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A minimal definition of cynicism: everyday social criticism and some meanings of 'Life' in contemporary China

The Cynics were missionaries, and their message was that life could be lived on any terms the age could impose. (Dudley 1937:x)

One evening last September, I was watching television together with my friend Chen Rong in his home in Lancang, Yunnan Province.¹ As a successful local businessman, Chen has a broad network of friends from all walks of life, including powerful local officials. The evening news on CCTV 1 was again focused on the trial of Bo Xilai, the former mayor of Chongqing who had been accused of corruption and removed from office, and whose trial had been headline news for most of September in the PRC. Day after day, new details emerged about Bo's corruption and decadent lifestyle, including pictures of his villa in France, allegations about his mistresses, lists of his son's expenses during his studies in Oxford and Harvard, and finally details about his wife's affair with his police chief, Wang Lijun. If previously many ordinary people had thought highly of Bo Xilai, now his public image was thoroughly destroyed, and he would eventually be sentenced to life in prison.

My assumption (and that of many observers) is that Bo's trial was broadcast daily to damage his reputation and to convince ordinary people that he could never return to elite politics. Those who praised the publicity of the trial as a sign of the increasing 'rule of law' in China certainly helped this cause. 'But everyone knows that every official in the central government has a villa in France and mistresses, isn't that right?' I asked Chen. He agreed: 'Of course, *we* know.' He paused and then added: 'But actually, many ordinary people do not know.'

Does everyone in China know that high officials are corrupt? It depends who you ask. Chen claimed that he knows, but many ordinary people don't. I asked a few more friends, and mostly got the same answer, *they* know (i.e. that most officials are corrupt). Some people, it is true, were convinced that Bo Xilai was somehow even more corrupt than other officials and had done all kinds of debauched things. Most of them, however, had only heard about Bo since the televised trials and hadn't known who he was before – an ambitious local leader, highly regarded by the majority of the population in the cities he governed, and contending for the highest offices within party and state.

Now, let us suppose that many people in China assume that all officials are corrupt, just like Bo Xilai, and yet the same people *also* maintain the appearance that the trial was transparent and fair and exemplary of the Chinese 'rule of law' – how other than 'cynical' should we label such a public?

In this essay, I want to discuss cynicism in contemporary China, suggesting that a ‘minimal’ definition of cynicism as everyday social criticism might be useful for ethnographic analysis. This is building on, but also in some respects counter-balancing, the focus in my earlier work on irony (Steinmüller 2011). I should also explain at the outset that the ideas for this particular essay grew out of a recent collaborative project on ‘Irony, Cynicism and the Chinese State’. Susanne Brandstädter and I organized a workshop on that topic and are in the process of editing a volume of the same title. In what follows there are brief references to my own fieldwork in rural China, but I mostly rely on ethnographic examples from the very thought-provoking contributions to our workshop.

The word ‘cynicism’ comes from the Greek word for dog, κύων (*kyôn*), or ‘dog-like’, κυνικός (*kynikos*). The philosopher Diogenes behaved like a dog, the inhabitants of Athens said. But Diogenes didn’t mind, he accepted that observation and even praised the dog: dogs don’t care about social conventions, which are vain anyways; dogs are honest and loyal. Diogenes refused the values of his society and lived a life against all conventions; sleeping in a tub, he did all his business in public – like a dog. What was meant as an insult, Diogenes turned into a compliment: the dog, not as a symbol of base instincts, but of loyalty.

Obviously there are quite a few differences between the ancient Greek philosophy of cynicism and what we commonly understand as modern cynicism.ⁱⁱ If we disregard the details of this history for a moment, we might say that the main difference between classical and modern cynicism is the same as the difference between Diogenes and the Athenians in their interpretation of the dog: it is virtuous in its honesty *or* it is deplorable because it doesn’t understand morals and convention. Be it upright refusal or bitter resignation, in all of its different versions, cynicism implies an antagonism to the values of society or the values of the times. What is put against society is some kind of ‘nature’ that is more ‘authentic’ than society.

Similar ambiguities about the ‘dog’s philosophy’ can be found in Chinese.ⁱⁱⁱ The Athenians accused Diogenes of behaviour that was not unlike what Chinese people might find contemptible about dogs: they are seen as dirty and polluting, specifically because they do not recognize the boundaries of propriety.^{iv} Dogs are often represented as loyal, but this can be framed in negative terms too: they are mindless and passive followers.^v There are numerous swearwords that have to do with dogs; the worst of them refer to someone else as “born by a dog” or “nurtured by a dog” (*gouniang yang de*) or suggest that someone else’s mother is a dog, or that she had intercourse with dogs (*gouri de*). A common saying has it that dogs don’t recognize their ancestors, implying in reverse that every human being should hold them in respect. The dog in these Chinese proverbs transgresses fundamental boundaries of proper human behaviour and social convention.

Hence in Chinese, it makes very good sense to refer to cynicism as the ‘dog’s philosophy’. In Chinese, as in English, the moral assessment of the cynic depends on what the implied view of dogs is: positive, in the sense that they are not ‘spoilt’ by society and culture, or negative in the sense that they lack ‘culture’ and ‘society’ and in some sense are just life reduced to its essence. The cynic is someone who criticizes contemporary society and compares it with life at a very base level, or ‘life itself’.

The minimal definition I wish to give to cynicism is the shared metaphor of the dog's life that is compared to social conventions. Different meanings can be attached to this metaphor and cynics might be condemned as outcasts or lauded as truthful opponents of everyday hypocrisy. I am particularly interested in the social uses made of this metaphor. Calling someone a cynic – someone who refuses human (social) convention – implies an interpretation of intentionality: the cynic knows about conventions but decides to refuse them. But my argument here aims not so much at the interpretation of what is happening in someone else's mind, but rather what is done with such interpretations, that is, how this metaphor is used practically in social interaction. The minimal definition of cynicism as the metaphor of the dog's life allows for situated and multivocal interpretations of social action.

In the following, I demonstrate how this minimal definition can be used to describe everyday social criticism in response to shifting moralities in contemporary China. But first, I will contrast the minimal definition of cynicism with the totalizing tendencies of other theories of cynicism that have been suggested in anthropology and philosophy.

Anthropologists who have written about cynicism often refer to Peter Sloterdijk (1987:5,101,305) and Slavoj Žižek (1989:27-30). In his best-selling *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk writes against the Enlightenment discourses of rationality and modernity, which he denounces as 'totalitarian' and 'dehumanizing'. According to him, these discourses have produced a lethargic cynical reason that is 'enlightened false consciousness'. He contrasts this 'cynicism' with a 'c' with 'kynicism' with a 'k', which is bodily, active, and aggressive. To the first he applies his well-known inversion of Marx's formula 'they do not know it, but they are doing it': the cynics 'know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it'. Sloterdijk's hope lies instead in kynicism, which is not abstract and theoretical, but immediate, bodily and pragmatic. As Timothy Bewes writes, '[t]he implication of this ... is an elevation of the 'gestural' life of Diogenes over the 'dialectical' one of Plato and Socrates, of spontaneity over discipline and patience, and of the 'chaos' of nature over the 'order' of culture' (1997:5).

Žižek's cynicism is of a more cerebral kind; he further elaborates on the formulation of 'enlightened false consciousness'. The traditional Marxist notion of ideological critique implies an 'unmasking' that would reveal the true state of affairs, that is, the social reality hidden behind ideological misrecognition. Inspired by Lacan's writing's on fantasy, Žižek holds that ideology itself is a constitutive part of social reality; the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, but on the side of doing: 'they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it' (1989:33).^{vi}

If someone pretends in public that s/he adheres to lofty ideals and then tells you in private that 'really, it's all about money, power, and/or sex', that's probably what we commonly call a cynic. According to Žižek this kind of cynical distance has become part of contemporary ideology itself. Therefore the simple and naive critique of ideology – in the sense of taking away the ideological veil of bourgeois ideals to discover the reality of exploitation, for instance - doesn't work any longer. What is necessary is another, more fundamental, kind of *Ideologiekritik*; a critique of the ways in which an illusion is part of 'our doing' (and not our knowledge). So if

contemporary ruling ideology would happily acknowledge that it's really about 'power, money, and sex', Žižek might insist that the drive towards money, power, and sex needs to be further explained via Lacanian and Marxist theory. That is, it is necessary to understand how ideological fantasy is an integral part of identity and exchange – and therefore actually pre-conditional to aspirations for power, money and sex.

While his outline is exceedingly complex and sometimes obscure, Žižek's moral assessment of 'cynicism' is fundamentally negative, and in that sense he is completely in line with the everyday use of the word. Cynicism, for Žižek as well, implies a 'dog-like' misrecognition; '[c]ynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*' (1989:33).

Even though this sentence implies that cynical or ironical distance is just one form of ideology, elsewhere Žižek suggests that it is the central form of contemporary ideology. The question of the origin of contemporary cynicism is glossed over by the use of a generalized 'we' and 'now'. This level of generality is problematic; but the suggestion that cynicism is often part of ruling ideologies, and that this is similar both in late socialism and in contemporary Western capitalist society remains attractive.

Various anthropologists who have discussed cynicism have made similar arguments about cynicism in specific places and times. They often share the assumption that the cynicism of ideology is matched by the cynicism of the powerless. Yael Navaro-Yashin and Alexei Yurchak have argued, for example, that cynicism has become a central part of ideological dominance in the last decades of the Soviet Union and in contemporary Turkey.

Navaro-Yashin asserts that cynicism is the "common and ordinary way of managing existence in a realm of state power" in Turkey (2002:5). In her argument, cynicism is not only the most common way in which people relate to the state in Turkey, it is also the general mode in which the state itself is reproduced. Alexei Yurchak identifies a similar cynicism in the Soviet Union of the 1970s and 80s (1997; 2006). Yurchak describes how jokes of disillusion – *anekdoty* and *stiob* – flourished in the Brezhnev era. This kind of cynicism was intimately linked to the ossified 'hegemonic form' of public discourse, a public discourse devoid of content. Everyone knew the rigid form of public discourse was just an empty shell, and nevertheless everyone kept referring to it. The 'cynical reason of late socialism' in part also explained the ease with which the 'last Soviet generation' accepted the end of the Soviet era.

Navaro-Yashin and Yurchak emphasize the gap between official representations and private beliefs. They point towards the dark underside of the state, which contradicts noble and sublime state discourses. Such tensions might be experienced as unbearable, and this can result in disillusion and even paranoia. As with Žižek, there is a certain 'totalitarian' element in Navaro-Yashin's and Yurchak's outline – as if this sad state of affairs was a total reality shared by everyone in the same way – and a tendency to replace specific ethnographic instances with generalized assertions.

Similar arguments have been made by literary critics and dissidents in China (e.g. Wu 2008)^{vii}. Hu Ping, one of the intellectuals who left China in the aftermath of 1989, has written an essay on Chinese cynicism that is very close in tone and reasoning to the

arguments I have just cited. Hu Ping's text *Disease of Cynicism: The Spiritual Crisis of Contemporary China* (Hu 1998; 2005) presents a compelling description of Chinese society and politics in terms of ubiquitous cynicism. He argues that cynicism is the prevalent mode of engagement and feeling towards politics in the People's Republic, both amongst the rulers and amongst the governed. The origin of this cynicism is the insurmountable gap between utopian socialism and ordinary experience in modern China. While China had a long tradition of public pretension concealing political manoeuvring, the violent history of the 20th century radically intensified the tension between pretended ideals and everyday social reality, to the extent that an internalized paranoia has become a core feature of political subjectivity in contemporary life.

In all these approaches, cynicism and paranoia indicate an abysmal gap between private and public, self and other, inside and outside. It is undeniable that in certain places and certain times political subjectivity was divided in these ways. But in these contexts were all people cynical in the same way? I don't think so, and that is why I would like to cast some doubts on this way of portraying things. My doubts have to do with the totalizing tendencies of cynicism when used as a social concept. It seems to me that these uses of cynicism propose an 'either-or' logic in which the two sides of the coin are completely separated and opposed to each other. A cynical subject is a split personality living in paranoia. He or she experiences the tension between content and form, feeling and expression, as an abysmal gap. Cynicism in many ways is the flipside of totalitarianism – real commitment and involvement can only turn out to be lacking when compared with the demand of totality.

At the same time, our liberal repulsion against totalitarianism should not blind us to the fact that some places and communities were really best described by these words; and then there is the fact that social actors make claims to totalities all the time. I think one way for anthropologists to study cynicism in an ethnographically and historically informed way, is to look at *accusations* of cynicism. That is the question, who is the dog? And is it a good thing to behave like a dog? In other words, which kinds of social criticism and claims about life itself, life stripped off the surface of social conventions, are implied in statements about and/or expressions of cynicism? And what are the moral consequences of such statements and expressions?

Below I will discuss some of the ways in which people position themselves in relation to what has been portrayed as a crisis of public morality in China, a society arguably characterized by greed and violence. There are famous news cases that are symptomatic of this presumed crisis: the milk powder scandal of 2008, when a number of infants died because a large dairy company had adulterated formula with cheap chemical ingredients, or the passers-by who ignored a toddler driven over by a van in Guangzhou. The corruption of party officials at all levels is a favourite topic of everyday conversation, and so is economic success arrived at by all kinds of dubious methods.

Underneath this perceived crisis of public morality, a fundamental transformation of everyday ethical life has taken place in contemporary China.^{viii} The era of reform and opening that started in the 1980s has been often described as a transition from more 'fixed' and unified moral codes to plurality in a market society. While under Maoism everyday life was subordinated to the heroic morals of socialism, in contemporary society everyday life, with all its different forms of pleasure and choice, has been

normalized. The choices and pleasures of everyday life come with constant moral challenges.

Rhetorical figures of cynicism provide excellent means of recounting a perceived moral crisis and dealing with the moral challenges of everyday life. They do so by contrasting the decadence of contemporary society on the one hand with a dog-like existence of life at its most base level, on the other. In the following I will discuss some examples drawn from contributions to the workshop I organised with Susanne Brandstädter (as explained above). These include examples of cynical resignation and calls for a new sincerity, discourses about personal connections (*guanxi*) and ‘grey societies’, and finally ‘face projects’ and the operational logic of local bureaucracies. In all cases, I use the metaphor of the dog-like existence to demonstrate the use of the minimal definition of cynicism.

Cynical resignation and new sincerity

Given all the violence of China’s twentieth century and the ideological U-turn of the 1980s, it is very easy to find people who are cynical in one way or another about their own history. It is just not very simple to find a narrative that would bring together social conventions, ideals and reality. John Flower and Pamela Leonard (2012) recount the story of one man in the village in Sichuan where they carried out fieldwork. Zhengguo had been an idealistic young member of the party when the revolution started, but over the years, with every subsequent campaign, he became more disillusioned. At the same time he read widely, from Mao and Marx to the Chinese classics, with socially critical books from the late Qing dynasty his favourites. Both his experience during Maoism and his reading made him lose his idealism:

The more I read the more I saw the contradiction between the propaganda and reality. Then I started to read a lot about Chinese history - the Three Kingdoms, Outlaws of the Marsh, Dream of the Red Chamber - but the books that influenced me the most were novels from the late Qing that criticized society: the Revelations of Officialdom (*Guanchang xianxing ji*) and Twenty Years Witness of the Grotesque (*Ershi nian mudu zhi guaizhuang*). Reading these made me realize it was all about power. After reading them I had no ideals at all. Then, after Chairman Mao died and there was the movement against the Gang of Four, I really realized that it was all about power and getting power. My philosophy and personality comes from that experience (Flower and Leonard 2012).

Zhengguo says himself that he ‘saw through’ (*kantou*) the jargon of socialist ideals during the Cultural Revolution. Flower and Leonard point out the similarity of his self-description to the experience of many urban intellectuals, a point that is underscored by the importance he gave to reading in his account. In everyday talk, he would often declare ‘his lack of belief in politics, in religion, in ideals’; and say in resignation “We’ve got nothing to do today--just kill time. It’s really boring” or “Why are we poor? Because we have got too much time to hang out and not enough work--it’s such a big waste.” He even says: “Work is no fun, being at home is no fun. I have no hopes, no ideals, and no belief.”

In their in-depth portraits of three men, Flower and Leonard describe other possible reactions to bitter experiences in the past and what many perceived as a world that had lost its moral bearings. Not everyone held the same cynical views of life of Zhengguo. They describe for instance a farmer, Guangxing, who persevered in searching for moral certainty in the face of relativism and corruption. While he recognized the same moral dilemmas, his answer was to look for a ‘new sincerity’, or rather to rediscover an old one: that is, the Chinese tradition of the ‘rectification of names’ (*zhengming*). That is, a new call for appropriate terms of address, respect between the generations, and the return to an older form of hierarchical morality. This man’s analysis of contemporary society is in many ways similar to his neighbour, the cynic – it’s only about money and power, especially for the young people. So much so that they don’t even care about the fundamental categories of human life, which are embodied in the correct use of kinship terms. Yet his conclusions are different – instead of resigning himself to an acceptance of the chaos, Guangxing struggles to rectify it. We might recall here the saying that it is only dogs who don’t know their ancestors. While Zhengguo would ‘cynically’ accept the fact that, actually and really, people nowadays just follow their base motives and just pretend that morality and hierarchy matter, Guangxing seeks to correct this situation by recourse to a ‘golden age’ in which humans were different to dogs. What is implied, I think, is a different view of what ‘life itself’ is nowadays, or, for the sake of my metaphor, what living like a dog means.

But actually the state of affairs that both men struggle with is not ‘simply’ about power and money: both of them also declare that what ‘really’ rules today are connections between people. That is, personal connections – *guanxi* in Chinese – are absolutely crucial to success.

Grey societies

Practices of drawing on connections (*guanxi*), then, are frequently seen in China to be ‘the truth’ behind the foreground of moral pretension. This corresponds to denunciations of a ‘grey society’, one in which ‘black’ criminality and ‘white’ legality/morality are mixed. Several contributors to our workshop refer to this ‘grey society’, including John Osburg, who describes it as follows:

Grey practices combine and mix the legal and the illegal, moral and immoral, and respectable and reprehensible. The examples of greying abound: Countless businesses, from factories to publishing houses, engage in practices which are technically illegal but widely practiced and generally tolerated. [...] In this grey context, surface appearances are understood to be a poor representation of reality: Entrepreneurs hire foreign students to pose as their foreign partners and investors. Prostitutes pose as virginal university students. Anti-corruption officials determine the targets of their campaigns based on who is likely to offer the most bribes rather than who is the most corrupt. Police and gangsters are not only “one family” as the saying goes, but, as the Chongqing anti-mafia campaign revealed, often one and the same individual. (Osburg 2012)

These practices, Osburg argues, bespeak a ‘post-belief society’, in which the ‘disconnect between representation and reality is simply taken-for-granted’. I’m personally somewhat sceptical about Osburg’s use of the notion of a ‘post-belief society’, because it assumes that there is no current belief and because it posits a society of belief, as if that had actually occurred. To say ‘post-belief society’ is then to make a claim to a totality, and precisely the kinds of claims that cynics make. The strength of Osburg’s contribution is in showing the different dimensions of such claims.

He discusses the moral implications of social practices that mix the colours of self-representation: ‘grey women’, that is, second wives and mistresses, and ‘grey societies’, that is, organizations of ‘brothers’ who straddle semi-criminal organizations and state institutions. If both practices are considered immoral by wider society, the moral self-representation of the women and the semi-gangsters are exactly the opposite: mistresses of high officials justify their actions with a cynical master-narrative (basically, ends justify means, and the ends are the same for everyone – money, sex, and power). The ‘brothers’ Osburg met in Chengdu, on the contrary, invoke moral high ground and claim that *renqing* and the morality of interpersonal relations are the ‘only law that matters’.^{ix} Both discourses, Osburg points out, are complementary in the final instance: both the cynicism of the women and the elite morality of the brothers can be seen as moral counter-discourses against a society that is ‘grey’ everywhere.

Yet while both of them can be described as cynical, their interpretations of what ‘life’ at the base level is or should be are diametrically opposed. The grey women justify their actions by recourse to a narrative of base instincts – the triad of power, sex, and money; the ‘grey society’ of ‘brothers’ claim that the morality of close personal relations is what really matters. Both confront the common denunciation of moral ‘greyness’ by referring to a more fundamental level of ‘life’.

Some politico-economic background

The ‘grey societies’ that Osburg describes have their historical background in specific politico-economic arrangements of China’s reform decades. While there are legitimate private entrepreneurs and companies, every company needs to have a party branch, and many companies are directly owned by the government (Guo 2003). The systematic mixture of ‘private’ and ‘public’ assets in ownership structures is further exacerbated by the relative financial autonomy of local governments. Not being able to rely on the relatively small transfers from higher government levels, local governments are forced to look for other sources of revenue. Many government units have effectively become corporate enterprises; other government offices created new enterprises affiliated to them. For instance, a village office in Bashan - where I carried out fieldwork - operated several tea processing workshops, the township government operated a factory for agricultural tools, and the local finance office of the city government had a car rental company.

To some extent these organizational models can be explained in relation to the long history of Chinese government, which has been called a ‘governance by exemplar’ – in the sense that the primary task of the Mandarins was to be moral exemplars and to

offer guidance to the populace, rather than having direct control and surveillance by higher levels. Mandarins were not supposed to be experts or technocrats, but morally upright polymaths. They also received relatively low salaries from the imperial court, yet it was understood that they could easily gain money through other sources, based on their local authority. These might include bribery, gifts, and insider deals.

One of the main changes of the twentieth century, and specifically the communist revolution, was that the number of officials and the ratio of officials to population increased exponentially. But while under communism salaries were relatively low and the opportunities for side-line incomes fairly limited, a similar dynamic of small official salaries which officials supplemented through other means, has re-emerged. These dynamics are further entrenched by the structure of taxation of local governance. The national tax reform under Prime Minister Zhu Rongji in 1994 obliged local governments to transfer a bigger part of tax revenue to higher levels, and further required financial subsidiarity, that is, the relative financial independence of local governments.

That means that both the finances of local government offices and the incomes of government officials need to be supplemented by their own enterprising activity. This happened precisely at a time when in many regions of China local industries and urbanization offered two new opportunities for revenue creation. Taxation is only a small part of the possible income for local government; others include insider deals, especially in real estate.

Many people are familiar with these circumstances – but are they cynical about it? People's reactions when this is pointed out are not always the same. Sometimes they carry the tone of indignation; one of my neighbours in Bashan, for instance, would frequently complain about local officials by saying 'how could they afford their cars, or even the tobacco they smoke, if they only relied on their small official salary?' But others would turn the same argument on its head. One farmer, who had very good connections to local government and some friends in town from his time in the military, pointed out to me at a family celebration that 'corruption is necessary; you will find it everywhere where there is government'. In that sense, he continued, 'it's not a bad thing or a problem – it's just how things are, and always have been.'

Such assessments are extremely common in relationship to the so-called 'face projects' of local governments. Many such governments create Potemkin villages of local development; they have little effect or purpose for ordinary people, but instead serve the needs of local bureaucrats within their hierarchies. Lower level bureaucrats within the government hierarchies are mainly responsible to their immediate superiors within the hierarchy; they are not 'afraid' of the populations they govern.

Face projects and bureaucratic games

In his contribution to our workshop, Tan Tongxue (2012) describes such 'face projects' in Guizhou Province. Local officials in a township government are busy doing what they themselves call 'political agriculture'; that is, development projects which are said to improve local agricultural production, but really are impractical and do nothing to increase production. The core objective of local officials is to create an image, a façade of local development; they do so to please their superiors. For

instance, they force local farmers to sow crops in a line next to the county road, so as to give the impression of successful agricultural development. Yet this ‘standardization’ had no practical effect in increasing production or saving labour time; its only purpose is to produce a beautiful image of development.

At the same time, both farmers and local officials understand perfectly well that the purpose of this kind of ‘political agricultural’ is actually not agricultural development, but that it has to do with personal relations and careers within the party hierarchies. In rather more private environments, they would offer their own explanations of their behaviour. One official explained his actions with a Chinese saying: *ren zai jianghu, shenbu you ji!* Literally, the expression means that ‘when you are in the *jianghu* your body does not belong to yourself’. The *jianghu* is ‘the realm of rivers and lakes’, but it refers to the social world, the world outside the family. A freer translation would thus be ‘in the outside world you cannot just do whatever you want, and you will have to make compromises’. Compromises, in this case, refer to the necessity of sustaining personal networks within government hierarchies. It is remarkable that the saying claims that in these networks the ‘body’ is not free – you cannot do with your body what you want, but you have to act according to social demands.

The official here inhabits different persona; what he admitted in conversation with Tan could never be said at other occasions, at which certain images need to be maintained. The peasants the officials deal with similarly know about the appropriate occasions when to express cynicism and when to downplay it. Tan Tongxue’s discussion of face-projects in the countryside demonstrates well the different effects of irony and cynicism in action. He describes as cynical those reactions that are generally voiced in more private contexts, and whose purpose it is to justify the status quo. Yet the same people are not cynical all the time, and there are other expressions that Tan describes as expressions of belief, or of irony. In both cases, it depends on the interpretation of intentionality; while irony claims a lesser distance between the outward social convention and the more profound meaning, or ‘life itself’, behind it, in cynicism the difference becomes an abysmal gap.

Irony and cynicism have different interactional consequences, as Tan shows. Irony, specifically, lends itself more to the creation of communities of complicity (see Steinmüller 2013), because here the difference between social convention and ‘life itself’ can be acknowledged and downplayed. If everyone is cynical, however, it is close to impossible to envisage any community. Here the difference between outward expression and inner meaning is constantly emphasized, and therefore any attempt at recognizing commonality might lead to paranoid and schizophrenic reactions.

Perhaps to some extent the kind of everyday social criticism that cynicism implies is common in many places and times. But there is also something specific about societies in which choice is fundamental to moral identities; Stephan Feuchtwang (2012) argues this is the case in modern China. The profusion of possible moral frameworks and ideologies leads to the constant need to adjust one’s moral persona, between ‘contextual realities and ideologies of reality’. Such adjustment can produce irony or cynicism; fundamentally it bespeaks the multivocality of the moral person in China today. As an example for such multivocality, Feuchtwang cites from Liu Xin’s ethnography of businessmen:

A case in point is the professor of political economy who became an entrepreneur and according to Liu Xin just lived from moment to moment as a boss making money, but who also explained himself as doing so because staying a professor he would not have been able to look after his mother properly (Liu Xin 2002: 133). He had adopted a cynical response to conditions in China, becoming an everyday opportunist without scruple. But at the same time he inhabited a second moral persona, or character as Liu Xin calls his first persona, that of the filial son. (Feuchtwang 2012)

Similar examples are easy to find – Chen Rong, for instance (the businessman friend I mentioned at the beginning of this essay). As noted, he claimed that ‘we’ know that elite politics in China are really only about *guanxi* networks and factional struggle. At the same time he would tell me many stories about his own friends and brothers, and how their human relations were governed by a sense of personal morals of loyalty (*yiqi*) and righteousness. The sense that some moral principles are unquestionable – immune to cynicism – was even more obvious when he talked about the relationships within his family, including the relationships between husband and wife and father and son.

Conclusion

Cynicism can be despondent resignation or courageous acceptance of the environment. It is in a way like someone’s interpretation of the dog – the loyal friend or the shameless animal. Used in social interaction, the metaphor of the dog implies a criticism of common social conventions and conversely an interpretation of what is ‘behind them’. That is, a juxtaposition of current human sociality and of life at a more fundamental and base level. My aim in this essay has been to explore the variety of social uses to which this metaphor and juxtaposition is being put.

I have described certain accusations or self-descriptions of cynicism, that is, literally, of dog-like existences, or of ‘life itself’. Constant swearing or constant complaining, for instance, can imply different attitudes towards the values of the day: subordination, excuse, or challenge. These are the different reactions that Flower and Leonard describe; some claim an abject position of self-scorn, while others excuse their (immoral) actions by recourse to the values of the time, and yet others challenge them actively – by the traditional Chinese practice of the ‘rectification of names’ (*zhengming*). All of these actions imply certain assessments of the values of ‘society’ and comparisons with ‘life’ at a more basic level, beyond appearances and pretensions. The talk of ‘grey societies’ exemplifies this further, and shows how cynical descriptions can be used to various purposes, including as a moral base-line. ‘Grey women’ might use it as self-justification, ‘grey societies’ of gangsters use it to challenge the duplicity of ordinary society.

By their interpretations of social convention and ‘life’, people take self-reflective and ethical positions. The ways in which these interpretations and ethics are socially enacted, can then refer to communities of insiders that are crucial for the workings of Chinese bureaucracies, as we have seen in the case of face projects in the countryside that Tan Tongxue describes. Judith Audin (2012) makes similar arguments about the everyday interactions between local inhabitants and residents’ committees in Beijing.

Different criticisms of social conventions and of the views of life embedded in them - criticisms that are voiced and mobilized in sometimes contradictory ways by the same people - provide us with a window onto the self-reflectivity of everyday life in China today and the multi-vocality of persons now.

Rather than a master-narrative of cynicism as ideology, I have suggested a 'formal' analysis of different kinds of cynicism in contemporary China. Inspired by the original meaning of the word, I have tried to show how cynical utterances and actions compare current conventions and values with more basic forms of human 'life' – they make claims to underlying motivations, or 'what it's really about'.

As should be clear, these claims are extremely diverse in China. I have cited from several ethnographic cases, in which 'life itself' is first 'life' stripped of social conventions. This extends from the common sense notion of what it is to be a dog (for instance eating faeces and not knowing one's ancestors) to the sense of living an abject life in a world that is ruled by power and money. But there are other kinds of 'cynicism' that make claims to more fundamental networks of *guanxi*, behind formal law and face-work performance. Here 'life itself' is about social connections.

We can say that cynicism implies social criticism of various kinds; and even if this 'social criticism' is similar – for instance in seeing 'grey societies' and *guanxi* as the logic of government and business in China – the moral consequences people draw from this are also diverse.

This 'formal' or 'minimal' definition of cynicism has two core advantages. The first is that we can avoid the question of whether the current state of China is totalitarian or ever was. The formal definition of cynicism makes no claim to one universal definition of cynicism, or to its totality – claims which often appear in discussions of cynicism as false consciousness. The second advantage seems to me the compatibility of the ethnographic method with this definition. Ethnography is perfectly suited to describe and analyse the many different kinds of everyday social criticism, as well as the implied meanings of 'life itself' and their moral consequences.

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ⁱThis paper has been presented at a number of research seminars, including the seminar of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, Germany, at the Département d'Anthropologie de l'Université Paris-Ouest, Nanterre, at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Oslo, and at the senior research seminar of the Division of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. I am very grateful to the organizers for their invitations and to all participants for their comments. Many thanks also to Charles Stafford for his suggestions and support, and to the anonymous reviewer of AOTC for very helpful comments.

ⁱⁱA number of literary critics have analysed the transformations the concept of cynicism underwent from Greece to its modern meanings (Mazella 2007; Shea 2010; Stanley 2012); this is a very complex history of conceptual transformations.

ⁱⁱⁱIn Chinese the word chosen to translate cynicism is also the dog; that is, the formal word for dog, *quan*, rather than the informal one, *gou*. So in the Chinese language cynicism is rendered as 'quanru', the school or scholars (*ru*) of the dog (*quan*).

^{iv}In some regions of China, dogs are eaten, but in many others they aren't, including in Enshi, the prefecture in Hubei where I carried out long-term ethnographic research. Here people generally don't eat dogs, snakes and horses, or at least they didn't in the past. Older men told me that these animals were taboo and that the kitchen and the hearth would be polluted if you cooked them, hence the kitchen god (*zaoshen*) would be offended. Dogs are dirty, and, most importantly, dogs eat shit, and so one should not eat them.

^vAs in the saying "One man excels, chicken and dogs go up to heaven" (*yiren de dao, jiquan sheng tian*), meaning that if one man rises to the top, his entourage will follow him there. This expression is often used to refer to the family members and relations of high officials.

^{vi}As Bewes points out, there is a certain affinity between Žižek's cynicism and pragmatist philosophy (ibid.42). Pragmatists such as Peirce would have argued that ideas and concepts don't have significance if they have no practical consequence – that is, in Žižek's terms, thoughts have to be part of what we do and not merely of knowing or thinking.

^{vii}A remarkable figure on the Chinese intellectual scene, the young critic and philosopher Wu Guanjun has introduced Žižek and his writings about contemporary Chinese society are inspired by Žižek's mix of Hegel, Marx and Lacan; see for instance Wu 2008.

^{viii}For anthropological studies of the moral landscape of contemporary China, see Yan 2009, Oxfeld 2010, Stafford 2013 and Steinmüller 2013.

^{ix}The importance of *guanxi*, personal relationships and personalized ethics, in contemporary Chinese capitalism has been discussed by many. Stafford (2006), for instance, points out the systematic articulation of (supposedly) immoral practices with the (supposedly) moral sphere of kinship and the ritual economy.