in Chinese tea culture and etiquette

### **Independent learning**

- Nicki, *Super Speakers* – watching TED lectures
- Hu Ling, *Super Speakers* – watching TED lectures
- Guo Feng, *Heart's Secret* – reading books of 'wisdom,' from Chinese classical philosophy to business self-help guides
- Li Dajun, *Heart's Secret* – reading books in psychology, watching documentaries and TV lectures in experimental psychology, as well as history and politics

- Li Chen, *Champion Training* – writing a journal daily
- Shili, *Champion Training* – writing a journal daily

### **Participation in other workshops and organisations**

- Li Chen, *Champion Training* – NLP workshops, psychology workshops
- Gao Rui, *Champion Training* – soft skills workshops of Liu Xingqi in Changsha, Hunan.
- Lila, *Heart's Secret* – Avatar symposiums and guides for spiritual self-development (a 'Large-Group Awareness Training')
- Hu Ling, *Super Speakers* – guide and coordinator in 'Design Thinking,' an international organisation that fosters creativity in children
- Shili, *Champion Training* – business symposiums, workshops for becoming a trainer-coacher for enterprises
- Yang Liang, *Heart's Secret* – 'Leave no Trace,' an international environmental organisation
- Changying, *Heart's Secret* – workshops for becoming a trainer who assists people to find direction, set goals, and realise their dreams
- Hu Ling, *Super Speakers* – 'The Human Library,' activities in the provincial library in which interesting people serve as 'books' for others (originated in Denmark)
- Guozhe, *Super Speakers* – 'The Human Library'

### **Attempted entrepreneurial or self-run initiatives related to soft skills**

- Gao Rui, *Champion Training* – running a university club with short activities inspired by Liu Xingqi's pedagogy
- Tao Wenya and Chuntao, *Super Speakers* – advertising a summer camp for children in public speaking (did not materialise)

- Shili, *Champion Training* – running an online ‘travel networks’ for university students
- Yaoting, *Heart’s Secret* – opening her own workshop space for psychology-related activities
- Liu Aisong, *Heart’s Secret* – practicing psychotherapy and advertising his expertise online and in radio programs
- Yang Liang, Lila, *Heart’s Secret* – opening together with friends a club for public speaking. Later, after I concluded my fieldwork, they have also began running activities that combine public speaking and psychology monthly
- Yang Liang, *Heart’s Secret* – attempting to open a pedagogic service that trains university graduates in soft skills and directs them to certain sponsoring enterprises
- Hu Ling, *Super Speakers* – attempting to establish an afternoon school for soft skills in his village in Liaocheng County