

**Distinction:**

**Consumption and Identity in the People's Republic of China**

**Michael Brian Griffiths**

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### Abstract

This research develops a grammar for understanding 'consumption' as a metaphor for the agency by which 'individuality' is structured in the contemporary People's Republic of China. The chosen approach holds that: individuality is less a thing-in-itself than constantly asserted by recourse to social systems of signification, such as language, symbols, and the human relationships formed around these; and that acts of individuation are not only expressions of individual agency, but also immanent in each other as expressions of *discourses of social distinction*. Where individuation is seen as informed by ontologically prior structures legitimating local cultural practice, this research seeks to demonstrate the interaction of those rules in their articulation, proving the courage of its methodological convictions as a theory of *how the social is brought into the political and the political into the social*. This is highly topical, because large parts of the literature on China remain heavily inflected by essentialist approaches to culturalism that systematically deny Chinese individuals agency, and more critically-minded literatures have thus far 'merely' documented how Chinese individuals struggle to individuate themselves *against* other agencies, neglecting to demonstrate how individual agency in contemporary China is *itself* structured. Data is gathered through ethnography and interviews in Anshan City, Liaoning Province, a burgeoning third-tier city, between 2005 and 2009. Empirical informants included: the rural migrant staff of an inner-city restaurant kitchen; the urban workforce of an industrial machine-repair workshop; white-collar private-sector professionals; state-owned-enterprise managers; private entrepreneurs; retired Communist Party cadres; young urban adults; and so on. The data is analyzed for the ways in which *symbolic boundaries* are drawn and managed through judgements of 'taste', 'purity', and 'worthiness' most broadly conceptualized. This discourse is treated as a *synchronic system* and disaggregated into eight conceptually-rich categories, each of which is reconstructed in their 'internal' and situationally-inflected logics. The research then pursues the 'grammar' structuring how individuals make these categories their own – that is, *consume* them – by dynamically juxtaposing a range of social 'fields' as examples of the infinitely various situations where consumption results in diverse but structurally unified outcomes. Thus, where the first analysis demonstrates how practices of individuation are structured, the second demonstrates how structure is individuated in practice. The results not only broach an entirely new way of thinking about the structuration of Chinese individuality and society, but also represent an especially *useful* conceptual 'launch-pad' for engaging Chinese individuals in their consumption.

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## Preface

When my Chinese language teachers gave me the name 'Standing Man' (Ge Lifu), I took that to mean that I was an autonomous, independent, and altogether individuated figure, but also that I was grounded, connected, and to some extent determined, a man whose standing depended on what he stood upon. As I began to review the literature on China's consumers, however, I came to realize that such an apparently straightforward figure was shrouded in mystery and confusion. Chinese individuals were not allowed this dual agency, but were instead widely characterized as lacking whatever agency would allow them to be persons of the independent and individuated kind, an agency which was supposed to obtain only in some vaguely-defined 'West', where the notion that a person's standing should depend upon what he stood on went considerably against the grain. But rather than unthinkingly accept these essentialisms, I chose to focus on the internal dynamics of propositions of this kind, for it was overwhelmingly apparent that any one part of any such proposition depended only on its opposite, *irrespective of whether the proposition corresponded to reality!* As I read around, I found that this same linear, binary logic was repeated *ad infinitum* in the literature, in myriad but approximate forms, even in fields which professed to reject or sophisticate its manifestations. These iterations, moreover, were always complemented by devices which variously but equally conspired to make China exotic, to emasculate Chinese individuals, and to institute some artifact of knowledge *in their place*. Thus, I eventually came to realize that the problem I was looking at depended not so much on a particular way of looking at China, but on a particular way of looking at things in general, especially things of a 'scientific' nature. What had at first seemed like a simply cross-cultural or 'merely' sociological problem, was a problem of the most profound epistemological order, one that had been systematically skirted over in the extant literature China, that is, *by necessity*, but that had never yet been tackled with a full-frontal and 'radical' assessment. In short, it was clear that the oppositional structure of all such essentialist propositions was the key, but that it was the *relations* between the terms were primary, and the ways stakeholders manipulated these relations vis-à-vis one another, rather than the terms themselves. Thus, this research became less about the subject of the Chinese individual, than about the Chinese individual *qua* subject per se.

I am thus aware that my encounters with would-be ontological objectivists have thus to some large extent shaped this work, and accept that the research will likely draw fire from those who will claim that if only I had properly understood the essential nature of 'collectivism', 'face', 'guanxi', or some such notion, all of this could have been neatly summarized without the bother. Needless to say, I am not overly concerned by criticisms of this order, since offending essentialist corners is presupposed by the nature of this research: suffice to say that the beneficiaries of the wealth of the more plodding literatures on such concepts will pass over my work the minute they are challenged in unfamiliar ways. But neither is the research probably best appreciated by disciplinary specialists who will likely disdain any form of true innovation either: Doubtless every professional reader will find that I have ignored some seminal work, or even whole areas of work, and will have myriad suggestions on how I should have better done things differently. Certainly social scientists who take the 'social construction of reality' for granted but who make little attempt to explore what that actually means will be particularly confused. But I would like to think that the research demands very little by way of expertise from its readers and can be appreciated by 'ordinary', non-academic individuals as much as by anyone else. Indeed, though an acquired familiarity with the pliability of linguistic concepts is probably a condition of getting the most out of the research, I would like to think the research can be appreciated by ordinary 'Chinese' individuals too. There would likely be rampant assertions of impenetrable essence there also, however—"China must be understood the Chinese way", and so on—and some Chinese will probably find this work guilty of all the essentialisms it tries to avoid. Still others will likely claim that China is really not as I have depicted it here at all, as if the research must only have validity in a small and somehow insignificant part of China if at all. But I have found that such judgements tend only to reveal a refusal to be identified with those aspects of discourse which one would rather not be known for by 'foreigners'. This research has remained as faithful as possible to the data that informed it, and I hope that these readers will see that I have tried to balance 'harsh truths' about China with a humour that they can relate to too. In the final event, however, all such judgements are of course welcomed, since it is often when saying what we are not that we most say what we are, just as it is sometimes when we are judged by others that we see ourselves most clearly. Indeed, it is only in these ways that we become individuated persons among persons—in China, *as elsewhere*.

On a more personal note, and the above notwithstanding, this research has been a deeply spiritual process, only reflected in the now public work, through which I have been constantly challenged and to some extent changed. Though I am unsure if I have absolutely overcome, I am nevertheless deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to grapple with the wondrous creativity of what I don't know and cannot possibly be sure about! During the process, I befriended scores of individuals across a vast spectrum of society, wining and dining with the highest authorities and the lowliest of farmers; I witnessed a city develop a consumer culture with shocking rapidity; I stumbled upon a cannabis plantation in the shadow of one of China's largest steel refineries; I was seized and held against my will for alighting the train at the wrong stop; and I became married into the local culture which was the object of my investigation. I also spent a lot of time walking the streets, soaking up China by osmosis. Often the research was rather like being lost in the wilderness without resources: literally, I paced up and down in the forest going over ideas and snippets of advice received from others, hoping to find within myself what I could not find elsewhere. But then, something magical would happen, like the typist who when I asked her what she thought of the data all these different informants had offered simply said: "different kinds of people have their different ways of speaking", which is precisely what this research about. Even so, there were times when the strain of embracing uncertainty was nearly too much, times when I found out how important my family and friends were. As the work entered its final stages, my greatest angst became whether I would finish it or not, not so much whether I would graduate, but whether I would 'complete' my work: I had become highly precious about a project I had often loathed for its size and complexity, and one I had invested so much in. Today, I find myself genuinely surprised to have arrived at a stage where the project can be concluded sooner than I had often thought, and now my thoughts turn to the future. It is a most curious feeling knowing what one has come through but not yet having the perspective to know what that means. Already though, I can be sure enough that the process has made me immeasurably better equipped to tackle life's challenges. Of course, had known what I know now at the beginning, I would have done things rather differently, but then I would not have learned what I have learned. Similarly, there are many things I would have liked to have said for which I could not find space, and many avenues I wanted to explore which will just have to wait for another work.



## Part I

This dissertation is divided into four parts. This first part is divided into two chapters. The first chapter raises the problem this research addresses through two broadly-parallel strategies: First, business-management and practitioner literatures concerned to promote and advise commercial engagement with China's consumers are criticized for persisting with a false epistemological agenda that systematically denies Chinese individuals agency, and for uncritically reproducing essentialized cross-cultural categories that obfuscate the actual *practices* of individuality. Second, those more critically-minded literatures concerned to deconstruct the consequences of China's market reforms, the (re)introduction of consumerism and the dynamics of social life in the contemporary climate most broadly, are shown to have similarly neglected to demonstrate how individual agency is *itself* structured in this age of immense social and cultural change, rather 'merely' documenting particular *cases* of how individuals struggle to individuate themselves *against* other agencies. These latter expositions are interfaced with the development of a more sophisticated epistemological agenda known as *critical discourse analysis*, where the problem of how individual agency is reconciled with the objects of its consumption is seen as the *same* problem of how researchers are reconciled with the researched. As well as indicting the way in which much contemporary scholarship precludes the possibility of such reconciliation, therefore, this chapter represents a manifesto for a particular way of examining human practices where 'consumption' is treated as an especially useful metaphor for the *synthetic and systematizing agency* by which 'individuals' uniquely appropriate themselves to the world, making all these questions possible. Let it be immediately clear from the beginning, therefore, this research concerns a *relation* before it concerns anything else, the relation by which *all* positive terms are generated, so does not begin by attempting to define 'consumer', or 'identity', and so on, but rather clarifies the meaning of these terms through their *use* in the course of developing its unique agenda. The second chapter contextualizes the research and narrates the process of data collection and analysis.

## Chapter 1

### Productive Consumption

#### 1. A Contemporary Context<sup>1</sup>

During the 'Maoist' era (1949-1978), individuality in China was remarkably standardized in accordance with the cybernetic rationality of Communist political discourse. Insofar as Communism made everyone subject to everyone else, it succeeded in an immense homogenizing, leveling and controlling experiment: no-one was encouraged to distinguish themselves from amongst 'the masses' in any way. Central government planners attempted to micro-manage every detail of the economy so that individuals' needs themselves were largely stipulated by the State. Urban individuals depended on their work-units (*danwei*) to distribute products to them in accordance with a market of scarcity regulated by rationing (Walder 1986). Incomes were meager and highly approximate across social and professional ranks. Public expression of individual desire was severely restricted, and consumption as an end-in-itself regarded negatively, so people wore the same uniforms and sported the same haircuts as everyone else. 'Personal identity' was assigned to individuals in accordance with a very limited range of State-ascribed status categories (*shenfen*). With the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (1966-76), in particular, pluralism and individual difference in the populous became utterly anathema and 'redness' the only social and moral category of significance (Krauss 1977). Social order broke down entirely as 'individualistic' dispositions were exorcised through violent public 'criticisms' and ideological 'struggle' (Chan et al., 1980), and warring factions of the infamous Red Guards killed or otherwise neutralized anyone who exhibited the slightest evidence of 'bourgeois consciousness'. Mao's ambition had been to make China self-sufficient and independent of other nations, so the commercial offerings of Western nations were strictly outlawed as capitalist enemy propaganda: Hooper (2000) reports a case of a Chinese official being sentenced to five years in prison for, amongst other things, "having a fondness for Coca-Cola". Far worse befell a great many for just as little.

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'contemporary' refers to the time during which this research was undertaken. I do not use the word to refer to the period since 1949 as historians of China sometimes do.

Nevertheless, and despite the master-narrative of egalitarianism and public subservience which disguised the terrorization of individual agency during this time, individuals still found myriad ways to make space for themselves from within this system, space which was in each case *theirs* (Davis 1995; Yan 2003). Manipulation of status hierarchies in the pursuit of social esteem was very much alive, so long as manipulations conformed to the categories ascribed by the State-administration: rural versus urban, 'worker' versus 'cadre'<sup>2</sup>, central work-unit versus county work-unit, rank in the salary system, seniority in the Party (i.e. time of "joining the revolution"), which 'tier' of city one lived in (major provincial capitals being seen as 'better' than country-towns) etc, were all legitimately distinctive in explicit or inexplicit ways (Krauss 1977; Whyte 1975). Social and symbolic capital were also traded by recourse to the underground markets and elaborate networks of personal relationships necessary to negotiate the infamously thick State bureaucracy too (Yang 1994), the ability to navigate 'the system', to grasp and bend the reality of it to the favor of one's patron—thus making one's own career steps seem like sacrifices for the common good—being particularly highly distinguishing. Material inequalities existed during this time too, even though this was explicitly against official discourse: senior cadres enjoyed "distinctive lifestyles" (Davis 2000, 3) away from the public gaze, and the political power implied by access to consumer brands such as Panda Cigarettes or Moutai (a distilled wine) was widely recognized. Further, it cannot be overlooked that since Socialism was an essentially *scientific* experiment that depended in some large measure on the intellectual elite (Andreas 2002; Konrad and Szelenyi 1979), even the outlawed 'class' distinction configured by family background, formal education, and social association was legitimately levered in "tactical" (cf. Dutton 1998) ways to suit lurching shifts in State policy at the time. For the overwhelming majority of China's population, however, upwards social mobility was prohibited to all but those who sang loudest from Mao's hymn-sheet, and room for individual interpretation of these commandments remained narrow to say the least. *Consumption*, that is to say, both as a *project of individuality* and as basic material sustenance, was reduced to a "bare", highly homogenous, "minimum" (Dirlik 2001, 4).

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<sup>2</sup> Cadres (*ganbu*) were Chinese Communist Party members of greatly varying levels of managerial responsibility. Middle-aged people still widely use the term today to refer to anyone with a professional job.

Consequently, while much of the rest of the world was steadily developing a vocabulary for understanding consumption, such an interpretive framework was largely denied to the Chinese until after Deng Xiaoping's economic 'reforms and opening' (*gaige kaifang*) were initiated in 1978 (Nee 1989; Nee and Cao 2005). These reforms were challenged by the political Left, but when the Special Economic Zones which had been created as experimental havens for foreign direct investment around China's Southern coast were given a boost in 1992 there was no turning back. Since then China has been amongst the fastest growing national economies in the world, rapidly restructuring its stagnating state-controlled agricultural and industrial base into a thriving mixed economy founded on increasing global engagement and markets 'open' to international trade. By 2006 the size of China's economy in gross domestic product (GDP) terms had overtaken both France and Britain to rank fourth largest in the world, up three places since 2004; but when the figures were adjusted for purchasing power parity, China's economy ranked second only to that of the U.S. alone (Garner et al. 2005). Indeed, by 2009 the size of China's economy ranked second only to the U.S. in absolute terms too. This extraordinary economic growth saw the return of *consumerism* to China, which rapidly replaced political correctness as the 'religion' in vogue, and emphasized symbolic and status distinctions in ways that had not been seen since Republican times (1911-1949). Historians had already shown that consumerism impacted hugely on the cultural orientation of 'treaty port' cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou in early the twentieth-century, where domestic consumer-goods brands were used to rally nationalist sentiments vis-à-vis 'foreign' brands and political loyalty translated into 'identity markers' which resonated with the growing middle classes (Cochran 1980; Lee 2000; Gerth 2003). Evidence even suggests that "consumers" used "brands" (Hamilton and Lai 1989) and "superfluous things" (Clunas 1991) to assert identity and social power as long ago as the Ming and Qing dynasties, well before the corporate producers of culture had taken on a recognizably early-'globalizing' guise. But as the contemporary State encouraged individual and household consumer spending throughout the 1990's in order to sustain economic growth, with national retail turnover and the advertising industry growing at averages of 15% and 93-97% year-on-year respectively (Cheskin 2009; Paek and Pan 2004; Hooper 1998a), there seemed little doubt that China was in the throes of a "consumer revolution" (Davis 2000; Li 1998; Wu 1998) which promised greater possibilities for individual expression than ever before.

Quite the contradiction of the Maoist era, “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen 1954) rapidly became popular, stimulating “cultural shock” (Barné 1999) within China and a flurry of worldwide interest (Croll 2006). By 2005, it was seen that consumer spending in China accounted for approximately 3% of global spending, a figure predicted to rise to more than 10% by 2014 (Garner 2005, 1-17). This meant that there would likely be more new consumer spending in China than anywhere else in the world over the next few (Garner 2005, 14). But when the hyperbole and agitation was laid aside, and China’s massive population was taken into account, the Middle Kingdom remained very far from the consumerist paradise international marketers imagined. Still today, the nation’s GDP per capita remains amongst the world’s lowest, with hundreds of millions impoverished; and while social scientists have often been inclined to hope that consumerism heralded the possibility of greater political agency for Chinese individuals to express themselves (Schell 1989; Davis 2000), the absence of thorough-going democratic reforms to accompany economic liberalization has provoked the widespread observation that the promise of personal choice implicit in the new consumerist culture might be no more egalitarian than the Maoist regime (Pun 2003; Zhou 2004). The contemporary State still maintains a firm monopoly over the reproduction of social categories, indeed, even though Communism has been thoroughly jettisoned as an economic ideology. Not least, there is still the systematic discrimination between ‘agricultural’ and ‘non-agricultural’ household registration (Cheng and Selden 1994) which disadvantages China’s poorer rural folk and makes life especially tough for the approximately 150 million rural workers who ‘illegally’ migrate to China’s newly-urbanizing cities in order to find work (Zhang 2001; Wang 2005). And yet, outside, or rather *within* these categories, individual expression is actually quite pluralistic and ‘free’ today, so long as you are not explicitly challenging Party-State authority. Party membership is much less of a factor determining one’s life chances than it was, and internal social mobility increasingly fluid, with new forms of social hierarchy rapidly manifested (Bian 2002). Most importantly, Chinese individuals are not just divided *by* the new discourse of market reform, but position themselves in *relation* to this (Hanser 2008; Hooper 1998a), finding all manner of ways to make room for themselves within China’s sweeping changes, ways which need not necessarily involve purchasing consumer goods, but ways which are nevertheless still usefully understood as *consumption* too.

## 2. Essential Consumption

Perhaps most scholars concerned with 'consumption' view the study of human practice as the mechanistic province of science, and pursue measurable, quantifiable results which supposedly perfectly reflect 'true facts' or causal laws about the world (cf. Lowe 2001; 2002). This *positivism*, very much the norm in business and management studies, holds that everything real can be *objectively perceived* and *counted*, since the meaning or identity of any entity is entirely fixed, finite and *present* in its manifestation to an independent observer. Thus, positivism presupposes an *ontological dualism* between a given knowing subject and a world 'external' to it, a cognitive and analytical strategy which derives from the misguided visual metaphors of the late medieval philosopher Descartes (cf. chapter three, page 52). Descartes thought that the fact there was 'thinking' proved that 'he' existed: *cogito ergo sum*. Not only was Descartes mistaken in this *belief* (there being nothing in the premise 'there is thinking' to assert the existence of the 'I' as a subject which 'contains' these thoughts or which is made present through them), Descartes further believed that this was the *one* thing he could be sure of, doubting instead whether he could be sure that the world he experienced accurately represented the world as it actually is, and even whether he could be sure that the world existed apart from his perceptions of it at all. An attendant problem was the existence, or not, of other minds. The social world thus *exists* for positivists only insofar as 'I' say it does; the 'I' exists, and exists *apart from* the world, moreover, simply because everything 'contained in' the world can apparently be 'accounted for' by 'me'. If the positivist is granted this most "dogmatic" (De Certeau 1984, 36) of identity-politics, however, the reality of the objective world must *necessarily* remain unproved, since the positivist must define the terms not only of any question but of its answer also, which is to never really *mean* anything. Strictly speaking, the only response a positivist can make to the question, "What is an individual?" is to repeat the lexical unit, "An individual"! No further elaborations can change the tautological and solipsistic nature of the assertion. The very *most* this (self)delusion of 'truth' can offer, in fact, is to show that any hypothesis set forward is *likely* not to be false when measured against terms of its own choosing. This is not to say that positivism is devoid of useful value, but rather to question how far this approach can be extended into the realm of *human subjectivity* without producing naïve, misleading, and even dangerously controlling effects *on* that subjectivity.

Positivist interpretations of consumption, indeed, typically assume a theory of action known as *methodological individualism*, which superficially affords individuals agency, but in fact allows only for a set of self-determining and self-maximizing intentions *ontologically prior* to the world (Arrow 1994). Individuals, in short, are supposed to act entirely out of their own ‘rational’ agency, and are not swayed to act by supra-individual social or cultural determinants in any way. From the broad ‘vision’ of a firm’s marketing ‘challenge’ to the textbook flow-chart models indicating separate stages in causal chains of consumer decision-making, every situation first must be *consciously problematized* and a *rational choice* made in accordance with self-defined ‘aims’, ‘goals’ and ‘objectives’; only *then* do agents *act*, effectively *doubling* causality! Although scholarly advocates attempt to factor “society”, “culture”, or a “relational and network context” (all quotes Bao et al., 2003, 736-737) into their ‘models’ of reality, the same failure to allow that so much of human practice is irrational, not at all purposive, and more a matter of “practical coping” (Chia and Holt 2006) than of temporally and causally suspended choice per se, effectively absolves scholars of all responsibility for asserting a particular *kind* of rationality *over* other social actors, even as the universal autonomy of ‘rationality’ is asserted too. Where individuals are cast as *cause-of-themselves*, that is to say, ‘consumption’ may be understood only in terms of *purchasing*, the *only* successful kind of action this logic designates for ‘consumers’ (cf. Croll 2008, 22), so that the prevailing concept of ‘science’ flourishes in the service of a mutually reinforcing economic and industrial system, and the logic of *capitalism* depends on a rationality which objectifies individuals and makes them subject again to be exploited by consumerism (cf. Marcuse 1964)—and this even though it should be self-evident that there cannot possibly be any ‘consumption’ in any place where any identity *alone is*. Positivist studies can therefore say very little about the *actual lived dynamics* of how consumption functions to configure individuality, in China or anywhere else, the question of what it *means* to consume answerable only by those individual agents at once made *subject to* and *logically excluded* by these studies. Though markets may be ‘segmented’ in terms of their demographics (Walters and Samiee 2003), geographical distribution (Cui and Liu 2000; 2001; Fram et al. 2004), psychographic attitudes and values (Schmitt 1997; Wei 1997; Schramm and Staack 2005; Dickson et. al 2004), and so on, studies of this form only ever trace where consumption *has been* (De Certeau 1984).

### 3. Essential China

In the particular case of China, this same epistemological arrogance (for both positivism and methodological individualism consist in the *willful* and therefore *self-denying* refusal to *critically reflect* on the conditions of the possibility of one's knowledge claims—an *essential* aspect of human life—Gadamer 1975) is levered to radically stereotype Chinese individuals along East/West lines in ways which further conspire to trap individual agency in an epistemological *no-man's land*. Almost invariably, wherever scholars set 'private selves' *against* 'public selves', 'personal identities' *against* 'social identities', and so on—quite as if the 'core' Cartesian 'self at once divorced from the world can now be made to "possess" (Belk 1988) all manner of other selves, each of which is equally absolutely divided from the other—some timeless "essence" (Stening and Zhang 2008) of "Chinese culture" (Yau 1988) or "Confucianism" (Bond 1996) is conjured to justify casting Chinese individuals as "collectivist" rather than "individualist" (Aaker and Schmitt 2001; Hwang et al., 2003), as "interdependent" rather than "independent" (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Singelis 1994), and so on, that is to say, further *essentialized* categories into which Chinese individuals are *made to fit*, each of which is equally taken to mean that 'selves' of this 'Chinese' *type* emphasize the collectives of which they are members over their own subjectivity! For example, one paper has it that: "In a collectivist country like China, the individual is not a complete entity. For example, a male Chinese would view himself as a son, a brother, a husband, a father, but hardly as himself" (Bao et al., 2003, 736-737), thus representing Chinese consumers as defunct or inferior versions of those "completely" *individual* agents, found, it is elsewhere argued, only in the "West". Another similarly wagers: "[Chinese]...do not necessarily think of themselves as distinct from others, as having unique internal attributes (that is, abilities, traits, motives and values), and do not necessarily behave as a consequence of internal attributes" (Eckhardt 2004, 407), thus giving the impression that Chinese individuals are not individuals *per se*, but are instead rather more like those bees and other insects supposed to share 'hive-minds', which must surely be a gross over-simplification of a very complex cultural logic. This latter paper even suggests that conversations with Chinese individuals should be *actively avoided* because: "in most Chinese contexts the appropriate unit of analysis is the group not the individual, as almost internally held beliefs, attitudes and values are the product of important in-group interactions" (Eckhardt 2004, 406).



Much of this “Orientalist” *Othering* (Said 2003) is (re)produced by scholars who have never even been to China (this much is known for a fact), or who have alternatively spent a mere few days walking the streets of Shanghai with a translator before pronouncing their conclusions to an audience in thrall to the exotic (indeed this much is even admitted—Eckhardt 2001a). But it is surely even more unfortunate that scholars from Chinese backgrounds have often uncritically accepted this discourse even as they presumably recognized *something* of themselves in a logic that systematically denies their agency, and teamed up with Western marketing professors to regurgitate it with little thought for whether it can be sustained. Perhaps even this might be explained in terms of ‘Chinese respect’ for ‘Confucian hierarchies’, where the student is unwaveringly obedient to his teacher, father, uncle, and so on, or alternatively by recourse to Hofstede’s “Power Distance” dimension (Hofstede 1991; 2001), which similarly casts Chinese individuals as hapless souls born only to be dominated by those who would *force them to fit* the one-dimensional mathematical logic from which such dimensions are derived. But seriously, this kind of work—and it is *everywhere*—is an insult to Chinese individuals, and has the insidious, bourgeois and colonialist side-effect of stripping Chinese individuals of any agency for themselves except as the *subjects* of Western academic enquiry. Indeed, even where (overseas born) Chinese scholars have themselves attempted to drop the hegemonic trans-cultural model represented by Hofstede and his ubiquitous derivatives and examine the world’s cultures from the perspective of “values” “traditionally” linked to China (Chinese Culture Connection 1987), they could not dispense with the positivist epistemology and thus could not have been further from an analysis that made what individuals actually *do* (in consumption) primary. The “Confucian Dynamism” that Chinese individuals were in this way stereotyped with was therefore just a more ‘active’ form of methodological individualism, just as ‘collectivism’ is just a more “capacious” (cf. Chia and Holt 2006, 638) form of the same. Even when business-management scholars and practitioners have embraced a little ‘Eastern holism’—some “contradiction”, “paradox”, and “ambivalence”—for good esoteric measure, commentators still typically perceive their role as being able to “resolve” these contradictions for Chinese consumers, to work them out, to “crack the reputedly indecipherable code”, to *reason away* the contradiction and *account for* it, providing instead a coherent and *definite* solution that “smart marketers” must “help consumers” find (all quotes Doctoroff 2005, 1-14).

But Chinese consumers are of course very well aware of the cultural “code” quite without marketers’ “help”. And although “Chinese culture” (*zhongguo wenhua*) is spoken about in the most vernacular of everyday practices where individuals especially like to assert the glorious unity and intransigence of ‘their own’ culture, Chinese individuals are only too well aware that there is no one *set* “code” that holds for all situations *a priori*. So, let it be quite clear: the dynamics of social and cultural practice can *never* be captured by the *one-dimensional* “dimensions” positivists (Schwartz 1994; House et al., 2004) like to believe explain all the world’s cultures (Kirkman et al., 2006; Smith 2006), and scholars who suggest otherwise deny what they themselves *do* in order to cover up the overwhelmingly obvious fact that individual agencies and the social world of objects *are indeed* reconciled in consumption! Even where the idea of this “Chinese code” is levered to mount a half-hearted critique of the rational, individually-centred Cartesian subject (see above), scholars steeped in positivism are unable to see that they themselves nevertheless reproduce the *belief* in a core Cartesian subject in their very methodology (Lowe 2001, 317). Such scholars imply, and then quite ironically, that the mere ‘discovery’ of a Chinese cultural emphasis on interrelationship or “assimilation” (Aaker and Schmitt 2001) as opposed to the *division* in which the power of their Western-created positivism consists has somehow reconciled subject to object in its own right, *i.e. once and for all, originally, and for all time!* But this is the one (impossible) challenge that all such essentialists cannot even begin to confront without becoming utterly undone, and so arguments are developed which persistently skirt over the most fundamental issue, back and forth from the subjective to the objective perspective, erroneously reproducing the same series of broadly parallel individual-collective binary oppositions without ever getting down to the analysis of what individual agents actually *do* within the social collective that *makes them* individuals. The point that scholars of consumption should be *most* concerned with, perhaps, is how far the rich tapestry of everyday life happens *in spite of* objectifying logics such as these. For certainly it is what consumers *do* with such logics that says most about individuality (Shutz 1967). When confronted by such totalizing statements as: “The individual has never been relevant in China” (Doctoroff 2005, 58), this research recognizes it is high time to ask from scratch how the ‘Confucian cultural collective’ is comprised of individuals; or rather how individuality in contemporary China is *itself* comprised by the cultural collective.

#### 4. Disciplined Consumption

It would be remiss not to acknowledge that business studies of consumption have lately given increasing credence to *qualitative* research, which has been instrumental in the development of what is now called “Consumer Culture Theory” (see Arnould and Thompson 2005 for a review). A broad agglomerate of theoretical perspectives from ‘Continental’ philosophy is harnessed to emphasize reality as it is *meaningful* for social individuals possessed of the unique ‘interpretive capacity’ (*verstehen*) to *construct* it for themselves, that is, a *subjective* capacity, rather than as a set of ‘true, objective facts’ about the world (e.g. Thompson et al., 1989; 1990; Thompson 1997; 2004); the empirical muscle comes from strictures long familiar to social anthropology (e.g Douglas and Isherwood 1979; McCracken 1990, 2005; Miller 1987, 1998; Baudrillard 1998). Research here remains distinctly U.S-centric, however, with only a smattering of articles in top-tier journals examining contexts outside of North America, and what little research exists on ‘developing’ or ‘newly-industrializing’ countries, such as China, often being of dubious quality; though the U.S.-bias of forums such as *The Journal of Consumer Research* and *Advances in Consumer Research* may now be waning, this probably says more about the export of a particular style of scholarship around the globe than about fundamental changes in scholarly practice (see Appadurai 1986 for an analysis of consumption in contexts around the world). Researchers here, moreover, retain a remarkable distance from social anthropological studies of consumption in the target cultures they analyze, which would inform many of the management, marketing and advertising issues they are concerned with; even where some cross-pollinated works are now emerging in the form of ‘cultural-studies’ scholars ‘turned’ business scholars (Wang 2008), or just straight business scholars who have learned that a few specialist references does them no harm (Hung et al., 2007; Zhao and Belk 2008), these works remain very much grown in a marketing garden. Even if understood qualitatively, consumption remains understood only as an *economic* activity, in the *monetary* sense, the ‘opposite’ of (economic) production as it were, a narrowing of vision which can only be a function of the same isolationist disciplinary ambitions that have allowed the *ad hoc* borrowing of concepts from the broader social sciences without properly reckoning with the epistemological morass underlying the fusion of commercial accountability with qualitative ‘insight’.

'Qual-light' versions of qualitative research couched in terms of positivism's atomistic and mechanical vocabulary (i.e. 'reliability', 'validity' etc) thus proliferate, where terms like "phenomenology" (Heidegger 1962) and "social constructionism" (Berger and Luckmann 1967) are loosely bandied around by commentators with little grasp of what research is trying to achieve. Qualitative researchers here are widely made to 'apologize' for not doing statistical research, as if they had not the ability, and are asked to make their research fit positivism's atomistic and mechanical parameters, thus making themselves accountable to objectivists who have little grasp of how challenging it is to read Heidegger, or how exquisitely and relentlessly sublime is Nietzsche's prose—*never mind the contributions of these scholar's theories!* It is necessary to be absolutely clear, therefore: no amount of 'methods' conjured up by research methods aficionados can *ever* fuse subject with object 'in theory' (*only in their use!*), and those who brush aside the 'paradigmatic gap' as "increasingly irrelevant" (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 868) do so only in order to demarcate and monopolize their own intellectual space! Indeed, the most pertinent observation is surely that it is only by way of the immanently *practical* task of making their research fit the parameters demanded by the need to enliven an intellectually banal discipline (i.e. marketing), that is to say, *making room for themselves within these parameters whilst not entirely escaping them* (De Certeau 1984), that the most critically-minded of scholars of this field (e.g. Murray 2002; Kozinets 2002; Thompson 2002; Holt 1997; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995) have reached out towards those most advanced of social and cultural theorists who still *essentially* fall short of brushing aside the 'paradigmatic gap' in grand theoretical sweep, but who have long understood that *bridging* that 'gap' is what consumption actually *does* (Dunn 2008 and Aldridge 2003 make comprehensive reviews; see also below). 'Consumer Culture Theory' scholars, that is to say, might learn much about the practical dynamics of consumption by means of an 'internal' examination of the processes by which they satisfy themselves that research meets their (vaguely) defined understanding of what 'consumption' is in order to legitimate their exclusive enterprise. For it can only be the results of just such a dual negotiation that an otherwise marginal scholar managed to force the following statements into press: "To live is to consume. Social and philosophical disputes cannot possibly pivot on consumption versus no consumption" (Borgman 2000, 418; cf. Denzin 2001)!

Scholars in the broader social sciences concerned with the consequences of China's market reforms, the (re)introduction of consumerism, and the dynamics of social life in the contemporary era most broadly, anthropologists, sociologists, and sinologists, indeed, have long recognized 'consumption' as a *political* problem per se, and sought to *critically deconstruct* this problem in ways that stridently avoid the essentialisms that positivism generates. But although the theoretical perspectives developed from the ethnographic fieldwork used here tend to yield far greater critical power than those developed from mathematical methods, these scholars have often been as guilty of denying Chinese individuals agency as the Cartesianists. Typically, all sorts of objectifying caveats and qualifications are made to assert the scholar's *own* position without discriminating much between those of informants', the individual being taken precisely as an example of a *type*, i.e. of 'the masses', and the objectifying stance taken in relation to objects of knowledge somewhat obfuscating the actual *genesis* of individuality beneath a dense mass of theory, factual detail, and/or narcissistic wordplay. Xin Liu's *The Otherness of Self* (2005), for example, begins by structuring practices of selfhood in an interesting and poignant way, but then does its best to lose the reader in a theoretical quagmire apparently included largely for the purpose of review. Quite similarly, Frank Pieke's book, *The Ordinary and the Extraordinary* (1996), which aspires to be exactly the sort of discursive "postmodern anthropology" *this* research aims at, gives much less room to the actual practices of Chinese individuals than he promises between the large parts of the book devoted to showing that he 'knows about' social theory and those telling the story of the 1989 Tiananmen event. Similar charges might be made of many of the other methodologically approximate works in the field, such as Andrew Kipnis's *Sentiment, Self, and Subculture* (1997). Scholars here do not write for the agency of those who inform their research, after all, but for precisely the *opposite* reason, for each other, and to complicate the object of knowledge until it becomes a *subject-matter* for sophisticated discussion and critique. This latter internally-referential disposition may also explain why scholars from this broadly-defined second field (Chen et al. 2001; Chen and Sun 2006; Guldin and Southall 1993) have been even more adept at ignoring those 'Other' works produced in the business management disciplines (see above), even though both bodies of literature are concerned with the same Chinese individuals—that is, 'consumers' or 'citizens', however we choose to look at them.

The privileged perspective social science brings to its object is perhaps nowhere more condescending than where scholars *most explicitly* seek to give “voice” to China’s “subaltern” (Pun 2003) types. Scholars of a ‘Frankfurt School’ influence, in particular (Anagnost 2004; Dirlik 2001), maintain a characteristic disdain for the commercial agencies which impact upon material consumption, matched only by an implicit disdain for the consumption decisions of individual Chinese themselves. The core argument is of the form: “Although people might not be aware of it, or indeed express anything like it, we social scientists *know for sure* that they are suppressed by consumption, whereas in fact they could have alternative and far more fulfilling lives, so why don’t they?” Pun Ngai (2003), for example, addresses her work on factory workers in Shenzhen directly at the idea that the re-introduction of consumerism into China may have engendered greater agency for Chinese individuals to choose their lives for themselves: this was the newest “ruse of capital”, Pun maintained, “whereby the extraction of surplus value of labor is... suppressed by the overvaluation of consumption and its neo-liberal ideologies of self-transformation” (Pun 2003, 469). ‘Consumption’ is therefore treated not as a metaphor for what individuals actually do with prior structures to make them their own, but as a metaphor that stands for the ‘domination’ these scholars *must* find in any problem they look at. Indeed, other scholars have reached quite the opposite conclusions. Davis (2005), for example, responded to Pun by stressing that although Shanghai home owners evinced ample evidence of social stratification in their consumption practices, they offered a “reflexive and critical narrative that signified agency and individuation more than manipulation and domination”: juxtaposed against past political repression and material deprivation, Davis maintained, her informants interpreted China’s “consumer revolution” in genuinely liberating terms (Davis 2005, 708-709). Indeed, whilst there is much to be said about exploitation of individual agency in contemporary China, it cannot be denied that many millions of Chinese have been rather glad to be ‘exploited’ and ‘consumed’ by economic reform. Hoist by their own intellectual petard and ‘noble’ ideals, therefore, the very projects that aspire to ‘liberate’ Chinese individuals from the ‘clutches’ of “global capital” (Pun 2003), or “neoliberalism” (Anagnost 2004; Yan 2003; Kipnis 2007), too often seem to individuals agency, making their informants *subject* even as they champion their ‘ordinary’ causes from the ‘extraordinary’ heights of academic theory (cf. Agger 1992; 2004).

## 5. Global Forces

Scholars from this broadly-defined 'sociological' second field have, however, convincingly shown that the Chinese have been equally complicit with the 'West' in essentializing their own culture. Chinese Communism was of course not only anti-capitalist but also anti-imperialist, tacitly but directly aimed at dealing with China's racist subjugation by foreign powers: Mao intended to build up an understanding of modernity not tainted by compliance with Orientalism and sufficiently differentiated from the 'corruption' and 'inefficacy' of the defeated Kuomintang Party; pursuing Marxism and implementing a scientific 'value-neutral' rationality with engineering precision was of course a way out. The reintroduction of consumerism after Deng's economic reforms therefore conflicted with the need the State increasingly felt from the late 1970's onwards to emphasize the 'nation' in order to maintain its legitimacy (Nyíri and Breidenbach 2005). A leadership anxious to include greater China within their sphere of influence and prepare for the return of Hong Kong saw the underdog ideology of 'catching up' with the West as negative, and generated a new story of the historical evolution of the nation in which there was a continuous positive contribution to mankind. Beginning with the 'patriotic education campaign' from the summer of 1991 onwards, the State tacitly condoned the resurrection of the Confucianist and Taoist ideals outlawed under Mao for their 'anti-revolutionary' emphasis on respect for traditional hierarchies and social harmony, and had these spliced into the official Communist Party line as an act of identification which essentialized China's ancient past and played directly into the hands of Orientalism (Ong 1999, 63). This provided Western essentializations of 'Chinese culture' with further credibility in China, meaning that essentialism was less nefariously imposed on the Chinese than manifested in the embrace of values and ideologies that allowed them moral judgements vis-à-vis the West (Ong 2005). This discourse was brought together with Western financial interests to propagate the myth of "Asian Values", a notion premised on the promise that capitalism would flourish wherever inequality, lack of individual rights, and political oppression were excused as reflections of a set of Pan-Asian 'values' that subordinated individual sovereignty to the social *role* in the family, society, and nation. Implicit in the witticism "Socialism with Chinese characteristics", "Confucian capitalism" legitimated authoritarian regimes complicit with international business whilst ensuring that their markets remained open to foreign investment (Yao 2002).

These antagonisms were framed by social science debates about the homogenisation versus heterogenisation of 'global' capital markets and cultures (cf. Hooper 2000; cf. Dirlik 2001), and speculation that China's development would realize "alternative" forms of "modernity" (Ong 2005). In literature pertaining to 'consumption' these discourses were manifested by a debate that raged out of all proportion from the late 1990's into the new millennium over whether Chinese preferred *either* 'Chinese' *or* 'Western' themes in consumption, quite as if the rise of consumer cultures in transitional societies did not inevitably involve "interactive forces from without and within" (Paek and Pan 2004, 509; Ouyang et al, 2002; Zhou and Hui 2003; Lu 2004; Pan et al., 2000). By the early 1990's, while foreign firms and investors were discovering that China was vast, poor (frankly speaking), internally differentiated, and resistant to foreign assimilation (Watts 2002; Fielding 2005), Chinese multinationals and home-grown brands had indeed increased the stakes fostering a new consumer 'ethnocentrism' that reflected a new-found pride in China's rise on the world stage (Hooper 1998b, 22; Ayala and Lai 1996; Ayala et. al. 1996; cf. Klein et al., 1998). Commentators reported a particular transformation in attitudes towards commodities of domestic origin following the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and again when a Chinese fighter pilot was killed in a crash with an American spy plane in 2001 (Dirlik 2001, 9; Ewing et al., 2002, 199; Hooper 2000; Wang and Chen 2004). But the idea that China would conform to a homogenized model of globalisation just because Chinese individuals evinced a strong desire for consumerism as the poverty and austerity of the Mao era fell away, and for the 'Western' goods and brands that had for so long been restricted in particular, was always misguided in its assumption that local consumers interpreted advertising images in the same way that the advertisers themselves intended, or in the way Western observers did (Dutton 1998, 273; Farrer 2004, 12; Zhou and Belk 2004; Hooper 2000; Eckhardt 2001a). While China indeed appeared to be in the process of "McDonaldisation" (Yan 1998; Watson 1998) or "Coca-Colonisation" (cf. Ger and Belk 1996) compared to its isolation under Mao, the evidence on the ground was much more complicated. Thus, it became necessary to conduct research that began by self-consciously striving to afford and reproduce individual agency, emphasizing the 'local' in the 'global' as well as vice versa (e.g. Eckhardt and Mahi 2004).



Stakeholders with vested interests in making Chinese individuals more like those *paying* consumers in the West, however, had always been aware that in a place where people had not so long ago risked their lives for expressing 'individualist' tendencies new forms of consumption would very likely be interpreted in terms of increased agency. From the beginning of China's reforms, marketers wasted no time in documenting how exposure to foreign media content was directly related to "individualistic values" and "hedonistic pursuits" among youthful urban Chinese (Paek and Pan 2004, 493), content analyses of advertising finding that 'Western' appeals held a position of symbolic dominance with values of 'modernity' and 'individualism' emphasized over 'tradition' and 'collectivism' (Zhang and Shavitt 2003; Lin 2001; Tse et al., 1989; Chan and Cheng 2002). Similar research drew similar conclusions: younger, wealthier and better educated Chinese enjoyed "conspicuous consumption", aspired to "self-actualisation", and "worshipped Western lifestyles" (Wei and Pan 1999). Many commentators pointed to the State's enforcement of the 'one-child policy' as a factor likely enhancing "self-centred" tendencies (Li 1998; Lin 2001); but the broader Deng'ist 'Get rich quick' vein of materialism was always also recognized as an individualizing driver, even by scholars who also chimed to the "Confucianist" mantra (Alden et al., 1999; Schmitt and Pan 1994; Wei and Pan 1999; Zhou and Hui 2003). That is to say, that stakeholders interested in making Chinese individuals members of intriguing "traditional" "collectives" at the same time as becoming more like those 'true' individuals in the West, always saw *themselves* as the "liberation" (Doctoroff 2005, 100) of a "repressed yet emerging need" to realize "'what I want', 'what I like', and 'who I am'" in Chinese consumers (Doctoroff 2005, 35). But not only did this argument mistake individuality as the province only of China's young and materialistic consumers (cf. Thøgersen and Ni 2008), much worse still it mistook individualism for *individuality*! It can only be assumed, moreover, that the Chinese subjects of these surveys agreed with scholars' implicit equations of "modern" and "Western" with individuality, on the one hand, and "backward" and "Chinese" with non-individuality, on the other, no doubt a product of *discourse* for all concerned. Seen through the haze of commercial accountability, there was no methodological way possible for Chinese individuals to be all of these binary oppositions—i.e. 'individual' *and* 'collective', 'modern' *and* 'traditional', and so on—all *at the same time*, albeit in ways considerably different from the West.

Commentators of all stripes seemed to fudge this most important issue in approximate ways. Michael Dutton, a political scientist, surely radically simplified when writing: "Fashion [in China] is not constructed to mark out one's individuality, but to mark out one's success...success is equivalent to choosing the popular product, making 'the popular choice'...to be seen wearing the same clothes is not a mark of social disgrace but of wisdom and affluence" (Dutton 1998, 273-274). Might it not be asked if Chinese consumers were not positively "marked out" by making the "popular choice", how else could they possibly be "successfully" marked out? Li Conghua, a business commentator, sought to sophisticate the issue by maintaining that Chinese people "follow the tastes of the group", but *within* the group they seek to differentiate themselves from each other as individuals (Li 1998, 12). "Chinese people", he concluded, "want to be the same but different" (Li 1998, 14). Tom Doctoroff, an advertiser, attempted to nuance this conceptual leap with his "theory" of "Conformist Individualism" (Doctoroff 2005), but unfortunately only 'explained' it in several misleading ways: Though occasionally recognizing that the *right* to "individuality" is the most crucial issue (Doctoroff 2005, 211), Doctoroff systematically neglected to address the subtleties of this, skirting instead only back and forth *over* the relation between the individual and the collective, essentializing China vis-à-vis the West *ad infinitum* quite as if individuality in the West meant doing whatever one likes (Doctoroff 2005, 82, 102-3, 211), thus entirely failing to embrace the "insight" (his term) that "conforming" can be a way of "standing out" (Doctoroff 2005, 11-15) at the same time. In fact, Chinese individuals of course find all manner of ways of distinguishing themselves from amongst their peers without necessarily "standing out" in an overtly egotistical 'individualistic' manner, and if we are only concerned about those explicitly 'individualistic' differentiating actions, of what limited interest is that! No-one [else] who has lived in China in recent years will doubt that consumption promises a far more profound social currency than mere individualism. Indeed the point is that even acts of individualism will be subject to ontologically prior imperatives *legitimizing* such acts. Thus, where this research asks how individual agency is *itself* structured in the contemporary Chinese context, it leaves the *merely academic* issue of whether or not China is more or less 'individualistic' than the West aside, and gets on with the business of disaggregating the relation between individual agency and the cultural collective, showing how each is informed by the other.

## 6. Leading Lights

Certain China scholars have attempted to nuance the paradigmatic stand-off in the cultural critique of consumption by arguing that because Chinese consumers are increasingly able to complain through official channels when sold shoddy or counterfeit goods, and to assert their individual *rights* under new systems laws designed to protect them, consumerism had engendered greater individual agency in China in its own right (e.g. Hooper 1998b; Ho 2001). Studies of this form have been methodologically approximate to those tracing the emergence of 'civil society' in China (e.g. Hook 1996; Kluver and Powers 1999; Brook and Frolic 1997; White et al. 1996), studies that have always been more or less explicitly attended by hopes of possible democratic reform, ranging from the skeptical (Schell 1989) to the more tentatively optimistic as China's reforms rumbled on (e.g. Davis 1995; 2000). But in no sense were any of these analyses systematic studies of how individual agency was *itself* structured in the sense that this research aspires to. Rather, they were 'simply' *case-studies* of how individuals struggle to individuate themselves *against* corporate and governmental agencies and structures, a very different mode of analysis to that proposed here. Quite similarly, anthropologists inspired by the work of eminent sociologists Ulrich Beck (2001) and Zygmunt Baumann (2000) have recently begun to document processes of "individualization", whereby individuals "disembed" themselves from social categories and ties (such as community, family, and class etc) without re-embedding themselves into new, similar categories (Hansen and Pang 2008; Thøgersen and Ni 2008), thus contributing the insights that: one, any greater agency that economic reforms and consumerism have offered Chinese individuals has come with the *burden* of agency, that is, the *having* to adapt, the new *demands* on, and new *expectations* made of individuals, and so on (Delman and Yin 2008); and two, that any sense in which China is undergoing a process of "individualization" may still be a highly collective experience, since the individual challenge, risk, personal guilt, and existential angst that new opportunities as well as constraints will likely entail may provoke entirely new forms of collectives (Rolandsen 2008, 105). "Individualization" research therefore explicitly recognizes that individuality need not take the form of the atomized and self-gratifying self implied by positivism, and that the analysis of the consumption of discursive forces need not necessarily produce a paradigmatic gridlock between free-will and determinism (Rolandsen 2008, 105).

Once again, however, aside from *documenting* areas of practice where this much more nuanced view of individuality is manifested, the “individualization” research program does not attempt to *prove* that individuality is configured from the interrelation of individual agency with structure, though this is of course assumed. Indeed, this research program makes no attempt to show that individual agency is itself *structured* rather than just in some sense determined, the ‘self’ *versus* ‘society’ paradigm adopted yielding a reading still fundamentally Cartesian in its form. The primary concern in this research, moreover, remains the diachronic *extent* to which agents in contemporary China are individuals, an emphasis which broadly parallels that of the marketing literatures (see above), and conclusions that Chinese are now acting as individuals ‘more’ can really only amount to saying that they are now acting *in ways* in which they did not before, which is patently obvious, though the new ways themselves are nonetheless very interesting. The papers and articles that make up this research are therefore perhaps best examined as a volume (cf. Hansen and Svarverud 2009; cf. Yan 2009), which does of course demonstrate a rich variety of ways in which individuality is configured from the structures of contemporary discourse, though this is still only to focus on where agency *has been* rather than a dynamic demonstration of individual agency’s structuration *per se*. This research recognizes that it does not really matter that much even to Chinese individuals themselves whether they are more or less “individualized” than they once were: Granted that individual autonomy and the acts that individuals *have* to undertake are hugely important; granted even that Chinese individuals *are* more “individualized” than they once were; still, as broadly marketing-communications scholars Paek and Pan put it: “the key concern in the development of a consumer society at the turn of the century is no longer whether consumers recognize their sovereignty but *how they seek for distinction* [in the consumerist culture]” (Paek and Pan 2004, 496; some emphasis added). Notwithstanding the fact that Paek and Pan’s formulation has an explicitly ‘consumerist’ edge to it, an analysis is called for which concentrates on the internal workings of what Chinese individuals perhaps *most* do to make themselves individuals, their judgements, differentiations, positioning statements, and so on, which at the very point of instantiation will always be informed by the same structures that facilitate them, for these latter structures remain analytically (which is to say ontologically) prior to *all* social interaction, and thus significantly underscore analyses of “individualization”.

These various predilections of the extant literatures make for a significant lack of analysis that examines the actual dynamics with which individual agents in China manipulate the cultural structures with which they *must* form identity, which strives to avoid the hobgoblin epistemological impasse of *either* objectivism *or* subjectivism as a first methodological principle. In respect of the *synchronic* (see also below) approach such an analysis would require, highly relevant work on China emerged from Amy Hanser while this research was underway (Hanser 2004; 2005), most notably while this research was in its final stages (Hanser 2008). But although Hanser develops an analysis based on data collected from a place very much like the place this research is based on, and indeed draws out some of the discursive themes that this research came to focus on, Hanser builds specific sociological arguments about gender and class, which thus remain of a very different scope and perspective. Though Hanser posits a “structure of entitlement” to make the link between culture and society, meaning and power, anthropology and sociology and so on, thus beginning with a theoretical and methodological impetus that this research broadly shares (see below), this research is quite different to Hanser’s in the way that it sticks with this impetus. This research intends not in the first place to draw out ‘sociological’ conclusions, but to focus more on the first discursive principles, the almost cognitive, nearly *rational* ‘internal’ operations of discourse, only taking a more explicitly sociological turn when a framework for interpreting the practical genesis of individuality has been amply demonstrated and individual agents are allowed to collapse that framework and crystallize it in its actual consumption. In many ways this research therefore underscores Hanser’s “cultural sociology”, just as it also underscores the similarly sociological “individualization” literatures referred to above. Underscored too, are the consumerist forms of individuation which Paek and Pan allude to (above), since this research in many ways reveals the structures upon which consumerism should be best articulated if firms’ offerings are to be matched with Chinese consumers’ projects of individuality and identity-making. Indeed, in this latter *useful* respect, this research should prove stimulating for everyone seeking to negotiate encounters with China, since although the analysis is not so bold as to pretend to represent the whole of China, or indeed the whole of the relevant discourse, many of the structures extrapolated from its analysis are highly salient throughout China too.

## 7. A Synthetic Agenda

Thus, this research seeks to make a major contribution here, by borrowing from Structuralist and Post-Structuralist inspirations on 'identity' (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984; De Certeau 1984), giving primacy to *practice* as a theory of consumption. But although this research therefore challenges most of the relevant business literature on theoretical and methodological grounds, *emphatically*, it does not seek to attack capitalism, commerce or consumerism in China per se. 'Capital' will not be reified as if it had an agency of its own independent of those who manipulate it; and neither is the research concerned with the global division of labor per se (e.g. Chan 2001). Even as it pursues the analysis of an economy of power relations the research strives to avoid the characteristic condescension to ordinary individuals that so often attends 'leftist' intellectual agendas. Rather, the research tries to chart a 'third way' between the imperatives of structural determinism, that is, the omnipresent influence of the cultural collective and market, on the one hand, and the autonomous agency of individuals, on the other, disaggregating the "symphonic" (Jenkins 1992, 58) logic of consumption into its patterns of modality and practical combination as it is manifested across a wide cross-section of society in one of China's most typical industrial cities. Importantly, however, this research does not presume to *complete* the insights it should promote for social scientists and business-practitioners in equal measure. As will be maintained throughout, meaning cannot be separated from interpretation, and research that admits fertile grounds for (re)-interpretation is infinitely more valuable than commentary which in the name of "simplification" closes down room for critical engagement. Whereas business-practitioner literatures, *as a genre*, pad out bullet-pointed 'insights' with anecdotal and heuristic notes (e.g. Doctoroff 2005; Li 1998; Garner et al. 2005), this research, *an epistemological exercise*, recognizes that 'culture' can be no more simply 'represented' than language can, because both *are* representation itself. Practitioners seeking to successfully consume 'Chinese culture' should not ask questions like "What do I do if?" (which is what they often do ask, having been led to believe in the "code"), or "Can you give me a summary of Chinese culture" (as if culture was a thing), but would better analyze culture in terms of their own relationship to it, because the way that culture is successfully consumed shares more in common with the *learning of a language* than it does with the acquisition of a thing.

Language learners must of course acquire *grammar* before their vocabulary can fully develop, the atomic internalization of lists of words being suitable only at the most rudimentary stage, so that vocabulary elements (i.e. the “What would I do in xyz situation?”) are internalized in the process of mastering broader, more fundamental and prior ‘rules’ governing how these are properly combined. Rather than being like a ‘code’ that ‘applies’ in the situation, culture is therefore much more like a fluxing and multidimensional system structured by broad axiomatic principles within which there is a great deal of room for *individual creativity*. Axiomatic elements of the system (i.e. grammatical principles) may sometimes be directly opposed with one another in the actual instantiation of vocabulary elements (i.e. specific situations), but this need not prevent the system as a whole from ‘cohering’ over time, and neither need this prevent cross-cultural practitioners from being helped to identify those core axioms in order to negotiate their experiences: everyday speech, we might note, need not be grammatically perfect for interpreters to understand the *sense* of it, unlike writing. This research contributes in just such a way, not with a check-list of ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’, and not with wistful tales of some timeless ‘Confucian’ esoterica, but by reconstructing the deeper ‘grammatical’ *sense* of the ‘language’ with which individuality is configured in contemporary Chinese contexts from the systematic and reflexive analysis of what contemporary Chinese consumers actually *do* with the core axioms of the cultural system they inherit from their environment. That the theory derived remains only a partial ‘grammar’, and does not pretend to account for the whole ‘vocabulary’, logically follows: readers wishing to put this ‘grammar’ to work, or to the test, must *consume* it in the practice of the target culture themselves. And therein lays the real value of this research: Because, as social practitioners ourselves, we are all of us engaged in culture everywhere, and as we interpret and internalize the core axioms of our local system, ‘reading’ them over and over in paradigm instances of their practice, the public use we make of this ‘language’ becomes part of its continuing evolution, a form of consumption which is also *another form of production* that unites ‘individuals’ everywhere. So, while this research is based on data collected in China, it ultimately maps the first discursive principles by which individual agency successfully negotiates social interaction *per se*, contributing to knowledge at a level not bound by cultural specifics, but in a way that finds the ‘Chinese consumer’ in all of us, and all of us in the ‘Chinese consumer’.

## 8. Structural Dynamics

In a very important sense, the ‘problem’ this research addresses can only be properly addressed by reference to the theory and methodology chosen to inform it. To explain why, which is also to *justify* a (Post-)Structuralist epistemology and critical discourse analysis, requires the briefest elucidation of some of the key turns in the ‘Continental tradition’ of philosophy, the tradition that *culminates* in the chosen analytical approach like a “ladder” (as Wittgenstein put it). The remainder of this chapter thus continues to raise the research problem through the sharpening of the epistemological and methodological tools which are the *necessary conditions* of understanding what this research seeks to achieve. For only then can it become clear exactly what it means to say that ‘consumption’ is an especially useful metaphor for the *synthetic and systematizing* agency by which ‘individuals’ uniquely appropriate and reconcile themselves to the world. Since space is strictly limited here, however, the roots of the argument outlined here in Hegelianism, Marxism, Nietzsche’s subjective perspectivism, and so on, are sidelined for another work. A proper reckoning with positivism would of course also have to consider Heideggerean phenomenology where the grounds for a sufficiently convincing *ontology of the social* are richest, but this, and the charges of subjectivism made against all forms of existentialism, can be internalized elsewhere (e.g. Gerner 2000; Mulhall 1996; Rorty 1993). Suffice to say that this research takes it for granted that Wittgenstein’s “private language” proved *language* to be the limitation of knowledge, and that truth does not exist independently of the always *social* practices of language’s actual *use* (Wittgenstein 1953). Insofar as anything can be known, that is to say, all that *exists* is the actual, dynamic linguistic act itself. Subjectivity does not therefore ‘originate’ from some metaphysical place beyond the reaches of space and time, but is rather *constructed* in socially local and historically particular ways. Individuals do not ‘have’ networks of cognitive intentions that make them *them*, but rather simply *are* those cognitive intentions in all their polyvalent, incoherent, and often internally-competitive nature. Wittgenstein only gets us so far, however. The question was, if all knowledge was language, and there was no core Cartesian subject, *how* exactly was agency to make sense of the world, indeed of itself? Thus, this research turns to Structuralism—a *way of knowing*—where it took some time before researchers ironically realized that the *methods* they were employing to address this problem in fact confused it.



Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure had shown that the relation between a linguistic sign and its referent in the real world was arbitrary and conventional; that is, there was no logical reason why any particular word should mean what it does in any given language, rather the meaning derived primarily from its *differentiated relation* to all the other meanings in the given language and consisted primarily in its *use* (Sanders 2004): the word 'cat', for example, has no logical connection to the four-legged furry feline who lives in our home; the meaning is attributed to the animal within the English language specifically because 'cat' does *not* mean 'rat', 'dog', or any other English word. Further, and most importantly, De Saussure saw that the *concepts* that languages referred to were as arbitrary as the relations between the linguistic signifier and its referent in the real world; some languages did not have a word to express the concept differentiated by two other concepts in another language: the word 'purple' in English, for example, may not have an equivalent meaning in a language that nevertheless has words to refer to what we call 'blue' and 'red'. Thus, although languages were seen to be constantly evolving, they were seen to order the infinite possibilities of interpretation according to *finite* systems of 'grammatical' categories from which human understanding of the world was *constructed*. The English 'Cat', for example, shares a "paradigmatic" relationship with 'cow' that it does not share with 'car': both 'cat' and 'cow' correspond to the category 'mammals', and the broader category 'animals', whereas 'car' corresponds to the category 'automobile'. De Saussure did *not* mean that languages do not refer to a real 'objective' reality, but rather that *knowledge* of reality was shaped in particular and limited ways by languages. Neither did De Saussure mean that the meaning of signs was not in at least some sense 'fixed'; on the contrary, signs derive the meaning of what they refer to in the real world from *consensus*, it is just that consensus was recognized to be only locally viable and temporally contingent. This far much was shared in common with (the later) Wittgenstein. With De Saussure, however, was the promise of applying these insights as a metaphor for studying social life: where valid language acts consisted of particular classes of words combined in particular ways, by analyzing instances of social "text", Structuralists aspired to reconstruct the underlying "transformational grammar" (Chomsky's term) by which the structural categories of the social system were legitimately combined to generate valid instantiations of practice, thus elaborating social practitioners' realities (Sturrock 1979; 2003).

Though the idea of “the individual” was experimentally posited as one of the categories necessary for social interaction (see Mauss in Carrithers et al., 2008), this was shown to be differently shared everywhere. Social anthropologists inspired by De Saussure showed how people/s achieved self-definition by means of symbolic classification and symbolic opposition, contrasting themselves with their neighbors using *locally* relevant metaphors for ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1956; Leach 1961; Levi-Strauss 1966; Douglas 1966; Turner 1967; Barth 1969; Ardener 1971; Needham 1973). Simply put, an individual in one time and place was not the same as an individual in another time and place (Geertz 1975). Structuralists came to realize, however, that just as language users were not usually conscious of the grammatical rules of their language as they instantiate linguistic acts, social practitioners were not usually aware of the “deep structures” (in Chomsky’s terms) governing their practice. Subjective meanings ‘attributed’ to practices were regarded as superficial and secondary to the ‘generative’ structures that remained latent until abstracted by the researcher’s analysis (Sturrock 2003). Indeed, the very aspiration of pursuing reductive analyses of data until the underlying structures that caused *all* practice were found (the “universal grammar” in Chomsky’s terms), was a lapse into objectivism that necessarily precluded the (Hegelian) *synthesis* of subject and object that Wittgenstein’s insistence on no one single *determining* rule-set had required: Structuralism had effectively privileged the social scientist’s analysis of reality with a ‘God’s eye view’ which supposedly granted more knowledge of the causes of social practices than social practitioners could have of themselves. The problem was two-fold: if the “deep structures” were not causal per se, then what of their ontological status? Did they actually *exist* in any sense other than that they were texts produced by the researcher? Did *any* linguistic or social structures exist independent of the actual people and organizations who manipulated them? Language had to be somehow the limitation of knowledge and social practice but also the vehicle of individual agency: both free will *and* determinism; socially constructed but *logically* determined. Thus, in the sense that this research seeks to abstract the “paradigmatic” categories of the “system” it analyses, the approach is solidly Structuralist; but insofar as the research asks *what makes the difference* between strategies for instantiating these structural elements in their actual practice, the research pursues Structuralism’s logical self-transcendence in Post-Structuralism. The difference, of course, is *individual agency*.

## 9. Discursive Consumption

When Derrida re-read the history of philosophy in light of De Saussure and announced (in 1966) that an “event” was both a “rupture within the continuous web of structures and a ‘redoubling’ of the structure upon itself” (Rabaté 2003, 9), this was highly significant in more ways than one: the last vestiges of metaphysics were reiterated in their Wittgensteinian death-throes and a new ‘discovery’ of the self earnestly began in the very last place one would expect it to be found: *in* the other. In Post-Structuralism, the very accentuation of individual agency in the social world is *itself* seen as a social construction (Giddens 1984). At the very moment of individual agency’s acting upon the world, individual agency is seen to be always *already* structured by the structures that constrain as well as enable it. Conversely, and with every act of interpretation, “I” *intervene* in the ‘text’, actively bringing something unique of myself to the (re)production of social structure. Metaphorically speaking (*since language is now a metaphor for everything*), individual agency operates in the crux between the linguistic subject and predicate, where neither the ‘what acts’ nor the ‘action itself’ can be ontologically privileged at the expense of the other. Action, that is to say, has no ‘origin’ *that we can speak of*; all we can be sure of is that there is agency (this much it makes little sense to doubt, since action evidently happens), but we can have no evidence that agency is anything more than just those instances with which it infinitely projects and (re)-interprets meaning-making. “Internally fractured” (in Lacanian terms) and externally linked to all other identities, ‘Self’ is therefore neither subject nor object, *but both at the same time*, always as yet (still) “deferred” (Derrida 1976) as the subjective and the objective interrelate *ontologically* in actual dynamic practice. Importantly, this does *not* mean that identities are indeterminate, for action must clearly refer to the internal ‘system’ to mean anything at all (Ellis 1989). And, although there can be no identity beyond the level of the signifier, Post-Structuralism need not question that the physical world beyond concepts exists: the world and other minds exist; it’s just that humans have a special dual status of physical brain-body and an immaterial ‘mind’ such that subjectivity cannot be sufficiently correlated with positivist analyses of the firing of neurons in the brain (a view known as Type Physicalism in the Philosophy of Mind). Simply put, language and socialization bring the objective, material world into the possibility of being understood: meaning and materiality, though not equivalent, cannot be separated in any *meaningful* way.

The matrix of differences—and questions of differences—generated in this interrelation is perhaps best referred to as *discourse* (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000). Discourse has no internal partitions or edges, and so there is no point at which this research starts or stops being ‘consumer research’, a point largely lost on those who would narrow their understanding of consumption to only *that* discourse defined by reference to monetary expenditure. Nevertheless, we may still refer to *discourses* in the plural, as structured collections of representations; indeed all the human technologies such as language, culture, politics, moralities, classificatory systems etc by which individual agency *must* assert itself may be referred to as *discourses*. Discourses may remain considerably ‘collective’ in their aims and projects while individual’s consumption of them may be highly self-assertive; but technologies (i.e. organized agencies) of ‘Self’ and the technologies of ‘Others’ can never be entirely equivalent or reducible to each other since individual identity, or rather *distinct personhood*, is cast upon agents by the very nature of the social world—that much is already proved in the insight that objective knowledge is impossible. Thus, where discourse is regarded as a metaphor for social life per se (rather than as a merely linguistic or psychoanalytical notion), *critical discourse analysts* (Fairclough 1989, 1995; Weiss and Wodak 2003; Wodak and Meyer 2001; cf. Philips and Hardy 2002) begin with the premise that the “undecided and undecidable” (Derrida 1976) nature of meaning consists in a *symbolic economy* (Baudrillard 1981) contested by more or less *powerful* actors. Where individuality is the issue (and in an important sense this is *the* issue), the concern is how individuality is *legitimated* within the social sphere, a primarily *political* project. Across all “forms of life” (to borrow a term from Wittgenstein), it is maintained, the individual is made a locus of *value* according to how prior technologies are negotiated, improvised upon, and put towards projects of individuality (cf. Carrithers et al., 1996): that it to say, *consumed*. Though individual agency is free to resist these technologies by recourse to ‘random’ non-sensical statements, assertions of this kind are only distinctive as failures to act strategically or competitively, to *achieve* within the social world. If individual agency may be referred to at all, therefore, it is a *will-to-order*, not simply a will imposed, but a will turned upon itself; a will that makes it possible to avoid the act of conforming to structure being conformity per se, but a means of seeking individuality and distinct expression of ‘Self’ that is socially recognized.

Where 'distinction' (a particularly useful metaphor for this other sense of difference), thus becomes also the point of inclusion in the world, every instance of self-assertion, it is maintained, is necessarily also a struggle to 'define the situation', to dominate the grounds and assumptions upon which social interaction takes place. The questions thus arise: "What must be *necessary* for there to be an individual?", "Who is in control of the discourse?", "Who sets the rules?", and "How do people resist?" In this way, Foucault (after Nietzsche and Marx), showed how individuals were willingly "complicit in their own victimization" (his terms) by more powerful others, *made subject* even while they believed themselves to be engaged in identity-making projects. Discourse, indeed, was seen as powerful and controlling in its own right, all-pervasive and all-consuming, a kind of autonomous "governmentality" that subverted both hegemonic and resistant agencies through their mutual dependence on it (Foucault 1970; 1975). But this approach (cf. Baudrillard 1996, 178-203), however, was once again charged with objective determinism, for over-emphasizing structure and domination at the expense of agency, and was roundly challenged by anyone reluctant to renounce free-will as Foucault's acolytes seemed to suggest they had already done (De Certeau 1984, 45-60). By contrast, *this* research recognizes that just as there is no reason to give priority to a grammar over the sentence or statement that utilizes it, 'domination' and 'resistance' must go hand in hand (cf. Foucault 1972). 'Consumption', this research maintains, is that agency actually *presupposed* by the ontologically prior structures of discourse, that immanently *practical* agency by which economies of social and political resources are *Otherved by nature*, the word being used here as an especially useful metaphor for that essentially *dual* agency which brings the social into the political and the political into the social, every act of 'consumption' in turn producing discourse (De Certeau 1984). The research recognizes that this action-theoretic means: one, that Chinese consumers cannot possibly be anything other than *fully agentive individuals*; and two, that since this essential dis-connection with the world is shared by individuals everywhere, Chinese individuals cannot possibly be so radically 'Other' as much of the literature implies. The research takes up this paradigm and disaggregates it as a systematic and ruthlessly rigorous analytical principle, "de-structuring" (Giddens 1984) it in terms of its patterns of manifestation and instantiation in order to generate new and original knowledge about how individuality takes its genesis in contemporary China.

## 10. Genetic Individuality

Pierre Bourdieu perhaps provides the most relevant theoretical point of departure (Bourdieu 1992). Whereas most sociologies of the political in the social remain caught in an internal positivist discourse about the “objective structures” of “class” and “strata” so on (cf. Zhou 2005), this research borrows from Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ to argue that these “objective structures” themselves consist only in individuals’ consumption of discourse (Bourdieu 1984). Epistemologically speaking, ‘habitus’ is *generative* of the ontologically prior logic of practice and *immanent* in actual action itself, “a structuring structure” and “a structured structure” that *inhabits* “the site of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality” where agency opens up onto the world and the world opens up onto agency (Bourdieu 1992, 53). Sociologically speaking, ‘habitus’ is that *largely unconscious* element of social practice which reduces the transaction costs of interaction, facilitates the flow of social information, and “disposes” social actors to cluster with those from similar “class conditions” within and across whatever “field” of cultural engagement occupies them. In particular, ‘habitus’ is that which differentiates social actors by their differentiations, by the “symbolic boundaries” (Lamont 1994; Lamont and Molnár 2002) they draw through judgements of ‘taste’, ‘purity’ and ‘worthiness’ most broadly construed: “Taste classifies”, as Bourdieu himself put it, “and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (Bourdieu 1984, 6). With ‘habitus’, therefore, this research seeks to understand the “discourse of distinction” (Hanser 2008) as a *synchronic system*, an approach which remains much closer to De Saussure’s original structural linguistics metaphor than, say, Foucault, who was primarily concerned to excavate the diachronic evolution of subjectivity. Though the historical perspective is the *givenness* of discourse, the research recognizes that structure is prior to history, the analytical value consisting in the disaggregation of *contemporary* discourse, ‘path dependencies’ to various cultural ‘-isms’ structuring individuation being for another project (cf. Foucault 1972). This point is doubly important to stress, since when critical readers recognize elements of traditional Chinese philosophies in this research, quite missing the core premise that people’s practices can be traced as products of discourse, they typically exclaim that this research has somehow neglected to ground its findings in “5000 years of Confucianism” or some such.

Acknowledged inconsistencies in Bourdieu's theory, and the associated charge that he is still given to an objective determinism (Jenkins 1992; Dunn 2008, 60-65) are taken inspirationally, as a problem of *method* rather than theory. The whole point of Post-Structuralism is of course that any 'completely coherent' theory of practice must pretend to know more about its empirical informants than they do themselves. It is only therefore by *showing* how culture and its consumption is structured by largely unconscious, supra-individual forces that individuality can *then* be 'found' in the 'subjective' "tactics of consumption" (De Certeau 1984) – of resistance, dispersal, and diffusion, and so on – by individual agents who take those structures and bend them to their will. Any further *theoretical* stress on individual agency at the expense of structure is to risk succumbing to the market-oriented conception of the self-determining 'consumer' as criticized above. Bourdieu allows that consumers can act against the dispositions of their 'habitus'; his point is to stress that so much of human practice is unconsciously determined *in spite of* individual agency, thus making the promises of freedom, and universal opportunities of identity-making explicit in the 'scientific' language supporting consumerism highly dubitable. Thus, this research joins the small but growing number of researchers who have followed the lead set by French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau (1984) in taking Post-Structuralism beyond the constraints imposed by the narrowing of vision that Bourdieu and others inherited from their focus on European, North African and American cultures, and hunts down the 'habitus' in contemporary China's vibrantly evolving consumer society. To reiterate, the research asks not so much 'what' the differences between individuals 'are', but how, when, and why differences are *drawn*. Only when the paradigmatic axioms of this discourse have been abstracted and developed in their 'internal' and situationally-inflected logics is it then asked how these axioms are consumed differently by different individuals from different 'objective' positions in society, as the underlying 'grammar' of their instantiation is fleshed out. All this is to ask only two interrelated questions: *How does individual agency manipulate its relationship with the world such that 'Self' is successful at negotiating social distinction? And, how does the structure of this discourse structure society?* Having thus developed the theoretical perspective that allows us to ask these questions, the following chapter turns to narrate the practices of conducting this research, raising the further question: *What is the structure of this discourse in Anshan City, Liaoning Province, China?*

## **Chapter 2**

### **Making Do**

#### **1. The Field**

This research also makes a significant contribution to knowledge on account of being sited in Anshan city, Liaoning Province, the fifth largest city (by population) in China's North East region, and the third largest city of Liaoning Province, after the provincial capital, Shenyang, and the highly developed coastal city, Dalian. The majority of studies of consumption in contemporary China are centred in the major urban metropolis markets of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and to a lesser extent on other 'first-tier' provincial cities, favoured by foreign researchers for their ease of access, comparative comfort and mistakenly-presumed 'representivity' (as if anywhere could be representative of a quarter of the world's population) (e.g. Cui and Liu 2001; Ouyang et al., 2002; Paek and Pan 2004; Wang and Chen 2004). Current observations from the world of commerce, however, suggest that China's many hundreds of smaller second and third-tier cities represent the areas of highest potential new growth for consumer-oriented business (Lane et al., 2006; Rein 2008). This perception has been accompanied by increasing calls for international firms to broaden their brand portfolios and target lower and middle-income groups outside of premium metropolis markets, as well as maintaining the premium approach they have used so far (Chen and Penhirin 2004); only in this way, it is said, will they be able to compete with the Chinese domestic firms who have concentrated on building up their market share from the 'grass roots' level, but who are now thoroughly "entrenched" (Fielding 2005) and making increasingly muscular upwards moves in the market. When this research began, the only significant study of consumption in China's North East was a quantitative study of the provincial capitals in the region (Zhou and Hui 2003). Since then, a range of excellent ethnographies have emerged from Haerbin, the provincial capital of northernmost Heilongjiang Province, and from the highly-developed coastal city of Dalian (Fong 2008; Hsu 2005; Hanser 2008). There is of course immense diversity in a country/market as large as China, but Anshan remains very 'typical' of the sort of place that international marketers and social scientists concerned with China's "Consumer Revolution" (Davis 2000) most urgently need to understand.



A 'rust-belt' city in the heartland of what used to be known as Manchuria, Anshan was relatively insignificant until the Russians and Japanese founded a steel mill there in 1909. All but destroyed during the second world war, the steel plant was rejuvenated under Maoist rule as *The Anshan Iron and Steel Company* (abbreviated to *Angang*), the city swelling rapidly around the *danwei* infrastructure that supported it. Between 1949 (the founding of the People's Republic) and 1980 (when the single-child policy was implemented) Anshan's total prefectural population doubled to 3 million, approximately half of which were classified 'rural' and half 'non-rural'. Since the vast majority relied in some way on the steel and mining industries for food, housing, and other resources, the mass industrial lay-offs precipitated by automation in the late 1990's had cataclysmic effects on the local economy, earning Anshan a reputation for social depression to compliment the one it already had for environmental grime. Today, however, the pollution that once stained Anshan's skies is now under control, and the city has cultivated a booming private sector and blossoming consumer culture. The (so-say) largest shopping complex in all of Liaoning Province was built in 2005, another finished in 2007, and yet another was launched in 2008. Local government strategy is to mould the city into a tourism centre for the whole province. International retailer Carrefour and a number of large Hong Kong and mainland competitors entered the market in 2007/8; Tesco and New-Mart are under construction, and Wal-Mart is set to follow. A major new elevated high-speed train-line running all the way from Dalian at the coast to Heilongjiang Province in the North (to be finished in 2010) will pass directly through Anshan's poorer district 'West of the Tracks' (*Tiexiqu*), promising further economic stimulus. The area 'East of the Tracks' (*Tiedongqu*) has always been regarded as more up-market than its compass-point opposite and Lishan in the North. Qianshan, the semi-rural 'Thousand Mountains' district, is a tourism magnet with vast new developments in commuter-belt housing. The total registered 2004 prefectural populous (including nearby subordinates Haicheng, Xiuyan and Tai'an) was a dynamic mix of some 3.5 million majority Han, Man, Hui, and North Korean ethnic-groups, supplemented by an estimated 500,000 un-registered economic migrants from neighbouring counties. Current rumours are that when nearby Shenyang is given the same municipal status as Beijing and Shanghai, Anshan will be awarded the title of provincial capital. For all these reasons, Anshan was considered an excellent place to situate this study.

## 2. Marginal Nativity

There were other reasons for choosing Anshan too, of course, Anshan being my wife's hometown, at which point I unashamedly introduce the reflexive "I" into the analysis! This research had the subtext of the practical makings of a relationship between two individuals from very different parts of the world, and is in many ways the subtext to *this* narrative rather than the other way around, what the research is actually *about* having been largely worked out as a by-product of the judgements, joy, misunderstandings, and solidarity, shared between me and my wife, and between me and the people of Anshan. My 'marginal native' status in Anshan afforded me a depth of appreciation across a broad spectrum of society that would almost certainly not have been otherwise possible (cf. Heimer and Thøgersen 2006). An alternative site was considered, a slightly smaller city where I had once taught English; a comparative study even proposed. But these ideas were rejected, not least because it was felt that the comparative dimension would add nowhere near so much value as repeat visits to a city with which I was already familiar, the latter strategy also offering opportunities for fine-tuning in light of further reading and so on. Essentially, my relationship meant that I had a good reason for being in Anshan that informants could understand, and that made them feel it was worthwhile investing in forming productive relationships with me. My 'gatekeepers' were suspicious at first; it was only natural to think that apparently confusing a relationship with a research project, and vice versa, would cause concern. But as time went by, my 'gatekeepers' simply accepted the fact that I was very interested in them, that I was going to be around for the foreseeable future, and that I was very grateful for their cooperation to get on in life. As I expanded the research beyond my 'gatekeeper's' constraints, I found that their blessing followed me to places where informants had nothing to lose. This arrangement did of course mean that reflexivity (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000) and rigor had to be my constant companions, but this would have been the case wherever I had gone. Indeed, all issues of sensitivity, conflicts of interest, those surrounding confidentiality and consent, and so on, were thoroughly discussed with my supervisors in relation to the ESRC guidelines (ESRC 2006) prior to fieldwork, the issue of 'going AWOL' in ethnographic research now recognized as somewhat irrelevant from the perspective of having completed it.

As it finally happened, I spent four months in Anshan immediately prior to starting this research, four months towards the end of the first year of study, another four months at the same time the following year, a month the following Spring Festival, and a further two months during a six month stint of writing hosted by Nanjing University Sociology Department, at which time my wife and I married. Throughout, apart from the occasionally profound challenges (in a non-negative sense) of negotiating a cross-cultural relationship, in no way did I feel that my *foreignness* was itself a hindrance to research as Chinese researchers often suppose. Naturally, the language barrier was a major issue, and the time spent cultivating and maintaining my Chinese, especially in the first two years of the project, should not be underestimated. But, quite the contrary, my foreign agency and identity, combined with my earnestness and frankness, was precisely what made informants willing to frankly inform me (cf. chapter six). Essentially, my foreignness meant that I was not a player competing in the same ‘ballgame’ as my informants: I was unavoidably ‘outside’ by virtue of my nationality, language, culture, and so on, virtues which in a sense meant that I was not at all a threat; yet in another sense I was unquestionably ‘inside’ by virtue of my intimate relationship, which meant that I could be trusted with information. Quite simply, from the perspective of most of my informants, I was *in need of* being informed, and with time, I found that I was able to balance my real ignorance with an affected ignorance and my intense interest with a cultivated disinterest, making my ambiguous position suit the demands of the research quite well. Of course, and especially when away from my host family, I found that my own agency and identity as a young(*ish*), Western, white, tall (relatively-speaking), blond-haired, blue-eyed, initially-unmarried male, was a significant “incitement to discourse” (in Foucault’s terms) in its own right, and one that provoked the assumption of a particular set of meanings and power relationships in the China context. But once again this was seen as an opportunity rather than a hindrance, a sort of constant reference point against which to evaluate all other contextual variables. My own individual agency and identity were therefore not at all denied in this work, but were rather written into it, hereafter appearing simply as the “I”, or occasionally in the guise of “the West” or “in Britain”, labels somewhat reluctantly chosen where some such was required for their heuristic and reflexive utility alone.

### 3. Operations

With the idea of a handy set of ‘scientific methods’ to effectively negotiate between the subject and object already roundly rejected in chapter one, readers will hopefully not be disappointed when I say that there was no *one* way in which I dealt with the field. Alternatively, the entire theory presented in the rest of the dissertation sets out to demonstrate just that negotiation, so we will not give over too much space to ‘methods’ here. Essentially, no matter how much I struggled to *make* the research “strategic”, the operations of fieldwork, analysis and the writing of the final dissertation were highly “tactical” matters of *making do* (terms deriving from De Certeau 1984, 29-42). This was not least because the ‘problem’ under investigation was not itself fixed, but crystallized gradually in my understanding. One of my supervisors had encouraged me to draft lists of finite questions which I was supposed to put to pre-defined people, so I had been forced to come up with some sort of rationale for ‘operationalisation’. But as I gradually became aware, the illusion of anchorage promised in this approach was haunted by positivism, and no amount of meddling could take my own agency out of the research. These early formulations were therefore discarded almost immediately as the project ran away with me, and bear almost no resemblance to research in its present form. This did not help the anxiety that accompanies uncertainty, however, it taking quite some time before I calmed down and appreciated that the field would be best made manifest to me when I had *learned the technique* of ‘taking myself out’ of the field whilst being right there with my informants, that is to say, a *practical* rather than a ‘theoretical’ objectivity. Most of the best data, indeed, was collected when I was not rushing around trying to ‘find things out’, but rather just *being there*, listening and watching, the ‘art’ of asking the question essentially being to *not* ask wherever possible. Wherever some further rationale to stimulate discourse was required, which was indeed often, I would simply explain that I was writing a book for my Ph.D, and hoped that my informants would reveal something of themselves interesting to *them* before I got too far into my ramble about ‘consumption’ and so on! Things sometimes became more complicated when informants focussed our dialogue on my answers to these questions, but the minor difficulties encountered in negotiating these challenges were the least of my worries, and generally speaking the very *least* rewarding times spent with my informants.

From a purely practical perspective, then, especially in the early stages, I simply tried to record every single empirical event that struck me as interesting, and every single thought that might have been of relevance. I experimented with a range of different tools for this, the most effective of which were a notebook and pen, and a digital voice recorder. In many situations it was not appropriate to record at all and I had to rely solely on memory, but at other times the research took on a much more 'overt' guise as I judged it appropriate to take notes, or asked if it was permissible to record. Most importantly, I had to develop the skill of performing many different operations at the same time: of listening intently whilst appearing interested but non-judgemental; of thinking about where the encounter might go next; of what question I might intervene with if necessary; and then of how that intervention should best be expressed in Chinese! A Chinese principle known as 'Casting a brick to attract jade' (*paozhuanyinyu*) proved priceless whenever it was necessary to throw out some commonplace observation in the hope of goading qualitative gems in reply. Operationalization remained the biggest challenge throughout, however, because as I eventually realized, this research is not only a critical analysis of a discourse *on* something (that is to say, of a *specific* discourse), but an analysis in an important sense *about* discourse per se, the 'grammar' structuring practices of individuation of course being a very fundamental part of human activity and social interaction, and rather difficult to 'isolate' from everything 'else' that people do. More or less anything thus became more or less relevant, a realization doubly complicated since my understanding of 'consumption' was highly limited during the first phase of fieldwork: though I had a fairly good understanding of the kinds of practical speech markers I was looking for – 'deictic' markers made in judgements and so on, methodologically speaking I was still thinking only in terms of the dichotomous oppositions of positivism, and still fundamentally thought that 'consumption' somehow equated to 'consumerism'. Also distorting data collected in these early days was the fact that I mainly made use of the fertile ground for enquiry close to 'home': I could not of course have been aware that the grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins, and so on, that I 'interviewed' would eventually become my family, and probably conducted myself with an abrasiveness that, to their credit, these people for the most part learnt to live with! Data from this early period is therefore hardly allowed to appear in the final dissertation at all, although some remains precisely as a testament to those most intimate of relations!

Initially, I rarely had the confidence to do 'interviews' without assistance in matters of interpretation. This was of course a contentious issue, and one that I had taken advice on (Borchgrevnik 2003), but I decided that this was the best way to make do for now. There was no doubt that in many cases having my partner present to help interpret was an advantage, presenting rich opportunities for 'triangulating' interpretations, and in other cases certainly less so: I had become acutely conscious of how the slightest nod of the head, laugh or smile, even a shift of one's position, could sway the course of informants' narratives, and wanted to be in control. Either way, by the second year, when I consciously extended the fieldwork to networks independent of my partner's family, I elected to do nearly all my interviews alone, accompanied only when I judged that a female informant might prefer to have another female present. During interviews I would offer a brief explanation that the interview was designed without any specific questions in mind, but rather to encourage the informant to speak freely and as fully as they saw fit. Depending on the subject and the context, I would then ask the informant to introduce themselves, describe their background, or respond to a question formulated there and then in the light of a broad and evolving "topic guide" (Mariampolski 2006). This "guide" included questions intended to promote boundary judgements, such as what kinds of people informants thought were superior and inferior, how they would describe themselves in light of the above, what other people thought of them, did they agree, and so on (Lamont 1992). Follow up questions included probes about aspirations for children, hopes for the future, and questions intended to provoke remarks about material consumption (Lamont 1992). Continually revised throughout the research, however, this "guide" was not at all systematic, but rather a prompt against which I would ensure informants had been given ample chance to position themselves in relation to the discursive paradigms around which the research came to be structured. In every case effort was made to solicit specific details about informants' incomes, occupations, family backgrounds, formal education, political affiliation, religious beliefs, contexts of social interaction, and so on, but in ways that encouraged these details to emerge 'naturally', the delicate balance of the encounter always made paramount. At appropriate times, informants were asked to crystallize any emergent themes in terms of oppositional categories (either/or sorts of questions), and invited to address any conflicting or contradictory elements of their narratives towards the end of the encounter (McCracken 1988).

Another technique tried in the first year was to experiment with the idea of 'definition-by-opposition' (a core Structuralist notion) by folding a piece of paper in half and asking respondents to enter on the left-hand side their comments about a "person of good taste" (*you pinwei de ren*), and on the right-hand side their comments about a "person without good taste" (*meiyou pinwei de ren*), an exercise initiated due to confusion in the contemporary use of two words for "taste", both of which are pronounced "pinwei", but both of which were written differently. Since informants enjoyed this opportunity to express themselves – statements ranging into several pages of text – the exercise was distributed frenetically, yielding one-hundred and sixty responses within a few weeks, all but the first few of which had suggested a number of areas informants might like to respond to pertaining to how "people with or without good taste consume (*xiaofei*)". In every case, it was made clear, however, that informants could write about anything they liked within the broad parameters of the exercise, some interpreting this very widely indeed. With the exception of the state-owned enterprise leader who made his entire management section take an hour off to complete the exercise, every exercise was implemented by either me or my partner. Although the results hardly appear in the final dissertation, so much richer data being gathered through less overt methods, the analysis of these documents greatly informed my analysis of ethnographic data collected at the same time. Analysis of these narratives, judgement by judgement (a 'unit' enforced with great difficulty as a function of my interpretive capacity), was aided by NVivo 7.0, a qualitative data program that enabled me to 'code' particular pieces of text and build them systematically into bigger codes that could be arranged and systematically cross-referenced against any other part of the data (Lewins 2008). I always intended to interrogate these texts in greater detail in order to further substantiate the claims made throughout the research, but in the final event that was not to be. Indeed, as I gradually became aware, the exact and precise pursuit of the structures underlying all the data was precisely the form of objectivism that inspired the transcendence of Structuralism into Post-Structuralism, and a fiction close to madness. For all the analytical power that information technology afforded me, NVivo could not make a single *interpretation* on my behalf. Indeed, the software only proved useful at all insofar as it helped me to reduce the data much as a giant filing cabinet would.

#### 4. Further Operations

During the second year of fieldwork I began to systematically explore areas of the 'field' I had not previously collected data from, mixing methods as appropriate. With a more evolved understanding of the research, the idea was to close 'gaps' in my data by approaching people from a wider range of contexts spanning the main dimensions of 'objective' difference (age, gender, wealth, and so on), a process constrained by the fact that the kind of faithful and frank interviews I sought were extremely hard to come by. I found, however, that I was able to cultivate relationships with people who had previously been on the periphery of the research such as neighbours and their families, friends of friends, bosses of service industry firms I was familiar with and their employees, and so on. In particular, I volunteered to wash up dishes alongside rural migrant workers in the kitchen of a 'hot-pot' restaurant, a restaurant I had eaten dinner in several times. I spent about two months in 'Lamb Buddha', fitting my interviews and other fieldwork operations around vegetable peeling wherever possible, collecting data not only in the kitchen, but in the migrants' dorms, and on the roof of the restaurant away from prying eyes and the noise of the street (cf. chapter ten). I also interviewed workers from a steel-roller machine-repair shop, workers I had already visited several times with my partner's father, but who I was now able to interview one-on-one when nobody else was around, not only in the factory while these workers were off-duty, but also in their homes in the evenings where I met their families too (cf. chapter eleven). This same broad approach was applied to individuals from more 'middle class' homes also (cf. chapter twelve), and with younger people in their parent's homes, and so on. All in all, I collected twenty to thirty notebooks of fieldnotes, several hundreds of pages of typed-up audio transcript, and around a thousand little notes made on whatever various scraps of paper were handy at the time. I typed up the notebooks myself, but had assistance with the written transcripts mentioned above because of the often impenetrable handwriting, all one-hundred and sixty documents being translated myself during the first half of the second year of study. Most of the audio transcripts were typed up by a range of local *getihu* firms; though these were all translated into English myself, greatly improving my language skills. Some of the initial NVivo 'coding' had been performed in Chinese, but I found it necessary to have the data in English in order to make the kind of rapid and penetrating insights necessary.



Data analysis, the facilitating link between data-collection and data-interpretation, was an essentially 'hermeneutic' process (Thompson 1997), whereby my understanding of any particular part of the data crystallized in tandem with my understanding of the whole, and vice versa. Superficially, the process was similar to 'grounded theory' approaches (cf. Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990), but in practice quite different since I had taken into the field with me the choice of a very particular way of approaching the 'problem'. Nevertheless, having dispensed with the binary, dichotomous computer-logic of NVivo, I had to find additional ways of facilitating interpretation. The object, of course, was to abstract the discourse into the smallest number of axioms that best described as much of the whole as possible. The NVivo program actually helped greatly in this regard, since it was possible to cluster disparate 'units' of data together and change the name assigned to the 'code' to reflect its changing 'content'. This one-dimensional logic could not facilitate the "dimensionalization" (Spiggle 1994) of each construct, however, the process by which the 'edges' of each construct were explored in their situational inflections and by which the 'hooks' with which each logic overlapped with the others in their actual practice were drawn out, since the discourse was not in any 'real' sense separated outside of my analysis of it, its internal dynamics expressible only in *language*, which necessarily beggars its joined up nature. My understanding of the research 'problem', that is to say, had by now evolved to a point where I had begun to realize that the capacity to impose only so much structure on any particular discourse was a fundamental part of the problem this research faced. Though I had identified some 'categories' to begin working with, these were altogether much more multidimensional and interconnected than the bucket-like imagery that 'category' conjures. From this point onwards, the research therefore refers to *construct* instead, a term which seems to slightly better reflect this connectivity. Mere change of words didn't help the practical operations, however. To borrow from the structural linguistics metaphor, I was only pulling the discourse apart into its *langue* in order that these could be allowed to crystallize into their *parole* as I put it back together again; only then could the 'grammar' structuring parole be revealed and would the research have charted its methodological way between structure and agency. I had to find a method of reducing and comparing cases across my data which imposed the emerging structures and yet allowed for these structures to be collapsed in their consumption.

I was eventually inspired by a very simple method used by Michelle Lamont for her work on symbolic boundary management amongst the 'upper middle classes' in America and France (1992), where she created a grid for scoring each informant against the 'categories' she had already abstracted ('money', 'morals' and 'manners' in her case) with a number. I experimented with similar graphic approaches, but found these just too much like NVivo in their objectivism. Thus, I created a simple grid around what I thought were my core conceptual categories, but rather than 'score' informants with ticks and crosses, numbers and so on (cf. Lamont 1992), I simply dumped the relevant text from each informant into the grid as I read through the data, even if that meant placing data in more than one place where I felt necessary. Of course, this greatly multiplied the total amount of data rather than reduced it, but alternative approaches, such as the NVivo approach, had the feel of this effect too, and were fraught with internal operations far more finicky and frustrating than the simple turning of a page! At least this method allowed me to scan the text in a relatively systematic way, but most importantly meant that I was evaluating the actual 'text' itself, not a score or a 'code' assigned to it (cf. Lamont 1992). I did, however, make a brief summary of the informant's 'position' across the grid, and listed any keywords and pertinent metaphors, or indeed anything that especially stood out, facilitating further interpretation, writing lengthier reflections into the grid alongside informants' text, since by now it was seen that it was the process of *engaging* with the material that was important, *not* the attempt to remove myself from it! Essentially, I was beginning to shake off the ghost of 'objectivity' and revelling in the operations of interpretation *at the level of the linguistic sign itself* (cf. Spiggle 1994). Indeed, it was only really when I began to *write* with the data that I was increasingly able to 'read' the 'grammar' of the discourse I was researching in the social situations I encountered and build 'original' theory, the process of collecting data and interpreting it at the same time making for a dynamic and iterative process in which there was thus a particular tension between wanting to find out more about the emergent themes I had begun to write about, but not being able to directly ask about these themes since I also wanted to examine the 'grammar' of their articulation across different individuals. Again, this was resolved not through any particular 'method', but through a delicate process of negotiation by which informants were subtly probed for their boundary management without being too explicit (as explained above).

The most challenging and most rewarding operations were those made at a later stage, where I had to decide exactly where in the dissertation to use exactly what data. Not least, there was the process of deciding which order the chapters on 'constructs' would be presented in. Since I intended to first show how practice was structured, and then the way structure was practiced, all from the same data set, I sometimes found myself wanting to use the same piece of data in more than one place. Even the internal structure of each individual chapter was constrained by the data available for each point. Indeed, though the arguments were of course structured around the data, there was occasionally an argument to which I wanted to *make the data fit*, but where a way could not be found to structure the internal 'flow' of the chapter around the data that was available. The process was made all the more demanding by the fact that the data was for the most part given in its 'polyphonic' form, that is to say, with all the constructs 'mixed up'. This meant that in order to impose structure I had to select examples that reflected *only* the particular logic to which I was presently addressing, a process which at times had the highly frustrating feel of pulling data apart that seemed most interesting when left together. Still further, those decisions pertaining to which data I would use in order to articulate the 'constructs' bore directly upon how I could structure the later chapters on the instantiation of the 'constructs' still to be written. Once again, the tensions I encountered whilst moving data around taught me much about the interconnected nature of the problem I was dealing with: I had to take a *finite* set of data, and turn it to my own use as best as possible – that is, *consume* it. These struggles especially informed those chapters which in their own right became metaphors for the research problem per se: particularly in chapter three and chapter four, it became almost impossible not to drift into demonstrating the actual consumption of these logics whilst I was actually writing about them, features of the analysis eventually embraced rather than resisted. Indeed, these struggles very much begged the question of why I would pursue so much structure in the first place. But this was of course the point: the intention was to make the internal dynamics of each construct build upon those preceding it, until they almost *demand*ed to be collapsed into one another, the 'sense' of their crystallization only apparent at the *end* of the process. At that point, the imposition of structure was begun again afresh but in a different way, as I began to look for the *variant* as well as invariant elements in the discourse.

## 5. Closing Operations

A particular challenge encountered along the way became how to find a *structuring ploy* to elaborate the second stage of analysis: how to show the 'grammar' of the structures I had already elaborated? Since a mechanical point-by-point analysis would clearly not do, running individuals from each group through the constructs, I still had to have some way of organising this second analysis on the page. I considered borrowing a social stratification grid from the Chinese empirical social sciences, a sort of Weberian inspiration (cf. Bourdieu 1984) where I would cross-reference the constructs already abstracted against social categories. I found, however, that it was necessary to structure this second analysis around the available data by means of narrative consumption, just as I had the first. Though there was a lot of available data, there was not necessarily enough to structure a thorough chapter-length analysis of how the constructs (*langue*) were inflected across various individuals in a group, 'field' or context. People, indeed, did not seem to want to be so easily categorized! And yet, there was unmistakably a structure to the data, determined by individuals' disposition to consume the constructs in particular ways. It was of course necessary to choose a mode of analysis that would express the breadth of data collection I had been engaged in, reflecting the wide range of ways in which individuals consume the discourse. In the end, the presentation was guided by the same practical logic that determined the structuring of the first analysis: I chose to write chapters on the smallest number of groups or 'fields' that best described the 'whole' of what I was trying to say – that is, groups that could each be feasibly completed within the scope of a single chapter, and groups that could be interestingly juxtaposed with other groups, drawing out the 'grammar' across them in the process. The process was doubly complicated since this second analysis, though referred to as 'second', did not take place entirely after the 'first', but rather whilst the first was still ongoing, though of course the first was primary. Through a process of dialogue with significant stakeholders (supervisors, research 'assistant' etc), and compromise with these, it was found that it was possible to make these chapters more or less reflect the 'naturally'-occurring contexts in which much of the data had been gathered and 'fit' the way I wanted to use particular pieces of data elsewhere in the dissertation around the demands of structuring these.

I chose relatively early on to write a chapter on the rural migrant kitchen workers, since these formed a 'natural' group in the context in which I worked with them, and I found I could avoid using too much of their data elsewhere. Secondly, I chose to have a chapter on the urban steel workers and their families for exactly the same reasons, places where I wished to use data from these people elsewhere in the dissertation being filled with other, in a sense more disparate pieces of data. These two chapters gave me a strong urban-rural and age/generational contrast, the analysis of the workers also giving me the beginnings of a gender contrast too. I was then faced with the challenge of broaching some sort of more 'middle class' discourse, but could not possibly approach a definition of such a massive concept within the space of one chapter. This was not least since the individuals I wanted to use at this point were characterized first and foremost by a *diversity* of individuality, and did not readily identify with a social group as did the migrants and workers. The problem was complicated by the fact that I wanted to write a chapter on entrepreneurs, who had a distinctly *shared* 'habitus' even if they came from different backgrounds, but so much of these data were needed to iterate one of the constructs (at chapter eight). I also had lots of data on young urban people who would have been especially interesting to examine from the perspective of comparison with their parents. An option would have been to examine the 'middle class' adults first, and then have another chapter comparing the offspring of these with the offspring of the urban workers. But the sheer number of variables involved in this comparison meant that this was impracticable within the confines of a single chapter. In the final event, therefore, I chose to write a chapter on 'professionals', including data from family members and spouses in order to draw out dimensions of difference and similarity vis-à-vis those already drawn out throughout. Regrettably, the scope of even this chapter meant that I had to leave out data from individuals who were professionals, but of a significantly higher rank to those eventually used; I had always intended to use data from these individuals in the constructs entitled 'Materialism' and 'Status', but again this was not practicable for reasons given in due course (cf. 177). This research never intended to provide an exhaustive account of the structuration of Chinese society, and enough had been done to demonstrate the core methodological point that Chinese individuals are as authentically agentic as individuals everywhere else, yet nevertheless disposed to consume social structure in particularly structured ways.

## Part 2

The following six chapters iterate the most reducible elements remaining from the disaggregated discourse of social distinction. These are reconstructed in their 'internal' and situationally-inflected logics as reflected in the data. Chapter three, entitled 'Authenticity', analyses an essential discourse of certainty immanent at the very first order of the 'Self's' assertion in the world. In many ways, this analysis represents an analytical justification for the epistemology chosen to inform this research and stands as a testament to the problem this research addresses in its own right, finding only individual agency and its re-instantiation of the formal structures of its own genesis as subject within discourse where these are shown to collapse into themselves. Chapter four, entitled 'Knowledge and Ability', builds upon chapter three by charting the logic generated where agency competes socially via the knowledge and application of 'rules' structuring social order. The analysis demonstrates how individuals compete differently in this way, by emphasizing the knowledge of different kinds of rules and the ability to consume them differently, but that in every case these different modes are ultimately expressions of the same practical logic whereby such rules are Othered even as they are instantiated. Chapter five, entitled 'Civil Behaviour', examines the socio-spatial boundary where the private 'Self' ends and the social world of 'Others' begins, demonstrating diverse, competing, and situational constructions of where this boundary lies, thereby exploring the construction of intimacy and social distance as appropriate in different contexts. The chapter presents a conceptual framework to understand how this discourse is structured in the China context, relating this, in turn, to broader, global contexts where the same discourse is structured very differently. Chapter six, entitled 'Sociability' is an almost social psychological discourse about how different personality types are socially constructed ranging from 'innate' character to the protean use of diverse registers of social intercourse, focusing in particular on the 'Self' that competes by projecting a character amenable to friendship or social liking. The analysis explores the situational structure of this discourse as reflected in the data from Anshan, showing how this structure can come into conflict with alternative logics of social interaction, not least the logic of 'Civil Behaviour' analyzed in the chapter five, but other, more formalized logics of social interaction also. Chapter seven, entitled 'Moral Character', directly addresses the social construction of morality as reflected in the data, arguing that the judgement of goodness and badness is structured quite differently in China to the contemporary West. The chapter argues that the Chinese construction can be understood by reference to two interrelated principles, each of which is elucidated in their situational inflections, overlaps and, as a secondary function, their contemporary diachronic dynamism. Finally, chapter eight, entitled 'Personality', explores the internal dynamics of the logic by which agency exerts itself upon projects of self-cultivation and control, an essentially existential logic by which social distinction is achieved as epiphenomenon. As with all the constructs iterated here, the analysis shows this most narrative of logics to be almost limitless in its potential to be manipulated by individual agency in its pursuit of identity, thus setting up the second stage of analysis broached in Part Three.

## Chapter 3

### Authenticity

#### 1. The Real Thing

Authenticity is a discourse pertaining to the certainty of truth and essentialist reality, of exactly the sort that bewitched Descartes (cf. chapter one). Explicit iterations of this discourse proliferate in everyday life; it may be something as simple as the common assertion that this or that consumer product is the ‘real’ variant. This research maintains, however, that the separation of ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ from any notion of *attributed* value is rarely possible in practice, and the assertion of a single, universal order (i.e. ‘the authentic’) nearly always partisan and situational, serving to justify implicit claims to authority vis-à-vis alternative and competing valuations. As far as actual social practice is concerned, that is to say, the issue is always about the struggle over precisely *which* definition determines authenticity. Consider, for example, that ‘Jonny’, the only son of a high-ranking State-owned enterprise official, is adamant that he does not like to buy clothes by his favorite brand ‘Esprit’ because of the association with foreign lifestyles in the firm’s adverts, but rather because “although another person may have an identical product but one that is nonetheless a fake, and no one else can tell the difference, I know myself that mine is real and that I am rich”. Jonny thus posits that his product is the ‘real’ variant, an assertion which, we are to understand, requires no further justification. But while it is clear enough that Jonny is referring to his purchasing power as a measure of his distinction, it is also clear that because the “fake” he postulates is “identical” to his own “real” product, and “no one [else] can tell the difference”, the notion of authenticity he appeals to only affirms a *subjective measure of quality* that functions to differentiate progressively ‘less authentic’ versions of this standard as inferior, dividing the ‘real’ by degrees; Jonny, that is to say, can only be *himself* the grounds for his judgement. The authenticity discourse as it is actually instantiated pertains less to the difference between the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’, and the ‘true’ and the ‘untrue’, therefore, than to *what makes the difference* between these concepts. The logic analysed in this chapter is not an easily identifiable concept therefore, but a *process* immanent at the very first order of agency’s assertion in the world, where the essential ambitions of subjectivity collapse into themselves.

## 2. Free Space

Discussion is grown from a dialogue with Gao Xiaofei, a twenty-three year-old woman, where the 'internal' dynamics of this construct are especially strong:

Gao Xiaofei: "Hairdressers look like whores with their blonde hair. They look like poor people who work in massage parlours. They all think that if they've got blonde hair they're not only fashionable, but also different from other people: they think they have a unique individuality. They think make-up and blonde hair is a way to attract men. This is a way to hide their dark side: because they do this kind of work they're always feeling very guilty. Blonde hair shows that they're confident and have nothing to hide; they think strong colours are attractive and confident. It's like they've nothing to hide; it's like a mask, it's like they're living under a mask. They're like a package: they're dirty on the inside but they try to make themselves really clean on the outside. They do exercise, sex, all the time, so they're thin. Like the 'suddenly rich' (*baofahu*) girls, these girls try to keep thin by not eating anything; they think thin is beautiful... so they can stay with the 'suddenly rich' men... Just like the 'suddenly rich' (*baofahu*) girls, these girls will fit the package for their men. These men have no education, so they think blonde hair and strong make-up is attractive. They find girls with no education. These girls will fit the package and match their expectations. It's all about money. Before they were all poor, but now they try to *show* as much as they can (cites digital cameras, DVD's, the latest mobile phone etc, as examples.) This is because, deep down in their hearts, they don't want other people to think they are poor again. Something they can't change is that their inside is still poor; they can't package, they can't wrap up their spirit (*xinling*). In a big company, a lady won't dye her hair blonde because if she did it would make her status lower... it would make her look cheap. These people don't want to package their outside; they want to package their spirit, to have a good character, to improve themselves in the *right* way. Look at professionals; they don't make their hair blonde; if it's black it just stays black. Low-class people, like the massage girls, restaurant workers, hairdressers, or those who work in DVD/CD shops, dye their hair and get tattoos; they do whatever they want to show themselves as different, unique and cool. Better class people have education, exercise, eat well and try to be healthy; they study, and show respect to others. These others are just focused on the way they look and what other people think of them.

Researcher: "But surely these people with the 'spiritual taste' you oppose these others to also care about what other people think of them?"

Gao Xiaofei: "Yes, but...everyone in the world cares. These people care but they are confident enough in themselves. They care, but they don't really care: when they're buying clothes, they'll choose what they want."



From the beginning of the dialogue, Xiaofei seems especially animated by the way in which these “hairdressers” have dyed their “black” hair “blonde”, a form of consumption judged disordered, chaotic, and immoral. We might reasonably assume that the “hairdressers are in some way motivated to emulate Westerners (cf. Johannsen 1998; Schein 1994), but Xiaofei does not make this angle explicit. Xiaofei is rather more concerned with the way in which this form of consumption marks the “hairdressers” as members of a *category*; indeed, it is precisely by the assumption of a category to which these “hairdressers” do *not* belong (i.e. blonde-haired people) that they show themselves as belonging to a category of “low-class” “restaurant workers”, and so on, the fact that they “show” so much, and only care for “money”, moreover, being precisely about “masking” this fact. But Xiaofei is adamant: though they have the latest digital cameras, DVD’s, and such like, these individuals nevertheless remain “poor” of “spirit”, a purity of “inside” which Xiaofei asserts vis-à-vis an “outside” that these “hairdressers” try to “make clean” but that in doing so cannot help but emphasize that their “insides” are still “dirty”. Still further, that these “hairdressers” consume in these ways means that they have surrendered themselves to a “package” not entirely of their own choosing, but one preordained for them by others (by the “baofahu men”, and ultimately by blonde-haired people; indeed, it is only in *this* way that these *willing subjects* can be said to be “different from other people” and “have a unique individuality”. That is, though “they do whatever they want to show themselves as different, unique and cool”, they are in fact only “focused on the way they look and what other people think of them”. That “other” category of “ladies” and “professionals” in a “big company” with whom Xiaofei implicitly identifies herself, on the other hand, are said to “improve themselves” in entirely different ways, indeed, in the “*right*” way. These individuals won’t “package their outside”, they’ll “package their spirit”, and in doing so will also somehow escape the pressure of other agencies: “They do whatever they want”, Xiaofei tells us, i.e. *for themselves*—they “care” about what other people think of them, but “they don’t really care”. The explanatory power of the (in)authenticity judgement as it is made to creep subtly in the explicit here (i.e. *really*), therefore, is supposed to indicate not so much that the “hairdressers” lack a sufficient *degree* of individuality to avoid the compulsion to copy others, but that they *categorically* lack whatever agency validates those actions or statements that people “confident enough in themselves” have.

To understand how such a categorical assertion can be possible (and then, indeed, how it cannot), observe that Xiaofei's "hairdressers" would be categorically marginalized by Xiaofei's discourse even if they had not dyed their hair, and that Xiaofei's purity of "inside" would presumably not be corrupted even if she were to dye her own hair too. The dying of hair, and so on, is therefore not the issue; the issue is the way that constructions of an *ontological* nature are drawn upon to support the categorical legitimization of (authentic) individuality. *Prior* to any genuinely social sense of exclusivity and discretion in this discourse, indeed, is the observation that Xiaofei's "inside" cannot admit the slightest invasion, least of all by being assimilated from within. That is to say, that wherever Xiaofei invokes a purity of "inside" vis-à-vis an "outside", a spatial metaphor, *a presence*, is made to come before a *division*, another spatial metaphor that gives an 'edge' to the first. The first metaphor *fixes* (cf. Douglas and Isherwood 1979, 45); the second *isolates* (cf. De Certeau xix). That they should come together, but one apparently 'after' the other, means that a temporal metaphor is begged for too, but there is not yet good enough reason to attribute one since the 'passage' of time requires more than just an "inside" and an "outside" to it (see below). *At once*, then, the form of Xiaofei's judgement both implies and derives that which Xiaofei's "hairdressers" allegedly surrender to the "package": that authentically *agentive* agency by which the "inside" is *furnished* with a "spirit" (as Xiaofei puts it). And thus is the reconstruction of the Chinese individual from the wasted rubble of essentialism begun, for it is only by virtue of this *principle of autonomy* that individual agency can be constructed as a subject of discourse at all. From the very beginning (which is still not a temporal metaphor), discourse depends on the *re-cognition* of agency as an authentically agentive 'Self' by the 'Other' that is necessarily *dis-placed* in this assertion (cf. Glendinning 1998, 1-6). Indeed, in exactly the same way in which the weight of a lump of ice is perfectly equivalent to the weight of the water in which it floats, *everything* displaced in the judgement of agency within discourse must *necessarily* recognize agency as authentically agentive, acknowledging its relation to *everything* that it is not. This is of course also why 'Self' must always be hyphenated in this analysis, and be capitalized since there is no good reason to privilege the 'Other'. Positivism, of course, is a most "dogmatic" (De Certeau 36) order of assertion that depends on not acknowledging *anything* that is displaced in this most *primitive* of relations.

Xiaofei's "hairdressers" are therefore no less 'fixed' in discourse for being judged negatively. But the issue, of course, is that not only have the hairdressers fashioned themselves in the image of a *foreign* order (i.e. blonde-hair), but that in doing so they also appear to have assumed a kind of existence quite unlike those who live for themselves: at once *given* by the logical form of Xiaofei's judgement, the "hairdressers" are also constructed as *having* to consume in a way that reflects the pressure of other, more powerful agencies: "sub-sumed" (Pun 2003); indeed, it is exactly as if any agency these "hairdressers" have is given to them *only* by the logical form of Xiaofei's judgement, while her own agency remains somehow independent of those she judges—*fixed for herself by herself*. And yet, although it is clear enough that Xiaofei fixes these women as impure of "inside", it is not entirely clear exactly *where* she fixes them; indeed we might note from the start that it is curious that on account of this form of consumption the "hairdressers" can be said to both "have a unique individuality" and to be "fashionable", a highly ambiguous construction. The "hairdressers" seem to be located somewhere between where they themselves want to be, and where those who judge them want them to be: certainly not powerful, but not entirely powerless either. The key to the conundrum, perhaps, is that whereas the "hairdressers" are judged to have an enduring and immutable impurity of "inside", that is, a dirtiness and poverty of spirit that cannot possibly be cleaned and enriched, those others with whom Xiaofei implicitly identifies herself are actually *supposed* to "package their spirit", to "improve themselves" "in the right way", thus somehow enduring whilst also remaining mutable. That is, not so much to simply say that mutability somehow guarantees a more privileged form of agency than does immutability, but that the purity of "inside" is in itself neither fixed nor isolated, but rather *ambiguous in itself*. Perhaps this is why Xiaofei seems somewhat unable to make her condemnation of these women final, each of her judgements apparently compelled to provoke and spill over into the next, ranging richly across many of the constructs of this analysis, *yet never quite arriving at a place*. Could it be that there is something about the categorical form of Xiaofei's judgement which means these "hairdressers" somehow covertly resist these terms even as they are drawn? Could it be, that is to say, that the logical priority which the dynamic relation between multiple and distinct entities enjoys over any particular identity means that the *process of fixing* is more important in the definition of 'the authentic' than the simply 'fixed' nature that 'the authentic' implies?

### 3. Solid Sight

With agency's initial, though somewhat slippery, 'placing' within discourse, the "play of differences" (cf. Derrida 1976) by which this *free space* is generated *solidifies* in an explicitly 'three-dimensional' (though still not yet temporal) fashion, as metaphors of *substance* further displace the 'Other', making the 'Self', as it were, 'more real'. Consider that even Xiaofei's hairdressers have a *density of presence*, a place "deep down in their hearts", where they are somehow more real than at their "outsides". 'Insubstantial' people are of course judged negatively because they lack this depth, because there is something about them that is not authentically present *in* discourse, a judgement distinct from those where others are judged willing subjects *of* discourse: Are they merely functioning mechanically, like a robot or automaton? Alternatively, and more insidiously, are they *intentionally* faking their motions? And it is this that the utility of the authenticity judgement consists, for we can never know for sure if agency *can* be faked. Certainly we cannot be sure on the basis of any *observation*: agency, again, must in every case be *assumed* within discourse, the question of 'reality' per se (in the Cartesian sense) always secondary to this premise, and nothing whatsoever to do with everything else. Beyond 'space', then, informants widely employed *visual* metaphors in their iterations of the authenticity construct: twenty-four of the one hundred and sixty informants who completed the written exercise used variants of "blindness" (*mangmu*) in their constructions, some even using the metaphor repeatedly. In the excerpt with Xiaofei, "blonde" hair is supposed to "mask" the alleged immorality of the "hairdressing" profession": "They think strong colours are attractive and confident... it's like a mask, it's like they're living under a mask", "it shows that they're confident and have nothing to hide". The overlap between "blindness" and "masking" hardly needs to be spelled out: "masking" implies a secretive, deceptive and untrustworthy existence; and 'blind people' are absolved of much of the responsibility for being 'inauthentic' since they lack the *intentional perspective* which would grant the right to "include" from an autonomous "place", all manner of things, "panoptically" (all quotes De Certeau 1984, 36). Indeed, insofar as *all* order is imposed on the world by making one's *own* judgements, *sight* is a necessary condition of making a "readable" (De Certeau 1984, 36) *site* of agency's uncertainty 'in the first place'. Agency is thus 'seen' in discourse before it 'sees' itself there too, subject to surveillance and control from the moment of its genesis, its perspective always informed by its 'Other'.

But although the assumption of a plurality of ‘seeing sites’ appears to be the necessary condition of discourse, those “readers” of discourse who are going to legitimately *write* discourse may not wish to be so transparently ‘placed’ and so faithfully read. Indeed, though “masking” is usually an attempt to be *in*-conspicuous, to ‘fit in’ as it were, “masking” is clearly a useful form of consumption where it actually *works*, and this notwithstanding the fact that in other situations it may be in one’s interests to stand out precisely *as* “masked”. Consider Zhang Jiali, for example, rural migrant at the ‘Lamb Buddha’ hotpot restaurant, who says that “hypocrisy” (*xuwei*) is one of two words to define China right now. “Hypocrisy”, Zhang explicates, “is what people speak: they can’t speak what they really think”. Zhang attributes this to the political status quo, which he illustrates for me by placing his fists one under the other descending and broadening outwards from a single point at the top of a hierarchy—Zhang is unwilling to go on tape explicitly criticizing the government, a reminder that authenticity is a discourse operated not only through practices of emulation, but also through processes of *resistance* (cf. Hanser 2008, 145), and often in the most *covert* sense of the word. Indeed, and quite to the point, although the definition of ‘the authentic’ in China is presided over by the Communist Party’s permanent veto on alternatives, all other ‘seeing sites’ being subsumed under its own, there must always still be an *ongoing, dialectical tension* between multiple agencies, and this despite the fact that the other word to describe China, Zhang says, is “nuoruo”, meaning “cowardly”, or “weak”. Thus, in just this way, certain market players brazenly encourage consumers to become themselves the arbiter of authenticity, even as these ‘rights’ are sold to them: Clothing retailer ‘Jeans West’, for example, exhorts: “Be yourself again, really it’s better” (*zuohui ziji, zhende geng jingcai*), even as they picture three white-skinned, laughing Western models, thus actually *highlighting* that the right these consumers have to ‘be themselves’ has indeed been sold to them. Yet the insight that ‘Jeans West’ was once an Australian-owned firm recently taken over by its Chinese supplier only further highlights the almost *endlessly* ironic form of the authenticity discourse. Indeed, this latter fact probably explains the ambiguity in the advertising proposition! Authenticity is thus shown to be much less a thing-in-itself, than an *inherently unstable process* worked out between social actors—the defining, identifying, and *authenticating* functions of subjective perspective. As such, the analysis demands that the *temporal* dimension be given explicit attention.

#### 4. Time's Beginning

So far, individual agency is configured as an autonomous three-dimensional 'seeing site' that can 'see' the objects and other such agencies from which it is forever removed (i.e. removed *by* discourse, not *from* discourse), but that cannot yet 'see' itself, and that cannot yet 'see' in time. By way of addressing this problem, let us consider that negative judgements employing metaphors of "place", "substance" and "blindness", and so on, tended to cluster with a *liquid* metaphor such as "flow", "tide", "drift" (*chaoliu*) or "float" (*piaoliu*) to make constructions such as "blindly flowing with the tide" and so on. Examples include: "They follow the tide; they read the biographies of famous people and other dry and empty literature"; "They only pay attention to their external appearance, and their inner being is empty"; "their thinking is comparatively empty; most have no point of view of their own; they drift with the tide", and so on. In other such judgements, the liquid metaphor signifies the *collapse of categorical boundaries*, as in the "inundation" (Lee 1996; Lee 2007) implied in "The floodgates open!", "They're everywhere!", and so on, the meeting of different classificatory systems and the maintenance of symbolic boundaries often yielding judgements of this form (Chapman 1992; cf. Ardener 1989). The same metaphoric may appear in animal form where persons are said to "swarm", "herd", "flock" etc (cf. chapter five, 94). In China, the terms "floating population" (*liudong renkou*), and "blind floater" (*mangliu*), have been thoroughly instituted to describe the 'flow' of an internally migrant rural population migrating to China's urbanizing cities in search of work, the latter term perverting the earlier term *liumang* (=hooligan) usually reserved for all manner of persons who similarly *don't belong*, from wayward criminal types to homosexuals and so forth (Chen 1998; Barmé 1998, 62-98); indeed, Xiaofei's judgements about "hairstylists" (above) are probably motivated by the material successes of such "outsider" peoples (cf. Lei 2003). This 'flow' (*liu*) is to be contrasted with the groundedness and rootedness of *tu*, the character for "soil", "native", or "land", which is variously applied to signify "crude", "coarse", "unrefined", "rustic", "local" and so on, the root meaning of which is of course *root*: that which is fixed and categorically does *not* flow around (cf. Hanser 2008, 15). But although we will think of time's 'flowing' past a 'fixed' point, the contrast of the liquid metaphors with the *tu* principle does not in itself explain how agency is constructed as a temporal 'Self'.

For this, consider that in an interview with the shopkeeper of the ‘Local Products Shop’ (*tutechan shangdian*), the word ‘local’ here using the same character *tu*, a question is raised about the justification for the premium pricing of pancakes (*jianbing*) virtually identical to those widely sold by peasants who come into the city to sell their wares from the back of hand-pushed oven-carts. The shopkeeper immediately states: “the workmanship is not the same”. Her friend, who pipes up as if he has the authority to interrupt, asks: “Can you compare in terms of hygiene (*weisheng*)? Incomparable! And moreover, you must think of the *source* of the product...”. He leaves this trailing as if the slight at the somehow questionable origin of the cart-pusher’s product need not be said. The shopkeeper comes back in right away to dispel any doubt: “You’ve also got to think of the prestige (*xinyu*) aspects of the product; we’re an honourable, decent, authentic (*zhengjing*) company; as soon as someone discovers a problem we’re here to be found, but the cart-pusher....”. She, too, leaves this trailing as if no more need be said. The implication is that these products, this shop, and the people that work here, are authentic because they are properly *located*, and therefore *accountable*, whereas the cart-pusher, on the other hand, is not only constructed as generally inferior, but also quite possibly a *dodgy* guy, given to tricks and cons. Just as with the case of copying, then, the crucial element in the authenticity judgement here is *originality*, but in this case as in “the source”, the trustworthiness and sincerity of the product and its traders consisting in the identifiable attachment to a point and purity of *origin*. And it is here, in the *distance* evoked by this first recursive allusion ‘back’ (which is a spatial metaphor) to the ‘place’ of its initial assertion that the temporal dimension of the ‘Self’ is configured, the first three ‘spatial’ dimensions of ‘Self’ thus being configured ‘before’ temporality, and agency only *hereafter* perceiving of itself as the forward-facing and still spatial present past which time is supposed to ‘flow’. In discourse, that is to say, time’s passage is subject to agency before agency is subject to time’s passage. The irony, of course, is that in another context the cart-pusher would be constructed as *tu*, but here, *out of place in the city*, he is constructed as *liu*. And the double-irony is that the ‘origin’ that validates the authenticity of the ‘Local Products Shop’ is actually the *same* countryside place that the cart-pusher emanates from—how strange, indeed, that those newly mass-produced pancakes sold in the ‘Local Products Shop’ could be thought of as *more* authentic than those hand-made pancakes sold in the region for centuries!

Ontological priority, we might wager, is defined by recourse to temporal priority. This of course explains why the first or earliest ‘version’ is often privileged at the expense of the second or later wherever authenticity becomes a question, and why the primordial ‘truth’ of nature is commonly asserted as authentic in contrast to man-made products. Consider here, however, that the French-owned cosmetics multinational *Loreal* heavily promote their new product *True Match* in China, a foundation which aspires to blend *identically* to the skin colour of the user, thus creating a “mask” that integrates perfectly with itself. “Natural can be better” claims the advertisement. In this case, of course, it is actually the later “mask” which is valued over the natural and original face, even though the latter aspires to assimilate the former *exactly*. It is not at all clear, however, exactly when the ‘inauthentic’ order can be said to have successfully taken over, and become ‘the authentic’, or what can then be said of the ontological status of the initial order as a result: is the original order ‘the real’, or is ‘the real’ obliterated by its simulation so that there is now a ‘copy’ without an original? (Baudrillard 1994). In any case, it seems self-evident that the later order should be somehow *more* real, but there is only the temporal order to refer to in support of this intuition. Or rather, that is to say, we can now only refer to the *subjective ascription of value* to the temporal order in order to justify our priorities. Gao Xiaofei (see also above), indeed, elsewhere contends the positive value of “naked dress” (*luozhuang*), a form of consumption which involves “wearing make-up so that it looks like not wearing make-up”, explaining this by recourse to the ‘substance’ metaphoric and that mysterious purity of “inside” once again (cf. above): “Some people perhaps wear make-up and have beautiful clothes but look like an empty shelf (*kongjiazi*); they make themselves up but there is nothing in their insides. Other women wear no make-up at all but have the look of ‘the girl next door’ (*linjia nühair*), a close feeling”. Thus, Xiaofei attests to a purity of prior presence that would be spoilt by any form of affectation, itself defined by reference to the ‘pristine’ and ‘virgin’ as opposed to the ‘refined’ and ‘contrived’. But the ‘nature’ Xiaofei more or less explicitly invokes here is a supra-naturally natural nature undemocratically given in its distribution; “spiritual people” (as she put it in the longer excerpt above) monopolizing the attribution of value to the concept, and the postulation itself only serving to disguise the fact that the categorical distinction she operates is the result of an *acquired* disposition—that is, precisely what it pertains *not* to be.



## 5. Keep It Real

The social value invested in authenticity, indeed, may in any case be just as much about the belief that value accumulates *over* time as it is about ‘location’ on a chronological axis, or a ‘point’ of origin per se, distinguished ‘space’ being in this case defined ‘first’ by a reference to ‘time’ (a reversal of the discursive priorities outlined above). Consider that when I casually remarked to a student named Sui that I liked the hole at the knee of her jeans, Sui vigorously asserted that she had not created the hole herself. The hole was worn, not torn; she had made no extra effort to appear this way. Indeed, Sui was probably also saying: “I don’t have these jeans because I’m fashionable, but because I’m frugal”, where authenticity is defined in opposition to materialism, a distancing from the ‘facile’ distinction to be achieved through consumerism, and an identifying with the ‘authentic’ distinction earned through persistence and endurance—a ‘Long March’ distinction say. In this particular case, however, the fact that only one leg of Sui’s jeans had a hole meant that her ‘truth claim’ remained in doubt, which again only goes to show that (in)authenticity is always still being-made in multiple layers of assertion and interpretation. In any case, this latter form of the authenticity discourse, where purity is refined with extension over time, may be particularly relevant to the Chinese, who like to assert that “their” culture has been passed down, unbroken across otherwise turbulent millennia, and *therefore retaining its purity*, from the mythical Yellow Emperor, supposedly uniting “Chinese people” (*huaren*) everywhere (Khu 2001; Victor Hao Li in Tu Wei-ming 1994; Duara 2004). And yet, this form of “consanguineous nationalism” (Fei 1992, 120-127) can be notably observed to join some Chinese in closer unity with this source of purity than others, and this need not necessarily be an argument about ethnic minorities or overseas Chinese. Consider Yuan Liwen, for example, a well-educated and high-ranking journalist in her mid-thirties, who is enormously attached to her ancestors, she says, and likes to go to the Jiangsu and Zhejiang area (*jiangnanyidai*) whenever she can, not for relatively inconsequential reasons such as sightseeing or shopping, of course (“not me”, she is adamant), but because it is her “hometown” (*guxiang*). Thus, Yuan professes to be especially motivated by *xiangqing*, the feeling or emotion of the hometown, familial source or ancestral origin:

“Especially where people are already a few generations away from their native land (*gutū*), they really like to go. They are sentimentally attached to the old hometown even if they’ve already left a really long time ago. China has an old saying that we are ‘derived from the same source’ (*yimaixiangcheng*). This *mai* means blood vessels, the blood of one’s ancestors. Foreigners emphasize genes, but Chinese people emphasize the origin of one’s blood. In my bones I am a Yangtze River Delta person (*jiangnanren*). The blood vessels of people from that place have been passed onto me (*yifangshuitu yang yifangren*).”

Liwen makes these assertions in the context of trying to impress upon me that she comes from the ancient crucible of Chinese civilisation, repeating several times that her father originates from Shanghai, but keeping resolutely quiet about her mother coming from Guizhou (a considerably more “backward” province in the popular imagination):

“From ancient times until today it, the Yangtze River Delta has been a place of trade and culture. There has been trade there since ancient times, and its culture, its land boundaries, and atmosphere are all really thick, including that place that many Europeans now admire: Wenzhou. My ancestors were all in this Zhejiang area”.

Though Liwen has lived in Anshan all her life, she is essentially ‘not from around here’, but is rather steeped in, and remains herself an extension of, the civilized traditions of a far-distant past. Explicitly, the longer the attachment, the more she is cultivated, and the greater the transcendence of the present is implied. Indeed, in case there was ever a question, she is explicit from the start, the value of the attachment only *increases* with longer separation, that is to say: “*Especially* where people are already a few generations away from their native land... They are sentimentally attached to the old hometown even if they’ve already left a really long time ago”. At once attached *and* separated, therefore, the appeal to a “natural” attachment (“blood” and so on) only serves to ‘mask’ the fact that her distinction is not at all as innate as it pertains to be; though in another context there may equally be distinction in the process of refinement itself (as in the case of Sui and her jeans, above), here Liwen is *of* the origin, not only formed but *form itself*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Briefly, from the previous page, the ‘Long March’ was a massive retreat of the Communist armies from Jiangxi and Fujian provinces in South-East China to Yan’an in Northern-central Shaanxi Province via a hugely circuitous route through South Western China, pursued all the way by the armies of the Kuomintang in 1934-35. The retreat has become mythologized in Chinese popular/political culture for the extremely Spartan conditions the soldiers experienced; most died.

*Neigong* translates as “internal work”, but might perhaps be better understood (in Hegelian or Sartrean terms) as the “internalization of externality”, one part of a metaphor for the relational nature of human practice—one part, that is, because anything that stands in for the same *essential relation* must be completed by its auxiliary. *Neigong*, accordingly, has a “dispersing” as well as a “centering” energy-function, the “externalisation of internality” that has been referred to as ‘displacing’ here (above). The same expression, *tu*, applies in a further relevant way too, used to disdain *categorical anomaly* (cf. Douglas 1966), such as where clothes or styles are indelicately matched, or where otherwise inappropriately conspicuous or gaudy consumption is exhibited. It is not clear, for example, what kind of distinction our neighbour thinks his doorbell reaps every time it plays a loud and whining version of Beethoven’s *Für Elise*, but this is judged *tu* because of the *clash* between the ‘class’ of in the classic work and its pitifully ‘crass’ digitization, *tu* applying because of the breach of boundaries defined by the judging power. Indeed, *tu* can be used to express categorical anomaly over what one *is* as well as what one does, operating at the ‘ontological’ level as it were: Thirty-five year-old Chang Jie, for example, says that *tu* is where persons “wear clothes that don’t show their personality, who copy other people, who don’t express their individual personality with their dress, and flow with the tide (*bu chuanchu xingge ... sui da liu*)”; thus, the judged are judged *tu* because they *are* agents, but *are not* authentically agentive in the discourse (*sic*), and thus represent a categorical ambiguity *in themselves*. The same clothes, Chang continues as if by confirmation, might look good on her, but not on someone else. Note, however, that Chang defines *tu* precisely by recourse to the liquid metaphor that is its semantic opposite (i.e. “flow with the tide”). Thus, when seen in the light of its temporal as well as spatial dimensions, the authenticity discourse is revealed as characterized by an indeterminate ambiguity in itself: *tu* is a metaphor for a *site* that signifies both the “inside” and “outside”, not only of the “circle”, but *of the discourse*, intersecting the temporal with the timeless, and *at once* (cf. Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’). Authenticity cannot be the grounded, pinned-down, ontologically-exclusive concept that constructions of it so desperately aspire to be, but is rather defined in the interrelation between that concept and the necessary element of *uncertainty* to its practical identification: somewhere between the determinate “fixing” of the “root” and the indeterminate “flowing” of the “blood”, that is to say, authenticity *depends on* the echo of its ‘Other’.

## 7. True Lies

Those who know China will recognize that the inherent instability in the definition of authenticity runs very close to the surface of everyday life, the direct juxtaposition of the word for “truth” (*zhende*) with the word for “falsity” (*jiade*) as a question for assessing all manner of truth claims (i.e. *zhendejiade?*) being especially relevant here. The Chinese, indeed, might be especially disposed to “uncover the mask” (Brandstädter 2009, 4) in the ‘market-place’ of meaning, the constant fear of being *sold* something meaning that consumers were observed to carry their own scales to market as late as the late 1990’s (Veeck 2000) and that purchase receipts are checked religiously for ‘errors’ even today. Advertising is viewed with suspicion, too, since many firms, particularly in the early days of reform, hugely exaggerated their claims (Chan and McNeal 2002). In Anshan’s “The Underground” (*dixiajie*) shopping precinct (a place identical in name and character to that of Hanser’s analyses in Haerbin (Hanser 2008), ‘fake’ luxury-brand watches and training shoes are vigorously passed-off as authentic by both buyers and sellers who may or may not know the difference. Logos and taglines from international brands ‘translate’ into areas entirely unrelated to the original product category, even areas that are not explicitly commercial, and hybrids abound to redefine originals even as they also reiterate them in a perfect example of how discourse works its ‘third-way’ way between structure and agency. This extreme malleability of ‘truth’ cannot of course be acknowledged in official-State discourse, but China’s leaders are probably much more concerned to address the widespread perception that it fosters this sense of “rootlessness” (Hook 1996, 8) with its ominous omnipresent oversight of conceptual definitions than it is to pay lip-service to international demands for intellectual property rights protection: indeed, the presence of a singular, dominating order from which the vast majority of individuals are categorically excluded is probably precisely what demands that so many Chinese are to some extent already engaged in the opaque tactics of this game of smoke and mirrors (cf. Pye 1996, 32-33); when the practice known as “lip-synching” was banned in response to the outrage caused by the revelation that Lin Miaoke, the girl who sang during the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, was in fact miming over a song recorded by another girl judged “not pretty enough” to perform for herself, the new law was justified “as being in the ‘national interest’” (Eimer 2008).

Indubitably, whether it is the street beggar popularly famed for his ploys and ruses (cf. Dutton 1998), or the “cunning entrepreneur” “eight sides all wide and slippery” (Ambler and Witzel 2000, 93), at least a great many Chinese are positively *tricky* in their dispositions. Even where consumers have been encouraged to exercise their newly-dispensed ‘consumer rights’ by taking traders to task over ‘inauthentic’ goods, individuals have demonstrated a remarkable ability to make fame and fortune by buying up all stocks they know to be counterfeit, and then claiming back the compensation that certain branded shops must repay at a given multiple of the sale-price (Brandstädter 2009). Stealth, deception (Ambler and Witzel 2000, 93), and even outright cheating (*pian*) (Wong 2009), are therefore recognized as legitimate practices in China insofar as they are necessary parts of outwitting others. Arrival at this point in the discourse thus warrants a more explicit examination of the apparent antinomy of legitimate inauthenticity and illegitimate authenticity, for while ‘falsity’ will always be ‘bad’ when defined against ‘truth’ *per se* it is easy to see that ‘inauthentic’ actions can even be explicitly ‘good’ where they work. There is of course the strategy referred to as “calling someone’s bluff”, or the case of the “white lie” (known as the “kind lie” (*shanyi de huangyan*) in China), where the lesser evil of speaking an untruth reduces the transaction costs of social interaction in some way. Similarly, there is the “whole truth” we all expect our children to divulge to us, but are loathe to divulge to our children. ‘Face’ (*mianzi*), the Chinese concept of social esteem, likewise often turns on the issue of authenticity: the ‘Self’ presents a ‘version’ of him or herself, a ‘mask’, in accordance with the strategic demands of the situation, something which is hardly culturally specific when one thinks about it (Goffman 1969). Indeed, as field researcher I would often play the role of the ‘dumb foreigner’, or feign failure to understand what was being said, or more often in fact signaling that I *did* understand just to keep up rapport with my informants. It was not even necessarily a problem even if informants *saw* that this is what I was doing, because individual agents, indeed, exploit ‘inauthentic’ strategies for action *all the time*, the difference between legitimacy and illegitimacy being nothing more than the question of negotiating the local social judgement of whether the action has been *worth it*. Indeed, once this is realized, it is not even beyond the reaches of this analysis to see that *two different versions of authenticity may be traded at the same time*. But there, as elsewhere, we cannot escape the fact that certain people will have more power to effect their manipulations than others.

## 8. The Hyper-rural

Let us further consider the ‘Local Products Shop’, here, which profits by drawing upon constructions of the countryside as a place of purity and moral fibre in a way that invokes the same *originality* that the *tu* principle does (see also above). In conversation with the shopkeeper, for example, we are told: “When seen from the perspective of science, local products are original/primeval (*yuanshi*) and have not suffered pollution” (*mei shouguo wuran*). (*Yuanshi* here is as opposed to “refined” and shares semantic proximity with “pristine”, “untouched” and “uncooked”.) Mentions are made of “pure wild ginseng, not like the transplanted stuff”, and the shopkeeper waxes about “rough cloth and candles from places where the wind of reform has never blown”. At the same time, the shopkeeper openly speaks her mind to my girlfriend (and in front of my fiancé’s mother too) on issues of intra-family relations, which strikes me as a kind of over-familiarity, literally *like family* (cf. chapter six), also answering my every question about her business with a little personal story highly inflected with local references and rural terminology (i.e. “Why, only the other day I said to Little Gao”, and so on, where Little Gao is not at all known to us). Thus the shopkeeper gives the impression that she is as plain and simple as the purity evoked in the products she sells. When it is asserted that lots of “this kind of grape juice” on the market are “fake” (*jia*) at the moment, however, the uncertainty of authenticity comes immediately back into play, as she leaps to her own defense by comparing her local product *Five Woman Mountain* with national domestic brand *Changyu*. Asked if a bottle of *Five Woman Mountain* is more or less expensive than *Changyu*, she replies that her product is “not expensive” (i.e. not a direct answer), “only twenty-something *kuai*” (i.e. being vague/playing down the price), before finally saying that she “can’t speak for the whole country, but the *Changyu* in Liaoning Province is not good” (i.e. recognizing that she has to qualify her claims slightly or risk being unconvincing). Thus she evinces a highly *tactical* disposition cultivated no doubt as the result of a life operating in the margins of social categories defined largely by others. Since she is herself so anomalously *tu* in this urban middle-class retail context, and profits precisely by traversing and reconfiguring the symbolic categories that legitimize this over her own rural roots, her occupation is somewhat *treacherous* indeed. But in a world of urbanizing steel and glass, this strategy works for her: her honesty, warmth and naïveté, if not entirely feigned, are skillfully *affected* to sell product.

Indeed, the 'Local Products Shop' of course also trades on a further, alternative version of authenticity, a new or modern 'real' of mass production, shop fronts, and product packaging, an authenticity that 'admits' the natural and original real is 'best', but that asserts that this can be *enhanced in its essence* through scientific testing, branding, marketing, and so on. The only difference between the pancakes sold here and those sold by the lowly "cart-pusher" (see above), indeed, is that these are packaged and branded with the name 'Intellectual youth pancake' (*zhiqing jianbing*), a ploy which explicitly harks back to the Cultural Revolution era when educated urban youths were 'sent down' to the countryside to 'purify' themselves through labour in the fields. The front-side packaging features a simple sketch of three people sitting on the ground happily eating these pancakes having laid their wheat sheaves and sickles (*liandao*) to the side; the rear-side echoes the political mantras that called them to work ("exercise body and spirit", and so on), and closes enticingly with: "Feel the era of the sent down intellectual youth, taste the charm of the countryside". Again (see also above), the shopkeeper's friend uses the term *zhengjing* (which can mean honourable, decent and/or authentic) to describe the source of production and packaging of these products, quite as if the quality of the packaging and the shopkeeper's own moral steadfastness perfectly justify each other. Literally, he says: "real factory: real packaging" (*zhengjing changjia: zhengjing baozhuang*). No further or external validation is required, we are to understand: the product must be authentic because the packaging says so. Indeed, to this extent, the product *legitimizes itself*. More explicit, less underhand, and altogether more *strategic* in his pitch, the shopkeeper's friend then raves at great length about how contemporary multinational Amway was founded on the basis of Traditional Chinese Medicine, intending that we understand that the 'Local Products Shop's' products are of the same order as Amway's: "Scientific deliberation will always be superior to crude methods. The whole world knows Chinese medicine is good, but the reason it is not accepted in many places is because the proportions of the ingredients have not been scientifically arrived at. The Chinese method of just grabbing a handful of this and a handful of that, charging two kuai for this, charging three kuai for that, cannot possibly stand up to scientific development". Thus, the shopkeeper and her friend work a double-act so that authenticity seems to obtain in the 'Local Products Shop' because of their mutual investment in signifying that it does so, *and for no other reason*.

## 9. Coarse Grain

Further consider on this theme that while this research was underway a range of up-market restaurants were established in Anshan's central commercial district offering explicitly *tu* produce with explicitly *tu* marketing themes. Perhaps the most interesting of these is called "Modern Coarse Grain" (*xiandai culiang*), which was opened in October 2006 to join three other restaurants around the city with explicitly "coarse grain" names. This terminology invokes the opposition between "coarse grain" (*culiang*) cereals and "fine grain" (*xiliang*) cereals, the former of which was all that common people ate before the economic reforms, when the "fine grains" were rare. After the reforms, "fine grains" became much more readily available, and "coarse grains" quickly went out of use in urban circles: "Fine grains" were seen to be refined, in both physical and moral senses, while the "coarse grains" remained the food of poor peasants. Today, this discourse is inverting in what is not so much a *return* to "coarse grain" as a *turning over* of the values imbued in "coarse". "More and more people are seeking coarse grain consumption", says the manager of Modern Coarse Grain: "Because urban people are already used to fine grains of the city, and want to change to peasant tastes". "Modern people already have high tastes", she continues, "coarse grain" consumption being explicitly understood as a "modern", "high" taste. Indeed, when several seafood and vegetable dishes that don't obviously seem to fit the theme are described as "high-level" (*gaodeng*) dishes suitable for the wants of "modern people", one of the chefs explains that it is precisely this eclectic range of healthy "green food" dishes (*lüse shipin*) under the overarching banner of "Coarse Grain" that distinguishes "modern" "coarse grain" from plain-old ordinary "coarse grain". Every one of the well-to-do consumers here described their consumption in terms such as "have no pollution" (*meiyou wuran*), "no chemicals" (*meiyou huaxue chengfen*), "healthy" (*jiankang*), "natural" (*ziran*), and "pure" (*chun*), some also referring to a "return to the simple and plain" (*fanpuguizhen*), and to "going back to nature" (*huiguiziran*), thus explicitly evoking the mythical "source" of purity. The implication, of course, is that these dishes are distinctly enhanced versions of the 'original' coarse grain foods still consumed in the countryside, somehow retaining this essence whilst being purified of everything that makes them "coarse". And all this, despite the fact that the serving staff, rural migrants every one of them, refer to the cuisine as "rural food", or "rural family food" (*nongjiacai*).



Yet some of the savviest of China's peasants are cashing-in on this inherent malleability in the authenticity discourse too. Peasants living in the 'Thousand Mountains' (*Qianshan*) scenic area that envelopes Anshan from the North-East have transfigured their once rough and ready peasant homes to cater to urban consumers who have begun to explore the countryside in their newly acquired cars in numbers unprecedented. While much of China's massive rural population are still struggling to establish themselves in the cities, the irony that cash-strapped peasants in the urban periphery should be able to market themselves *qua* peasants, and profit from prostituting their 'authenticity' to cash-laden urbanites seeking home-cooked food in countryside settings is sweet indeed. Some have become rich beyond their wildest dreams without having to alter their homes much from their original forms save for the presence of signs reading "Rural Accommodation" (*nongshe*), "Rural snack food" (*nongcun xiaochi*), "Peasant family farmhouse food" (*nongjia fanzhuang*), or "Farmhouse courtyard food" (*zhuangjiayuan fanzhuang*), that transfigure the rural experience into an object to be consumed. Indeed, proprietors are only too well aware that the 'authentic' rural experience is precisely what urban consumers are seeking, and present exactly the same: the iron cooking-pans, smoke filled kitchens, and 'firebeds' (*huokang*) (where guests will warm themselves alongside the resident family in the winter), as their neighbours. This differentiates their product offering from the throbbing out-of-town karaoke investments that usually pass as *nongjiale* ("happy farmer"), with all their distinctly urban trappings and undercurrent of moral licentiousness: consumers here want the 'real' rural. Still other establishments, however, and one feels that it must be these establishments that the other more 'down-market' versions are imitating, have revolutionized the peasant home, magnifying and concentrating the essence of rural life many times fold, bottling it as it were, until it becomes almost unreal, or rather 'more real' than the original. These proprietors present tidy shop-fronts made of wicker, and fairy-light name-signs reading "rural food", and open up onto clean picnic tables lit by lucky red lanterns. Some of these have constructed accommodation facilities so that guests can spend a night or two under the starry, countryside sky. Even here, however, these in many ways *less* authentic rural family homes remain distinctly *rural* in their product-offering, service providers only too well-aware that a moderate exposure to insects, dirt, and animal smells is precisely what service-users are looking for. One such owner had it thus:

“Even the 5-star professional chefs in the city can’t cook the *real* rural food that we cook; they may add luxury sauces etc, but we get *real* chickens from the hillside. We fry caterpillars out here, and little fairy insects that no-one in the city has ever even heard of. This is ‘special character’ food (*te se cai*). You can experience what you can’t experience in the city. Goose, duck, chicken, pigeon, fish, natural, natural, all animals that fly in the sky and all animals that swim in the river, we have them all here to eat. ...The pork in the city can’t even compare to the pork here. Here a pig grows 1-2 years naturally; in the city it grows 1-2months and is fed by chemicals. So they’re no competition; you can’t even talk about us competing with them.... We only use in-season vegetables; we never buy (artificially raised) food from the greenhouse”.

In the ‘Local Products Shop’, the ‘Coarse Grain Restaurants’ and the ‘Happy Farmer’ courtyards, authenticity as it is understood by ‘real’ peasants is therefore packaged and made available for middle-class urbanites when, how, and where they want it. The revolutionary rural past is reinvented in a way that somehow retains and intensifies the desired essence of the ‘original’, even as the poverty, disease, and political violence is filtered out. And yet, by instituting this ‘copy’ as the ‘real’ in its contemporary invocation, the original is made unreal, forever lost, not only to time, and to memory, but in its *ontology*, as the shared root that makes the Chinese still *tu* is entirely Othered (cf. Baudrillard 1994; cf. Eco 1986). The bodily integration of ‘authentic’ countryside produce is a metaphor for the way in which contemporary urban consumers possessed of “modern” symbolic dispositions institute *themselves* as ‘the real’. These dynamics are therefore quite different from the way in which nostalgic interpretations of the Cultural Revolution were re-enacted in the first themed restaurants in the early 1990’s, that is, symptomatic of a much more *current* shift in discourse. Quite remarkable because of its co-concurrence with the largest and fastest urbanization in history, consuming the *hyper-rural* offers a way for those so disposed to tap the quintessential root of their worldly beginnings, to taste its raw and earthy flavour in refined form. But once the recurring, amniotic memory of that primordial reflexion (cf. above) has been traced, the umbilical cord may then be cut again as the new middle classes drive away in their Mercedes (Griffiths 2009; Griffiths et al., 2010).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> These concluding sections share some very minor overlap of data and authored text with some of my other works, but only in the context of making an entirely different argument.

## 10. Return to the Source

And so! The race is on to be the first to rupture nature's hymen, the first to drive a stake into the utterly pure and unspoilt and make it subject, instituting 'Self' at the interface of *all* contradictions. The first, no less, to puncture the 'original' divide between discourse and the 'Real', the first to "return to the self" (*huigui ziwo*) as a "self-determining" (*duli zizhu*) and "self-controlling" (*ziwo kongzhi*) individual (all quotes Festa 2006, 11). The *first*, that is, because this boundary is always being pushed back: once 'born' into discourse (in Lacanian terms) there can be no return to one's psychoanalytical origins, and no escape from the desire for authenticity; the hyperrural may invite those so disposed to take temporary refuge from the pace of contemporary signification in the placental "soil" and "blood" from which they were originally birthed, but out past the morally ambiguous karaoke bars that usually pass for 'happy farmer' (*nongjiale*) outlets and up into the 'Thousand Mountains' range, there is no-place and no-when for 'Self' to arrive at, *because 'Self' did not come from anywhere identifiable in the 'first place'*. Authenticity is a socially constructed ideal: the postulation of 'the authentic' aspires to various exclusive forms of located purity—certainty, origin, coherence, quintessence, and so on, but this of course only ever remains an ideal *by definition*. The postulation, indeed, can only ever conjure the *question* of what it aims to express, that which can never be adequately expressed, the very *idea* of the 'Self' that first existed before it then went on to create itself that so entrances positivists and methodological individualists (cf. chapter one). 'Authenticity' invokes that ontology which has *no* origin, and which could not possibly be located *in* or *by* anything else, because it is being "founded-upon-itself" (Baudrillard 1996, 79). This ideal cannot possibly be sustained because a *sign* cannot be found that does not but only *metaphorically* refer to that which cannot be spoken of. But the *idea* invoked by this sign (i.e. 'authenticity'), though the invocation cannot ever effectively represent or express the idea, *is* actually necessary to discourse, not in-itself (of course), but for exactly the same reason as the newly-moneyed Chinese middle-class exercise their attachment to their rural past by consuming coarse grain cereals—*for its difference*. There must always also be this 'Other' condition of all discourse, *the idea of its negation*, an 'echo' of agency before it was re-cognized within discourse, and of the primordial relation between subject and object thus configured.

No! More than the idea, a *sense* even, of agency scrambling up against the walls of language unable to escape! The *proof* that 'Self' is produced in the interrelation between structure and agency lies the observation that it is *impossible* to write about the internal structures of discourse without using those very same metaphors by which those structures are themselves constituted. The core metaphors of fixing, space, vision and so on, as elucidated throughout here, demand to be used again and again *ad infinitum*. Apart from the almost unconscious repetition of the spatial and visual metaphors made throughout this chapter, that is, the way these want to just 'pop up', the authorial agency of this analysis has found it extremely difficult to avoid referring to the internal structures of discourse without using terms like 'dimension', 'aspect', or 'dynamic', and so on, the first of which is of course a spatial metaphor, the second of which is visual metaphor, like 'blindness' and 'masking', and the third of which is a spatial metaphor which also connotes movement, the 'activity' of the Cartesian mind as it were (cf. chapter eight), since these are the first discursive principles of the possibility of meaningfulness *per se*. Even 'structure' and 'construct' are of course spatial metaphors, as is 'distinction', which of course connotes a division and a 'visual' perspective too. And if the term 'metaphoric' is used to internally refer to internal referrals then this is merely tautological, indeed the only form of statement that can *truly* be 'true', thus quite proving the postmodern insight that you cannot use language to come between language and the world (Wittgenstein 1953). 'Truths' are only 'true' because their instantiations draw upon exclusive systems of mutually validating 'rules' for their *truth-value*. All signs, including 'authenticity', are socially constructed ideals; and none such can be sustained, because each contains within it the 'echo' of their antithesis. Ideals *add to themselves* (as Derrida put it) the possibility of being replicated, metonymically, such that meaningfulness is spun out by the infinite deferral of signification. Thus, there can be no end and no beginning, but only the instantiation itself: individuals' social power, their legitimated agency or distinction, is reflected in the ability to reappraise, to redefine, not just to *take over*, but to *turn around* (thus completing the meaning of 'revolution' as that which *breaks* even as it revolves), and make of the structures that even the most 'lowly' of persons *must* consume objects of desire, beauty, art even, an expression intensely about 'Self'. And in this, now, is *my* 'Self' constituted. Here, indeed, *I am*.

## Chapter 4

### Knowledge and Ability

#### 1. Rules of Engagement

Having thus 'found' myself in the discourse, the question remains: exactly *how* does individual agency manipulate its relation to the world such that the instantiation of individuality is legitimized? Still, this research maintains, this can only be achieved by negotiating all the other socially constructed 'rules' bearing upon the situation at once, of which the previous 'Authenticity' construct is only the first. *Knowing* all the 'rules' is therefore of the greatest possible importance. Individuals can only make judgements about what they know about and in terms of the vocabulary they have mastered: if you have no knowledge of something you cannot express an opinion about it; as far as you are concerned it doesn't exist. On the other hand, it is precisely by discerning between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' judgements that individuals acquire knowledge and learn to manipulate the parameters for social power. Knowledge, thus, has an *institutionalizing* function, granting access to the 'right' to apply value judgements, and becomes forceful in its own right, functioning to include and exclude (Berger and Luckman 1967). Institutional boundaries will be marked by 'insider' differentiations and references, technical terminology, ideological apparatus, in-jokes, and idiomatic expressions, and so on, such that the institution is lived in language (Foucault 1970). In academia, for example, there will always be those who will judge "multi-", "inter"- or "trans-disciplinarian" (Ma 2006) work by the internal rules of a discipline, rather than judge the work on its individual merits (i.e. "This is neither good sociology, nor anthropology" etc), individuals' basis for value judgement always already informed by the consumption of other more-or-less institutionalized works (Gadamer 1975). Similarly, institutional practitioners may be accredited with social distinction on account of an 'institutional memory' ("Oh, I remember when we tried all that years ago, it didn't work"). Likewise, the 'connoisseur' will show that they have invested the effort necessary to differentiate expertly within a given field, others perhaps even defining the field by reference to their differentiations. Though *not* knowing may absolve agents of some responsibility for their impropriety, this can exclude them nevertheless (Douglas and Isherwood 1990, 180).

The *ability* to apply knowledge in value judgements is important apart from the knowledge itself, of course, because from the perspective of negotiating the judgements of others, you can have knowledge of shared norms and standards, but fail to demonstrate your knowledge in the proper way at the proper time and place; merely being aware of the existence of good protocol is not enough, you have to *act* in accordance with that protocol. This emphasis on *efficacy* and *performance* is of course also why the 'rules' underscoring institutions need only be a loosely shared set of dispositions to behave in more-or-less 'normal' ways in response to more-or-less 'typical' stimuli (Bourdieu 1992); you may even hint that you know the 'rules' and others don't without ever clearly explicating their basis or integrity, the actual existence of the 'rules' being nowhere near as important as their social construction (cf. Clissold 2005, 19-20; Blackman 2000). But individuals do not simply 'follow' socially-agreed rules, and neither do they always break those rules ignorantly, however, but rather actively contend the right to define those rules in the first place; and, though it may be important to know about rules governing when breaking one rule 'trumps' another rule, the rules of symbolic inversion, the "rules of disorder" (Featherstone 1990, 21-22), and so on, these rules are no less knowingly bent to individuals' advantage where those individuals think they can get away with it. The key question is therefore of whose version of 'knowledge-worth-knowing' sticks, and who sets the rules for others to follow. Further, since the "arbiter elegantium" (cf. Bourdieu 1984, 255) who would birth new orders is usually required to first *master* prior rules before redefining his or her relationship to them in a way that is acknowledged as 'transgression' but nevertheless ultimately accepted by those who seek to stay ahead of the changing 'game' (such as in humour, or playing the 'blue-note' in jazz), a still more interesting question is how far individuating statements instantiate new forms of order, rather than merely referring to and therefore re-instituting prior orders; that is to say, the most interesting question is how far individuals must conform to prior rules in order to find room for themselves within them (Wittgenstein 1953, 158-243; De Certeau 1984; cf. Kozinets 2002). Thus, this chapter examines the situational and transient nature of knowledge as it applies in China, maintaining that legitimate political and social authority arises from the active and continuous decision making on what has been socially agreed, and that individual agency is always charged with finding ways to consume this consensus, *because that's just what individual agency does!*

## 2. Knowledge Economy

The 'legitimate' order of knowledge in China is defined by reference to formal academic schooling and merit (*wenhua*), which was established as a valid route to success in China in Imperial times when scholarship was closely linked to morality and leadership of the nation, and when the lowliest of peasants could in theory have studied his way up to the right hand of the emperor (which of course very rarely happened in actual practice). Formal education remains an enormously important dimension configuring social distinction in contemporary China, of course, thanks mainly to Mao making formal education distinctly *illegitimate* for a while and sending most of China's youthful urban population "down" to "learn" from illiterate farmers during the Cultural Revolution. Today, and notwithstanding the State's frantic re-investment in education in the reform era, still only 1.1% of China's population aged over twenty-five have a post-secondary school education (Blackman 2000), the fees for schooling beyond the mandatory nine years having been consistently expensive enough to exclude most people by default. Nevertheless, the ruthless competition provoked by the pace of economic growth and social change, and the often intense demands parents make of their single-children, mean that formal education is much less of an 'option' for social advancement than in the West. Indeed, curious for a place where "class warfare" reigned for a large part of the last century, foreign researchers will be surprised by the regularity with which Chinese individuals refer to themselves and each other as having a "level" (*shuiping*) or "grade" (*cengci; dengci*) in these and related respects. But although it is generally accepted that the attainment of high-level formal qualifications requires considerable skill, control and self-determination, however, formal knowledge is perhaps valued less for its own sake in contemporary China, and more for the social status, good jobs, high salaries, and material lifestyles that these are perceived to translate into more readily than elsewhere. China, moreover, is no exception to the rule that with the advance of what the critics like to call 'neo-liberalism', knowledge-worth-knowing is everywhere converging to that defined by reference to capital markets, the best education possible in the contemporary imaginary being a Ph.D in an explicitly commercial discipline, 'the best of both worlds', as it were. Though classical skills and abilities such as painting and calligraphy remain highly valued, these are perhaps increasingly difficult to legitimize if they are not converted into monetary wealth.

Still, China has no shortage of people who will regularly say they are “unable to represent” (*buhui daibiao*) because of a lack of “ability” (*nengli*), even though their manipulations of that money-making ability so very highly valued in today’s China have been very successful, simply because they “lack culture” (*que wenhua*) relative to the educated elites by whom the official sphere is defined. This is perhaps especially the case where individuals have had a rural upbringing, the urban/rural divide still being a major factor structuring the knowledge economy, like Zhang Xiuzhen, for example, the leading distributor in the city for an up-market U.S. direct-marketing firm, who nevertheless frequently apologizes for “lacking culture” relative to her husband’s “intellectual” urban family, the significance of the urban/rural contrast drawn here inviting the comparison of the *tu* principle, meaning ‘soil’, ‘local’, ‘native’ etc (as discussed in the previous chapter), with *ya*, meaning ‘refined’ or ‘cultured’, as in *wenya*, a term closely linked with the urban elite. The term “intellectual” (*zhishifenzi*), incidentally, does not necessarily refer to practicing intellectuals, but rather to anyone with a university education. For an alternative example of how the urban/rural divide functions to structure China’s knowledge economy, consider that Grandma Liu, a neighbour, is especially keen I know that she is from a “cultured family” (*shuxiangmendi*), given the fact that both sets of her grandparents were scholars in times when most women were unable to read as evidence of her pedigree, assertions made primarily as a function of articulating her urban status vis-à-vis the countryside. Those pensioners who currently get a much higher pension than her, I am to understand: “Ate more bitterness; were born before me and came from the countryside; their culture was low; they had a hard time and many children; they had no salary and no money: all the high-level jobs went to poor peasants like them”. The only reason Grandma Liu was herself able to rise up in society, she explains, was because her husband came from a “peasant” (*nongmin*) background: “Some people with education still made it into the Communist Party in the early days; it was only later that all the intellectuals were killed off”. Somewhat surprisingly, however, Grandma Liu ‘confesses’ that she in fact has “no culture” (*meiyou wenhua*) herself since she never attained the *certification* that should have attended her studies. The Chinese she studied from 1953-56 (she produces the exact dates without skipping a beat) and the Russian she spoke for “three to five years” “do not count”, because claims to a formal education are of course illegitimate without the requisite *form*.



The fact that formal education is a major driver of material consumption in China, many parents making the most immense personal and financial sacrifices to send their children to the schools of their choice, is widely-recognized in the academic literature (cf. Fong 2008). Child-raising in a land of (mostly urban) single-children is a particularly rule-based technological affair in any case, with mothers perhaps being especially the most concerned to internalize, contend and disseminate the rules of ‘best practice’ in this area. Perhaps most believe that a foreign education is the best, the West very much remaining for most people where knowledge-worth-knowing is supposed to emanate from. China is not without a number of world-class universities of its own, however, but places are restricted to only the very brightest students of all, and perhaps only those genuinely in a position to compare – intellectual elites and so on – adequately appreciate this. A foreign education, on the other hand, is accessible to anyone who can pay for it, so it can easily appear that those fathers with whom I exercise in Anshan’s ‘219 Park’ believe the amount of money they have spent on their child’s learning is genuinely a mark of their child’s knowledge and ability, alongside their child’s examination results and the names of the schools, universities, and countries in which their children are registered. Though Zhao Guangyao is more tactful than those who openly brag about the price, for example, it is well known that he spent a fortune sending his daughter to an expensive international joint-venture high-school at the age of sixteen, and then on to university in the U.K.. Zhao did not have intellectual reasons for these decisions, but justifies them by the appeal of exposing his daughter to an “international experience”, a very different kind of emphasis to a formal education per se. The fees, which turned out to be even higher than initially expected, were financed by Zhao’s steel-roller business, where his intellectual as well as financial capital lies. Zhao has ducked and dived his way through the fast and turbulent waters of Anshan’s reforming economy for more than a decade principally in order to pay for his daughter’s education. Now that she is in her final year, Zhao says that his “mission is nearly accomplished”, but neither he nor his daughter have any idea of what she will do when she graduates apart from return home, both Zhao and his wife “hoping” she will live near them. Though Zhao also hopes that there will eventually be a return on investment by his daughter getting a good job somewhere, or taking on the family business, the degree was never in this sense purposeful, just a very costly means of attaining a formal certification.

Paying for education, however, is of course a kind of ‘consumption’ quite apart from the distinction achieved through knowledge, ability and learned skills; you cannot pay someone else to get your education for you since there is a *personal sacrifice* demanded in the learning process; and while tuition in those skills based on individual artistry or creation such as piano or violin highly valued in China can indeed be paid for, the purchase alone in no way guarantees that you will master the skills taught. Accordingly, whereas some Chinese parents will appeal to the monetary price paid to enroll their child at an expensive foreign-invested college as a mark of their distinction, or in order to justify sending their child to an overseas boarding school at a very young age, other parents who would perhaps be appalled at these notions, emphasize the sending of them to the ‘best’ schools and universities on account of their children’s *own* knowledge and ability, perhaps emphasizing their own role in nurturing that ability. Fifty-two year old manager Du Bin, for example, likes nothing more than to talk about his role in his son’s success:

“I told my son very early on that my own situation wasn’t that great, and told him that he son should aspire to more. I took him to see the workers at the Angang steel plant, saying: these are the workers. And then, in the holidays, I took him to Beijing and showed him rural migrants working in temporary jobs. And, on the same trip, I took him to a high-level state-owned-enterprise conference so he could make his own choice. At my son’s primary school there were bad pupils around who clambered all over each other ‘riding the donkey’ and playing games; some were coarse and had bad habits. I let my son see and made it clear that games were only allowed if my son first finished his homework. He never fell behind in his homework. Then, I taught him to sing myself believing that it was important for him to have extra-curricular abilities too. As I explained to him, if you’ve got special skills, you’ll soon have opportunities. Since my son had so many different abilities he was entered for a great many competitions so that when he won one he would have a feeling of superiority and excel at other things. In order to enter the best middle schools in the city, a competition was held with the top one-thousand five hundred students from all schools. My son achieved fourth place and promptly entered the best school available and was consistently excellent at everything he studied, including singing, mathematics, sports, media competition, the youth cadres, and language skills.”

Du’s son would have been eligible for a scholarship place at the very best of China’s universities, but he chose himself to apply for scholarships in the United States, perhaps making the ‘smart’ move, working in finance on Wall Street upon graduation as of 2007 (just before the global financial crisis began).

The 'knowledgeable' and 'consumerist' logics cannot be entirely separated or opposed to each other in the discourse, however, because individuals may reap distinction of the former kind by demonstrating knowledge of the 'rules' governing consumption of the latter kind without actually being able to afford to make distinctive purchases; indeed a great many people in China are concerned to reap distinction in just this way. Ma Yi, a broadly working-class 'player' in his mid-twenties, for example, never misses a chance to drop into his discourse references to the latest fashions and styles, the availability of things, their cost, comparative value, and so on, even though his teacher's salary makes for less-than-premium purchases. Consumer goods firms, moreover, can be widely observed to market their products by appeal to design by brilliant designers, master craftsmen, artisans, and so on, such that much of the distinctiveness that the consumer buys into derives from the appreciation of the earned skills invested in developing the product. In still other cases, of course, although consumers *can* afford distinctive choices, they do not know how to appreciate the 'taste' they buy into. Entrepreneur Zhao Guangyao (see also above), for example, a university graduate straight after the Cultural Revolution, knows that the red wine he has recently begun to buy is good for his health, but does not know that wine should be consumed within a couple of days of uncorking the bottle, instead consuming it in very small amounts over very many months! Zhao can be interestingly compared with Fang Jian, his elder brother, who was "just a soldier" back in the day by his own admission, but today practices photography at an artistic level, and likes to reminisce how he was able to distinguish the country-of-origin of every kind of loudspeaker in the hi-fi store he opened in the early days of reform just by the sound, thus distinguishing himself as 'connoisseur' even in retrospect. Fang wittily refers to his younger brother as an "intellectual" (*zhishifenzi*) to account for the fact that whereas Zhao can only drink a "little beer", he himself has the "ability" (*nengli*) to drink *baijiu* (the strong liquor of national choice), thus parodying the discourse that privileges Zhao on account of his formal education and turning back on itself in order to assert that he can *handle* any challenge on account of his extensive life-experience. Zhao, for that matter, is widely respected for the business acumen that has made him considerably more successful than Fang. In these flexible and situationally-complex ways, therefore, knowledge and ability are thus shown to be dynamics of social difference that cut across others factors such as age, wealth, and formal education.

### 3. Knowledge Politics

Indeed, it is less *whether* you ‘have’ knowledge, or ‘how much’ of any particular kind, than how you use it to compete socially that primarily interests this research. For some further examples of how this discourse works, consider Chen Xueyuan, a-retired SOE employee of fifty years of age, to whom I have casually dropped the proposition that he should be considered “knowledgeable” (*bijiao you zhishi*):

“Oh yes, I’ve got a lot of knowledge, really a lot of knowledge. Not being modest, I’d have to say I’m someone with really quite a lot of knowledge. You could use a Chinese expression ‘has read more than ten-thousand books’ to describe me (*dushupowanjuan*), which means someone with a lot of knowledge, who understands comparatively more, and often feels lonely. The knowledge I’ve gained from reading gets me regarded by many people as obstinate (*guban*), because, in China, my entire boundary of thought and ways of thinking are different from most people. The way Chinese look at problems is not the same: summed up, we could say it was philistine (*shisu*). I really don’t identify with some of these philistine things; rather, I’m galloping away in my own my spiritual world. Sometimes, when communicating with other people, I feel really irritated because their level of knowledge just isn’t the same; they’re at a different level. My knowledge is at this level (makes a levelling gesture), and the level of the people I am talking to is at this level (makes a lower levelling gesture); it’s like they’re speaking another language. Because I’ve read so many books, when I’m with people who haven’t read much, we’ve nothing to talk about; our talk is as dry as dust (*kuzao*), with no flavour, just really tasteless. So, just now, that friend of mine, that friend is someone who’s *really* got culture (*hen you wenhua de yige ren*), he’s someone who’s read widely, he has a doctorate, he’s the only guy I can share my thoughts with (*sixiang*). Other people are no good: we can only talk about the ordinary things in life, nothing about ideology, and so I feel really lonely. People with whom I can communicate about ideology are so few, but there’s nothing I can do about it; it’s irresolvable, because no-one has read as many books as me, because they’ve no time, and no interest in doing so”.

Chen is evidently very keen to assert how his knowledge and reading has distinguished him from “most people”. As he portrays it, his knowledge has actually worked negatively to exclude him, exiling him to a “lonely”, somehow higher, “spiritual” stratum of existence, shared only with his friend with a doctorate; he explicitly uses the term “level” five times in this excerpt alone. Chen continues in this vein:

“The crux of the problem is entering a completely scientific ideology. This is the spirit of European humanism (*renwenzhuyi*): scientific ideology. Of the greatest importance is that constructing a world of correct judgement cannot be separated from study. Reading from an early age will cultivate a certain consciousness, the recognition of correct judgement. A lot of people do not have this consciousness. An awful lot of people do not have this consciousness; a great many, following the development of this society, institute their own views, and live entirely according to the customs of society. Chinese people have their customs, but scientific culture (*kexue wenhua*) has no national borders. Having this kind of thinking, this kind of consciousness, makes one really clever, and changes one from being ordinary to being extraordinary... The Chinese language is rather vulgarized (*yongsuhua*) and Chinese popular culture tends towards the vulgar. A great many people have no consciousness; they do not understand humanism. Since the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Renaissance, the European Renaissance, is the most advanced kind of culture in all mankind. But Chinese people don't know. A great many people in China don't understand this matter. The only consciousness they have of science is a very latent one. Many, many people are like this. This is only a kind of shallow consciousness. One cannot say these people have gone deeply into science. In China there are many people with this kind of thinking. Thank goodness I'm not like this!”

Chen's agenda begins to become a little clearer here. His remarks about “European humanism”, “scientific ideology”, and the universality of these, are of course intended to provide a scientific basis for his other comments, and to solicit recognition and empathy from me. But Chen's assertion of “the recognition of correct judgement”, and a “certain consciousness” of “extraordinary” distinction, is actually the basis for a more subtle form of positioning. Differentiating himself from the “vulgarity” of “China” and “Chinese people” is evidently a major part of this, but this is a broad-brush primer for a more specific target. Chen's real target are those who “institute their own views”, “and live entirely according to the customs of society”, who rather than “study” are interested in “philistine things”, a materialism against which he asserts his own “spirituality”. Though I have only asked him about what he likes to read, Chen goes on and on, bringing in a wide range of canonical citations that perhaps only those with a formal education would recognize, as if to reiterate his point that those he differentiates himself from are indeed “speaking another language”:

“Because universities have got lots of teachers, scientists and musicians, graduates’ thinking is generally more advanced. Most people’s thinking, including that of some (government) officials, is still about burning incense to Buddha. Many officials are like this. Many of their practices and beliefs run directly counter to science. I’m like this: I rely on my own study, and master this culture. This knowledge, this is a habit. I received the influence of reading from a very early age. When I was young the fundamentals were the influence of novels; novels are also really important – the Russian Lermontov who wrote the ‘Contemporary hero’, and Pushkin, who is very similar. They both died when they were very young. Balzac, Pinder, Herbert, Hegel etc. I read all these when I was young. I suddenly wanted to read and was ‘cultivated up’. And perhaps it was because at that time I had the conditions for reading books. Many people, like the children in the countryside, have never read books of this kind. And there are some children, and their children too, there are many like this, who *already* have this kind of consciousness. Perhaps it is inborn. There are many children like this who have become outstanding people... In this studious generation, one must study this kind of knowledge, mastering it well, so that one has understood this kind of scientific knowledge, and has the correct manner of thinking, has the correct way of thinking about this world. Otherwise you will become very vulgar (*yongsu*), and end up thinking that money is the most important thing. What I want to leave you with today is that scientific culture is and will always be higher than money and power. This is my argument. I told my daughter, do not respect money: you should despise money and power, and instead respect scientific culture. It doesn’t matter how much money you’ve got. In one of John Hoffman’s books, expressed by piano, in the foreword, there is a sentence: “do not revere money and power, rather, we should despise money and power, and respect scientific culture”. My daughter follows me in these respects. Although she’s still small, twelve years old, she has taken my thinking on board, she respects my thinking. She says to me she doesn’t want to be a businessperson, and doesn’t want to be an official. She wants to be a scientist. If she is a scientist she can freely develop wherever she likes in the whole world, because the contributions that scientists make to humankind will always be greater than business-people and officials. How can I say? It’d be best if she got into Holland’s Leiden University, or the U.K.’s Cambridge or Oxford to receive the most outstanding of educations. In this way, one can live very well, and make a contribution to mankind. And there would be huge benefits for her. She would be really happy. The life of a scientist is always going to be happier than that of an official or a businessperson. Businesspeople have an awful lot of troubles (*fannao*), and officials are the same”.

Chen sees knowledge as the vehicle of human freedom, *a project of unique individuality*, and seeks to lever his knowledge in order to institute himself in relation to this problem. The “humanism” he proposes is intended to directly counter the “philistine” alliance of “money and power” dominating contemporary China (as he sees it). His comments about “Chinese popular culture” tending towards the “vulgar” are probably intended to address the way in which the single-party State encourages the rejection of such noble humanist ideals, instead splicing its adulation of Western scientific and economic ideals with a valorization of the “wisdom” of the “ordinary” people, their “everyday” practices and “folk” (*minsu*) customs, a *mass* and *popular* mechanism contrived to bypass those so-called “traditional” and “elite” cultures that threaten dangerous ideas like universal respect for individual autonomy (cf. Festa 2006, 23). Chen he seems to put this beyond doubt of his own accord.

“People in the West think like this almost universally. The value of an individual person is not really the same in these developing countries. My wife understands the degree of respect that should be offered to every individual, but China hasn’t realized it yet. The difference between us is that she thinks that when living in China one should do as the Chinese do, and not try to live like they do in the West. And what is her mistake? It’s that she fails to see that one can live as a Chinese does, but think like a Westerner does. Dispute is unavoidable. Science has no rules, and no national boundaries. All persons are the same. There’s no way to solve this. My thinking cannot resolve this problem that Chinese people have.”

We might note, however, that although Chen emphasizes the “universality” of “humanism”, and “cultivation” of knowledge, how easily his discourse turned to a categorical innatism (“Perhaps it is inborn”). We can only surmise, moreover, that Chen would be intrigued by the idea that all knowledge is the product of people instituting “their own views” and living “entirely according to the customs of society”, the thesis effectively underscoring this analysis. Of course, projects of freedom through knowledge need not necessarily be opposed to traditional Chinese “customs”; indeed Chen elsewhere articulates a healthy admiration for Laozi’s thought, “insofar as it has a great respect for freedom”. Yet the point still stands that Chen would no doubt be appalled to know that so much of the Western academic establishment he reveres actively conspires to deny Chinese individuals agency with their essentialized tales of ‘collectivism’, and so on.

#### 4. Practicability

Of course, many Chinese do not reproduce the dominant discourse of 'culture' that privileges formal knowledge and assiduous, expensive, schooling in the first place. Not least among alternative emphases is the exposure to a broader register of social phenomena than formal schooling allows. Consider how these elements are made to interact in these statements from Lin Yue, a fifty year-old journalist, for example:

"China has loads of university students now. University education is not the same in China as overseas. Chinese style is *guanshushi* (a teaching style), no matter whether you understand or not. We think that some content should be changed; in some aspects education is failing here. Besides, 'persons with culture' (*you wenhua de ren*) are not necessarily those who have read at university; but at least you must have some sort of cultural level. Right now university students are already really pervasive, much more so than before. In the past they were seldom; educated people were few and culture was not popularized. In the past, people's thinking wasn't very active (*huoyue*). People in the past were comparatively stupid (*sha*); they pursued whatever career they liked. Now the education style is squeezed in to your brain (*mantangguan*); it doesn't allow the students to digest it, absorb it; it doesn't let the students make the things of their schooling their own. Foreign education on the other hand... overseas university graduates can get a job in society when they graduate. In China, the practical ability of students is really lacking: they speak a lot, but they can do very little, and university students have many bad habits. People who have just graduated lack experience, they must temper (*molian*) themselves; they must try to 'find out' (*mosuo*). Their ability is poor, and they look down on other people. It's not that they're not good; it's their education. After they've been in society for a few years they'll be outstanding, some of them anyway, but some of them think they are awesome (*ziji hen liaobuqi*). But they don't understand anything when they've just graduated. They lack the ability to work. They have absolutely no way to compare with us at work. They only have eyes for themselves (*muzhongwuren*). In fact, what is a university student? Everyone's been to university: 'self-study university' (vocational training) people have far greater practical ability and they really cherish the opportunity to work. There are too many people – a 1.3 billion population - everyone must strive really hard (*nuli gongzuo*), otherwise they'll lose the opportunity to eat (*diule fanwan*); even to the extent of losing one's job (*xiagang*). But there are some university students who just don't appreciate how much it takes to make a success (*tiangao dihou*). Some people when they're working are extremely industrious (*nuli*). Some leaders also have the ability to work very hard. I think I've really got this ability; everyone's ability is different. Some people are good at management; some people are



excellent at selling things. There are many kinds of ability, and abilities you can't see; so you can be good but people won't use you. Of course these things are everywhere in society, i.e. people want to be in charge so they'll try to endear themselves to a leader. This is really quite normal; at least it proves that this person has a heart for striving upwards (*shangjinxin*). Wanting to do some business and be a leader are not necessarily bad things. But the key is when you go through abnormal means: for example, like using money to buy officialdom, through abnormal means...."

Unlike Chen Xueyuan (above), Lin Yue had to make up her education deficit after the Cultural Revolution through on-the-job vocational training, the programme of adult training she undertook online being what she refers to as "university" in her own case. Accordingly, Lin Yue asserts her *practicability* as resistance to her journalist younger colleagues who have genuine university qualifications but cannot get anything done in the 'real' world, as it were. Lin Yue's stress on "striving", "industriousness", "work", and so on, and the implicit reference she makes to her contributions to society (i.e. "They only have eyes for themselves", and so on), only serves to further identify her with a social category (i.e. the "us" she uses rather than "I" to oppose "them"), and further constructs her difference from the young university students and graduates of today. She stresses her experience, too, making her age a virtue rather than a handicap. She allows that intellectual elites might have had some value in the past, but stresses that "culture" has now become "pervasive" and "popularized", and in doing so subtly, almost inadvertently, reproduces the dominance of formal knowledge she no doubt actually wishes she actually had, even as she tries to make it seem cheap. Interesting, too, she evidently broadly shares the criticism of the fusion of business and government as articulated by Chen Xueyuan (above), her criticisms of the Chinese education system and praise for the "foreign" (read "Western") system probably containing a guarded criticism of State social engineering (cf. her remarks about the technology of "squeezing" 'the rules' "into your brain"). Indeed, this latter criticism is couched in interestingly *practical* terms itself too; that is to say, that Lin Yue asserts that the State's methods actively deny students the opportunity to take what they are given and bend it to their *own* projects (i.e. "...doesn't let the students make the things of their schooling their own"), precisely the sort of creative consumption she herself actually *demonstrates* even as she overtly champions it too. She takes up the 'dominant' discourse that privileges the formal education she lacks and does her best to turn it to her advantage.

A great many informants made similar constructions to Lin Yue: “Formal education is not enough”, said Du Feng, owner of a luxury health club, emphasizing the knowledge he has gained through the *experience* of his life in a way not entirely dissimilar to Lin Yue. Again: “Reading ten thousand books is not as good as walking one thousand kilometers”. But Du doesn’t like to highlight that he had no education to speak of, and is very keen to come across as knowledgeable in his outlook most generally, taking great pains to show me that he *knows* a lot about the army and its functions, ranging strategically across national policy, global, and current affairs, dropping comments about international destinations, the importance of environmental management, the difficulties presently being experienced in the Olympic preparations, and so on, clearly also enjoying discussing the works of art in his office, and religion too. But this is ultimately a function of Du’s *resourcefulness* rather than of “culture” per se, a purely *practical* approach improvised *ad hoc* precisely because Du feels that he “lacks culture” in spite of his success. Particularly on his mind are his brothers who have all become “high officials” in “formal enterprises” (*zhengui de qiye*), he says, making an expression that reflects his perception that his enterprise is a ramshackle and makeshift affair. Du, indeed, like many of the entrepreneurs in this study, seeks to trade his financial capital for what he perceives he lacks within the symbolic economy: though all the entrepreneurs in this study took great pains to emphasize the value of practical ability over academic knowledge as far as their own achievements were concerned, without exception they sought to ‘cash-in’ the wealth they had accumulated in return for academic scholarship and the acquisition of formal culture for their children. Du would like his son to go to a good university and then go abroad, not to stay in Anshan: “Money isn’t necessarily the most important criteria to be occupied with: you can have money but not necessarily have culture. If I’d had an education I would have done much better than I’m doing now. Although I’m doing okay now, this requires no real knowledge”. Businesspersons, incidentally, also all strongly emphasized the importance of their *own* achievements against what they saw as the ‘illegitimate’ achievements of those who have become successful by cultivating cliquy circles of favours and mutual obligation, the “philistines” Chen Xueyuan was so incensed about (above) having of course widely fuelled the perception that “personal ability” (*geren nengli*) is not nearly as important as one’s social and political connections in any case in China.

For a still further example of how individuals use whatever knowledge and ability they have in order to compete socially, we might consider that many of my rural-migrant worker colleagues at the ‘Lamb Buddha’ restaurant were especially given to competing through practicability too. These informants were amongst those who would most often excuse themselves from answering my questions saying they had “no level”, or were “unable to represent” because of a lack of “ability” or “education”, but this disposition was less an indication of a fundamental *lack* of ability to make differentiations than a reflection of the result of exclusion from particular *kinds* of differentiations. Though these informants clammed up when confronted by an abstract noun like “taste” (*pinwei*) (not a very good strategy for research as I quickly found out), they *actively* differentiated themselves vis-à-vis discourse in accordance with their projects of individuality, even as they indicated they were “unable” to differentiate in terms of formal knowledge. As migrant worker Lin Chuan contends:

“People don’t necessarily rely on knowledge acquired through education; but their brains are extremely quick, they can look into any problem they encounter in real detail. They can connect a problem with so many other problems, and converse about it, but we can’t do this. For example: one plus one equals two. We only know it equals two, but they can make it equal something else. They can calculate, but our thinking is naïve (*danchun*). They can think in really complex ways, but our brains are not the same. They have nine years of formal education, I have only three. So their culture is high, of course they’re cleverer than I. But it’s not the same: if a real situation comes up they’ll not necessarily be any cleverer than me. They only understand expert knowledge; they don’t understand ‘extra-curricular’ (*yeyu*) knowledge. So, actually, everyone relies on their brains to get on in society and cope with issues.”

The analysis of these last few cases, therefore, demonstrates not only how individuals are differentiated by ‘what’ they know, but how they are united by the *practical skill* with which they take prior discourses of knowledge and ability and turn them to their own ends. It has been shown, indeed, how individuals divided by ‘objective’ differences in knowledge and ability, draw upon the knowledge and ability construct in ways which are more or less similarly shared with individuals from quite different ‘objective’ positions in society. Thus, we have the beginnings of the ‘grammar’ that the later chapters of this analysis will seek to draw out.

## 5. Law and Practical Order

The Chinese might have an especially “pragmatic” (Blackman 2000) attitude to the negotiation of social rules, quite suiting this analysis. Whereas in the contemporary West the ‘rules’ are fetishized as if they cannot be broken, and exist for their own sake, in the Chinese case social knowledge is always aimed at judging rules and their application in terms of the immediate situation, the stark necessity of actively consuming the rules being deeply understood. Every Chinese is ready to quote the expression: “The hills are high and the emperor is far away” (*shangao huangdi yuan*), to explain the disposition to find room for themselves within ruling systems; and even then there is the widespread perception that those who set the rules are those who follow them the least. Chinese humor, moreover, famously involves laughing *at* the rule, rather than at those who fail to comply with the rule, as is the case in most Western cultures (Wang 2006, 31). The oft-professed notion that in a society such as Britain (often chosen as China’s other-worldly orderly and law-abiding opposite in conversation with me) there would be nothing to do except *follow* the rules therefore probably only reflects the sense in which the only ‘golden’ rule in China is that *every* rule can be bent. There is a saying: “The rules are fixed, but the people are flexible” (*guijushide, renshihuode*). Indeed, and distinctly contrary to those literatures that suggest Chinese individuals are the hapless slaves of more powerful people’s rules (see Hofstede’s concept of ‘Power Distance’ for example) this is one respect, indeed probably the only respect, where the kung fu clichés are true. When Gao Xiaofei’s mother took her driving test along with twenty others at the test centre, all failed the test and were told so, but all were given licenses anyway. ‘Jonny’ did not even have to take the test; his father was able to procure a license for him through the appropriate connections. Thus, it is said: “Our law and regulations are like a rope. The tall step over it, the short go under it, the only ones who get caught are the honest” (Wang 2006, 28). And yet, this flexibility with the rules applies to their initial assertion too: the deliberate allusion to rules that do not even exist is well-recognized as a salient trait of political, legal and business practice in China (Blackman 2000). Indeed, in a still further sense, the Chinese can seem extraordinarily strict about following rules, and highly technological, possessed of a very strong sense of proper practice in all situations even if these rules are ignored when it suits; as it is said: “If there are no rules, one cannot draw a circle” (*meiyou guiju, bucheng fangyuan*).

It is of course the introduction of ever-more sophisticated forms of law, governance and surveillance that make willful 'rule-breaking' a very necessary form of self-expression in China, a kind of 'flexing' of agency against social space and political structure. Passengers on the newer 'harmony' trains (*hexiehao*) are subjected to a wide range of remarkably forceful instructions on how to behave, by both loud-speaker and visual means, because the government believes that 'the rules' need to be explicitly spelled out, so that everyone knows, and perhaps most importantly, so that everyone present knows everyone else has been told too. At every stop passengers are reminded not to smoke, not to run, to put their toilet paper in the basket rather than down the chute, to speak quietly on their mobile phones, to be sick in the bag provided, to ensure that one's sunflower seed shells are gathered only there too, right down to minutiae such as "drink only in the designated area, and if you return to your seat with a drink, please ensure you have not overfilled your cup". Yet right in the face of what can seem to British eyes quite a rigorous form of instruction, even those not flagrantly breaking the rules at least *expect* others around them to be doing so. Consider a flight, for example, where many Chinese will strip off their seatbelts even as the crew explicitly reminds them to keep them fastened; notably a great many others will follow suit as soon as one or two have led the way. Similarly, while Britons will slavishly wait until the plane has completely docked before using any personal electronic devices, Chinese will begin mobile phone calls as soon as the landing gear touches down and they judge it safe to do so, even though these behaviours are explicitly against the 'rules'. The fact that in all these cases many Chinese individuals do not expect to be much troubled for their 'transgression', indeed that they have likely negotiated a gross contravention of the weight and size limits for hand-luggage in the first place, is evidence less of simple 'unruliness' as such than of a cultural logic where social actors negotiate the rules between them on situational and *ad hoc* basis, even where rules have in fact been made explicit and generalized by a ruling authority. This is of course not to suggest that any particular rule-set should apply equally as well in China as Britain, but that a great many Chinese people are adept at negotiating *legitimate individuality* from within the apparent 'chaos' generated by the relative paucity of absolutely fixed rules—and this despite the fact that genuine *ignorance* of social rules is probably much higher in China than in Britain, where ignorance and unruliness tends to take the form of a wantonness quite foreign to most Chinese people.

Think, too, of those Chinese drivers who refuse to wear their seat belts, and yet drape the belt across their shoulders to avoid the twenty *yuan* fine if spotted by the police, but without actually fastening it. The notion that you might as well just fasten your belt the moment you enter the vehicle doesn't hold much water because where the 'rules' are instituted to address the 'unsocial' element of society, intending to make everybody conform to the model of an 'ideal citizen', like the Lei Feng character of Maoist propaganda, the contemporary significance of wearing your seat belt becomes no different from the imperative to memorize the latest eight-character Party-policy slogan: of course you have to *show* that you comply in order not to receive sanction (fines, exclusion, punishment), but *actual* compliance is to admit that you belong to the 'unsocial', the 'bad', who need the policy for real. Thus, the *symbolic insubordination* to rules imposed, such as not fastening your seat-belt, is actually an assertion of your *legitimate individuality*: you have the *ability* to break the rules because you are a 'good steward' of your immediate social sphere; you don't need the belt because you are a good enough driver, a good citizen. Quite similarly, the ability to drink on the train whilst seated in your seat without spilling your drink everywhere is highly distinctive and socially legitimate, forging *social solidarity* even, precisely because this is 'against the rules'. Indeed, such insubordination is probably highly beneficial to a society as engineered as China: When I raise with entrepreneur Zhao the new law decreeing that long-term employees *must* have a permanent contract, he insists that this will have no effect on him. "Isn't the law *the law*?" I ask. "The law is the law", Zhao replies, "but China has certain characteristics". But at least part of Zhao's point is that there is *no need* for the law as an external sanction or intervention by the State, however minimal, at least in his case, since he has his employees' welfare *personally* in hand, ultimately a *moral* measure to balance the rampant rule-breaking going on everywhere else. When they are sick or injured, he pays for their medical expenses; when they're off work, they still get paid. Indeed, Zhao volunteers all sorts of unexpected additional financial assistance too, helping with child's education fees, and so on. But Zhao cannot give his workers contracts because he has to compete locally in the same way that his competitors do or he would go under. Zhao thus makes all these additional gestures to sustain his workers loyalty, 'plugging the gaps', as he sees it. His point, of course, is that even if his employees did have a contract, it would be next to worthless in the Chinese context compared to his personal guarantee.

This insubordination means that a somewhat 'game' attitude to *risk* is highly salient in Chinese discourse too. Tens of millions of Chinese, we might note, positively indulge in gambling *even though it is illegal*. Consider those pedestrians who step out without looking in front of cars whose drivers would never pause to allow them to cross otherwise, even though the rules say they should wait till they can be ushered across by red-capped, CCP-armband-wearing volunteers, full in the knowledge that they are protected by laws that stipulate drivers will be at fault in the event of knocking them down, laws that have been thus formulated because the ruling powers recognize that pedestrians would otherwise be killed and injured even more than they actually are. Thus, the pedestrians "poach" (De Certeau 1984) rules laid down by the ruling powers against the middle-class, car-driving, allies of that power. Indeed, some drivers will thus drive right at crossing pedestrians, forcing them to push their insubordination right to its limits: "They don't look at me; I don't look at them", a taxi driver once explained to me. Conversely, the fact that most Chinese by and large drive very carefully, rather than gambling with the margins of speed-limit infringement as many drivers do in the rush-hour West, only reflects the immediate necessity of a system where you cannot have faith that other people are behaving as the rules stipulate they should be. Those moneyed Chinese who mock motorway speed limits as they overtake on both sides in their foreign-imported cars take genuinely high risks of ploughing into the back of the truck whose driver has decided to uniquely interpret the rules by reversing back down the slip-road, or those plain ordinary drivers who switch lanes without either signaling or observing their mirrors yet nevertheless think themselves sufficiently in control of their environment. But, to repeat, it is as much the *presence* of rules that explains so much apparent 'unruliness': true to an extent, the introduction of new forms of law only applies to those who cannot afford to transgress, so that if the fine levied means nothing to you, or if you are on first-name terms with the chief of police or a high-ranking officer in the local authorities, you do not stop at the red light if you judge it is safe for you to cross; but you will of course still try to dodge the traffic cameras wherever you can. *Creative consumption* of prior rules *always* occurs in direct proportion to the instruments of rule designed to govern this: China's journalists conform to central government censorship far enough to avoid official sanction, but nevertheless manage to bend these rules in favour of what they want to write, *just as any good professional does* (cf. chapter eleven).

The irony, of course, is that this dynamic and relational nature of potentiality is perhaps least understood from the perspective of *ruling*. Consider those scholars who like to invoke “Confucianism” to contrast fluid relational rules negotiated between individuals and groups, which they take to be a model for Chinese society, with notions of legally binding rules, which they take to be a model of ‘Western’ society, to explain why social “relationships” (*guanxi*) are so much more important in Chinese business than contracts, and so on. While these rulings obviously have broad currency in this analysis, and no doubt this is part of what entrepreneur Zhao means when he refers to “Chinese characteristics” (above), all *law-like* deterministic statements of this form misleadingly suggest that social practice in contemporary China is governed by a mysteriously unruly *set* of rules called “Confucianism”. The Chinese, in fact, can be extraordinarily picky about the precise intricacies of the law when it suits their interests; and Westerners are no less compelled to take prior social rules and insinuate themselves into their constraints than the Chinese. Thus, when we learn that graduate Xiao Qiang has read in a management textbook that “In the West a red light means red, people *cannot* cross even if there are no cars in the road; Chinese people, on the other hand, will cross the road depending on their individual judgement of the speed of the cars at the time”, such constructions only evince how ‘rules’ formulated by people who have not actually *practiced* the culture they objectify are consumed by social actors even *in* that ‘target’ culture and reproduced in essentialized forms. The simple fact that the other relevant sound-bite favored by management literatures is the one contrasting “rule by law” with “rule of law” should immediately tell us that something is awry with this simple linear logic, since this contradicts the emphasis on fluid relationalism over legality. With similar *practical* effect, that is to say, “rule by law” only conjures an authoritarian state, and fails to do justice to the dynamics of how Chinese individuals work things out in the absence of the “rule of law”. Thus, and quite similarly, where consumer gurus assert that China is “a rule-bound society where acceptance of conventional order is second nature” (Doctoroff 2005, 73), and that “individualism [in China] is a clever interpretation of convention”, that “does not carry the slightest hint of rebellion” (Doctoroff 2005, 209), they can only be in any way correct if they allow for individuals’ active (re)production of that “conventional order”, and surely quite wrong to think that ‘resistance’ need be confrontational in order to be effective, *since interfacing with ‘rules’ in creative ways is just what consumers do!*



The notion that the Chinese are somehow more (or indeed less) relational than consumers elsewhere is a fallacy perpetrated by the myopic arrogance of the positivist-inflected scientific discourse in the West, where the modernist illusion that all things are not in fact interrelated in their determination has a much more sophisticated grip on thinking and action. Cultural practice is *always* informed by prior rules, just as the prior rules were informed by practice, the only 'golden rule' being that there must always be both "chaos in the order and order in the chaos" (*wuzhong shengyou, youzhong shengwu*). This might be especially well recognized in China, where known rules for legitimate action are much more like a rough guide that must be applied warily from context to context than a rigid "code", but this is not at all to say that this is not also equally the case elsewhere. Rules are made to be broken by the individual agency presupposed by them, the tension between the prior rule and the agent who consumes it being generative of everything meaningful about social practice. The logical implication of this, of course, is that the legitimate utility to break socially-agreed rules as elucidated here must always be evaluated in light of all other rules bearing on the situation, some of which may be contradictory. Indeed, even where the agency of manipulating and breaking the rules becomes a social asset, it remains the case that individuals cannot help but negotiate redefinitions of the rules only by referring to and therefore re-instantiating the rules in the first place. Thus, the assertion of the knowledge of social rules and the ability to consume them, or indeed the lack of these, must always be seen in the light of the other constructs of this analysis still yet to be introduced. But while various overlaps could of course be elicited here to capture the 'sense' of this 'inter-construct' negotiation, this would be to somewhat pre-empt the chapters still to come. The analysis therefore turns now to analyze the 'Civil Behaviour' construct, a logic which projects the notions of rule and ruling onto physical and social space, before proceeding to examine the remaining constructs abstracted from the 'language' of social distinction. This done, the analysis can address the question of how all these 'rules' are crystallized in their actual consumption, which will show us not only how the necessary tension between the prior rule and the individual agents who consume it is reconciled in various social situations, but also where the right or power to be able to 'set the rules' for the others comes from.

## Chapter 5 Civil Behaviour

### 1. Spaced Out

This chapter concerns the boundary differentiating the private 'Self' from the social world of 'Others' as these are constructed in physical space. As with the situational and transient constitution of the other constructs, the analysis maintains that there are diverse and competing constructions of where this boundary lies: there is no *set* boundary; rather the boundary is drawn by persons who put it into use as and when needed in order to include and exclude. The question, then, is of the construction of *intimacy* and *social distance* as appropriate in different contexts and situations. Discussion begins with the observation that until the 1980's most informants of this study shared a very limited living space with at least four but perhaps as many as eight or more family members. With China's economic reforms, the introduction of private ownership, and massive urban expansion, however, most families' living environments have become considerably less intimate in both total occupancy and person per square meter terms. These developments, and the increased frequency of interaction with strangers from other places who speak different languages and behave very differently, have provoked the perception of a 'code' for operating in an increasingly 'civil', universal and cosmopolitan public sphere, an arena dominated by the West in the Chinese construction. Boundaries between the intimate and the social remain configured somewhat differently in China to the West, however, and the competing constructions of intimacy in the data largely mirror the differences between China and the West in these respects. Essentially, China is constructed as occupying the local and intimate end of a situational spectrum between intimate spousal and familial relations at one end, through relatives, friends, colleagues, and strangers (where the 'Self' comes into contact with individuals who represent other, separate, intimate spheres), to the official, civic sphere of employers, government, and ultimately the cosmopolitan 'global community' at large, at the other end of the spectrum. This chapter explores the 'internal' structure of this discourse, acknowledging that many Chinese might find some of these remarks offensive, but maintains that offense is somewhat unavoidably the 'nature' of the 'beast'!

## 2. Orifices!

Analysis revealed that judgements related to the comportment of the physical body itself, and in particular the opening and closing of bodily orifices, points of direct intersection between the most intimate, and personal sphere, and the social, and public sphere, were especially relevant to the construction of civil boundaries. Relevant judgements were often also paralleled by a metaphorical dialectic between 'cleanliness' and 'dirtiness' whereby 'clean' was equivalent to the private, intimate, or inside, and 'dirty' equivalent to the public, social, or outside. Importantly, however, other judgements inverted this congruence of metaphors. Behaviours relevant to the first iteration included urinating and defecating in public space, which, like prostitution and thieving (similarly judged 'dirty'), were widely blamed on peripheral 'outsiders' (*waidiren*) entering 'central', urban space. And this, despite the fact that most of the excrement, toilet paper and sanitary products that litter Anshan's wooded parks, are dumped by urban residents and cleared away by rural migrant sanitation workers. In the public playground in '219 Park' a grossly obese child urinated onto the grass in broad daylight, directly supervised by his elderly grandmother, his trousers and pants around his ankles, in full view of bystanders; adults squatted to defecate just past the tree-line. People spit in China's cities, moreover, just as profusely as they do in the countryside, usually following a highly conspicuous effort to rally phlegm from the lungs, "powerfully" (Krajewski 2009), quite as if there is rationality at work whereby this is an entirely legitimate strategy for asserting the 'Self'. Some people spit many times in succession, or indeed regularly as they go about their daily business, without discriminating much between the floors of public restaurants, supermarkets, offices, and spitting in the sink or toilet in their own homes. Being accidentally spat on is not at all uncommon. Blowing mucous from the nasal cavity directly onto the ground, with or without the aid of fingers and thumbs, is also quite normal. Some will spit repeatedly into a bag throughout the duration of a journey on a cramped public bus, apparently with a view to sealing the bag as an act of "closing" (Krajewski 2009) only to then throw the bag out of the window to slake the sidewalk without a thought for passers-by! Some claim these are acts of *cleansing*, to expel inertia, "a site of possible decay" (Krajewski 2009), and thus *healthy*, but this does not account for the lack of discretion.

For other people who more acknowledge and anticipate the 'gaze' of society, however, these practices are considered polluting, *dirty* because they cut through what are seen as important social boundaries and categories. While some Chinese cough and sneeze directly into my face without a thought, others evidently find it proper to place a hand over the mouth, for example. One such teenage girl recalled that her mother had taught her that she must also cover her mouth when laughing: "Well brought up girls don't show their teeth when they laugh". Quite similarly, other informants would say that their parents had admonished them not to pick their teeth with a finger, or to leave chopsticks protruding from the mouth, actions that similarly draw attention to, and interfere with, the boundary between the body's intimate internality and the public externality. In exactly the same way, however, the handkerchief, a distinctly Western and modern import, similarly blurs categories by contradicting the need some feel to "expel" and "close" by retaining a snot-soaked rag in one's pocket! There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way that civil boundaries should be asserted, therefore; and behaviours considered inappropriate in one context may even be quite permissible in another. Indeed, internal body matter is of course considered fertile in some contexts, a site for new life rather than a pollutant. A passenger waiting at Shanghai Pudong airport, however, blows his snot directly into the bin marked 'inorganic matter' (in both English and Chinese) whilst neglecting the adjacent bin marked "organic matter". Babies in China, for that matter, do not wear nappies, but rather a kind of jump-suit that leaves the bottom and 'private parts' exposed through a hole, which would be utterly unacceptable in the West, where our child-care is so sterilized and fear of paedophilia so hysterical. In China, however, many parents will simply lift their infant into an appropriate position so they can be relieved in their immediate public vicinity, making for much less dirtiness for 'Self' but not such a pleasant environment for the 'Other'. Of course, reasons other than mere personal convenience are offered for this kind of baby-wear; an open bottom is apparently preferable to nappy-rash. Nappy sales are rising rapidly in China, however, indicating that these practices may be on the decline. The discourse of civil behaviour thus far, then, is shown to consist in a tension between a humoric medicine view where the openness of the body to the social sphere, expectoration and bare-butt babies are considered 'healthy' and 'natural', and a 'modernity' view of the opening of the body in public space which is an extension of urban society's enforcement of 'hygiene' as civility.

### 3. Animals!

Just as foods and liquids must exit body, so they must be replenished. Healthy eating thus emerged particularly strongly in informants' judgements of civil behaviour. In particular, it was "eating anything" and/or "eating carelessly" (*luanchi*), which was found disagreeable, which is of course another breach of the 'floodgates' governing the perception of classificatory boundaries discussed at chapter three; where one anomaly comes through, legions will follow (cf. chapter three, 54). Of course, only "animals" will "eat anything", a judgement which constructs the uncivil 'Other' as an entirely different order of existence, the emphasis is on the 'dirtiness' of the excess of organic naturality. Civility of course aspires to be especially *rational*, so that the "animal" metaphor lurks wherever the 'uncivil' is defined as a lack of control. In the West, of course, certain animals have been deemed "unclean" for human consumption since Old Testament times (cf. Douglas 1966). Many Chinese, on the other hand, share a strong passion for eating 'wild' (*yesheng*) animals, the rarity and high price of which translates into a marker of status as well as 'healthiness', the revelation that the outbreak of SARS in 2003 was linked to the consumption of civet cat meat having provoked a raft of new hygiene legislation in order to annul the risks to public health that such tastes entail. Indeed, it is Guangdong Province (closest to the SARS epicentre) that people in Anshan most characterize as being "willing to eat anything except aeroplanes and cannons" in reference to the monkey, bear, reptile and insect delicacies favored there, as well as the brains, penises, lungs and intestines less eaten in the North. A further contrast in the construction of civil behaviour is emergent here too, and one that inverts the purity of 'inside' asserted in the *cordon sanitaire*: it is probably no accident that the Chinese character for 'dirty' is identical to the character for 'internal organ' being only differentiated by a tonal inflection on the syllable *zang* in the verbal language. Slightly contradicting this in the first place, however, is the 'folk' awareness that the healthiest animals to eat are those furthest away from the human gene pool, the rule being that animals with the least possible number of legs are healthiest. Meat from animals that walk on only two legs, such as chicken, is considered healthier than meat from animals that walk on four legs such as pigs and cows. Best of all are animals that do not walk on legs at all such as fish, prawns and shellfish. How this is squared with eating centipedes and millipedes in China's far South share is beyond me!

Hygiene in food consumption is of course an issue which comes into conflict with the 'modernity' construction in China in the public sphere if not in the intimate sphere also, and in ways which can interestingly confuse the congruence of the metaphorical oppositions articulated thus far. Some foods must of course be prepared to be healthy, whilst others need not be, introducing the contrast between the "raw" and the "cooked" (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1975), a form of judgement which inverts the privilege given to judgements of the natural, ripe, and unspoilt 'purity of origin' discussed at the 'Authenticity' judgement, and which broadly parallels the opposition of 'nature' with 'culture', 'animal' with 'human', 'rural' with 'urban', 'cleanliness' with 'dirtiness', and so on. Grandma Liu, for example, a neighbour, defined peasants as "dirty as hell" (*zangshile*) on account of not washing fruit and not cooking vegetables before eating them: "They just take a carrot, give it a rub and eat it", she said, "they don't peel it... they don't even wash it!". Until sterilizing machines and vacuum-packed dining kits were very recently introduced to China, diners at anything but the best of restaurants would routinely ask for a pot of boiling water to wash bowls and glasses before eating, the excess water usually being cast onto the floor; insisting on disposable chopsticks was also standard practice for the same hygienic reasons until environmental awareness was very recently flagged up as a public priority (cf. Ikels 1996, 29). But for the very same informants with whom I often enacted these practices, hygiene also remained in other ways very much *opposed* to health, since the Chinese understanding of health is still strongly informed by a traditional medicine discourse which is often set explicitly against scientific healthcare and the modern cleansing agents increasingly recognized to do as much to weaken the immune system as to heal. This explains why informants often seemed to have double-standards in these respects, spitting indiscriminately on the ground, for example, but loathing the picking of the nose, spots, and scabs, and so on, for fear of infection. This tension in the discourse also explains why my hosts in Anshan love to jibe that I am "always ill" because I am "too hygienic", in defence of the implicit accusation that their environment is 'dirty' every time I suffer stomach upsets in their company. But while I thoroughly enjoy eating farm-produce on my excursions into rural climes, for example, and heartily appreciate how much healthier and better-tasting home-grown eggs and free-range meats are than their mass-produced versions, the regularity with which I suffer diarrhoea in the countryside somewhat spoils my appreciation!

#### 4. Ins and Outs

Unhealthy or sick people, of course, may burden others with their care and possibly spread infection, so people have a *civil responsibility* to try to be healthy. But where civil boundaries pertaining to hygiene awareness are brought into the private or intimate sphere in China, this can result in problematic charges of pedantry, formalism or even selfishness. My hosts, for example, found it incomprehensible when they heard that my own parents might elect to sleep in separate beds if one of them has a bad cold or flu in an attempt to prevent the other getting ill too, civil concern for personal health being the very *last* of things one should admit to if a relative is sick in China; hypothetical justifications about the necessity of one of them having to care for the other, to go out to work, and so on, held no ground at all! By a similar token, whereas it is widely understood in the West that children over a certain age should be given their 'own' space to play, and quite negotiable that an adult may need to shut themselves away for a few hours in order to work, in China on the other hand, the shutting of an internal door for anything except the most *personal* of activities can be considered quite rude; most urban single-children of course playing *with* their parents. Even fifty-five year old Fang Kai was consistently unconcerned to leave the room if needing to use his mobile phone while I was reading and writing, and though I made every effort to keep quiet whilst he slept in the middle of the day, my consideration towards him earned no capital at all because Fang was much less attuned to these kinds of deferential behaviours. Indeed, it is really quite important that there should be no 'civil' boundaries asserted within the intimate sphere in China, and sometimes my hosts would deliberately exploit my investment in 'civility' to indicate my exclusion. Zhang Zheng, for example, flagrantly flouted the idea that he should have to keep his lips together when chewing, asking: "Why do you keep your lips closed?", "What use is it?", and "Is it because of the influence on other people?", whilst slopping and slurping noisily away, consuming with every motion the idea that he should have to conform to my foreign norms. Zhang, however, who was not especially civil at the best of times, nevertheless notably made the effort to wipe his mouth and guard his burping when we were with his friend and relative Guan Hongliang, a man of high status representative of the 'civic' sphere, who himself only occasionally opened his mouth when eating.

Speaking of eating, talking about the origins of the food we were eating whilst actually eating it, and ‘unsavoury’ topics of conversation at the dinner table most generally - indeed talking about bodily functions and animal parts and so on – were areas where once again there was occasionally explicit contention: once it had been discovered that I would rather not think about the cow’s udders whilst drinking milk, for example, even the eating of human placenta (still available on the black market), and unborn foetuses (*taier*) (allegedly a favourite of the still much reviled Japanese), was not off the menu for discussion, provocations justified by the fact that human placenta and unborn foetuses are believed to be extremely high in nutrition according to now illegal interpretations of Traditional Chinese Medicine (cf. Pritchford 1993, 322). *Powerful* assertions of ‘incivility’ like this are perhaps quite difficult to understand from a particular modern perspective: though many of these behaviours are enacted in genuine ignorance of ‘civil norms’, they are also made in wilful ignorance. In some cases, the ‘opening up’ of the physical body onto others or otherwise ‘opening’ the “floodgates” governing civil social categories are perhaps the only resources individuals disaffected by the trajectory of China’s reforms have left to ‘open up’ a social space for themselves. At other times, however, it was precisely by others making a ‘civil transgression’ in my presence that I was to understand I *belonged* to the intimate sphere. Long after first meeting my wife’s grandfather, I was assured that when I had first met him he had tried not to speak too much because his wife had given him explicit instructions to try to hold his wind. I was explicitly led to understand how significant it was that the grandfather, “who was well accustomed to doing whatever he wanted and received the best of gifts back in the days when nobody was corrupt”, had altered his behaviour for me, and then changed it back again once he felt that I belonged! In contrast to European middle-class households, therefore, which socialize their members to behave towards each other as if ‘strangers’ in the civic rather than intimate sphere, at least some Chinese families tend to afford more intimacy between their members, allowing for belching, farting, ways of speaking and other behaviours, which define the intimate sphere in ways also observable in some non-‘middle-class’ European families. In China, that is to say, the lines of intimacy and friendship are drawn such that the situational inclusion of friends and colleagues into certain intimate spheres, often to do with eating (cf. following chapter), can probably be sealed with a fart or burp as a waft of belonging!



## 5. P's and Q's

Intimacy, indeed, is actively encouraged in China, especially at the 'local' end of the situational civility spectrum, where people are actively encouraged to get along with each other without ceremony (cf. following chapter). As a foreigner, I am forever told that I needn't say "thank you" (*xiexie*) so much, "We are family; you don't need to say thank you", and "English people are really polite" (*tebie limao*) being regular refrains. Those who know me well know that I act out of deeply ingrained habit, but relatively new acquaintances can find it disarming, my excessive civility, to their minds, keeping them as strangers. Of particular potential for confusion is the fact that I cannot help but say "thank you" to my wife, which in the Chinese context signifies a lack of intimacy between us (which is not the case), something reserved primarily for the public, non-intimate sphere. One can now imagine the dilemma, say, of secret lovers: if they fail to say "xiexie" in situations where it is socially expected, they may reveal their intimacy to others, while by using "xiexie" they are mutually undermining their relationship. There is also a sense, however, in which one does not normally say "thank you" in China to people who are just doing their job or fulfilling their role, so it seems exceptional to my informants that I feel the need to say "thank you" to the waitress for filling up my glass. Though one may comment positively on people's work if it is excellently performed, 'recognizing' the serving person as human by saying "you're hard-working" (*ni xinkule*) or some such, saying "thank you" in a service context in China always carries an ambiguity of *command*, and in exactly the same way in which saying "please" (*qing*), has tones of subservience to superior status. A careful ear to the ground, however, will note that a more democratized form of thanks in response to the ordinary and unexceptional exertions of others has begun to sneak into the Chinese discourse, perhaps as a result of Hollywood movies, and exposure to foreigners. This tendency has been encouraged by the State which is keen to make it seem that the consumption of culture is equally accessible to all, which it is of course not, the whole point of saying "thank you" just out of politeness in China being precisely to demonstrate *exceptional* cultivation and personal quality. Indeed, where explicit expression of gratitude *is* required, merely saying "thank you" is *never* enough, the "buyongxie" that the Chinese say in return every time someone says "thank you" ultimately signifying the meaninglessness of words.

The relationship between *professed* intimacy and actual behaviour is complex in any case: the steel workers who kindly agreed to have me over for an evening excitedly exhorted me to “be at ease” (*suibian*) even as they over-arranged tables and chairs and flapped around offering me fruits to eat. In other contexts, indeed, precisely this “suibian” was used to make negative judgements about people who do not understand ‘civil’ requirements: when I complimented the general manager of a Western-style restaurant on the orderliness of her staff, for example, the word “suibian” was used to describe “outsiders” (*waidiren*) who “don’t do it well”. Further, and conversely, excess civility can be used to exclude even with the guise of intimacy, such as when a family friend I had not previously met asked me if he could serve me, as if in order to draw us together in friendship, saying “You’re a guest”, and where I reply, “I’m not a guest; I know all these people; I’ve lived here for years and now I’m family”, before the response came: “No, really, I’ll serve you”, as if directly disagreeing, asserting his somehow more profound intimacy, and therefore keeping the interaction between the two of us in the civil, non-intimate sphere. Intimate relations in China, therefore, involve serving each other in ways quite different to ‘civil’ relationships: while service to a ‘universal’ norm in the civil sphere is supposed to benefit everyone no more than any other (i.e. you must be public-minded and public-spirited etc), service in the intimate sphere is explicitly personal. Accordingly, there are other instances, too, where the perception that the public or civil sphere has been illegitimately brought into the intimate sphere can cause upset: if good hygiene, rationality, the necessity of being socially responsible, accountable, and fair, and so on defines the ‘civic’ sphere to the contrast of the poor hygiene and self-interest of the ‘intimate’ sphere, then corruption, official nepotism, and corporate pollution are close in the discourse too. And this is perhaps especially the case where there is such little *trust* in the official sphere as there is in China, where the ‘public’ seems so often only something to be *taken advantage of* (cf. Fei 1992, 60). Where the boundary between the intimate and the public is perceived to have been breached by way of official corruption, for example, at once ‘opened’ inappropriately, the boundary is perceived to have been equally inappropriately ‘closed’ to protect those who have failed their civic duty. Thus, while there are competing constructions of where the boundary between the intimate and the civil should lie, most people agree that there should be at least some separation between the two in all situations (cf. chapter seven on ‘Moral Character’).

## 6. Public Sex!

Sex is a particularly interesting area of practice from the perspective of the construction of intimate and civil boundaries, since it is perhaps where 'Self' and 'Other' come closest, though there are many other ways to be intimate (Yan 2003). In sex, the metaphorical dialectic of 'closed is clean' and 'open is dirty' with respect to the exposure of the insides of one's body can be entirely reappraised: it is easy to see how 'animality' can be desirable in sexual relations for example. Similarly, it is easy to see how suspicions of sexual laxity or hyper-sexuality can arise from women exposing too much flesh on the leg or around the midriff as they try too hard to be 'modern' (cf. Lei 2003). Thus, the "floodgates open" metaphoric (discussed above) returns: "Some women will do *anything* for money" said an attendant at a luxury health club, referring to the women who work in the 'massage' area downstairs. Yet a certain sexualisation might be quite necessary for Chinese women to compete in the increasingly internationalizing and cosmopolitan sphere (cf. Hanser 2005). Certainly Anshan's masseuses perceive their role as providing a *civil* service, where the rule that they touch the customers rather than the other way around keeps them 'clean'. Quite similarly, in prostitution, where the 'intimate' is actively consumed in the public sphere, the 'whore' must make herself out to be a 'clean girl' in order to generate business, her comportment dignified and governed by the civil decorum appropriate for a business deal, right down to the additional charge for having sex without a condom, the ultimate prophylaxis between 'Self' and 'Other', even though the service purchased is perhaps intended to be fouler and baser in its raw 'intimacy' than the interaction of spouses in any case. Newspaper advertisements promoting prostitutes services, moreover, explicitly emphasize the 'quality' of prostitutes in terms of them being "university students" (*daxuesheng*), presumably in order to appeal to a more 'civil' client, those plying the big-city markets for foreigners commanding the highest prices, thus further complicating the axis of the civil and the intimate (cf. Xin 2002, 35). Extramarital sexual intimacy, in prostitution or otherwise, of course remains explicitly 'deviant' in discourse, but even within marriage there will likely be separate rules about how partners construct and deconstruct their intimacy from out of the public sphere that surrounds them. One would expect a proper intimacy rather than a stilted civility between sexual partners, yet these boundaries are negotiated in complex ways, actors graduating 'in' and 'out' according to mutually-defined terms!

The sexual and gendered dimension of bodily *posturing* therefore emerged as especially important in the construction of civil behaviour. More than one female informant asserted the importance of sitting with one's legs crossed rather than apart; in the Anshan branch of the international supermarket Carrefour, however, a middle-aged woman holds a young girl over a waste-bin, her legs splayed wide apart against her chest to reveal her peeing vagina to every customer arriving at the top of the escalator. Similarly, when another middle-aged woman has finished clambering around to arrange her belongings on the train, she bends to attend to something at her feet, thus forcing her bottom directly towards my face for a prolonged period of time, quite without shame! "They just don't know", said a presumably wealthy man of the migrant worker changing-room assistants in the 'Euroland-Style' health club, who were apparently unaware that clients might prefer space to shower and towel away from the immediate gaze of several same-sex attendants: The man's comment was supposed to indicate that we shared a similar way of thinking in this respect, a rare act of 'warmth' shown in an environment where clients neglected to afford me any of 'intimate' interest in my being a foreigner that most Chinese do, preferring instead to act indifferently, *civilly*, in accordance with their own perceived status and their perception of the 'international' sphere; and yet, it was perfectly acceptable for men to walk about in the changing rooms with their 'private-parts' dangling and swinging about, making full-frontal naked greetings, even to touch, quite without any fear of adverse judgement or homophobia! —and this, in a manner quite unlike the assertion that only too much testosterone in uncouth, loutish men could generate in the U.K.. In the U.K., of course, you are supposed to posture yourself with a subtle but complex mix of eye-contact aversion and general economy; but in China many people seem to feel little compulsion to avert their eyes to ceiling above, left or right into empty space, down to 'mind your own business', or indeed *anywhere* but the regions of an another mans' business even whilst using the urinal! The stripping off of shirts in public, again a male thing, or the lifting of the shirt to expose the abdomen in order to cool down (*bangye*), are also status quo practices that the government is anxious to divorce itself from (see below). Once again, however, these are forms of assertion quite different to the essentially aggressive and needy showing of skins that adolescent and otherwise immature males in Britain feel the need to indulge as soon as the sun comes out: nowhere near as sexualized and yet still highly *masculine* somehow (cf. following chapter).

## 7. Take a Stand

It is rare to hear people in China publically challenge what they perceive as 'uncivil behaviour', but many complain in private, signifying the frustration that reality doesn't add up to supposed norms. Various neighbours professed that they self-consciously avoid the sidewalk whilst walking, instead using the middle of the road, thus ensuring that they avoid the food waste, litter and various other objects often thrown from the windows above. Anshan's drivers, who of course now tend to be of the emerging 'middle-class' type, then moan about the disorderliness of people "randomly" walking about in the roads. Many of these revel in blasting the horn at point blank range from within the privacy of their cars, forcing pedestrians and cyclists to scatter away muttering loathing under their breath. Various complaints are made when a new neighbor lights a fire-stove in the communal corridor, and proceeds to spatter boiling hot cooking oil over the tiled flooring for fully four hours, smeeching smoke and wailing fire alarms notwithstanding, before finally flying into a fit of rage when ordered to stop: "This is China's crude method (*tu fangfa*), it's my culture to do this on the first day in a new home!" Still other neighbours complained that those who have bought into the recent dog-ownership craze coop their mutts up in high-rise flats to bark night and day, no matter that they live in close proximity to non-intimates, before occasionally letting these dogs out to excrete, fight, and mate *en masse* with each another in the streets. (One such young woman chased her pretty little poodle – without a collar, let alone a leash – in and amongst six lanes of rush-hour traffic as the dog chased a leaf, beating the dog viciously around the face upon catching it as if it was not her own fault.) Another popular gripe is that one will only very rarely get an apology if bumped into whilst walking, many people indeed apparently oblivious of the trajectories of others negotiating public space around them. And what of the construction works pounding throughout the night; the high-intensity dance music for spritely old people to exercise by at the break of dawn; or the fireworks set off at the same hour for weddings, funerals, and the opening of every new restaurant that Anshan's populous must suffer on a daily basis? Many of these disruptions are now outlawed in Beijing and other large cities on the grounds of disturbing the elderly and infirm, but not so in Anshan, so that more developed cities can be seen to lead the way in the transition up the sliding scale from the intimate towards the civil sphere, from the local to the cosmopolitan, as a new form of judgement becomes increasingly normalized.

Essentially, the avenues, institutions and *rights* to complain about civil behaviour remain either non-existent or largely ineffective in many parts of China: “We’re used to it” (*xiguanle*); “There’s nothing that can be done” (*meiyou banfa*); and “Everyone’s doing it” are ubiquitous refrains. But it is of course important to see that *not* complaining can be highly distinctive in the first place, for individuals who make a civil virtue out of *restraint*. In Britain, ‘holding’ a ‘civil tongue’ means to exercise a particular form of control where one avoids unthinkingly speaking one’s mind in public, especially on intimate and sexual matters. But in China it is far more legitimate for people from the ‘external’ sphere to interrupt in the ‘intimate’ sphere. Answers are publically demanded to all manner of questions about matters one might otherwise think private: “How much is your salary?”, “Are you married yet?”, “Why don’t you have any children?”, “Do you have an illness?” etc. Relevant too, is the way in which I occasionally find myself remonstrating with my hosts for discussing what I consider to be intimate family business as we pass in and out of the threshold of our home; quietening my own voice is deeply learned and habitual, but both my hosts and our neighbours seem subconsciously mindful that not so long ago people would leave their doors open throughout the day and neighbours would come and go as they pleased. My companions in Anshan are also noticeably less bothered to hush their voices when laughing at what to my mind are potentially injurious judgements about uncivil others when there are many others around, on a bus, say; they don’t seem to see that I am really judging negatively, and that I intend this to be a private matter shared between us, the fact that others are uncivil still fundamentally acceptable, if laughable. Indeed, these same companions will pass audible public judgement on non-familiar third-parties without the slightest fear of reprimand. Similarly, Chinese can be observed to be much less concerned about interrupting others than many Western people would be even in the explicitly ‘civil’ sphere: even Chinese delegates at academic conferences are sometimes evidently less inclined to lower their voices if compelled to speak at the same time as the principal speaker! And yet, although many Chinese do not register the ‘polite’ cough, prickly glances or (if absolutely necessary) ‘tut’ of the tongue variously expected to be enough to ‘correct’ ‘uncivil’ public behaviour in Britain, dissatisfied frowns and mutually acknowledged rolls of the eyes at third-party behaviour are increasingly common as the finer comportments distinctive to the civil sphere become rapidly understood.

## 8. Age Concern

It is often Anshan's youths or young adults who try hardest to be identified with 'manners' (*limao*), perhaps on account of greater exposure to 'modern' (*xiandai*) or international norms. 'Sam', for example, really doesn't like it when his newly-wed wife interrupts him while he is telling me about how much he knows about music in the West: he doesn't react and makes her wait until he has finished even though I offer him an opportunity to break off the conversation to attend to her by deliberately averting my eyes from his to her. His wife has not been abroad. 'Sam' also covers his mouth with his hand if he needs to speak when eating, something he has probably picked up in Canada as an overseas student I wonder. Likewise, 'Andy', who has schooled in South Africa thinks it is good to have me as a friend because he can "learn manners" (*xue limao*) from me. Again, 'Cindy' "liked the U.K.", because people were "more polite" (*limao*) and "opened the door" for her, and so on. Quite clearly these people believe that there is a certain set of behaviours appropriate and necessary for negotiating the cosmopolitan or international sphere, that they are eager to re-enact in the cause of asserting themselves vis-à-vis their surroundings. By contrast, it is significantly the middle-aged and upwards who lived through times when civil behaviour was denigrated as 'bourgeois' who invest least in competing through civil behaviour. Those rummaging through racks of unpacked raw meats in the supermarket with their bare hands before wandering off to touch everything else around the store are nearly always middle-aged or older. Age is also nearly always the difference between those who upon finding me practicing *taiji* in Anshan's woods whisper a note of surprise between themselves ("foreigner!"), or even call "hello!", and those who seem to almost deliberately disturb my space, walking right up to and immediately past me, causing me to have to stop and look around to ensure my safety, before walking on by without any obvious qualms at all! "Either they don't have any education or they want to feel like they're the host, like they've got power", a young and relatively civil friend explained to me. The taxi driver who immediately belched into our confined enclosure in a disgustingly forced way when I said I was a "social scientist" (*shehuixuejia*) in response to his question about what I did for a living was also middle-aged. Another taxi driver, again of advanced years, who had likewise burped powerfully within the cab, picked his nose and flicked the substance at me over the plastic divider between us when I asked if he would mind not doing that again!

Age, however, is by no means the only factor structuring consumption of the 'civil behaviour' construct. There *are* those modernizing sophisticates for whom barefacedly staring or pointing at foreigners are norms regarded as rude; but then there are just as many young people who have evidently not been schooled in the ways of civil behaviour at all. Indeed, and more to the point, there are plenty of urban families who still leave the doors to their homes wide open so that the public can see and hear everything that goes on inside, quite as people once did all over China, but as only some of those who live in the countryside still do today as a matter of course. Walking around Anshan's more 'downtown' urban areas, one sees families occupying some vaguely delimited space in the streets outside their homes, hanging around in various degrees of undress, washing clothes, washing dishes, cooking, arguing, and so on, yet entirely ignoring or not at all expecting any public gaze. While Westerners and now many Chinese would expect the 'private' to be closed, secret, and out of sight, for these individuals bathing bodies, breastfeeding babies, and even sleeping directly before the public eye, the sphere of intimacy is distinctly *within* public space. The consumption of the 'civil behaviour' construct is therefore quite clearly divided between those for whom intimacy and privacy are coterminous, on the one hand, and those for whom intimacy remains visible and not coterminous with privacy, on the other. There are of course many factors structuring the 'grammar' of this divide aside from age, not the least of which is formal education, but let it be remarked here that the difference is in some large measure apparently also related to the difference between those who can *afford* to affect the civil sphere as a boundary between the 'intimate' and 'public', and those who cannot. Indeed, when we realize that the new and expensive homes currently shooting up with breakneck speed all over China's cities are constructed precisely to cordon off 'private' utopias away from these lively and textured street scenes; and that the distribution of social space on those lively streets is apparently governed by the rule that the bigger and more expensive to repair one's car seems to be the more rights to social space one can lay claim to, we must explicitly consider the question of 'civility' as a function of social, economic and macro-political power. For as China increasingly engages with the 'civil', international sphere, the perception is rife that the 'intimate' is rapidly being hollowed out of the 'public' by private property and commodity ownership, that is, by the 'consumption' that business practitioners most readily understand.



## 9. Breaking Them In

By way of analyzing this problem, consider first this excerpt from Du Feng, owner of a luxury health club, who is answering a question about the “responsibilities” (*zeren*) his firm has to society:

“China and Chinese people still have to go through certain process of adjustment before they can have a high-degree of cultivation and high-level quality-of-personhood’ (*suzhi*). Most important is that they must be educated. Anshan city is not the same as before: a good environment is being created to cause those who don’t understand civility (*budong wenming*) and public morals (*bujiang daode*), to force (*qiangbi*) them to embrace civility (*qu jiangwenming*). I’ll give you a simple example: if there’s a person who doesn’t understand civility, who spits everywhere as he likes, and randomly throws dirty things around, and you take him to the great hall in a five star hotel, where the floor is really clean, clean beyond comparison, and everyone is wearing Western suits and leather shoes, he will be too embarrassed to spit on the floor. If you have a clean environment you’ll force (*bishi*) him to behave”.

Du clearly thinks that civil norms are Western, of the cosmopolitan sphere in origin, and come at a *cost*, of the “embarrassment” caused to those that he and his firm must “force” to change their behavioural norms, and (we may infer) of entrance to the “five star hotel”. Du then goes on to say that from a certain date members of his club will not be allowed to wear the loose pajama-style clothes currently provided, but must rather bring their own sports clothes, thus making it clear that his understanding of civility is underscored by a particular *vision* where individuals must *look* the part as well as behave in certain ways: “Sometimes, as soon as you are not careful, they ‘open up’ (*la kai*); opening up is uncivil (*kaile bu wenming*), and not nice to look at”, he explains: “When doing yoga, you’ve got to see the curvy line of your body. You must wear the right clothes, not these baggy things. It doesn’t look good for others”. This *aesthetic* of course goes beyond the simple adherence to rules about not spitting etc, because it is a ‘total vision’ of an alternative reality rather than of any one particular behavioural adjustment. But Du may have mistaken what civility is: civility might be an important part of his sanitized vision of material affluence, but civility is not equivalent or reducible to this. Civility, indeed, cannot be “forced” on individuals at all, but only encouraged, because although there is a disciplinary cost, there is always a corresponding gain.

Discourse on *wenming*, the term that Du Feng uses for “civility”, has crystallized in the contemporary era in approximate parallel with discourse on “quality-of-personhood” (*suzhi*), two terms that have become almost inseparable in their contemporary usage. The precise meaning of the latter term is little agreed upon, the utility of the term of course consisting in the flexibility of its application, but suffice to say that ‘low *suzhi*’ (*suzhi di*) is the most commonly cited reason for ‘uncivil’ behaviors, and that ‘uncivil behaviors’ are amongst the first things people raise when trying to define *suzhi*. Academics broadly agree that *suzhi* discourse has conflated ordinary people’s lack of manners and lack of formal education with issues of over-population in the countryside and the lack of progress among the lower rungs of urban society, and constructed the State and its allies (i.e. those who most stimulate economic growth) as “supplement” (Anagnost 2004, 193) in order to validate the political status quo and legitimize a paternal role in raising China out of the ranks of the ‘unruly’ (Murphy 2004; Fong 2007). Particularly in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the State harnessed hosts of celebrities to nod their approval for acts of civil deference (such as opening the door for others) on national television, and plastered more prohibitive instructions about not spitting and so on in local newspapers and in public places right across the land. Noting that this discourse has the effect of shaming ‘lower class’ persons into global cosmopolitan norms, scholars of a ‘leftist’ disposition (Anagnost 2004; Yan 2003; Pun 2003) have attempted to lay the blame for this mechanism at the feet of the Western consumer, arguing that this discourse actively disguises the fact that the “bodies” (Anagnost 2004) of rural migrants and the urban poor provide the surplus of cheap labour that allows the accumulation of capital in the hands of the global elite and the flourishing of the Chinese middle class (cf. Elias 2000). The internal dynamics of this naked “neo-liberal” (cf. Kipnis 2007) exploitation are reasonably clear in their implication in the objectionable excerpt from Du Feng (above). But while discourses on civility surely *are* used to excuse all manner of actions that unjustly constrain individual agency in China, and the accumulation of capital in China’s cities indeed *does* in large part depend on the exploitation of rural to urban aspirations, and of the social aspirations of all non-elites most broadly (Pun 2005; Hanser 2005; Chan 2001), of which civility is no doubt a part (see below), there is nothing in this discourse to suggest that the goals of civility per se are mistaken, and nothing to suggest that market capitalism per se need be opposed to social intimacy.

## 10. Breaking Them Out

By way of making the point, consider Xiao Qiang, a talented young graduate, who is keen to speak the ‘language’ of civility as a function of articulating his aspirations of transcending his working-class background (Xiao’s father was a worker at Angang of limited education; his mother had no formal employment):

“On the bus in foreign countries, people will smile at each other to express their kindness when their eyes meet, is this not so? But on buses in China, when two strangers’ eyes meet, they immediately hide away from each other. Why is this? Because there is a distance between people; really strange, a very indifferent (*mosheng*) feeling. Uncivil behaviours are universal here. For example, spitting randomly; there are loads of people like this. Others make lots of noise in public, upsetting other people but without the slightest self-awareness. These kinds of things really are a widespread. For example, when we get on a bus there’s no queuing, making people feel real regret (*yihan*). In fact, Anshan also has this situation. What can we say about the universal situation in China right now? It’s people’s hearts; people’s feelings are more and more indifferent (*lengmo*). No-one cares about strangers at all anymore. This is all unsatisfactory. Of course, there are many people who play on other people’s kindness and empathy to cheat them. For example, beggars who use people’s empathy (*tongqingxin*) to cheat them, and don’t rely on their own hard work (*nuli*) to live; they only want to abuse people’s kindness to cheat them. The result is that ‘human feelings’ (*renqing*) have become very, very cold. It used to be the case that, in China, when two people met for the first time, even if their only relation, their only link, was just a number or a QQ name, or an email, they wouldn’t break the feeling: it was ‘group living’ (*qunti shenguo*). But now it’s all cold, flat and lonely (*pingdan*); so it’s a tragedy, a real tragedy”.

The interesting observation to make here is that in conflating the discourse of civil behaviour with an attack on *selfishness* (the opposite of what he calls “group living”), Xiao actually *inverts* the linear continuum in which this chapter has argued the structure of the civil behaviour discourse consists. That is to say, it is not so much the spitting, the not queuing, or the making of lots of noise that bothers Xiao, though this is indeed what he refers to in the first instance, but rather the pronounced “indifference”, lack of “human feelings” and lack of intimacy between people. Xiao doesn’t see civil behaviour in terms of personal privacy at all, but rather through the prism of intimacy with others, *precisely the opposite concept*, a perception only reinforced by the way he mixes this judgement with the judgement of those who “play on other people’s kindness and empathy” for personal gain, and so on.

Where Xiao continues to seek intimacy in the public sphere rather than in personal privacy, he remains *unable to separate* his judgements of civil behaviour from judgements of moral character, a very different discourse altogether (cf. chapter seven). This is therefore an excellent example of how the civil behaviour construct is structured by those for whom intimacy and privacy are coterminous on the one hand, and those for whom intimacy remains visible and not coterminous with privacy on the other: Xiao, essentially, will never transcend his working class roots while he continues to see things this way, no matter how much he makes aspirational judgements about the ‘uncivil’ behaviours of others: he is speaking the ‘right’ discourse in the ‘wrong’ way. Xiao might, however, eventually realize that the *ability to separate* is the very essence of civil discourse, and that learning to seek intimacy in personal privacy rather than visible intimacy in the public sphere, is a form of individuation necessary for his middle class aspirations along with separating his judgements of uncivil behaviour from judgements of ‘bad’ moral character (i.e. as progressively shown in this dissertation; cf. chapter eleven in particular). Most importantly for our purposes here, however, there is nothing in Xiao’s discourse to suggest that civil discourse is itself the cause of the “cold” and “lonely” “feelings” Xiao regrets; indeed it is quite clear from his narrative that everything ‘bad’ he bemoans is the result not of civility but of *incivility, precisely the opposite concept*, although Xiao himself doesn’t know it. Xiao is quite right to point out that the underlying cause of all the spitting, not queuing, and general incivility in contemporary China is the fact that Chinese act only out of their own convenience and self-interest when in public and have very little responsibility to society at large (cf. the discussion of the ‘proximity law’ at chapter seven of this research): “No-one cares about strangers at all anymore”, as he puts it. But although Xiao somehow seems to lay the blame for this lack of intimacy at the door of economic reform simply by virtue of pining for an earlier, supposedly more intimate time, there is nothing to suggest that official State discourse on civility, or market capitalism, or indeed Xiao’s (albeit misguided) ‘middle class’ aspirations, are themselves in any way culpable here either. Xiao’s feigned nostalgia is idealistic, misplaced, and only serves to underline his working class ‘habitus’, for rather than being the harbinger of *incivility*, market reform is much more likely the harbinger of civility; it’s just that Xiao can’t see the difference between civility and a lack of intimacy.

## 11. Civil Society

Consider one final example from fifty-four year old journalist Lin Yue, just to make the point here:

“Chinese people have many bad habits, uncivilized habits that make people disgusted. They speak in an uncivilized way, and spit indiscriminately. They are unconscious of it themselves, but the people around them think it is disgusting. They have no control over these bad habits; they make no demands on themselves. In recent years the government have become aware of people’s uncivil deportment, and gradually advocated civility, especially ahead of the 2008 games. But we can’t suddenly change to a civilized city; a tree has deep roots. Randomly spitting is already regarded by a lot of people as extraordinarily ugly, but there’s no way; they will have to recognize bit by bit, and change bit by bit. We tell them, but they will think we are ill! Right now, we still don’t have that kind of fine atmosphere: if we tell them, they’ll think we’re ill, do you know? Perhaps this is a Chinese characteristic; perhaps in foreign countries, paying attention to other people’s behaviour and matters that don’t concern you is very normal, but in China you can’t criticize others behaviour because we have not yet advanced to that kind of atmosphere, we must slowly change, and gradually improve this environment. It’s not that we don’t admit it: our government has put up many lists not allowing this, and not allowing that; we have the ten ‘don’ts’ and so on. In fact everyone knows these uncivil things. Everyone understands; it’s just that they don’t want to be the first to change. But we all hope that if we can start with ourselves that everyone will start from themselves, and this phenomenon will perhaps change. From the television; the media all report it, every level of government has declared it, public benefit announcements have also stated it; in fact everyone knows, but for many people their cultural cultivation is too low”.

Lin is quite right that provoking civility in China will take time; and surely she is right that civil progress will be little helped by people openly criticizing one another. The problem, as she quite rightly makes explicit, is that people “just don’t want to be the first to change”, implying the ceding of an advantage. The solution to the problem, as Lin quite rightly points out, begins with *her*, a gesture anything but selfish. This is admirable: civil discourse begins and ends with self-reponsibility for one’s influence on others. The government is of course trying to tilt the balance so that ‘starting with oneself’ becomes a competitive edge worth more in terms of social currency than whatever is gained by jumping the queue and spitting with gusto. This is admirable too.

Responsibility for the lack of public morals (*gongde*) in contemporary China does not lie with capitalism or neo-liberalism: though the sudden ‘opening up’ to the agents of global capitalism might have been part of the cause of the perceived decline in public spiritedness in China, the rush to ‘get rich’ precipitating all manner of morally objectionable practices, the further advance of global capitalism need not be at all threatened by Chinese people exhibiting greater civil courtesy towards each other. Civility, after all, isn’t about whether you spit or not, but ultimately about the ‘right’ not to be spat on if you don’t want to be spat on; and manners, to put it bluntly, need not *cost* anything except respect for a “value code” (Anagnost 2004) that allows people to begin from a relatively universal starting point. The Chinese themselves don’t have a problem with some people being richer or more socially elevated than others, or so at least the government now tells us—trading and accumulating money, *are* Chinese characteristics; what they most can’t stand are rich or powerful people, especially from the public or official sphere, who don’t afford poorer and lower persons the same degree of civility that they themselves demand. Because ‘uncivil’ individuals need not necessarily be the rural migrants and urban poor the social science establishment would have us most feel sorry for: in fact, a less-politically biased observation would note that youthful internally-migrant rural individuals are now often *more* civil in their mannerisms than their urban hosts; and this, not because they have somehow come under the spell of ‘neo-liberalism’, but because they are taking this discourse and making it their own to get on in the world, collapsing the urban-rural boundary upon which the genesis of civil discourse to some large extent depends. Moreover, and as shown here, neither do those people who do enact ‘uncivil’ behaviours always do so as innocently as the social science ‘left’ would have us believe, but rather as tactics of *self-assertion* that suit their individual and collective projects of exclusion; and this, even though civil behaviour remains a very *necessary* condition for social distinction in China today (whereas until very recently you could still garner respect even if you were uncivil) and one perhaps *most* necessary for people of public rank or power (which is perhaps just as it should be since these are those most charged with responsibility for others). No, responsibility for the lack of public morals in contemporary China clearly lies with the pseudo-Socialist State for repressing the evolution of a political environment conducive to equal respect for *all* persons to accompany its economic reforms (cf. Yan 2003, 225-235).

The Chinese State is caught between a very difficult task and another of its own making: it must level gaping economic inequalities, and sufficiently provoke a more democratic notion of 'civil behaviour' amongst the population, preferably both. But insofar as the State has promoted a set of social norms for civil behaviour which offers as much potential for social aspiration as it does for marginalization, it should be praised, and this not least because such universalism has not been a feature of the Chinese political disposition to date (cf. chapter seven). In sum, the social science suggestion that a more 'democratic' form of discourse would tolerate incivility is fatally flawed, for there simply *must* be some normative basis for individuals to self-determination as 'socio-spatial' entities or there can only be the unchecked tyranny of raw power, the most uncivil state of affairs conceivable. Democratic reform need not mean civil anarchy as its opponents in China's Communist Party like to suggest, but the formal implementation of a mechanism by which individuals are as able as possible to universally access equivalent political rights. Markets can aid in this regard (Davis 2005), so that there is nothing inherently wrong with aspiring to consume more like Westerners, to be 'middle-class', or urban, and so on, if doing so means that individuals are increasingly afforded equal rights and equal opportunities to assert themselves as such. The 'trick', of course, is to ensure that personal privacy and individual autonomy are enshrined in civic institutions without individual agents losing sight of their communitarian responsibilities and allowing the intimate sphere to be hollowed out of 'legitimate' society, respects in which markets must be held accountable by government. This is precisely what the Chinese State promises in its fusion of "Confucian collectivism" with the capitalist market economy, and indeed there might yet come a time when China has much to teach the supposedly 'civil' West about how to balance these imperatives. But this is also what cannot possibly be realized until the Chinese State is properly held to account by the Chinese people, and there are no 'Chinese Characteristics' that can prevent that, as the government must by now almost certainly be aware.

## Chapter 6 Sociability

### 1. Interrelations

This chapter is about how different personality types are constructed ranging from 'innate character' to the protean use of diverse registers of social intercourse. In particular, the analysis concerns the 'Self' that competes by projecting a character amenable to friendship or social liking. The judgement analyzed here is therefore much more subjective and situational in its 'internal' form than those 'rules' articulated in some of the previous constructs, but a judgement that nevertheless describes a particular *form* of individual, and one that takes a *particular* form in the Anshan context. For clarification, 'Sociability' is not a sub-set of the logic analysed at 'Knowledge and Ability', though there is a certain skill to manipulating your character in the pursuit of good rapport. If we think in terms of competing to achieve distinction, and the exercise of various strategies towards those ends, there is clearly a difference between 'to know', as in knowing the rules, being able to apply them appropriately, and being able to negotiate the judgements associated forthwith, and 'to know', as in having relations with people, and being known by them *as a character*. Sociability remains very closely linked to 'Knowledge and Ability', however, because we must *know the form* appropriate for social interaction in different situations in order to generate good rapport with others. The sense in which it is important to *know* the 'right' people is of course close in the discourse too, but 'connections' is quite a different modality of social competition to effecting positive relations as a function of personal character. 'Sociability' should not be mistaken for the 'Moral Character' construct elucidated in the following chapter either, because although a person considered 'morally good' is usually also considered 'likeable', and vice versa, the two concepts are not mutually equivalent. Whereas 'Sociability' concerns the 'Self' as a social-psychological construct, *irrespective of action* (sic), the discourse of moral character, on the other hand, is a discourse where 'who' you are is defined first and foremost by what you *do*. Indeed, insofar as 'Sociability' concerns a judgement of "being" sociable no matter how this sociability is arrived at, this discourse shares a closer affinity with the 'Authenticity' construct than it does with 'Moral Character', and this is perhaps especially so in the Anshan context, as will be shown below.



## 2. Personal Character

The Chinese, or rather the Chinese language, shares the concept of an 'innate character' or 'personality' (*xingge*) unique to the individual with most people and languages elsewhere. The extent to which personal character is truly innate or is entirely socially constructed itself is not of concern here. Suffice to say that personal character often constitutes the locus for judgements of social transgression (i.e. "He can't help it, it's just his personality"). But while the social-psychology-inflected literatures on Chinese consumers widely essentialize the Chinese as having a low "awareness of one's distinct personality traits" (Aaker and Schmitt 2001, 562; citing Markus & Kitayama 1991), in terms of 'innate' character agency is if anything configured as much *more* of an individual in China than in the contemporary West, if for no other reason than that despite the universal sanctity of the individual firmly enshrined in modern European political thought (i.e. the very idea often set against the Chinese 'collectivist' stereotype), the discourse of 'innate' character in the West remains highly *normalizing* in form. Consider, for example, that one of the biggest adolescent crises young people in the U.K. face is that they will be branded with a marker of *ab-normalcy*. At school, it is utterly unacceptable to stand out as different from others, and if you are branded with an abnormality marker (i.e. "freak", "geek", "nerd", or "perve" etc) you do not say "I'm a nerd and proud of it", but rather do everything you can to conform, often resulting in the most ridiculous and tragic of measures to 'fit in'. Even in the best of schools any marker of difference is subject to being highlighted, ridiculed and 'corrected' as part of the imposition of a median or norm for identity, and it almost doesn't matter what individual characteristics you have, others will surely find something to manipulate ("piggy", "four-eyes", "skint", or some such). Even in adult life, markers of character extremes such as "introvert" or "extrovert" are implicitly seen as "deviant", prefixed albeit invisibly by a "too", eccentricity is labelled "weird" or "intense", and work environments disguise brutal character assassination as affectionate banter (i.e. "taking the piss"), where the very worst thing an individual can try to do is to opt out of this discourse, which would be understood a weakness, thereby implicating all those present and instituting this mode of socialisation. The extreme *individualism* characteristic of certain elements of youth and counter-culture, indeed, is probably best understood only as a reaction to this very strong process of *normalisation*.

In China, on the other hand, young people are not pursued by the same kind of angst, and neither are adults plagued by the same kind of insecurity; in general people feel it far less necessary to grind the individuality out of others in the cause of 'making fun', and individual difference is far easier to negotiate. Take Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), for example, where *everybody* is regarded as a unique mind-body complex, distinct, whole, and complete within itself, yet nevertheless in constant free exchange with the world of energy around it, a bounded entity that *is*—rather than 'has'—a certain nexus of traits separate from all other traits. From this perspective, individuals are always, for example, more or less "damp" (*shi*) or "dry" (*gan*) than all possible others, axiomatic principles of discernment that *diagnose* individuality within a matrix of such principles. Likewise individuals are always also more or less "sensitive to" (*pa*) "hot" (*re*) or "cold" (*leng*), and it really doesn't matter which, but it is recognized that you will be always be either "one who fears hot" (*parede*) or "one who fears cold" (*palengde*), both being equally legitimate *directions* rather than extremes. This discourse penetrates deeply into everyday life, proliferating in judgements about your physically embodied individual constitution and "temper" (*piqi*), such as whether your "stomach" (*wei*), "spleen" (*pi*), "kidney", (*shen*) or "lung" (*fei*) is or is not "suited" (*shihe*) to particular foods, practices, or combinations of these, judgements given further definition by reference to axiomatic principles of *taste*, "sour" (*suan*), "sweet" (*tian*), "bitter" (*ku*), "hot" (*la*) and so on (cf. Farquhar 2002). Correspondingly, it is perfectly legitimate in China to accept or decline colours, dress-styles, activities, environments, jobs, even relationships, almost anything in fact, just because it does or doesn't "suit" (*heshi*) your 'innate' character or personality, and *entirely without fear of negative social impact*. It is understood in this articulation moreover, that objects of consumption, at once tailored precisely to match, must be continuously regulated and adjusted, since in this sense personal character is never in fact 'innate' at all, but rather defined by its environment, the parameters for judgement always moving, continuously re-defined by individual agency's constitution at the time. As such, the Chinese discourse finds almost no illegitimate extremes in terms of the particular mix of character attributes that makes individuals 'them', and where a wife says her husband is "introverted" (*neixiang*), "liberal" (*kaifang*), or "conservative" (*baoshou*), and so on, this is seen as an entirely good thing, not as deviance from a norm, a statement of *difference* taken precisely as legitimating the person's *normality*.

### 3. Magnanimous Me

Given that the Chinese discourse of 'innate character' finds so little by way of transgression compared to the 'West', it is all the more the case that the organizing metaphoric of the judgements constituting this construct is an *openness* and *generosity* of character and the perceived opposite. Keywords in the positive discourse include "huoda" or "dadu", and "dafang", the root or common meaning of which can be usefully summarized here as *magnanimity*. This 'Self' is outward-looking, engaging, open-minded, tolerant and forgiving of others. Correspondingly, the negative 'Self' in these terms is closed-off and ungenerous of spirit, unforgiving and intolerant, miserly (*tiegongji*), and worries about petty gains and losses (*xiaoqi*), and so on. When asked what kinds of people she thinks are 'superior', aspiring young urban sophisticate Li Sha refers to someone in her class as "outstanding" (*youxiu*): "He's the chairman of the student campus, people like him as soon as they meet him they like him; his personality is magnanimous (*daqi*) and carefree; you can be really relaxed when together with him". Li contrasts this impression with someone in her student-lodgings who is: "Awful (*hen taoyan*), everything she does makes other people dissatisfied (*bu manyi*); she expects other people to do everything for her and always tries to get out of helping; her personality (*xinge*) is lacking something". It is important to see, therefore, that the opposition in the 'Sociability' construct does not correlate to a distinction between 'good' outward-looking extroverted characters, and 'bad' inward-looking introverted characters. On the contrary, it is fine to be introverted in China as long as you are willing to freely give of your character in whatever way you do. Migrant worker Xue Liang, for example, doesn't like going dancing with the other migrant-workers on pay-day because he's "not very open" (*bu kailang*), he becomes "embarrassed" (*buhaoyisi*) and "gets a red face"; he won't sing at karaoke either, but his friends entirely accept this about him, and he about them. It is this acceptance itself, rather than being extrovert, that earns credit as good social rapport here. 'Sociability' thus describes the importance of *reflecting* character in others. If you are unwilling to join in, to take people as they are, and be unrestrainedly generous of oneself, it may be taken as an affront, and a very personal one at that. Indeed, in this sense, success in the 'Sociability' construct *takes* character more than it is about merely *being* a character; indeed that's what "openness" in the sense of the 'Sociability' construct means (cf. Gold 1985).

“Openness” of character can only too easily conflict with the construction of boundaries between intimacy and the social in the ‘Civil Behaviour’ construct, however. Indifference (*lengmo*) is to civil behaviour what magnanimity is to intimacy. Thus, while civility is constructed through statements like, “They’re dirty, loud, coarse and vulgar”, the antithesis is offered through statements like, “They’re uptight, they can’t relax; they’re unfriendly”. Literally, as it is said in Anshan, “They won’t open up” (*tamen fang bu kai*), this latter judgement, of course, supposed to indicate that the judged *are unable* to ‘open up’ as a function of an *innate* characteristic. Yet this close discursive proximity means that generosity of character can sometimes usefully smooth over a civility transgression, such as when the guests and I rallied around the host when there were dead insects in the drinking glasses. Though we complained to the restaurant staff and insisted that the glasses were changed, we played it down like it was no grave matter, immediately moving on in hearty sociable spirits, and when the second set of glasses arrived also dirty my suggestion that we just drink directly from the bottle worked wonders since my hosts seemed to regard me as the locus around which ‘face’ was to be lost or gained. In respect of annulling social boundaries, the character given to cultivating good social rapport can also usefully iron out status difference in the formal structures of authority too. In some social spheres or situations, when you are not in the intimate but the civic sphere, say meeting one’s boss, for example, it may be very beneficial to be ‘reserved’ or ‘tight’ in your projection of character; over-familiarity might be inappropriate, but some staff will try to be on familiar terms with the boss in order to climb. The boss, for his part, may insist on maintaining a distance thinking this fairer to others and more congruent with the demands of managing multiple people. But the practical balance between formalism and informality is often much more complicated than a simple dichotomy: a senior figure may profess to be ‘easy going’ (*suibian*) but still expect to be given face, for example. An openness and generosity of spirit, therefore, which is often demonstrated through exuberance or ebullience, will likely constitute a transgression in some situations, just as excess formalism or pedantry will transgress in others, the extent to which form is required depending entirely on actors’ intentions. But ‘innate character’ will dictate that people only have partial control over how they present themselves to others in any case, so that the ‘Sociability’ construct becomes about how people *break the rules by character*, and also how people *use character to break the rules*.

#### 4. Drunken Style: A Form for Formlessness

Taking others out to dinner provides perhaps the most relevant context for cultivating good social rapport in urban China, occasions where form is always an important factor. Of particular import is the role of excess. Formal etiquette holds, for example, that hosts should order more than his guests can eat, and that guests should not finish all the food offered as this would indicate that the host is lacking in his generosity, potentially a major loss of 'face'. An acute observation of dinners in the North East, however, where individuals pride themselves on having personal characters especially disposed to cultivating good social rapport, will record that even at ostensibly 'formal' occasions, interaction consists largely in the spurning of these ritualisms reserved for strangers and foreign business partners. Once everyone is happy with where they have been seated (an area of practice which can sometimes be highly regulated by formality in itself), and the actual eating begins, formal form is quickly relaxed and an entirely different sort of social interaction is sought to bind the occasion. Though the host will pointedly order more dishes until everyone has eaten their fill, no-one is actively thinking about leaving some on the plate to 'give the host face', quite the opposite in fact! Eating in Anshan, both away from the intimate sphere and within the home also, is always an occasion of boldly expressed fellowship, where diners will continually encourage each other to "Eat more!" (*duo chi yidianr a!*), and very likely consume excesses of beer and/or potent 'whitespirit' (*baijiu*) to the tune of raised voices, unrestrained laughter and general frivolity. It is of course precisely an abundant excess of social spirit and a collective dispersion of formalities affirmed in the exclamations, "It's all in the wine!" (*dou zai jiuli!*), and "bottoms up!" (*ganbei!*), as drinks are deeply indulged, if not by full glasses at a time. Outside of the intimate sphere, drinking alcohol with dinner is regarded as an essential lubricant to the mutual relaxation of form. Unless you have a very good reason, refusal to accompany others' drinking is likely to be seen as a sign that you are unwillingly to meet others on the same terms. Many people feign or exaggerate medical conditions to get around this imperative, excuses quite accepted because alcohol just doesn't "suit" that person (see above). It has also become increasingly socially accepted not to drink because you are driving, now that this is strictly illegal. Declining to drink is of course more legitimate in more intimate situations, but there the requirement for the relaxing of form is also highest, making birthdays, weddings, Chinese New Year, and so on, especially good fun.

The way drinking is conducted in Anshan, as throughout China, however, can often seem overtly formalistic, and quite the *contrary* to relaxing form, even *within* the intimate sphere. Glasses are most often filled up in tandem with each other -- i.e. if I empty my glass, the other person (nearly always a male, but there are notable female exceptions) should drink up too and we will refill together (cf. Kipnis 1997, 53-54). In less than intimate situations, where you are inferior or subservient in position, and especially where it is acknowledged that you want something from the other, you *must* drink, and demonstrate that the glass has been emptied by emphatically overturning it before setting it down on the table for a refill! At a still more formal occasion, you are likely to have to stand to drink at every toast, though the manner of expressing your respects by tapping the glass on the table where reaching to chink glasses would not be possible (or rather gross over-reach) is widely in force. Even in the intimate sphere, however, if you do chink glasses together, even from the seated position, you should always try to defer by chinking your glass below the others, so that your own glass is lowest, depending on age and social seniority; and if initiating drinking, you should always make sure to toast at least some other person, preferably the host, but probably everyone present just for good measure, before drinking from your own glass, even if it is just a slight tip of the glass and nod of the head as form is mutually acknowledged yet relaxed. Yet even on those occasions where this kind of behaviour is indulged *ad absurdum*, the form is actively joked with, consumed even as it is conjured, actors manipulating decorum in terms of context and strategic intent. When one observes, for example, men stripped to the waist, challenging each other in strictly observed unison, and piling up empty beer bottles below each of their chairs (the spoils), the 'form' is certainly about competing through *willingness of character* rather than 'formality' as such. The only general 'rule' in such situations is that the *heartier* the situation is, the more this 'form for the abandonment of form' has to be adhered to. As it is said in Anshan: "If friendship is strong, you'll drink till your stomach bleeds" (*gemenrtie, hechuxie*). This is the spirit embodied in the 4.6% proof beer joint-venture between Shenyang-based national brand Xuehua Beer and local brewery Anshan Huarun Beer, a beer made only for Anshan that has dominated the market since its release in 2008, and is spoken of in glowing terms around the city for its "kick" (*jinr*) and "strong flavour" (*nong weidao*), quite the opposite of the "light" (*dan*) and watery beers that Xuehua promotes around the country.

Not all drinking is legitimate in the first place, of course, the object of drinking not being, like it often is in Britain, simply *to get drunk*. Drinking in China should always accompany eating and some form of ritual 'feast', usually indoors, and for best effect in order to seal the occasion, friendship or deal. Drinking on your own is seen to defy the point altogether, and drinking till you are out-of-control considered quite shameful. Best of all is to drink to prove yourself against others, as test of strategic control, drinking *not* to get drunk, or rather to maintain form *whilst* getting drunk, a sense of competition that accounts for ensuring that all the others present enjoin in drinking to toasts made to you, and the practice of pouring more drinks for others than for yourself! You will even be asked if one has drunk two, or precisely two-and-a-half glasses thus far, and people make remarks that reveal they have a mental record of how many glasses the others have drunk. But although many Chinese are especially concerned to ask "*ni neng zheng ji pingr?*", which translates variously as "How many bottles *can* you drink?", or "How many bottles do you *want* to drink?", depending on context (an ambiguity that only exacerbates the tension somewhat at odds with simply drinking at your own pace without being monitored, matched and competed against), it is usually less about the outright 'winning' as such that matters to the Chinese as the *taking part*: you get one over on the others by being qualitatively *more willing* to drink, the actual quantity drunk being relatively inconsequential in the final analysis. Hence, though there is always the question "How many bottles can you drink/do you want to drink?", there is very rarely the inane boast "I can drink ten pints" familiar to social drinkers in the West, each persons' "drinking capacity" (*jiuliang*) a respected factor of their individuality. Most Chinese would perhaps be more likely to boast in the strength of the spirit being drunk than in their actual drinking of it, or to boast in their fellow-drinkers' capacities rather than their own; indeed people will compliment each other on how much they can drink even if they haven't actually drunk much. The undercurrent, of course, is a complicated interplay of all these elements: considerable social rapport is surely reaped by stoking the fires of collective enthusiasm, but a sense of form is demanded throughout. "You must "know how to be magnanimous (*dadu*) without losing (your) elegance and grace (*fengdu*)", as one informant put it. Far from being formless here, you must get the balance just right. For though you must ensure that your generosity of spirit appears boundless, you must also ensure that the object of your friendliness knows this is directed especially at him or her.

## 5. True Grit

Even so, some Chinese individuals evidently invest in 'competing' through a generous excess of character more than others. When my wife (then girlfriend) and I are invited for dinner at Guo Jiale's, a skilled-worker from a steel-roller machine-repair shop, we are joined by his best friend Chen Dehua and his wife, another couple, and the only-child from each family. As we sat on the floor to eat around a large spread of red meats, with lashings and lashings of cheap lager, Jiale did most of the talking, his discourse liberally awash with the use of exuberant expressions such as: "Do as you please" (*suibian*), "don't be polite" (*biekeqi*), "chill out" (*fangkai*), "be open and bright" (*kailang*), "we're happy/open-hearted" (*kaixin*), "and cheerful" (*kuai*), "buddies" (*gemenr*), and so on, expressions which served to create the impression that there were no boundaries to social interaction, as if judgement and prejudice were suspended and all rules and form relaxed. These were regularly supplemented by further exhortations including: "Whatever you want to eat, just eat it", "Whatever you want to do, just do it", and "Whatever you want to drink, just drink it"! After dinner the women and children separated to the other end of the room, divided from us men by a curtain, intending to leave us to freely converse. At this point discourse became additionally supplemented by statements such as: "We can say anything to one another", "We are brothers" (*xiongdi*), "We have a responsibility to each other", "We are in it together" (*zaiyiqi...huxiang...*), "We do what we like; we are free and unrestrained (*zizai*)", "We must have our freedom; we don't change our personality for anyone", and so on, expressions which cemented our male belonging through the unrestrained sharing of *self-expression*, and the mutual flaunting of form, pretence, and the all-too-familiar 'rules' of health (i.e. "don't eat too much lamb", "don't drink too much", "don't smoke too much"), commandments seen as "severe" (*lihai*), and somehow *female* in this context, perhaps because they come heavily laden with responsibility (*zeren*). My wife was actually referred to as "severe" (*lihai*) on this occasion, for intervening quite firmly to limit the amount I was eating and drinking (to her credit I was on doctors orders to avoid alcohol at the time), actions which were seen to cast a down-turn on an otherwise exuberant event specifically because they prevented me fully expressing my *character*. At this, the others immediately pronounced: "Have another drink. As long as you are happy, everything's fine!" (*zhiyao ni kaixin, jiu haole*).



At one point, Jiale volunteered that he was “proud and cool” (*haoshuang*) by character, expanding on the meaning the term had for him:

“I love to talk; my personality is ‘proud and cool’ (*haoshuang*), and frank and plain speaking (*zhishuai*); and my child is like me: playful, and active.<sup>5</sup> Whatever I want to say, I say. Mr Zhao knows this about me. I can’t keep something inside myself. I’ve got to speak it out... I’m sincere and true (*zhengcheng*), honest and simple (*laoshiren*). This means that whatever I’ve got to say, I say it. I don’t want to keep it in my heart: that’s very reserved and not open-hearted... When I drink with my friends, I speak out amongst them with a proud look on my face... I’ll stand next to you whatever the situation is. We are brothers (*gemenr*): together (*zaiyiqi*)... Many people are fraudulent, crafty, treacherous (*jianzha*); they make friends with you when you’ve money, but when you’ve no money they’ll be gone. If you’ve no money and they still want to be friends with you, this is a true (*zhengcheng*) brother (*gemenr*)”.

On another occasion, when asked if his “personality” (*xingge*) was reflected in his material “consumption” (*xiaofei*), Jiale pulled no punches in reply, showing how his generosity of character and the importance of being unrestrainedly true to himself were intimately factored in together:

“I don’t like ordinary (*putong*). Everyone wants money, I want money, but people’s *priorities* are different. Others spend and save carefully, but I’ll have whatever I like at the time, even if I can’t afford it. If I need seafood, I’ll have seafood: I’ll have seafood *today*. I’m still young, I need to express myself. I don’t care about the price. Everyone in the world needs to have their own dream, to be themselves and not like other people. Take for example my hair. (Jiale has long hair in a slightly Mohican style). It’s different to everyone else (*yuzhongbutong*). Around here, no men have long hair. Mine has especially individual (*teshu*) characteristics (smiling broadly). My own style (*ziji de fengge*): my own desires (*ziji yiyuan*). I don’t want to be like everybody else.<sup>6</sup> I like to play. I like to travel but I have no time to go anywhere. I never save; I spend everything. I borrow money from my parents and friends and spend that too. I’m not afraid to spend. I don’t worry about anything. I believe in fate (*mingyun*). Ye Yeye (the senior manager at the factory) saved forty-thousand *renminbi* to pay for his wife’s hip-replacement. I don’t earn much; if I earned a lot, I’d like to save. If I saved now we would eat poorly and dress poorly. When I get to the point of being rich, we’ll deal with saving then. Whatever I love, I just go and buy it. Now I am living; if I’m not like this, I’m dead. I earn one-thousand *renminbi*, they earn one-thousand *renminbi*; but they save three-hundred *renminbi*, while I

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<sup>5</sup> Others might judge Jiale’s son a little too boisterous or ill-behaved.

<sup>6</sup> This excerpt is synthesized from two separate interview texts from Guo Jiale.

save nothing. This is my life. These others, they're too careful (*zixi*); they're not cheerful enough. There are some who cannot even face themselves. They're unhappy...lacking... They live badly. I've got a kid; they've got a kid; so why don't they treat their kid a bit more? Their attitude is "nearly enough will do"; "as long as our stomachs are full" etc. Take shoes: I'll spend three-hundred renminbi on a pair of shoes and know that they'll be comfortable and fashionable (*shishang*). Others will say you can get them for thirty renminbi, so why spend three-hundred renminbi. I think they're sick. I have a brother whose situation is much lower than mine. He's satisfied with a bowl of rice, but I like to drink beer, watch T.V. and chat (*laolao ker*) at the same time as eating dinner. I'm not satisfied with just a bowl of rice. As long as my brother is clean and not showing (*lou*) flesh through his clothes he is happy. But not me, I need to dress better. Also, my brother doesn't love chatting like I do, but I love to talk and get on with people."

Both Jiale and his best friend Chen (who is somewhat quieter and saves his wages diligently), regularly indulge in excesses of eating, drinking and gambling together. Both are both overweight and smoke heavily too. Jiale admits he is "a bit greedy, a glutton (*chan*)". Both stress that health is very important to them, however. "I like to protect my body while I'm young just as a woman loves to protect her face", explains Jiale, and then, speaking for the both of them, actively underlining their rapport: "We like mutton, beef and pork, because we know that cows and sheep eat *naturally* healthy grass in an open environment, whereas pigs eat man-made food, which is unhealthy". Thus, Jiale's projection of character is closely linked to his *health*, which derives from the medicinal brew of deer penis, antler, snakes, lizards, and ginseng roots he distils himself in maximum strength *baijiu* aided by his Chinese medicine doctor friend, he believes. Indeed, and somewhat beyond simple health, it is ultimately Jiale's *virility* expressed in his gusto, excess, and his extra helpings at dinner, and so on, *competing* socially in a way nevertheless lubricated as forming good social rapport (cf. Bourdieu 1984, 191). There is thus something distinctly *masculine* about the personal character given to this modality of cultivating good social rapport in Anshan, and this in exactly the same way in which there is something distinctly *feminine* about the "cordon sanitaire" discussed at the 'Civil Behaviour' construct: what some people might find offensively "loud", Guo Jiale and his friends find "bright, candid, and hearty" (*shuanglang*), and this despite the fact that certain women in Anshan can be very generous, unrestrainedly expressive, and *bold* of character too (see below).

Not all men seek to be identified with these “proud and cool” (*haoshuang*) characteristics, however. Fifty-two year old male SOE manager Du Bin denies being “proud and cool”, saying he’s not like other men from the park who indulge in drinking and so on: Du knows his limits and believes he should stick to them; he likes “conversation with meaning and content (*yiyi*), not just laughing and mirth (*lele*)”. Sixty year-old male entrepreneur of mixed fortunes Fang Jian, too, similarly says he shouldn’t be considered “proud and cool” (*haoshuang*), also professing a preference for a more gentle form of social interaction. Yet both Du Bin and Fang Jian, despite their espoused views, are in fact quite typical of the “proud and cool” character-type, however, only distancing themselves from the highly expressive and excessive consumption behaviours that come with the territory as and when they see necessary to document their awareness of where these behaviours cross into civil transgression. Even otherwise very feminine twenty-four year old Gao Xiaofei, who positions herself very much contra these characteristics, saying things like, “Women shouldn’t pour drinks, encouraging others, forcing drinking on others in public places: they should be quiet. All this ‘ganbei!’ behaviour is much too masculine, it’s too rough”, nevertheless also defines herself by reference to these magnanimous, unaffected, and (in this sense) *masculine* characteristics:

“If I want to laugh, I just laugh. If I want to eat, I just eat. If I want to speak, I just speak. I don’t hide. I don’t think the fact I eat, laugh or speak a lot is bad thing. I don’t hide (*yincang*) in front of other people. My behaviour is the same no matter who I’m with. Some people, for example, will even go to the extent of suddenly behaving differently in front of their boyfriends: they won’t eat cakes, they’ll speak very quietly, if they’re hungry they’ll just bear with it etc.”

Xiaofei raises this same nexus of themes in a conversation about a male relative of hers called Qian Cheng, who is somewhat out of place in Anshan:

“He’s always going to the beauty shop to have face masks for his spots. His parent’s encourage him these beauty treatments. But this is not very Chinese, especially for a man. Chinese should know the healthy way. Face masks only help the external, not the internal. His body is weak... In many ways, the modern Chinese consumer is not very Chinese. I think the boys from Macau, Hong Kong and Taiwan are not manly... their voices, they’re like gays! Japanese are especially short and have sick blonde hair. They’re less manly; they’ve long hair, and they’re thin, with no muscle at all. And that sweet voice, my God!”

In exactly this way, these character attributes are claimed as 'innate' to people of the region and articulated against stereotypes of people from other parts of China, even by people who are not themselves especially given to the character-type. In what is essentially a discourse of *regional authenticity*, the people of Anshan assert themselves as tall and physically powerful, as unrestrained in both spirit and spending (*xiaosa*), as confident, robust (*shuangkuai*), frank, plain speaking (*zhishuai*), and forthright (*zhishuang*). They like to believe they are unreserved, easy with emotion, and wear their hearts on their sleeves (*shizai*). Their straightness (*zhi*) is explicitly articulated as a positive virtue and contrasted with the roundness (*yuanhua*) necessary to adapt to unfamiliar people and varied situations, which in turn made the discursive neighbour of slipperiness, cunning and ambiguity (*jiaohua*) (cf. the discussion of inauthenticity, 61). These latter negatives are made the province of people from the comparatively wealthy South, along with tight-fistedness (*kou*), meticulousness (*jingdaxisuan*), dishonesty, and shortness of height or otherwise physical weakness (*xiuqi*). Taiwanese men in particular are singled out for their high-pitched and effeminate voices, as in Xiaofei's example; people from Shanghai, Fujian, and Guangdong for their financial shrewdness and business acumen. It is said, for example, that where a Southerner will buy a single piece of fish at the market and take it home to eat alone, a North Easterner (*dongbeiren*) will buy a whole fish and share it with his friends. Yet North-Easterners somewhat jealously admire Southerners, and reluctantly accept the counter-discourse that labels them crude, coarse (*cu*), unrefined, old-fashioned and provincial (*luohou*) etc. Recognized too, is that roundness can be advantageous in social situations where straightness could variously imply inflexibility, overt formality, social clumsiness, and over-simplicity, and so on. But it will not be allowed that Anshanites could be anywhere near as 'crafty' as penny-pinching people from the South. The whole point is that Anshanites are unlimitedly generous *even though they're poor*. Fifty-two year-old Zhou Shushu, for example, archetype of the North Eastern 'man's man' (*chun yemenr*) defines himself as a "poor big-heart" (*qiong dafang*) whenever given the opportunity. Thus, the North East is not so much barbarous or untamed (metaphors reserved for the far-Western provinces), but buoyant and sanguine, gutsy and tough, vibrant and heterosexual, fundamentally good-natured and down-to-earth. Anshanites are *the salt of the earth*, as it were, as the very idea of 'the authentic' is manifested in 'innately' sociable characteristics.

## 6. Worth Your Salt

Saltiness (*xianweir*) is perhaps an especially useful metaphor for analyzing the everyday social exchanges in Anshan through which character is manifest, particularly since the saltiness of North-Eastern cuisine is opposed to the sweetness of, say, Shanghai cuisines. Essentially, in just the same way as a person from Anshan will try to lever as much volume onto his dinner plate as possible when preparing for dinner vis-à-vis the manifold tiny dishes picked over at dinner in the South, he/she will also invest in every ordinary utterance the maximum possible intensity of 'innately' sociable character, a disposition towards the emphatic that can come across as coarse and abrasive for those used to a more delicate palate. Nothing ever simply meets an individual's approval in Anshan, without doing so exceedingly well (*laohaole!*). Everyday speech is littered with a litany of speech particles ending with the syllable 'a!' or other response-invoking variants such as 'ba!' or 'na!', which are found elsewhere yet are perhaps especially emphatic here, the most abrupt, snappy, and provocative of verbal ejaculations, intended to goad a reply. Women of the region, in particular, can manifest a characteristically *caustic* style of conversation inflected with particles that can almost seem intended to provoke altercation rather than rapport with others: "What are you up to?" (*ganhawanryine?*), "What are you playing at?" (*ganshale ni?*), "What are you on about?" (*shuoshale ni?*), and so on, are constant refrains the salty sense of which is difficult to capture in the written word precisely because this is a *way of speaking*. As a male taxi driver once explained for me: "North East women can be especially 'burning' (*huolala*); they've much more flavour than in the South" (*you weir, bi nanfang you weir*). This particular character complex is often coupled with *pedantry*, where the same engaging style of conversation takes an instructive form in expressions such as "You ought to..." (*ni yinggai*), "I tell you.." (*wo gaosu ni!*), and so on: those same people who ask my girlfriend (now my wife) "Who does the cooking?", "Who does the washing?", "Ah, so that's what his contribution is (*gongxian*)" over dinner, are never short of suggestions for how we should do things on all variety of matters of diet, health, inter-spousal relations etc, interventions evidently intended to probe and *resolve* comradeship by jousting in somewhat oxymoronic 'friendly competition', thus demanding that the only way to cope is to invest an equivalent amount of resources in the acerbic exchange: rubbing up against each other, generating warmth through friction.

There are further interesting dynamics here, too. If a bicycle and a car, say, prang in the street, highly confrontational and full-blooded exchanges of views will be immediately forthcoming. Rather than move the damaged vehicles to the side of the road for the benefit of larger society, the dispute will be enacted in the middle of the road, actually inviting others to become involved in what is essentially a private matter (Jankowiak 1993). Similarly, where a man and his wife are arguing fiercely in the street about personal matters, for example, the party who feels most aggrieved will likely try to generate as much friction as possible, "adding chaos" (*tianluan*) to the situation in order to attract arbitration from as many other people as possible. It has already been mentioned at 'Civil Behaviour' how many Chinese think nothing of intervening in other people's business, asking the most 'private' or personal questions and so on, and sure enough the general public is especially motivated to "check out the noise" (*kan renao*) here too. Here, however, the point is to intervene (*zhaduir*) in order to play the 'sage' or 'hero' (*shengren*), that is, to *resolve* the situation, as if acting under the presumption of some grand mandate to pass judgement and give advice on behalf of the whole of society. Only in this way, once huge reserves of emotional energy have been spent, is the problem at first inflated and yet *dissolved* into the social sphere in a way that enables all parties concerned to step down without losing 'face' (cf. Ikels 1996, 29-33). Thus, when someone gets loud and apparently angry with you in Anshan, it is of little use appealing to sophisticated sensibilities: you have to get even more loud and angry back, investing the situation with even more characteristic emphasis, until the matter becomes everyone's matter and thus no matter at all. But though apparently acrid and sometimes quite hysterical in the process, the bluster and interlocking of horns is balanced by a real sense of community, social harmony, and humour, extending far past the point where violence would erupt in the U.K. And even when violence does erupt it is nearly always more bark than bite, since there is always a very subtle balance of choleric and the phlegmatic to the Anshan people, the second making the first as fluid a substance as the spittle that lines the pavements! Much like seawater, or *sperm*, say, the characteristic 'innate' to the region reflects a high degree of saline suspension: *haoshuang*, after all, means both proud *and* cool! <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I am aware that I have almost subconsciously fallen into the register of the Civil Behaviour construct here, which just goes to show that these structures work at meta-levels of analysis also.

## 7. The Price of Friendship

The logic of social distinction achieved through good sociable character can conflict in all sorts of ways with more formalized and instrumental manipulations of social relations. As in the *guanxi* system (Gold et al. 2002), where networks of reciprocal favours and mutual obligation are manipulated to open doors to all manner of social, political, and legal 'rights' otherwise out of limits, consumption relevant to cultivating good social rapport is often *purposive* (Yan 1996; Yang 1994). The need for generosity, moreover, can often require that there is a *monetary* price to pay to successfully negotiate the judgements forming the sociability construct: the 'inviting' (*qing*) of another to dinner, though a polite and generous deference to court the other, is nearly always purposive if only in the most general sense; but if you want to discuss a particular issue, or seek someone's assistance, or to thank another for a service already or still yet to be enacted, it is expected that you *must* invite the other out to eat (*qing nin chifan*). Of course, there is the idea that expensive things are better, and therefore the more lavish the meal, the stronger the implicit tie between persons, but venues range from the plushiest five-star hotel to the lowliest snack shack. Whoever makes the initial offer to the other to eat does so expecting to pay for the meal; the bill is rarely split. Such situations can be highly problematic, however, since consistently consuming at another's expense is a significant negative of the balance between generosity and miserliness in this construct; hence, the 'right to pay' is frequently contested in loud public squabbles, pushing and pulling etc, which can present a civil transgression (cf. previous chapter) for other diners present, and is sometimes taken to the extent of fully-engaged physical contact, with hands placed all over the body of the other and shouting that can build to quite aggressive levels, either forcing money onto the body of the other, or away in refusal—merely saying 'thank you' is rarely enough. But most often, despite the sometimes apparently extreme arguments, it is nearly always determined in advance who will in fact pay on account of seniority of wealth, age, or whoever called the dinner in the first place, the relative importance of these having been decided in advance by the protagonists in question, so that paying is often less about being generous per se than about playing your socially constructed *role*. If the 'fight for the right to pay' is purposive at all, therefore, it is about competing through intensity and excess of *character* (cf. Fang 2003, 358).

Even so, there are rules governing generosity, not the least the obligation to reciprocate: favours accepted are actually expected to be returned, which is of course where *guanxi* comes in. Heuristically speaking, it is much less possible to simply accept someone's generosity without worrying about how you will pay it back in China than in the U.K., and therefore much harder to simply treat someone without thinking about the ramifications, especially if the other person is less well-off than you. Entrepreneur Zhao, for example, cannot attend dinner with the large 'autonomous group' of men who exercise in the park, because if he does he will have to pay for them all since it is well-known that he is wealthier than them. Even if it is possible to have a dinner with a substantially poorer person, say Mr. Wen, Mr. Wen will insist till the death on paying since he is senior in age and generation: he will not let me pay no matter how far I try; to do so would be to 'lose face'; by having dinner with him, I have obliged him, and he has agreed to be obliged. On the even rarer occasion that I eat with Mr. Wen *and* entrepreneur Zhao, Zhao will pay, and Wen's struggles are vigorous, but not nearly as vigorous as when trying to stop me paying for him! Indeed, it is not usually possible for younger or junior people to invite older or senior persons to eat, which is often a challenge since I would often happily pay for a meal just to have the chance to 'interview' a subject; but older people will invariably offer an excuse for why they can't make it, the implication being that if they accepted my offer, they would have to return it too; thus, they get out of having to buy me dinner (which they often can't afford) but save 'face' and keep the generational social norm in line. Other informants would explain that it is not that these people really don't have the money, but that if they were going to blow money on a meal, they wouldn't do it on an *ad hoc* and casual basis as I would; rather, they would wait and call a big meal with all the family, and possibly some friends, and make a big show of their generosity in a rare orgy of excess. Still, certain people are *expected* to oblige each other: the system ensures that people of approximate social class socialize. Many middle-aged informants tell of not being able to maintain old friendships because the friends have an improved economic situation that they can't keep up with; correspondingly, if you don't want to be obliged, you can easily be seen as lacking in some way; and once involved it can be difficult to extricate yourself again. Within the *intimate* sphere, however, differences in wealth are always negotiated: if you cannot give from the wallet then you must invest of the socially magnanimous self in whatever way you can.



Consider then, the occasion where I had already 'spent' on cultivating a relationship with Fang Hua, a younger and less wealthy male, who felt a strong imperative to repay the favor. Fang asked two of his friends to join us to dine. Anxious to pay himself before anyone could mention it, he asked the waitress to bring him the bill in advance of time in a low mumble so I couldn't hear, and when the appropriate time came scrambled so violently to pay, lest I should try to do so (which I did not, and would not have), that he dropped his mass of coins and low denomination notes all over the floor, then dived under the table before the waitress could get there first and embarrass him further: "In the presence of my friends" (who evidently expected him to pay), Fang proudly told me afterwards, "I will definitely pay". Thus, Fang was somewhat over-keen to institute himself as *accounting for* his friends, confusing the compulsion to show proper character with the issue of brute reciprocity and 'face' (*mianzi*). Eventually the relationship became spoilt because we could not do anything together without Fang feeling obliged to 'keep up' by 'inviting' me next time to what he perceived as occasions of equivalent significance. Though I was quite happy to pay, or indeed to undertake shared forms of consumption that didn't require much or indeed any money at all, Fang was not at all happy for me to pay even slightly more often than him, and constantly clutched at opportunities to offer me drinks, cheap snacks, favors etc in what seemed like efforts to 'make up for' what I had done for him. On the day I remembered that I had to buy some bread to take home but had neglected to bring my wallet out with me, mentioning this out loud as a sort of stream-of-consciousness that in mind could only lead to me going home to get my wallet, Fang attempted to lend, or rather *give*, me a hundred renminbi note, about thirty times more than necessary, raising the offer thrice more over the next half an hour or so before finally accepting my refusal. Of course, had I accepted such an excessive amount from him, saying something like, "Okay, thank you very much, I'll return it to you immediately", Fang would likely have argued just as hard to refuse the money when I tried to return it. A third-party explained that Fang was "very traditional" in the way he treats his friends, "concerned about face (*mianzi*)", and that if I was to ever pay for a dinner again he would likely excuse himself from future 'play' (*wanr*) with me, and could even take offense. Fang himself, indeed, often mentioned face (*mianzi*) in his everyday talk, evidently wanting it to be known that 'face' was important to him; but this only served to underline his lack of ease, insecurity and 'category displacement'.

Overt concern for 'face' in Fang's manner is usually the province only of those who can afford it, or those who can at least *make it look* as if they can afford it, a function of pride. Think how different this modality is from that of Guo Jiale and friends above. Other informants over the years, indeed, have had no problem at all accepting my repeatedly paying for dinner. Some, such as a group of youthful rural migrants, a small group of intimately-connected skilled manual-workers, and the self-defined 'autonomous group' of men who exercise together in the park, would in fact *always* go against the grain of this alternative logic, splitting the bill "AA zhi" (Chinese for 'Dutch style'), the cost of eating out in large, sociable groups recognized as too great for any individual to bear, and 'face' acknowledged as quite contrary to the form of the occasion. Essentially, Fang had mistaken the imperative of having a magnanimous and socially generous character for the more formalized imperative of keeping a clean slate with others. Missing the point that good social rapport is founded on a somewhat prior, purely *emotive* economy of explicitly immeasurable human relations, Fang drew upon the more formalized logic by which "courtesy demands reciprocity" (*lishangwanglai*): he didn't want to *owe* me anything, a fact which was ultimately symptomatic of our lack of intimacy, something which Fang was evidently unable to get over. The fact that he believed his 'debt' had to be made up by monetized gestures only further contributed to the sense of superficiality about interactions. Thus, you can't put a *price* on good social character in China: there *are* those more formalized mechanisms where you are very much expected to invite the other out to eat and pay; and there can be no doubt that this logic structures Chinese society in very important ways (Yan 1996); but there is also another, in some ways more primary modality, by which it is still not possible to simply accept someone else's generosity without being concerned about how you will pay it back, and likewise still very difficult to simply 'treat' someone without thinking about the ramifications, but primarily because of *affective* rather than measurable reciprocal considerations (Kipnis 1997, 105-115; cf. Yang 1994, 312). These affections (*ganqing*) (Yan 1996, 139-145), indeed, cannot possibly be 'made up' or 'paid back', but are only *generated* through close relationship with others, shared between the "hearts" (*renxin*) of the actors involved. This is why the 'fight for the right to pay' is most intense amongst close friends, or more specifically, between those friends who *want to be closer*.

Good personal character, therefore, though constructed as more or less 'innate' to different individuals, is ultimately manifested as a factor of *familiarity*, a logic quite distinct from the formal and ritualized logic of commodity exchange. Formalizing favours, after all, can be distinctly *counter* to good social rapport in China; certainly keeping a record of others' obligations to you, calling them to "level accounts" (*suanzhang*) at times of your choosing is a faux pas that will likely spell the end of the relationship. This is of course quite different to much of the West where friends commonly divide up the transaction costs of the relationship to the nearest economic unit, effectively treating their intimates in ways reserved only for strangers in China (cf. Fei 1992, 124-127). 'Guanxi', of course, can be even less intimate, often being about knowing someone who helps you influence someone else that you don't know, thus placing you in their debt, and themselves in the third-parties' debt. Yet even with this even more unfeeling and highly "politicized" (Yang 2004, 320) logic, the salience of the need for affective social character can be high. Indeed, the point is that although 'guanxi' can all too easily become an excuse for not getting on with someone you simply just don't like ("He didn't cultivate me and my network with ritual gifts and favours, so that's why I excluded him"), *some* sort of material token or formalized indication of instrumentality is very often demanded in order to *facilitate a basis* for sentiment-based fellow-feeling in China (Yan 2003, 80-83). This is why taking others out for meals was an absolutely necessary part of this research; it can be very difficult to get close to people in any other setting. And yet, it is quite remarkable how some Chinese in some situations evidently want to either give or receive a gift, whereas other Chinese in other situations just don't see the need, and are quite content to forge meaningful relationships based on affective character. Sometimes where I have tried to engage the more formalized logic of social rapport, people have found it absurd, unnecessary, out-of-place, and not just because I have failed to 'follow the rules', but because those 'rules' don't have a *ruling* place in our relationship, the interface between the ritual and formally accountable logic, and that of emotive forms of identification being worked out as we go along. Indeed, it is perhaps most curious that sometimes those I would think *most* want a formalized and material token of rapport, say people I don't know intimately but am eager to please or influence, who are least interested in receiving one, and those with whom I am already most intimate, whom I would think least expect one, who do in fact most require one, *and vice versa!*

The tension arrived at in the discourse here can only really be explained by reference to the sense in which 'worth' inheres in the individual only through accountable *action* in the Chinese context, as explained in the following chapter, and the sense in which the difference between 'rational' and 'emotive' rationalities tends to dissipate in actual practice, as touched on at chapter eight. But even so, it remains possible to say that much of the Chinese 'human economy', but perhaps especially in places like the North-East where people retain a close demographic link to life in the agricultural communes and the state-owned-enterprises, still operates today on a logic of intimate dynamics governed in the first instance by personal character rather than the ritualized and instrumental logic of formal exchange; and this, even though the social sphere for many people has already been quite divided according to that situational continuum stretching from the private and intimate to the public and civil introduced at the previous chapter. As argued there, the construction of these intimate and public spheres owes much to the difference between traditional rural societies, where human relations were based on immediate, intimate dynamics, and modern, urbanized, market-based societies, where interaction with strangers is the norm and social relations often more formal, instrumental and politicized. Certainly the later chapters of this analysis testify that those Anshanites who invest most in 'competing' through an economy of social relations based primarily on 'immeasurable' personal characteristics and "human feelings" (*renqing*) tend not to be the wealthy, powerful and well-educated, and that those who invest most in 'competing' in these respects tend to retain some immediate familial proximity to the countryside (Yang 1994; Wilson 2002). This is not the case with materialistic and face-focussed Fang Hua (see above), we might note, but is certainly so with exuberant Guo Jiale (also above) and a great many other people in Anshan 'like' him. Notwithstanding the supposed 'innateness' of these characteristics to people of the region, and as if to prove the point that personal character is only a function of environment, 'competing' through social character is revealed as a product of emergent structures of 'class' (cf. chapters nine, ten and eleven). Indeed, when all is said and done, perhaps people *are* more formalistic, pedantic, and instrumental about social relations in the more 'developed', so-say 'cultivated', and materially pretentious South!

## Chapter 7 Moral Character

### 1. Goodness Me!

The judgement of moral character aspires to be a measure of a quality *beyond* that captured by any of the other constructs of this analysis: a measure somehow independent of judgements of individuals' excellence or lack of it at various kinds of performance; a measure by which falling short is supposed to render success at negotiating other modalities of social judgement somehow irrelevant; a measure that may be constructed as present or absent in gradated degrees but to which no other measure is reducible. These *foundational* aspirations are of course shared with the authenticity judgement (cf. chapter three), where these ambitions were implicitly shown to be unsustainable. Here, however, the discourse of distinction is *explicitly* turned upon its head and directed towards a quality that supposedly obtains in individuals *only* insofar as they make the interests of others their own, in what we might call the *social referent of morality*. The idea of an irreducible moral quality, or incontrovertible moral law (for that is what the social referent of morality pertains to be), however, is of course explicitly at odds with the notion that morality, meaning, and identity most broadly, is a continually emergent social and historical product. Moral discourse, this research maintains, functions to obscure the fact that agency is *always* rewarded for particular kinds of performance, and that the worth of *all* actions, perhaps *especially* that of 'selfless' actions, is contingent and socially constructed. We might even say that the 'goodness' appealed to in the judgement of moral character is not only that which has been so completely institutionalized that it is no longer called into question, but that people assume there has never even been a question about it, a function of the most sophisticated of all (inauthentic) cultural technologies where the fundamentally self-interested passions of individual agency were first made *subject* in exchange for social recognition (Nietzsche 1994). But rather than ask whether this exchange was worth it, because it obviously was, and therein lies the point, this chapter seeks to reclaim the question of this exchange for individuals in China, where the moral tension between individuals and others is configured very differently to that in the contemporary West, and where the idea of a 'goodness' above and beyond social discourse has not occupied anywhere near as large a place *in* discourse in the first place.

## 2. Proximity Altruism

In the Christian tradition, being 'good' or 'bad' is ultimately a matter of the relationship between the individual and God (Mealey 2008). This relationship is absolute, since the omniscient Deity will know about things not even said or done yet, and will record any transgression in a ledger to be cleared on the final day of judgement; but the uniqueness of this relationship is what sanctifies individuals as ends-in-themselves, transcendent of earthly relations, and equal before God (Kant 1996). All persons are by definition 'sinners', but will be redeemed by turning to God through Christ who is supposed to have been God immanent in man and alone capable of fulfilling the old Judaic religious law. A recidivist baddie is thus in a sense 'better' than somebody who follows the narrow path of virtue. On the other hand, ostentatious denouncement of 'sinners' is a sin, and being 'good' means to embrace the outcasts, the harlots, tax collectors and traitors, the very opposite of the Pharisees' self-righteousness whose sin is to 'judge' as only God can. This means that Christian morality has two dynamically interacting faces: firstly the judgement of moral character as a shared, social notion that implies self-righteousness and exclusion; and secondly the imperative of 'grace' for sinners which is more sophisticated in easing the relations between people, where people are given what they want/need even though they 'don't deserve it' (Hauerwas and Wells 2004). Morality is configured in a similar way in Islamic tradition, too, where the same (Abrahamic) divine referent stands 'outside' social interaction as the ultimate arbiter of moral judgement, and the individual's moral worth is accounted for with similar eschatological legalism, though without the 'guaranteed' salvation offered by the Christian messiah: less 'grace' and rather more 'works' and 'deeds'. None of this is so in China, however, where the millions of practitioners of all the world's major theistic faiths are somewhat complications to a simpler and more fundamental cultural construction, where there is no divine referent, where moral character is much less legalistically defined by an 'objective code', and where individuals have no *intrinsic* moral quality.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> These comments about Christianity and Islam do not of course account for the myriad internal factions and nuances of these respective moral cultures. The comments are in no way intended to reflect the personal beliefs of the author; they have been given only in order to sophisticate the argument about the construction of moral character in contemporary China.

Moral character in China is determined solely through the individual's social practice, and the judgement of 'good' or 'bad' entirely relational and situational in its construction. In the Western Christian construction, of course, where the judgement of moral character is supposed to remain divine prerogative even though many people no longer believe in God, people simply *believe* the individual to be unique and socially autonomous, yet nevertheless engage in moral judgement of others in absolute terms. In China, on the other hand, the judgement of moral character is *never* absolute, and the notion of social autonomy is reserved primarily for the negative judgement of others, legitimate value accruing in individuals only insofar as beneficiaries accredit actions with an implicit *reciprocation*. Essentially, that is to say, the *rights* to legitimate individuality are realized only through your 'moral' responsibilities to others, which is to say through *networks of obligation*. This earthly (as opposed to heavenly) reciprocity is of course what has allowed tales of "collectivism" and "interdependence" to flourish in the positivist-inflected literatures. But, categorically, this does *not* mean that Chinese are 'incomplete' selves or unfreely acting individual agents; indeed, the point stands that Christians are *de facto* as liable as anybody else to make moral judgements, and that the insight into the Chinese case should make Westerners examine their own moral engagements, *including academic research*. If we are to have any argument at all here, it must be that the Chinese do not set so much store by the idea of equality and liberty for *all*, which we at least aspire to in the democratic West. Or more precisely, that Chinese morality is informed by a politics that systematically denies individuals comparable agency. This chapter argues that this politics determines that actions must take two major interrelating reference points in order to accrue moral value in China: Firstly, a 'good' action must have a highly altruistic social referent, *serving as many people as possible*—your community or collective, the 'Chinese nation', and so on—and *the self last*; Secondly, a 'good' action must *serve first those people in your own intimate in-group/s or network*—your immediate family, extended family, then closest friends and so on—before serving others in close proximity, with rapidly decreasing priority given to those further away from the intimate sphere, *to strangers last*, who do not generally figure in 'moral' action in China. The first of these reference points is referred to as the 'altruistic deferent', the second as the 'proximity law'. The practice of these in combination means that morality in the Chinese construction might be referred to as *proximity altruism*.

### 3. The Altruistic Deferent

A morality with a highly altruistic social referent is of course still very much the official position enshrined in China's (superficially) Communist constitution. Chinese parents who grew up in an age of harder-edged Communist ethics will often remark that they want their child to make a "contribution" (*gongxian*) to the "country" or "nation", the single-party State having of course skilfully conflated this notion with itself. Young people, too, speak passionately about finishing school or university and "entering society" (*jinru shehui*) to "contribute" to its development. Grandma Liu has an "excellent reputation" in these respects, she assures me, for "taking pleasure in helping others" (*zhurenweile*). She is not all self-effacing as she tells me that various neighbours leave their house keys with her whenever they go away, listing the households explicitly: "And I get the milk for my neighbours from the post-box everyday". Businessman Zhao is likewise understood as particularly 'good' here, because when the neighbourhood committee wanted to install a security camera in the street to monitor for thieves and hoodlums a whip-round was conducted to which he contributed "more than half". Moreover, having observed that the lamp in the bike-shed was out of order on his way home late one night, he immediately went out and fixed it *even though he doesn't actually use the shed himself!* Even thirty-five year-old 'worker' Guo Jiale, who works for a private company and is in many other in other ways very 'individualistic', is still acutely aware of the altruistic referent of doing his job well: "The product we make is still for the country; it's still a contribution to the country. This is united strength (*tuanjie de lilian*)". This strong altruistic referent is where the Chinese most judge fault in me, since as a foreigner it is less the things I *do* than the things I *don't* do that is found unacceptable. My failure to lift food into my girlfriend's bowl with my chopsticks, for example, runs the risk, I am assured, of others labelling me "selfish", "uncaring", "a bad boyfriend" etc, even though this is not part of my core cultural make-up! By a similar token, one day early in the research, others noticed that a spoon had been placed on the table next to 'my' bowl of food; although someone else must have placed it there, it transpired to make it look as if I had drawn a spoon from the cutlery drawer for myself whilst neglecting to get spoons for everybody else, and I felt the severity of the unspoken scorn as I fulfilled the perception that 'foreigners' are "selfish" *by definition*.



The converse of this altruistic deferent, indeed, is that actions performed just for the sake of the 'Self' alone are highly distasteful. Although it is understood that people are fundamentally self-interested (there is a saying: "If people didn't serve their own interests, the world would go under" (*renbuweiji, tianzhudimie*)), openly subscribing to self-indulgence, or appearing to put yourself in front of others in social situations (*ziyiweizhu*), is highly illegitimate. Still today, aging self-professed "revolutionaries" (Communists) will actively play on the negativity that remains latent in the Chinese word for "private" (*si*) in their judgements of business people as "selfish". And whereas in the West you might legitimately say: "If I don't make profit, someone else will", the Chinese see right through this, acknowledging the exploitation even where this is also acknowledged as a legitimate strategy for creating wealth for society.<sup>9</sup> Consumption of material or hedonistic pleasures is taken as particularly 'bad'. Material gratification is of course infinitely more legitimate today than it was under Mao, where frugality was everywhere lionized as an important part of good moral character through rhetoric such as "Take pleasure in poverty" (*yiqiongweile*), but still today advertising themes such as 'being good to yourself', or 'treating yourself' (for Belgian chocolates, say) are much more difficult to negotiate than in the West. It is not that the Chinese do not understand the individualist appeal in Loreal's personal hair-care products' tagline "Because you're worth it", but that the strap-line contains a sort of taboo-transgression which makes it stand out in a thrillingly iconoclastic way, which justifies selling the product at exorbitant prices! Indeed, the translation of this tagline goes some way to show why materialism has been so curiously successful in a proximity altruism climate: *nizhide yongyou* is actually closer to the logic of *possession*, as in "Because you're worth possessing it", whereas in English the value is firmly centred on the individual, the *whatness* of the "it" somehow equivalent to something intrinsic about that individual. The translation from English to Chinese is of course awkward, but there is something about the Chinese version which reflects the fact that self-interest is a difficult notion to legitimize, the *thatness* of the individual only important insofar as the object is the centre of value.

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<sup>9</sup>Entrepreneurship is highly admired in contemporary China for the fairness, level-headed decision making, and self-control it necessitates (cf. following chapter). The moral judgement and resentment of business people is reserved primarily for those who do not keep within limits of propriety, who are unfair and excessively exploitative. Oddly enough, this has made for some positive popular verdicts for some rather corrupt businesspeople from the 1980's: they took more than their fair share, but this was 'justified' by their 'altruistic' contribution to the local economy!

As well as altruistic service, active *self-sacrifice* thus becomes necessary to a far greater extent than in the contemporary West, sometimes causing considerable embarrassment to all around. Zhu Jun's elderly mother insists that we sleep on the bed in the master bedroom while she sleeps on the floor. The resulting fracas (very similar in form to the 'fight for the right pay'—cf. 'Sociability') eventually results in us finding a room in a nearby hotel, but not before relations between all have been frayed well past their limits in cross-wired attempts to give and save 'face'—that is, where 'face' is to be seen as of 'good moral character' (*lian*). Indeed, people in China can often be seen to seek to take over "responsibility" (*zeren*) for matters that are plainly outside of their remit of duty or beyond their capability in the pursuit of good moral character, believing that this earns them significant moral credit with others. You should of course stand up on the bus, allowing pregnant women, children and the elderly to sit (the example of good moral character that a great many people seem to have at the tip of their tongues, indeed enshrined in law), and if someone offers you a place to sit you should decline. This may sound trite, but in China people will apparently behave quite 'irrationally' in the cause of 'duty', perhaps standing when there is an empty seat, for example, or otherwise refusing the help of a third-party other than on the grounds that their own hardship is somehow serving a greater good. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear people say things like: "If my hardship allows others to be happy, that's fine (*wode xinku, weile fangran bieren jiu haole*)", though perhaps not without an element of irony. Still, if you are "selfish" (*zisi*) enough to decline to enjoin in the family karaoke evening on account of the awfully distorted speakers and ear-drum-perforating decibel-level, this can be seen as severely impolite, a *personal* slur, since this is an event that *explicitly* maximizes the collective referent. And likewise, whereas some vague last-minute apology would usually be enough to excuse attendance at a pre-arranged dinner of colleagues in the West, indeed you might even believe you are being altruistic – "I really don't feel like it, so it's probably best if I don't go" – this can be highly problematic in China; non-attendance can quickly metamorphose into judgements of "selfishness", and you will have to demonstrate a very good reason for not attending lest you be blacklisted from the whole network, the anticipation of *moral* judgement from the group demanding that you be consistently prepared to sacrifice your own priorities in anticipation of 'moral' gain.

The conspicuousness of outward acts of altruism and self-sacrifice is balanced by 'inner' *moral control*. A great many Chinese people will appear to readily forgo realization of their own desires and satisfaction "because they are of good moral character", or even indeed, "because they are Chinese", the two concepts, again, having been deliberately conflated. It is not that Chinese people do not have personal desires independent of significant others, but that to sate them without first finding an altruistic social deferent is seen as crass, and self-seeking. Hence, the importance informants professed in qualities such as forbearance, frugality, chastity, and so on. Whereas in the contemporary West 'gratification' means that desires be fulfilled by definition, in China individuals are likely as gratified where desire remains unfulfilled in spite of immense suffering. *Dying* without consummation is perhaps a far more meaningful motivator than the simple "happiness" of having desires met, the ultimate sacrifice reaping the ultimate reward in China, a form of asceticism that reifies and aestheticizes morality, so that the judgement of good moral character does not in fact *deny* the benefit to the 'Self', but actively *promotes* it. Since 'Self' is always morally invested in the 'Other', and vice versa, that is to say, cultivating the 'Self' can actually be *equivalent* to cultivating the 'Other'. This is of course why one of the most intense forms of guilt I am made to feel in China is for not looking after *myself*, that is, for not eating as healthily as I perhaps might, for "enjoying myself", and so on, incriminations expressed with the same retaliation one would expect from vengeance. This is also why 'random' acts of malice make very little sense in China, all animosity being deeply personal, and justice devoid of mercy. Indeed, and by this same suspended logic, since actions have no intrinsic value apart from their being acknowledged by others, there is even a sense in which the doing of the 'good' act is *more* legitimately highlighted for others to notice in China, that is, *less* imperative to defer the distinction sought away from yourself. Once your actions are negotiated as for the benefit of others, it is far more legitimate to shout it from the rooftops that you are 'morally good', quite as if good moral character were an egotistical mark of distinction closer to status, or the profligate deployment of a prestigious brand, accruing 'face' as moral currency in a way that is not at all readily seen as coarse and self-seeking. For ex-rural migrant and newly started-up entrepreneur Zhang, for example, moral character is massively about self-assertion; her altruism is to be declared powerfully since her moral 'ledger' is to be accounted for entirely in the social sphere:

"I'll lend money to a friend if their parents are in dire need; then I'll not even think to ask for it back. I will *give* it; this is my duty (*zhize*). But I won't lend it if they want to buy cars and houses. When this family encounters trouble, when the child has an emergency, or when parents have an emergency, I cannot look on unconcerned. There was this one time where I intervened to save a friend's father who had a brain hemorrhage. He had to stay in an emergency room costing five-thousand RMB per day. I lent the family ten-thousand knowing they had no way of paying it back. And then I got together with my friends to muster together another fifty-thousand. This money has not been paid back even till today, but this is really normal. Your uncle and I have a different way of thinking to other people; where there is trouble, we will help. You think, in the future when your friend makes a big profit, will he be able to overlook you? There was also another friend whose child had a big cut on his leg. She called me and asked me: "Where are you?" She said: "Please come over immediately and bring some money with you, because I haven't got any with me, and I dare not tell Grandma because I'm scared to make her worried. I said: "Okay, I'm coming immediately; how much money do I need to bring; I'll be there immediately". She said: "Sister Zhang, please bring one to two thousand RMB". I said: "Okay! I'll be there immediately. After I arrived, she said: "Sister Zhang, I will give it back to you after two days". I said: This is not important; the important thing is that we get the child sewn up quickly: we can't let the child bleed". So, when it comes to matters between friends, you always tell your friend that you will definitely be there within a few minutes, and will do whatever necessary. So, you can see I'm really responsible to all of my friends around me. Me, Zhang Xiuzhen, here, no matter how you say it, I'm in this city too. They can think, no matter if it's a big thing or a small thing, a big matter or a small matter, I will come, and come to help. When they really meet with something, they will come to find me, and I'll do my level best. I won't just stand by and watch. So amongst my friends I am considered good. Everyone says I'm really filially pious too; I can face my parents. Many people nowadays are parents who are looking after their kids, but I'm also looking after my parents. Take my older brother. He's really anxious. When he got married, the house and everything wasn't ready: this wasn't okay, that wasn't okay. While I was arranging a new house for my brother, my brother was just there, filling the streets with complaints. At that time I said to my brother: "Although I am your younger sister, today I will say a few words to you: you must thank your parents for raising you this far, and should rely on your own efforts from now on; if you rely on the wealth our parents have left us you will never profit". He said "Our parents saved this for us, saved that for us; how can I have grown this old and still not have anything". I said: "Having nothing is better; you must promote your incessant advance and progress". But my brother and I remained completely different. My father always explained to me about the importance of moral spine (*zuoren*). He said that if people were poor, they had to be clever, and never be shortsighted. I'm ok now; now I just take care of Mother's illness, and wait on my husband's mother, and everything'll be fine."

Zhang must document that she has done her *duty*: she cannot have any moral capital in my eyes until I recognize the value of her actions. This is course why she highlights at every turn the *loss* to her personal self (the money's not paid back etc): the action cannot be 'good' unless it has *taken something* from her. And yet, Zhang is quite unashamed to admit that the anticipated reciprocal benefit she expects to gain from these acts is the *point* of doing them. This is what her father means when he says "poor people" should "be clever": she should have a "moral spine", *so that* she will reap returns. And thus does the 'good' act *bind* in China, holding others over to a duty to reciprocate. This is of course not to say that Chinese individuals are somehow fundamentally incapable of 'selfless' actions, but rather that 'good' actions in China most often come with the expectation of reciprocity attached, and that those that don't *demand* reciprocity nonetheless. The corollary, indeed, is that it is very hard to do something 'for free' in China, the word *bond* quite capturing the sense in which autonomy has its wings clipped here. Indeed, this is again why *possession* is actually quite legitimate within this moral logic (cf. above): in this binding sense, those others comprising the network to which you are bound actually *belong* to the self (Eckhardt and Houston 2001b). So, whereas in the contemporary West, where people have little choice but to believe in the necessity of self-sufficiency, self-determinacy, the need to be 'smart' and so on (i.e. if they can't complete the job themselves they must ask for help otherwise it won't get done), at least many Chinese, on the other hand, are used to thinking that they can invest considerable time and energy in "taking responsibility" (*fu zeren*) for others, time they could be spending on their 'own' responsibilities, because somebody else from their immediate network is supposed to always be looking out for all the things necessary for their upkeep on their behalf. And whereas in the West you will ask strangers for help believing that they can straightforwardly refuse if they do not want to be obliged, and that if they say "yes" they do so out of some immediate inclination without necessarily having expectations of reciprocity, the Chinese will not likely ask for help at all, since to ask is to formalize a request for help that should already be forthcoming. In short, wherever there is confusion over whether "yes" means "yes" or in fact really means "no", confusion which can be genuinely paralysing, you are simply expected to *know* that the right action to undertake is always the one that puts others before yourself, even if that can seem illogical and inefficient in the situation, especially to Western eyes.

#### 4. The Proximity Law

The 'proximity law' somewhat contradicts the imperative that a 'good' action should serve as many people as possible by demanding that a 'good' action serve your own people first. On the other hand, without this second imperative the strong altruistic referent would demand that all actions be reciprocated by everyone, which is ultimately to say that individuals would need to be recognized as having intrinsic value, which cannot be squared here. The form of the 'proximity' law is very similar to the configuration of intimacy discussed at 'Civil Behaviour': a strong inclusion-exclusion dynamic binds people closely together according to a sliding scale of *network density* (Fei 1992, 23), but also binds them strongly apart from other Chinese, so that the "collectivism", or "solidarity" (Chinese Culture Connection 1987) positivist commentators see in the strong altruistic social referent in the Chinese discourse only hold water if *active non-cooperation* is recognized as a part of that (in which case these are probably not the right words at all) (Fang 2003, 361; Faure and Fang 2008). Indeed, the proximity law somewhat explains why the 'public sphere' is so abused in China, since rather than having responsibilities to broader "society" as such, the Chinese have *moral* responsibilities (*zeren*), where you are accountable firstly to the most intimate of your own in-groups or networks, but where in-groups or networks remain unaccountable to each other, except where the specter of "the nation" is invoked as the mother of all in-groups and "the people" are marshaled together as assertion against foreign powers. The extent of corruption in China's official institutions can no doubt be explained by the fact that from a 'proximity' perspective an action can be both "public vice" and "family virtue" at the same time (Blackman 2000, 6). For this same reason too, the biblical 'Good Samaritan' figure who helps a downtrodden man from a foreign land makes very little sense in China: you look out for sufferers in your own intimate network, and then you *have* to help out of an emotive sense of duty that becomes a rational imperative, even if the sufferer is judged comprehensively undeserving of your help; but help is not usually either expected or solicited from strangers. The proximity law also goes some way to explain why there is something of a consensus in the cross-cultural management literatures that Chinese individuals are not especially good teamworkers, co-operating efficiently only with those in their immediate network, and bickering with everyone else (e.g. Wang 2006).

The 'proximity' construction exists to protect and nourish, preserve purity and minimize risk, an almost *genetic* determinant of action, where individuals are the essentially self-seeking 'carrier' of the 'family gene'. The character for "bad" in Chinese (*huai*), we might note, is composed of two components, one meaning "no" and the other being the *tu* already referred to throughout, which again means "earth" or "soil" (cf. chapter three), the person who does not share the same root being "bad" by definition. In just this same way, too, the word "everyone", which in English signifies a situationally and vaguely-defined collective of people who are first and foremost *individuals*, translates literally into Chinese as "big family" (*dajia*), an equally situational yet highly *subject-centred* "we", which by definition excludes as well as includes (Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances' being relevant at a structural level here). Essentially, the Chinese word *dajia* stands in relation to the English word "everyone" in the same way as the Chinese exclusive term for "we" (*zanmen*) stands in relation to the Chinese inclusive term for "we" (*women*), the collective cultural consciousness (*sic*) always demanding a boundary metaphor for its self-definition. To get the same meaning of "every individual" in Chinese, you would have to say "*mei yi ge ren*", which nevertheless loses the situational collectivity implied in the English word "everyone". Thus, one time, early in the research, soon after meeting my girlfriend's parents for the first time, and in the middle of trying to express that I felt quite at home in China having lived there previously and didn't anyways feel particularly rooted to any particular *place*, I made the mistake of trying to say to my girlfriend that she was "my home" (*wode jia*), as in "home is where your heart is", a sweet notion in English. But this was far too abstract a notion for her parents to glean through my bad Chinese, and caused temporary affront: she was not "my home" but *their* family I was assured! Upon our later marriage, I was assured of being accepted as a full member of a vast web of familial relations, but since my roots remain regarded as profoundly incompatible the splice entails that I will perhaps forever be the *marginal* native, with moral obligations to uphold but without the authentic rights to belong (cf. chapter three). Now that my wife is pregnant, the issue of 'mixed blood' (*hunxue*), still a relatively new notion for most people in the Anshan context, provokes great interest amongst brooding types. Of further relevance here, too, is that the characters in the word for (social) "relations" (*guanxi*) can also be read as "closed system", which is of course why networks are always (more or less) *in-groups* too.

Resisting “foreigners” (*waiguoren*), of course, is to maximize the collective referent and lever the proximity law simultaneously (cf. Barne 1999, 254-280). The Chinese have long been taught to be especially sensitive to foreign ‘bullying’, and remain highly suspicious of foreign criticism; intelligent and otherwise apparently reasonable people are remarkably ready to erupt into the most hysterical nationalist rage. ‘Proximity’ demands an enemy, so that the Chinese construction of moral character is to some large measure *explicitly* set against the perception of the West as morally vacuous on account of its polluting ‘individualism’. Anshanites are forever harping on about my Nan who lives alone, in good health, supported by nearby family and friends, apparently finding it incomprehensible that she might actually enjoy her independence (cf. Thorgersen and Ni 2008). Also frequently encountered is the characterization of Westerner’s “kicking their children out of the home as soon as they are eighteen”. And yet, Westerners are equally complicit in this discourse: gripes about “uncivil” transgressions are invariably matched by claims that “Chinese” are nevertheless the kindest and most hospitable of peoples, a perception which probably reflects the need Chinese individuals have to prove to themselves that they are welcoming people capable of ‘selfless’ acts, for having been shut-off to the world for so long the foreigner included in the proximity network is of course only the ‘token’ foreigner. Indeed, if you are a homeless person without family, an outlaw or outcast, say, it is quite possible to be the world’s loneliest person in the world’s most populous country, though doubtless these latter individuals find belonging within networks of moral expectation too. Yet loneliness is precisely what the ‘exiles’ complain about, those overseas Chinese students (in Britain, for example) living a life divorced from ‘the motherland’ in many cases to be endured only for the sake of the parents who made such sacrifices to send them there – i.e. returning a sacrifice for a sacrifice. Almost invariably these students construct those they find in their Western host countries as “cold”, “selfish”, and “impersonal” (*lengmo*), while they themselves huddle together for “warmth” in clans of ethnic brethren. While the degree of ethnic exclusion Chinese experience overseas must not be underestimated, Westerners in China seem altogether more capable of embracing the experience of being the ‘lone foreigner’ (though expats often huddle together in cliques too), hence the prevalence of the ‘teaching abroad’ phenomenon, in which there is something of the challenge of self-discovery, enlightenment, and the becoming of the ‘authentic self’ (cf. chapter three).



The strong “in” (*nei*) versus “out” (*wai*) boundary judgement the proximity law demands also accounts for the sense in which the discourse of moral character in the China context can appear strongly characterized by highly *polar* judgments of individuals as either “good” or “bad”, in black and white terms, with very little room for people in between and shades of grey: whereas Christians have to balance their absolute moral judgements with confession of their own sins, at least many Chinese seem to instinctively believe they are righteous until given convincing reason to think otherwise: if you have satisfied the ‘altruistic referent’ and the ‘proximity law’ then why should you feel bad? In front of journalists’ cameras, for example, police will proudly hand over prisoners indicted for drug dealing to be executed without evincing a moment’s hesitation or remorse, because they have “served the nation”, or some such -- which is precisely to say that accused criminals are *less than human* since they are judged to have comprehensively failed in this duty. Grandma Zhai, for example, finds it purely a matter of pride that she once approved the execution of thirty people she believed to be murderers and criminals while working for the Public Security Bureau: since she was herself promoted to the post for her own good “moral character” (*renpin*) and skills of assessing the “quality” of character (*pinzhi*) why would she doubt her actions were righteous? Criminals, for their part, can often be seen to be forced to confess their crimes by police in China (on T.V. and so on), since this is an important part of getting individuals to accept that they have done something wrong: without the extraction of a confession, individuals might only have the impression that “something has gone unexpectedly wrong here” (Nietzsche 1994, 56; cf. Foucault 1975). This is of course quite the contrary of the West where the sense of the the omniscient God and his earthly manifestation in law means that you likely feel guilty before you have even been caught. Thus, though the Chinese are especially proud of their nation, this discourse operates at a level of abstraction which somewhat overlooks the sanctity of each and every individual who comprises it. Compared to the contemporary West, the value of individual life is significantly relegated to the value of broader collectives, collectives delimited, metaphorically speaking, by the Great Wall, because moral worth can only be attributed to the ‘Self’ until the ‘altruistic referent’ and the ‘proximity law’ have first been met. “The people”, indeed, has only ever really been a metaphor defined from the top-down, the very same logic that makes dissenters ‘traitors’: you’re either with us, or you’re against us, and on your own.

In addition to the 'simple' proximity law, your *roles* in relation to significant others are particularly important for good moral character in China, a highly subject-centred imperative somewhat contrary to the self-denial of the altruistic referent. Your familial obligations as a husband, father, son and brother, and their female equivalents, are all immensely important, and deviance from these is particularly hard to cast in a positive light. Likewise, whether you are an employee, colleague (comrade), manager, boss, and/or party-member etc, your "responsibilities" (*zeren*) are taken very seriously, and will be actively levered in pursuit of moral distinction. Children will hardly ever openly act against their parent's wishes, and parents will do virtually anything for their children, not infrequently to the extent of spoiling them awfully. Adults are as equally concerned to buy their parents products that promote longevity and health as they are to buy things that their children can study with, the "respect for the old and care for the young" (*zunlao aiyou*) being enduring aspects of traditional 'Confucian' ideology enshrined in contemporary *law*, along with similarly binding interspousal obligations (Davis 2000, 65). In the case of my host family, the five middle-aged daughters of the maternal grandparents earnestly vie for the distinction of being a "good daughter" by trying to cook the best dish and best serve the others at family gatherings, starting with attendance to their elderly parents first. Those who can afford it will present expensive gifts (foreign branded clothes, liquors, and teas), spurring those less well-off to even harder filially-pious (*xiaojing*) labor in the kitchen. Yet even those who give expensive presents also have to put in their time on actions of demonstrable altruism and subservience to filial authority. Indeed, the fact that social roles are highly *gendered*, that women are expected to be concerned primarily for the family and home, and men for "taking responsibility" for working more and earning more, and being concerned about earning more, and this despite the attractions of independent careers and lifestyles and the "equality" of the sexes so professed by the State, is no doubt also a factor of the almost *biological* form of the proximity law bearing on action. So, too, is the fact that family elders are instrumental in pressurising young people into getting married as soon as possible ("So when are you getting married?"), and then into having children ("So why haven't you had a child yet?"), as is the fact that, once grown, most parents expect ("hope" (*xiwang*) is the preferred term), their offspring to remain near to them, *in close proximity*; indeed in most cases those offspring are only too happy to oblige.

Further to social role, the level of moral conduct expected of individuals in China also varies significantly according to various types of *status*, not least if your status is explicitly intended to maximize the 'altruistic referent'. In these respects, the contemporary official is an incarnation of the Confucian *junzi*, the noble scholar-officials who led society in imperial times, and who were supposed to cultivate their own moral being for the good of humanity, versus the "small people" (*xiaoren*) who were supposed to be petty, narrow-minded, self-seeking, and materialistic. And yet, these various moral imperatives, altruism, proximity, role, and status can come into interestingly conflict in certain situations: One of China's thousands of popular old stories is about a waterworks engineer, Da Yu, who passed the door to his home without entering at three separate critical times (when his wife was ill, pregnant, and delivering his child respectively), because he was needed to harness a flood disaster affecting ten-thousand households, an obligation to the wider population seen as even more binding – *the even greater good*. Quite similarly, in the aftermath of the massive earthquake that struck the Chengdu region in May 2008, a school teacher was ridiculed nationwide as 'Fan Run-run' (*Fan Paopao*) for running from his school as soon as the earthquake struck, and then admitting afterwards that in his moment of terror he thought of saving no other students except his own daughter. Fan was publically defamed as unfit to teach since his 'proximity' concern should have been made secondary to the more primary logic of the altruistic social referent, which demanded that he save quantitatively *more* students. Thus, teachers in China are burdened with the weight of a Confucian tradition which once gave them high social privileges in return for enhanced social responsibilities, but today demands only responsibilities without the corresponding privileges: salaries and status being minimal at best. Interestingly, Fan attracted further public wrath sometime later when he tried to defend his actions on his internet blog, explaining that when life and death hung in the balance, his thoughts were only for his daughter, and he "wouldn't even have stopped to save his own mother", a boast which was found exceedingly distasteful even though the public seemed willing to accept that self-preservation was human nature. Resisting the bullying of the State-motivated media, Fan staunchly refused to retract these statements and shoulder the requisite shame, professing that he was a "person who believed in freedom and justice, not some kind of self-sacrificing hero", thus bringing the politics underscoring proximity altruism starkly into view (Chen 2008).

## 5. Good Sex and Moral Dilemmas

The essentially *organic* nature of the proximity law means that some of the worst 'sins' you can commit in a climate governed by this kind of morality are those of a *sexual* nature. In Western expressions of morality, sex is a prime measure of good character alongside lying, thieving, and so on. Both the Bible and the Koran feature two types of sex, the legitimate and the illegitimate: the illegitimate is so because it is seen as socially harmful; if you transgress and have illegitimate sex, you betray your intimate in-group. But while adultery is still far from acceptable in the West, if you are 'unhappy in love' then almost everything becomes permissible; even sympathy for the adulterer becomes almost legitimated since it is recognized that the individual has 'moral' obligations to themselves too. This is not so in China, however, where adultery is less about 'sinning' in the first place, but about upsetting the almost *civil* gradations between the intimate and the public spheres, an almost *bodily* matter, much more situational than categorical, but nevertheless subject to strict prophylactic control. What might pass as 'innocent' flirting between elsewhere already attached individuals in the West will likely reap the harshest of moral judgements in China: you don't speak the "deep feelings" of the "heart" (i.e. sexual attraction, lust, and so on); you are just supposed to *know*, and not be too explicit about it. Some unmarried rural migrant women in the 'hotpot' restaurant where I washed up dishes would not be interviewed on a one-on-one basis, though they were quite happy to converse in groups, stating that "Chinese cultural tradition" prevented them from speaking alone with a man to whom they were not married. Young urban men in approximately parallel jobs explained this as a function of these womens' backwardness, rurality, and lack of education. Almost needless to say, some married men were not particularly willing to let me speak with their wives, yet this was also notably more the case for people of low status and education. On the other hand, where sexual relations can be legitimately broached in China, an elaborate, morally-fringed, 'mating dance' must ensue in which the male is expected to resolve all the contradictions for the female by making promises of commitment, marriage, future children, and so on, before the female, let alone her family, can consent. A merely philosophical approach to the question of whether partners will *necessarily* remain together will likely fall foul of the charge of "lacking a sense of responsibility" (*meiyou zerengan*), the cardinal sin.

*Commitment* is therefore the sexiest form of social currency in China, again a factor of the proximity law. Outside a local university (in the U.K), a very masculine looking sports car (to my eyes), presumably owned by a male Chinese international student, has *zhongcheng* in large Chinese characters inscribed upon its side, meaning “loyal”, or “devotion”, signifying a meaning quite at odds with the “racy”, “sexy”, or “hot stuff” that the same car might signify in the contemporary West, an image based in large measure on the implicit *lack* of devotion and the promise of a ride with a quite possibly *illegitimate* lover! But despite the reversal of signifiers, the signified is of course nonetheless just as self-promoting in the China context. Indeed, in exactly this ever-so morally-laced way, twenty-four year-old hairdresser Zhan makes advances to my wife whilst cutting her hair (my wife reports): He says he still likes the friends he’s had since childhood, “they are very true” (*zhencheng*) and “friends who can help each other, because when you want to start on your feet in society you need some friends”. Apparently (again, I am told), Zhan’s friends like him for two reasons: “One, because I am humorous; and two, because I am really committed in my relationship (*dui ganqing zhuan yi*): it’s just me and her”. Is Zhan interested in other girls? “Of course not”, comes the reply; and moreover, he wagers that: “If my friends think that I’m really good to my girlfriend I must be a really good person to trust”. Thus, in spite of all this chastity and piety on the surface of public discourse in China, the ‘proximity’ boundary is being widely transgressed in actual practice. The huge letters daubed on the walls of the district in which I live reading: “Community is at the centre of my heart” (*shequ zai wo xinzhong*), and “I contribute to the community” (*wo wei shequ gongxian*), are immediately juxtaposed with smaller signs advertising the services of “private-detectives” to spy on spouses suspected of adulterous liaisons. Divorced wives of all social ranks tell stories of husbands who have “run off to the South to earn money”, having “turned bad” (*xuehuaile*), leaving them and their children penniless. The category *baornai* is widely used to label those secret second wives who provide sexual favors whenever their wealthy patron happens to visit in return for their keep; the secret second wife knows that she is just the secondary wife, and so she is judged a little “bitch/whore” (*biaozi*). Similarly, “playboy” (*huahuagongzi*) is used to indicate those who indulge in “play” (*wanr*), which is here to be understood as the opposite of “responsibility” (*zeren*) since it involves what people in the contemporary West might quite legitimately call “casual sex”.

But people engaged in 'illegitimate' sexual acts may also feel 'legitimate' moral obligations to each other, of course, expectations that will be set against duty to prior roles, not only as spouse but against all the other familial roles too, so that if the transgression was to come out in the open it would 'shame' (*chi*) the whole group. We may now imagine the case of the woman who bails her male lover out of a blackmail situation incurred over gambling debts using the money she has saved for her children's education, but then requests the money back from his family and chastises them for being negligent of their duty. Her liaison with him binds her to help him out, but since she is bound to keep her affair a secret she is doubly bound to demand the money back from his family. The act of bailing out is expected of a lover, but her denial is even more expected, so she has to make a claim vis-à-vis his family. *Secrecy* therefore stands above all other moral obligations in China: just as the 'goodness' of an action consists only in its being explicitly acknowledged by its beneficiary, if sexual indiscretions are not revealed, the notion of illegitimacy *does not apply*. Indeed, in a climate governed by 'proximity altruism', there need not necessarily be any sense of *guilt* apart from the fear of being found out: the 'shame' is manifest only in revelation. Similarly, you don't *confess* in China because there is not the same sense in which you should be shown mercy, forgiven and 'absolved': the Christian God may forgive and forget, but the Chinese certainly do not; a 'face' (*lian*) tainted is tainted for life. Indeed, if you *are* 'found out' in China, the results can be spectacular: When computer hackers drip-fed to the internet more than a thousand photos of 'playboy' film star Edison Chen involved in explicit sexual acts with a litany of Asia's most famous female stars in the summer of 2007, the nation was rocked to its roots in a way that must surely have bemused the architects of tabloid scandals in the West. Edison was vilified nationwide for his promiscuity, hounded from his home in Hong Kong, and had to live abroad in hiding in constant fear for his life. The shame for the women involved (they were all fully aware they were being photographed) was so severe that despite multiple high-profile displays of repentance and atonement directors refused to employ the prolific actresses since the market demanded that they be thought of as morally good as well as attractive, talented and so on. Of perhaps greatest significance, however, is that the hackers in the 'Yanzhaomen' scandal made no demands for ransom to any of the stars involved, as if the whole operation was a comment on the role of shame in China's proximity altruism morality: *they didn't want anything back*.

When the almost *physiological* perspective to the proximity law is considered, however, 'illegitimate' sexual acts might even be thought of positively in China. In Taoist medicine, promiscuity is thought of as 'nourishing', and there is an emphasis on cultivating essential energy (*jing*) from multiple sexual partners. Indeed, for all the attention on self-denial and moral self-control in Chinese discourse, at bottom fulfilling your desires is recognized as *healthy*. It is no accident that China's lurid side-street massage parlours are marketed by appeal to 'cultivating sexual health' (*xing baojian*), and 'washing' (*xiyu*); and neither is it entirely paradoxical that the men who frequent these places are elsewhere doting husbands and fathers. Further, there is also a sense in which sex with partners outside of your immediate network has been precisely what maintained the health of a group governed by the 'proximity law', which would otherwise have had a very limited gene pool. Incest is of course the boundary *turned in upon itself*, which is why it is the 'cardinal' sexual sin, and the hardest bend to morality's flexible fabric. Proximity altruism, after all, is an essentially *self-seeking* morality, a highly malleable discourse where social actors justify their actions by appeal to the same referents from different positions. 'Masseuse' Jiang says that her husband knows she does massage but doesn't know the full story: "He would be really upset if he knew; he's quite traditional. You have to understand the economic situation: my husband was laid-off from Angang. I do this for my husband and my son". Similarly, 'masseuse' Jun says she left both school and her boyfriend to support her family: "I do this kind of work for my younger brother's tuition fees; of course my parents don't know, they think all my money is from an internship with a foreign company". In this way, provided that 'moral transgressions' are portrayed in accordance with the other 'rules' bearing on morality, actually inverting the form of the 'moral dilemma', these justifications become entirely legitimate. Morality is *always* made to fit actors' strategic intent. Even overtly unscrupulous types will appeal to the 'social referent of morality' in order to secure an edge and justify their actions, stressing the high personal risk, the personal sacrifice made in order to achieve 'worthy' results: the "gold-digger" is "just looking for commitment"; "sharks" will stress the loans they offer as a service to the public; gangs "provide employment", "keep the peace", and "look after their own"; just as thieves "stick together". Morality is thus the continuously evolving product of negotiation between different actors in the situational context, distinctly perspectival and practical in nature.

## 6. Good Times, Bad Times

The moral order may be changing rapidly in contemporary China. Many people seem to perceive that the strong altruistic social referent in the Chinese moral discourse is inverting to a radically weakened one, replaced by a strong emphasis on the consuming and commodified 'Self', a perception widely expressed in searing criticisms of the wealthy, materialism and the self-seeking youth. Consider an example of this kind of discourse from a taxi driver:

"In the past people would just drop you round some dumplings or whatever, but not any more. This is directly related to economic development. People nowadays have become bad. There's no help, no friendship between them. The police only know about fines, not how to help others. Young people these days don't understand us; they don't know about Mao Zedong. I love Mao Zedong; I don't like Deng Xiaoping and anything he brought with him... Some people only have money, but nothing else. They've got no culture, no knowledge, no education; they don't know how to help others. I look down on them (*kanbuqi*); they're bad (*kewu*), disgusting. If I had lots of money, I'd be completely different; I'd be virtuous (*meide*) and help others. People have no social responsibility, they're selfish, and only know how to consume (*xiaofei*), to buy the most expensive car or villa. These people and I are completely different kinds of people. Helping others is much more important than being rich. On this earth everyone should live happily; there shouldn't be just a few people who have happiness (*xingfu*). I admire (*chongbai*) Bill Gates. He gave all his money away. People like Bill Gates in China are too few."

Thus, moral discourse is thus strongly inflected with cynicism. Whereas in the Maoist political era it was said "Ridicule the whore, not the poor" (*xiao chang bu xiao pin*), today this expression is mocked and made to revert to its allegedly original inverse form: "Ridicule the poor, not the whore" (*xiao pin bu xiao chang*). The implication is that "whores" are using their "ability" (*nengli*) to make money in a comparatively "honest" way, which at least makes them better than those beggars (*yaofande*) widely accused of playing on 'good' people's heart-strings to trick them out of their hard-earned cash. The moral flux and opportunism of the contemporary era is also expressed in the formula: "Rich men will be bad, bad girls will be rich" (*nanren you qian jiu xue huai; nüren xue huai jiu you qian*). Indeed, it is probably only those who are sufficiently young, sufficiently old, sufficiently partisan in the sense of the 'good Communist', or sufficiently wealthy to be secure in their naïveté who attempt to deny this increased flexibility in the moral order.



But China is not yet ready to admit in the public sphere that those given to anti-social and self-seeking actions often get away with it and get ahead of the 'altruistic' masses; this would be to explicitly acknowledge the fact that the morality of self-sacrifice for the collective social referent *is* being irrevocably replaced by a morality of the 'Self'. Indeed, many other individuals, and perhaps this tends to be those who have done rather better out of the reforms than their jealous peers, make alternative constructions to the effect that the altruistic social referent of morality is holding China *back* in its development. In particular, many adults complain about young people not being self-sufficient and independent enough, but only "selfish". But young people are of course expected to be independent-minded *and* intensely filially pious, of course, the latter imperative ensuring that the former is smothered by 'proximity'-type effects. Thankfully, and perhaps even as remedy, the 'proximity law' may be softening to reveal a much broader collective referent. Even during the time this research was undertaken, the 2008 Beijing Olympics did much for China's consciousness as a member of a global collective. The Sichuan earthquake fallout, moreover, where charitable donations took on an unprecedented popularity across China, led commentators to document "the first time in recent history that ordinary Chinese have participated in a national movement that was not a protest against something – usually a foreign power" (Forney 2008). "Us vs. Them" changed to "Us without Them", "forging a new sense of "modern identity without resorting to foreign scapegoats" (Forney 2008). But of course, the earthquake was also a very good example of another kind of "Us without Them", that is, the arousal in public sentiment aimed directly against government, a recent example of the "yearning for common decency" (Christiansen and Hedetoft 2004, 15) seen in the vigils in the German Democratic Republic before the fall of the wall, in the Belgian protests against the paedophile ring involving top bureaucrats and politicians, in Britain after the killing of Diana, and in the build up to the events of '89 in China's capital. This movement is no doubt part of what the Chinese State is trying to address in its 'comprehensive personal quality' campaign with all of its altruistic communications, recognizing that in a society where the strong altruistic social referent is weakening, the proximity law only serves to foment selfishness and unrest in the population, which somewhat ironically can further foment a popular political movement, hence the heightened ethnic protest China saw at economic and social marginalization in Tibet and Xinjiang in 2008 and 2009.

'Ordinary' charitable acts towards strangers (i.e. acts that are not part of a mass popular movement), which might perhaps have once been seen as a *weakness* in China, may now be on the up too, a new kind of distinction for those who can afford to feel sufficiently secure in their superiority. The unprecedented success of martial arts film star Jet Li's 'One Foundation' (launched after his near-death first-hand experience of the Asian Tsunami in 2004) evinces well that China's emerging middle classes may now enjoy what Nietzsche called "the delight of doing good" (Nietzsche 1994). Citing the State's reversal of long-time suppression of organized charity for fear of autonomous civil movements, Li is quite clear that launching his Foundation required the building of a culture of charity in a climate governed by 'proximity': not only has the "massive corruption and lack of transparency" (which again may be seen as functions of proximity) in China prompted Li to station his charity in nearby Singapore, he self-consciously named his foundation 'One' to reflect what he believes are the *universal* humanist values necessary to "change his country's attitude" (Bishop 2009). And though it cannot have escaped the public's attention that it is relatively easy for a multi-millionaire to say that "everyone" can afford to give at least one yuan per month, this has not dampened a new-found nationwide enthusiasm for giving: Anshan entrepreneurs Liu Zong, Du Feng, and Zhao Guangyao all profess a penchant for charity and 'ethical consumption' (cf. Ma and Parish 2003), "blatant benevolence" involving "the profligate deployment of resources" in just the same way as does Veblenesque "conspicuous consumption" (both quotes Author Unknown 2007). *Volunteering*, too, in the form of a wide range of collectively referential practices— tutoring students from impoverished families; neighbourhood security programs and so on – has been shown to take on a stridently self-fulfilling form in the contemporary era, quite the contrast of the "forced duty" of Maoist times (Rolandsen 2008): a *self-fulfilling* form, that is, rather than a self-sacrificing form, the 'good act' being no longer expected to *take* something from the individual (Rolandsen 2008, 112). Recent years have also seen the emergence of moral complication in popular and mainstream movie culture, the 'good crook' who faces off against the 'bad cop' in the 2002 hit film 'Nothing Between Morals' (*wujiandao*) (later remade for a Western audience as the 'The Departed' starring Leonardo Di Caprio), for example, where proximity 'black' and 'white' are mixed to get grey.

Chinese morality, then, may be moving from a politics based on proximity to a politics based on *empathy* with non-intimate others. Christian church communities, which of course sometimes play an important part in integrating the 'exiled' Chinese visitors to foreign countries, have an important role to play in this. These are communities which are by definition supposed to embrace people without probing their character and credentials, and seek to convert by example, so it is perhaps significant that overseas Chinese church communities have grown rapidly and have ever-increasing influence and connection with the equally rapid, and genuinely huge, Christian movement in China (Williams 2007). There, the Christian faith has been shown to take a form of syncretism, interestingly associated with *modernization* and advanced status, an almost *fashionable* endeavour, even as worshippers find belonging and shared identity with new forms of collectives (Madsen 1998). No doubt those youthful iconoclasts glamorized by Weihui in the popular cult novel *Shanghai Babe* (cf. Weber 2002; Knight 2003) actually exist too: that is, those who believe they have a *moral* responsibility towards their own pleasure, towards breaking bonds and taboos in order to 'realise the self', and who ruthlessly restrict solidarity to others who pursue the same aims (cf. Farrer 2006). The irony is, of course, as 'enlightenment' dawns over China, that it is only by first becoming more 'selfish' – that is to say, *legitimated as individuals* – that Chinese people will be able to become more legitimately self-sufficient and more capable of moral compassion for those outside of their immediate collectives. Very difficult in a place where the moral 'Self' is only found in the altruistic and proximity social referents of actions, the Chinese will need to give something up without getting anything back in order to further find themselves, which cannot be in any way a 'bad' thing.

## Chapter 8 Personality

### 1. Personhood

The 'Personality' construct is about the 'Self' projected through forms of control exerted as *self-cultivation*. 'Personality' is a category of judgement in some respects similar to the 'ontological' logic of the 'Authenticity' construct (chapter three), but quite without the passive ahistorical ambitions in which that essentialist logic consisted. 'Personality' refers to a distinctly *existential* logic which somewhat describes what agency is doing through all the other constructs, that is, competing to assert and realize 'Self' within socially determined orders, rather than the 'who' of 'Self' described by judgements of 'innate' character (chapter six). Like the Chinese discourse of 'Moral Character' (chapter seven), 'Personality' will not allow that value consists in and of itself, but quite unlike 'Moral Character', which emphasizes that value accrues only through reciprocity with others, 'Personality' emphasizes that value that accrues only through exertions made firstly upon *oneself*, and then only *epiphenomenally* on the world. Notwithstanding the fact that the construct sometimes takes a 'transcendent' form, or that the ways informants consume it are very often retrospective in form, 'Personality' reflects not so much a transaction, or even a presence as such, but in the first instance the *motion resulting from a force*. Much closer to the playing of 'the game' itself than its rules, the form of judgement analysed here maps the logic immanent in the the making sense of individuality through the actual articulation of formal structures, rather than the formal structures themselves, and is thus close to the "narrativity" (Carr 1991) of individual agency's expression in discourse per se. This means that 'Personality' cannot be so exhausted in its elucidation in isolation from actual dynamic practice, not at least without pre-empting many of the points made later in the dissertation. This chapter therefore draws upon some particularly salient empirical manifestations and a particularly salient 'field' of empirical practice in order to identify 'Personality' as an analytical principle, before moving on to analyse the actual *articulation* of structure in later chapters. This particularly salient 'field' is *entrepreneurship*, a concept which in many ways defines the 'Self' that competes through control and self-cultivation, and perhaps especially so in the context of post-reform China.

## 2. Intent and Intentionality

In the first instance, the 'Personality' construct is perhaps best defined by its "constellation" (Levi-Strauss's term) in the Chinese semantic field. In its positive form, the 'Personality' construct proliferates in judgements concerning, variously: self-improvement and endeavour (*zhiqiangzili*), enrichment (*chongshi*), purposeful application (*nuli*), strengthening (*jiaqiang*), making rigorous demands (*yaoqiu*) of yourself, the earnest pursuit (*zhuiqiu*) of personal ideals, strenuous effort (*chili*), determination and resolve (*juexin*), striving and struggle (*fendou*), hard work (*chiku*), going forward (*shangjin*), making onwards and upwards progress (*shangshangxin*), active application (*jijide; jixiangshang*), self-reliance (*kao ziji*), single-mindedness and concentration (*zhuyi; zhuzhong; jiangjiu*), assertiveness, challenge (*tiaozhan*), the grasping (*zhua*) of opportunities, overcoming (*kefu*), conscientiousness (*renzhen*), concern (*guan Zhu*), and the relentless and incessant (*buduande*) imperative of all these, persistence, perseverance (*jianchi*), and in particular the ability to tolerate, bear, and endure (*ren*). By contrast, negative judgements in this construct constellate around malaise, laziness (*landuo*), idleness (*dai*), slovenliness, decadence (*tuipei*), being disengaged and careless (*daiduo*), lacking attention to or overlooking details, lacking goals, targets, pursuits, purpose (*mubiao*), mediocrity (*yonglu*), sluggishness (*tuola*), lacking plans (*jihua*) and ambition (*zhuiqiu*), and leisureliness (*xian*), where leisure is equivalent to loafing about, fickleness, being easily distracted, and lacking stickability (*santiantayu liangtianshaiwang*), and so on. A relatively random, but quite typical example of this discourse would be the contrast between pursuits of *significance*, such as reading, with television watching, which some informants saw as empty, time-wasting, devoid of application and self-refinement. As one informant had it: "Most of these people are wallowing in not using their brains; the kind of entertainment they fill their time with consists of, for example, playing mahjong and computer games; they are shortsighted and don't think to keep forging ahead (*busijinqu*)". Satisfaction (*manyi*) can be a negative of this construct, too, as can luxury (*shechi*), since the root construction is precisely that a kind of added-value accrues through the projective process that cannot be simply paid for, and that can only be fully appreciated by the individual *subjected* to it alone. As one informant had it in the written exercise: "Value in the minds of people without good taste just means money; they don't understand that value must be created through persevering effort".

*Effort* of course invariably features in the reflex reaction well-off people make when they find themselves confronted by the need to justify social inequalities, “If only the poor worked harder, and weren’t so lazy, they wouldn’t be poor”, a mantra to the promise capitalism makes to its agents, even while it is recognized that effort is at most a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. Yet the whole point of the ‘Personality’ construct is that discourse and the ‘objective’ reality are mutually constitutive, so that constructions about self-cultivation were conspicuously absent in the narratives of laid-off workers, who often seemed quite *resigned* to their fate (cf. chapter ten). Anshan is a place where an awful lot of people of working age seem to sit around in large, often gendered groups, in the middle of the day, “just waiting for reform” as one laid-off neighbour put it. And yet, Socialism, as if it was a metaphor for this whole construct in its own right, is remembered just as much for slow, sluggish, under-performing, innovation-and incentive-free markets as it is for *labor*. *Purposelessness* is of course the ‘blindness’ metaphor again (cf. chapter three), but here the emphasis is not so much that they have ‘come from everywhere’ (the ‘floodgates’), but that they’re *not going anywhere*. And whereas much of the temporal dimension to the ‘Authenticity’ construct concerns ‘timelessness’ and the past-looking ‘origin’, ‘Personality’ has a very strong *present-making* focus, and this even though the construct can also take a ‘transcendent’ form (see below), and even though the narratives informants that construct to compete through the construct are often retrospective in form. The modalities of self-cultivation are complicated and not limited to the kind of effort manifest in *forwards and constant striving*, however, because the capacity to *withstand*, which is said to be a virtue of rural folk – a virtue, which like the wind-battered pines atop Chinese mountains is *made of necessity*, and one that similarly justifies inequality – is a significant positive of this construct even though this is largely an agency *acted upon*. In this respect, the spirit signified by the image of a dead child’s hand protruding from beneath a grave of rubble after the Sichuan earthquake, still gripping his pen, captures this construct well. So, too, does the selection of an indomitable pig, renamed “Strong-Willed Pig” (*Zhu Jianqiang*), which survived under the devastation for thirty-six days on charcoal and rainwater, as China’s most inspirational animal for 2008. The pig lost two thirds of its body weight while trapped underground, but upon acquiring celebrity status became so gluttonous that it could not even raise its snout from its trough (Liu 2009); readers may see interesting connotations in that!

The causal complexity latent within (or rather *generative* of) this construct is further explained by the observation that many relevant keywords in the discourse turn on the character *yang*, the root meaning of various compound forms including: supporting, providing, raising, maintaining, giving birth to, forming, cultivating, resting, recuperating, and so on. Perhaps the most apt derivative for our purposes here is *xiuyang*, which variously means accomplishment, training, mastery, self-cultivation and so on, and which is often combined with *wenhua*, meaning 'culture' to make *wenhua xiuyang*, or 'cultural cultivation' (cf. chapter four). Quite ironically, but nonetheless entirely congruent with the parameters of the construct, *xiuyang* is also given a negative orientation, and used to refer to those laid-off workers who, ineligible for either unemployment benefits or public pensions, are paid a sum significantly lower than their previous salary until they reach retirement age. Often occurring in the discourse too, is *suyang*, meaning accomplishment, attainment, and self-control, which uses the same *su* as in the *suzhi* meaning 'personal quality' introduced at chapter five, and which is sometimes also prefixed with *wenhua* for a knowledgeable stress, or with *geren* for an individual or personal stress. *Peiyang*, which means to foster, train, develop and nurture, and similarly, *jiaoyang*, meaning breeding, upbringing, education, are forms of control more often explicitly aimed at cultivating others, but which can nevertheless be conceptualized as forms of *self-cultivation* when seen in terms of familial investment, the intense control over the offspring-cultivation many Chinese parents are given to, the planning, monitoring, assessment, and never-ending comparison with other people's children in league tables, and so on, even lineage and status. *Jiaoyang*, incidentally, is also given an ironic twist, used to describe the 're-education' political prisoners are exposed too in China. Further relevant terms include *qizhi*, meaning to have a certain manner, air, or countenance about you—that certain "something that comes from the inside to the out; something that you can't change overnight", as one informant explained—which can be marked in practices as varied as walking, talking, sitting, standing and so on; and *juzhi*, which means something like poise, elegance, grace, composure, and so on, which is perhaps best understood as the result of *qizhi*. Also occasionally occurring are *taoye*, meaning 'to shape character or taste', and *qingcao*, meaning intellectual or aesthetic sentiment, which again is perhaps best understood as the result of *taoye*. A *verbal* relation to the world, intended to achieve a particularly *focused* result, is therefore the essence of the 'Personality' construct.

We might usefully consider, here, those Chinese students who will study in the library for days on end, without a break, and without any sense of “I’ve done enough today”, “I just can’t study in the daytime”, or any of the other indulgences that Westerners would likely allow themselves. Students with a thick accent at a particular school foreign language school in Beijing, I’m told, get up early in the morning, “especially”, of course, and put a stone under their tongues to correct their accent – the idea is that the stone is painful, and causes discomfort, forcing the students to alter their enunciation. Students throughout China will practice their actions with their weaker hand, “because this exercises the left side of my brain”, and correspondingly, whereas in some cultures it might be legitimate to ‘drop out’, to ‘slack off’ etc – indeed it might be *self-destruction* rather than self-cultivation that is seen as desirable (drugs; self-cutting etc) – any form of this is much harder to negotiate. In just this way, Gao Xiaofei has read in the Chinese version of ‘Vogue’ magazine that dieters are encouraged to eat holding chopsticks with their weaker hand to discipline themselves, chopsticks never being just simply useful eating tools when raised in conversation in China, but pure genius, exercising every muscle from finger-tip to shoulder and waist, as well as nerves and brain. Everything in China, it seems, is more or less “good for cultivating the body” (*dui shenti hao*), this same imperative explaining all manner of positive self-investments, from choosing the right product from the supermarket, to control over food intake and exercise, to the exotic health-cultivation practices Chinese people perform in parks, the banging of backs up against trees and the rubbing of bodies against playground apparatus in strange ways, the walking backwards and the calling of animal and bird noises in the woods, and so on. Consider, too, the extreme dedication of China’s sports stars, and the stories of coaches and parents who zealously encourage pre-pubescent children into feats of the most ludicrous endurance (cf. Brownell 2001), such as the young girl who swam across the Yangtze with her arms and legs tied behind her, urged on by her father (Coonan 2007). But might we not ask what it really means to say that individuals *compete* through *self-cultivation*? Why is it that when Gao Xiaofei sees a young child skateboarding on the street this is not understood as simply having fun, but as “developing the waist and legs”? Why is that entrepreneur Zhao spend hours and hours in his second flat, on his own, playing table-tennis against a robot that fires balls at him only for him to return the serve into a net from which the robot is reloaded again, over and over, *ad infinitum*?



### 3. Kung Fu

All Chinese know the proverb: “As long as your kungfu (a term that usually refers to martial skill but can refer to all sorts of skills cultivated over time) is deep, you can grind an iron pestle into a needle” (*zhiyaogongfushen, tiechumochengzhen*). But it means nothing to cultivate kungfu if you cease to practice it: kungfu must be continually refined in an ongoing effort of realisation. The emphasis is very much on the *process* rather than results, even where the process is highly ‘competitive’, as is the case with contesting social distinction. This importance of being *engaged* in the discourse is to be compared with the importance not so much of winning but of being *willing* to compete: While trying *too* hard to compete can be a negative, just as self-importance is also, outright winning as an end in itself is similarly seen as crass and juvenile by those who are really in control. Holding the upper-hand in the ongoing strategic battle is far nobler than ‘merely’ having won in China (cf. chapter six, 120). In just this way, whether it is table-tennis, chess, or business, entrepreneur Zhao likes nothing more than to find his opponent’s weakness and press that point over and over again, but is genuinely disappointed when his opponent eventually resigns to loss and calls a halt to the game. While there is genuine delight in honing his fore-hand smash, or in selling out his shares before the price drops and everyone else loses out, Zhao cultivates a kind of control exerted firstly upon *himself* before it is exerted upon anyone else, a control intended to *perfect* himself. Yet even these most personalized of ‘existential’ projects of control are nevertheless always *social*, since the world is always what ‘Self’ is projected onto. Similarly, although such projects are first about cultivating the ‘Self’ in and for oneself, they are not simply equivalent to a rampant individualism, though this idea is close in the discourse also, because control exerted simply to *satisfy* the ‘Self’ will always fall foul of social judgement in China, and raw, unchecked expressions of power for self-seeking ends are never likely to be legitimated by others, though they may be jealously admired where they work. Only the gods or immortals can get away with being wanton; but if your exertion is successfully negotiated as ‘contribution’ to society by conforming to ritual, obligation, role, and so on, such that your action is seen as the *right* thing to do, so it can be reasonably *expected* of you, then your exertion just because you *can*, because you are *able*, because you are fulfilling your ‘destiny’ and ‘being the best you can be’, and so on, becomes entirely legitimated, and you become ‘good’, a positively distinguished presence within the social sphere.

Indeed, cultivation of the 'Self' in this sense is a compulsion that cannot be avoided: individuals simply *must* be competitive if they are not to be found guilty of the negative judgements of the construct (i.e. sloth, purposelessness, decadence etc). Thus, this construct concerns the control in realizing the 'Self' not only from the *power* to do so, but also ultimately from the *responsibility* to do so. What at first glance seems like a set of highly individualizing traits (purpose, ambition, direction, self-confidence) need not be so much an individualizing 'opting out' of society but a complex form of cultivating one's individual worth *within* and *in relation to* that society, part of an *ordering* process and an *ordered* state, a framework for social behaviour and action, which like 'moral' action is again founded on reciprocal exchange (a thoroughly Confucian notion, incidentally). In these respects, as with the discourse of moral character, it is often that which is *given up* that most counts, a *transacting* logic which makes this cultivation quite different from a simple investment. As with the credit earned for enduring hardship, this can sometimes seem to be quite the *opposite* of self-cultivation, though nevertheless self-induced. Consider Li Na, a nineteen year-old high-school student, who "admires" (*xianmu*) "good students" who are "excellent" (*youxiu*), with "extreme talent" (*shifen youcai*), "who have been through a really hard time to be this excellent". "For example", says Li, "If they play the piano and guzheng (a Chinese musical instrument), they need to study from theory first, then the music second. They often practice four or five hours a day. This is really bitter (*ku*)". I nudge Li by asking what it is about this "hard time" that makes these students so excellent. Li replies: "Normal people just play for one or two hours a day, just for a hobby. But these people, if they want to be excellent, they must practice for four five hours a day without food or drink". Li goes on: "When they do the guzheng for many hours their nails become black. Some people wrap up their fingers, but the most excellent don't wrap up their fingers because they want the real feeling". And further: "Their teachers say that when they play sad music they must also have an accompanying really sad and powerful feeling, so they don't wrap up their fingers". I ask Li: "Do their fingers bleed?" "No, it's not that bad!" she replies. Now, despite my thinking that it can't be that 'bloody' excellent then, it is clear that Li alludes to a different, or rather *further*, kind of distinction than the separation made between the learning of socially-valued skills and the distinction of paying for violin lessons at chapter four, a distinction that begins and ends with the guzheng player herself.

The distinction Li invokes is less about the acquisition of socially esteemed forms of ability, or their demonstration, than about the pursuit of and indulgence in “excellence” for its own sake: there is nothing obviously social about it, and there is no explicit competition in Li’s imagery; the “hard time” she depicts is as much against the ‘Self’ as others, and in a way evidently related to the ‘Authenticity’ discourse (cf. chapter three) – “the *real* feeling”, she says. The guzheng player’s (almost) bleeding fingers are talked about as if they were a kind of sublimation, a kind of spiritual transcendence or perfection drawn near through the intensity of material discomfort, much like the self-flagellation Christian monks practiced in medieval times. The *making-present* of control here is a *qualitative* refinement of a purely ‘artistic’ persuasion intended precisely to break out past the limits of the form and rigor required to learn the instrument, strictures which can ultimately stifle and choke creativity. Li then goes on to raise Langlang, the greatest of China’s pianists, balancing her admiration with an acknowledgement of the awesome, life-sapping sacrifice made, a sacrifice that has somehow *taken* something fundamental from him in exchange for some supposedly higher plane of being called “excellence”: “His father beat him until he played. He doesn’t do anything save play, so he’s like a withered date (*kuza*)”. It is interesting that Li seems to romanticize the experience, since this ‘transcendent’ element to the ‘Personality’ construct, with its element of exaggeration, ardour, the pushing on through the pain-barrier, and so on, lends itself well to *myth-making*. On the ‘other side’, of course, lies the same thing that lies at the end of the road out into the ‘original’ countryside raised at ‘Authenticity’ (cf. chapter three, 68), ‘purity’, ‘truth’, and so on, but in an entirely *subjective* sense – an almost *Buddhist* metaphysic of ‘enlightenment’, and one very difficult to call *a priori* since it necessitates the *process* of walking the metaphorical road less-travelled *alone* (Propp 1985). Thus, in many respects, this construct begins where the ‘Authenticity’ construct left off, that is, with the agent who with relentless focus strives to find foundational truth *in himself*, just as do those daring individuals who pioneer the road out into the mountains in search of the ‘original rural’, hoping to find themselves masters of their own fate in the process, the *self-made-man*, or indeed woman. It is of course this highly *individualized* nature to this discourse (hence the title ‘Personality’ for the construct), the immense personal resources invested, and indeed the *cost* exacted in the process, that make the ‘character’ of the *entrepreneur* such a useful metaphor for our purposes here.

#### 4. Bittersweet

Consider Lin Wei, here, owner of the restaurant in which I washed up dishes, whose retrospective narrative about overcoming humble beginnings and bitter trials is relevant here. From a base of “extreme bitterness” (*tebie ku*), as he tells it, Lin built himself up, bit by bit, starting out as a painter-decorator, where he was frequently ripped-off, before opening his first restaurant six years ago. Lin claims that his father dying early in life gave him “a good foundation”, teaching him that “whatever the situation”, he “must tackle it independently, and with purposeful application (*nuli*)”. He goes on:

“Success is something that everyone must achieve for themselves. Everyone must eat the bitterness of their own struggle. Hardworking (*qinlao*), you must be hardworking. Whatever it is, you must do it yourself; you must not be lazy; you must not be idle (*landuo*); you must be hardworking and fond of physical labor”.

Now that Lin has ‘exploded into wealth’ (*baofahu*), however, he is in fact extremely idle, and rarely lifts a finger to do anything except smoke, eat or drink. He is certainly not fond of physical labour. Though he appears to only ever hang around with his friends, chat, and go touring to shop, he denies that his life is “leisurely” (*xiuxian*), preferring the term “relaxed” (*qingsong*), perhaps sensing that he is to be judged decadent, a distinct negative in terms of this construct. He shifts suspiciously around behind his cigarettes as if he has something to hide. Now that he has lots of money, and all the spare time in the world, does Lin study? “No, I’m too old; it won’t go in”, Lin replies: “I don’t read; I watch T.V. and “fry” shares (*chao gupiao*)”. Nevertheless, it is clear from Lin’s narrative that self-cultivation of the kind he imagines is actually very close in the discourse to the self-denial and self-deprivation which was explicitly a major theme of the previous ‘Moral Character’ construct; very close, that is, even though it seems as if projects of self-refinement should be diametrically opposed to the demand for selflessness in the Chinese construction of good moral character. In both constructs, a particular kind of *performance* requires that something be exchanged for it: the greater the *sacrifice* made, the greater the reward gained – exactly the same *ascetic* logic, except that here the referential dimension of action and judgement is inverted from the ‘Other’ first to the ‘Self’.

Highly successful Anshan entrepreneur, Liu Zong, lives by “a principle”, she says:

“By eating the bitterness of bitterness you can become a person above persons’ (*chide ku zhong ku, fang wei ren shang ren*). If you cannot eat the bitterness of bitterness, you cannot become a person above persons. The reason for my success is mainly that I can eat bitterness. How can I say? It’s all the effort (*xinku*) I have expended. I took my entire essence and put it into managing my business: enterprise culture, enterprise management, enterprise decoration etc. I definitely can’t say that it was physical bitterness-eating on my body; rather it was my entire spirit and energy (*jingshen*) that I invested. Perhaps other people would have used this time to play mah-jong, eating, dancing etc. But my time was entirely invested in work. Several years ago, when I was setting up the business, my days of work everyday were extremely long; I only ever slept for several hours.”

Liu Zong is clear: her success directly reflects the effort she has put in. But she alludes to more than the simple return on investment. There is also that which her effort has *taken* from her in the meantime. The point is made by comparing similarly causal constructions operated by other Anshanites, such as, “If you don’t eat the bitterness of bitterness, you can’t eat the sweetness of sweetness” (*buchi kuzhongku, nande tianshangtian*), with the broadly-equivalent Western version, “No pain; no gain”. In the Chinese construction it is not simply the *gain* that is important, which is the point of the “pain” in the Western construction, that is, ‘merely’ accumulating to a somehow *prior* point of exertion, but rather the *circularity of process per se*, the Western construction of course lacking the reciprocation of the ‘social referent’ to the same extent (hence the juxtaposition of “individualism” *versus* “collectivism” in the positivist-inflected literatures, which cannot hope to capture this relationalism). This is what entrepreneur Zhang Xiuzhen means when she volunteers the following:

“You have to first give something up before you can get something back... Just now I talked about being willing to expend (*shede*). First you must expend (*she*), only then can you reap rewards (*de*). Some people say to me: ‘Is it the case that you set up this business, made lots of money, and now want to give some away?’ Obviously, you’ll never have any profit if you’re like this, and will never get rich. Rather, everything you have now, you must be willing to part with. You must be in accordance with causality. Only where there is fruit can there be a cause. So you reap what you sow. Fang is too kind, he works hard but he’s too kind; he’s not suited to business. Some things you have to be unscrupulous, and ruthless (*jianshang*), but he couldn’t handle this word. He is more charitable. All his business was financed with high interest loans. He wasn’t ruthless enough”.

It is thus, in fact, *equally* as legitimate to sacrifice the 'Self' for the single-minded pursuit of personal achievement in China as it is to sacrifice the 'Self' for others, because just as moral action is also legitimately cultivation of the 'Self', self-cultivation is also manifestly *moral* in its referent. Whether it is acts of demonstrable altruism, on the one hand, or the refining fires of sacrificial bitterness, on the other, the logic is ultimately the same: agency transcends the divide, no less, between the subjective and objective worlds, uniting itself with that which is shared about *all* experience, or at least that is the social construction! Indeed, it is only the *sensation of resistance* that discourse puts up as it is displaced by this reflexive "pushing out" (Fei 1992, 66) that leads individuals to think that which is in fact *constitutive* of the subject-object relation is somehow lost. For that effort almost Munchausen in its conviction, where students in ancient China would tie their hair to the ceiling and place an awl against their backsides to spur them to greater efforts whilst studying for the imperial exams (*touxuanliang, zhuicigu*) is also what joins individuals in *communion* with others and with that which is 'greater' than the individual. The 'Personality' construct is thus ultimately about both the *power* and *powerlessness* of discourse: Firstly, the power of discourse, where you must be an upright sound revolutionary, an honest child of the people, able to 'eat bitterness', able to undergo something which takes something from you in order to achieve something greater, able to endure evil to arrive at the good, and so on; this is a discourse which goes beyond the Chinese State's efforts to inculcate a particular morality in the populous that impinges on the credibility of the Communist Party – abstinence, frugality, the 'Yan'an Way' etc – to an almost universal statement of human purpose and meaning – Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the self-flagellation of Franciscan monks, the Buddhist path to Nirvana etc – a discourse which speaks of something fundamental to human life per se. Secondly, the construct is about the powerlessness of this discourse when it is *turned around* (cf. chapter three, 69) and made into a human condition by individual agency, since this road can only be travelled alone as it is lived out in the narratives with which individuals synthesize their own identities. The Chinese construction of 'Moral Character', and in particular the 'proximity' law (cf. previous chapter), is thus provided with a stabilizing counterpoint where self-exertion lends an individual and therefore pan-Chinese imperative to a morality that would otherwise be given to warring tribalism.

## 5. Cultivating Technologies

Consider, now, the different ways this construct is *made to work* by Zhang Xiuzhen, as she interprets her rise from the fields of nearby Xiuyan, where she was born in 1970:

“I used to ask my mother and father what life was like outside the mountains, and they would say to me: ‘You study well now, and after you’ve got into university you will see the magnificent sunlight, you will change the fate of your life’.

Zhang never made it to university. She had two younger sisters and two older brothers at a time when women were severely underprivileged, especially in rural areas, which meant that when her father fell into a coma for five years at the age of forty-two, as she tells the story, she had to single-handedly care for her mother, her sibling’s, and her elderly grandmother:

“While my brother had to study a craft, and was allowed to leave home to study driving, and mechanics, I stayed at home and worked the fields, burnt the coal, cooked, worked manure into the land, and planted trees. As the heavy responsibility of life fell on my body, I worked in factories doing heavy work suitable only for men, and suffered horrific injuries.”

In 1992, Zhang decided that learning about computers would give her a competitive advantage. When she finally “came out of” Xiuyan to gain work experience at a hotel in Dalian, she was one of thirty-five selected from four-hundred, and then one of five selected from these. When Zhang studied English, she says, she would “get up at 3am even if she did not have to get up till 7am”. Eventually Zhang found herself working as a waitress in an entertainment facility owned by the son of the one of the most powerful industry magnets in Anshan, eventually marrying this boss and becoming a full-partner in the business. Zhang interprets her extraordinary success in terms of migration: “By moving you can live” (*rennuo nenghuo*). And now, she can speak as if she has *arrived*: “And so how did I get to where I am now? It was all because of my own struggling (*fendou*) that my life changed”. Though Zhang has paid dearly for her success, with blood, sweat and tears, the perception is that the exchange adds value, a *personal* realisation that could not have been realized in any other way, or by anybody else, one that was broadly guided throughout its genesis by her *force of intent*.

Today, Zhang puts this same existential control to use in the cause of developing her network-marketing company. She tells me how she divides targets amongst her group in a "systematic" fashion:

"They must complete it every month; it must be the case that everyone is incessantly learning; they are learning as they do it; they must incessantly improve and perfect themselves. When they meet a problem they must think how to get over it, they cannot just avoid or evade a problem when it comes up. So my attitude is that there are not one hundred problems I face, but that I will find the one hundred answers to these problems. Is this not right? Look at my condition... I have my target, I have my plans. In life, people without pressure will fall away; a well without pressure will not spurt oil. Giving yourself a little pressure is correct. But you don't want too much pressure. You must go pace by pace, you must walk on the road in an earnest and down-to-earth manner. You can't miss a step; missing a step is no good. You have to leave your trail of two footprints on the ground. You can't just set yourself a target too far from you. For example, if it was a step, if I wanted to step up all of them in one go this would be impossible; you can only do it step by step. First you must have plan, a target plan. I must think, "How to complete", and everyday repeat this action. And secondly, you must do things accordingly to the plan. Right now, we're about to have Spring Festival, and I'm thinking what'll I do after, how will I move things forward. I have my plan now, I have my targets now... in this process I am really cheerful, I believe that people in life should incessantly challenge; when they meet adversity they must challenge it. When you meet something you've never met before, you must also challenge it; when your challenge is successful, that kind of victorious feeling, the joy of victory, there is no way in language to express it. When you come across a difficulty, you must think of a way to get over it. You need to have a position to orient you when you're anxious. I think I'm this kind of person, I rely on my own perseverance and striving; there is nothing I can't do. But only if you're willing to do things in the proper sequence, gradually, with perseverance, can you do it; with the right attitude you can do anything. It cannot be the case that, in this life, if you expend, you will always get results; sometimes you will expend and not get any payback, no results at all. But if you don't expend, it'll be even more the case that you'll never get anything back. Life is fair, we all have twenty-four hours per day, but how long we live is up to us. Life is in the palm of our hands. Just see if you treasure it. The whole of life is not easy; we must cherish it. Especially fate, it's really not easy to get. You must always think, now that my parents have given me a life, they have given me this environment, I must strengthen myself, pump myself up. This is very important. Life is never easy, never plain sailing, it's always bumpy with up and downs. See if you can strive with all your might. There is nothing difficult in front of me. I always say 'when the car is at the bottom of the mountain, there must be a road'; you don't need to think about it too much."



In the first instance, Zhang Xiuzhen's narrative shows how the process of self-refinement, though essentially *qualitative*, and for all the sheer intensity of will that she exerts, might nevertheless be a very disciplined, precise, exacting, and graduated process, systematic and methodical in its rationality. There is therefore ultimately no difference between forms of 'existential' control that are explicitly qualitative, such as that which Li Na invokes in the guzheng player's reveries (above), and the more technical forms of control Zhang invokes here: insofar as both are 'existential', both achieve fundamentally the same result, and both somewhat presuppose each other. Some people may of course see more value in impulsive, ostensibly unstructured expressions of will; indeed we saw 'Sociability' (chapter six) how an excess of control, perhaps as planning, calculation, or formalism, and so on, can be a negative transgression where some impulse and flair may be highly desirable. And indeed, control might perhaps sometimes only be achieved by acting largely on instinct – "going with your gut", as it were – so that any amount of planning and meticulous deliberation is actually insufficient on its own, and this even though an element of grit, determination, and a particular resistance to the impulse to give up when the going gets tough is no doubt required for distinction, even if the ultimate goal is personal liberation. Even the most disciplined of efforts is perhaps insufficient for achieving control: 'mere' effort just makes you headstrong. For distinction, ultimately, the *uncertainty* of the 'game' must be embraced. For it doesn't matter how hard you try, you can never be *sure* whether it is your effort and control or something else that does the trick, something like faith, luck, or that element of imagination which roams free of the will. Willing, indeed, may sometimes *by itself* trigger "miraculous" results, or at least that is the social construction (think of cancer sufferers who fight it off against all the odds, and so on). On the other hand, the 'miraculous' breakthrough can sometimes only come when you entirely *let go* of control, when you take a long walk, browse an unrelated literary source, or meet with an unexpected encounter, such that discipline is highly valuable and useful in a way that disciplines ultimately are not. Effort, that is to say, must always be complemented by an 'external' element beyond agency itself – "fate", as Zhang puts it – so that the actual engagement in such projects does not prevent an advance that can only come when, in the worldly imperfection that all humans share, individuals cannot but help but relax their control and see the "car at the bottom of the mountain" (as Zhang put it).

Exercising the 'Self' in this way thus requires something of an 'authentic' realisation of the 'Self's' possibilities for being, including its inevitable finitude. Control requires that you be *resolute* in the face of your being, including an always imminent death (that which lies outside your capacity for 'final coherence'), thus making coherent narrative sense of your present from all possible futures and from interpretations of the past (cf. Heidegger's notion of 'Authentic Dasein'). As Zhang Xiuzhen puts it (above), we must objectify our lives in the "palm of our hands". That is to say, that in this sense of individuals *taking* control, they do so ultimately from no-one else, because what they 'find' is what they, and they alone, already had. But this need not be conscious as a process and certainly not rational as such: "You don't need to think about it too much", as Zhang explains. Indeed, only the likes of the Cartesianists think this positive *disinvestment* of 'Self' can be consciously grasped for anything more than the vaguest promise of a moment. As well as being close to myth-making in the discourse, therefore, we are close also to *mysticism*. But *resignation* to fate remains entirely insufficient for social distinction; positive affirmation is still very much required; the 'gods' help only those who help themselves. "Fate", as Zhang puts it, is "really not easy to get... we must strive with all our might". All Zhang's other constructions are thus made subordinate to an intensely *vital* energy: "Every time my mood is bad, I'll go to the top of a mountain and shout to the North, South, East and West, shouting out my wishes: that my business will be good, and my dreams will be good", she elsewhere continues: "All the dreams from near and far, no matter if it's a big target or a small target (*mubiao*), they're all within your grasp". *Vitality*, indeed, is very much expressive of Zhang's 'innate' personality (cf. 'Sociability'), and indeed vitality is where this construct tessellates most closely with a sense of self-confidence (*zixinxin*), self-respect and esteem, enthusiasm (*reqing*) and optimism (*leguan*), creativity (*chuangzao*), courage (*yonggan*), exploration (*tansuo*), an expansive, pioneering, *enterprising* spirit, as opposed to small-mindedness, pettiness, and intolerance, all of which are also negatives of the central importance of magnanimity in the 'Sociability' construct. The *vital* person positively welcomes and actively consumes whatever he/she encounters. But an 'open' *willingness* should not be mistaken for unassertiveness, or self-denial: "internally referential" control is *highly* assertive, a kind of assertion maybe less understood in the West, perhaps, but an assertion that orders the world even as it orders the 'Self'.

## 6. Control Freak

Control, indeed, need not even be conceptualized in terms of positive assertion at all in order to be a legitimate form of social competition, for in some situations control can be quite indirect. If your actions fill the gap of indeterminism with drive and direction, as in most of the purposeful examples about Olympic training and so on (above), this is of course legitimate, and perhaps more obviously called 'control'; but if your control is used in a stabilizing or *entropic* way (*wenzhong*) that can also be legitimate. Self-cultivation can be apparently quite static (playing on the less dynamic meanings of the 'yang' character as noted above, page 160 – resting, recuperation, and so on), just never entirely stagnant. Indeed, the tension between the imperative to be earnest, engaged, and assertive, on the one hand, and the utter distastefulness of being overtly ostentatious, on the other, is resolved by a family of ideas including moderation, simplicity, acting in a 'naturally' fitting way, and so on, all of which are highly self-disciplined and entropic forms of assertion, but that are nonetheless not at all passive. Excessive effort to supersede your position leads straight to anomaly. The case of 'conspicuous consumption' is similar: ostentation shows loss of control; people in control don't need this, but if your ostentation is expected in your role or position this is necessary, and shows you are in control. For some people, moreover, the embodiment of 'taste' must be played down, almost denied, in a highly controlled way, so that praise, esteem, compliment and so on are deflected as if disowned and unwanted, though nevertheless yet reaped as such. Indeed, knowing when to document these forms of control is itself *prudence* (cf. 'Knowledge and Ability'). Further still, much of the time social actors are engaged in an entirely pre-reflective or largely unconscious form of control, the 'done thing' that maintains social order, and which is most obviously disclosed only when it is broken down by somebody becoming explicitly 'out-of-control' (cf. Heidegger's notion of 'ready-to-hand'): When a woman threw a fit of hysterical anger about "selfishness" and "the pressure of the crowd" on the train from Beijing to Liaoning, for example, she stood on her seat, and shrieked and wailed at the carriage full of bemused passengers for some several minutes until she eventually realized her embarrassment, her wrath turning away from the perceived offence to society at large, and the whole human condition, before she eventually settled down again, finding a ladder to climb down on by blaming an almost unidentified other for "swearing" (*ma*) at her.

In any case, and most importantly, all these different types of control – i.e. technical versus qualitative; dynamic versus stabilizing; impulsive versus deliberate; conscious versus unconscious; fated versus free, and so on – can never be really separated anyway. All forms of control become *existential* for exactly the same reason that all the constructs of this analysis are only ‘separate’ as the result of their abstraction and iteration, and hastily collapse into one another again in their actual practice. Witness that many of the examples of ‘self-cultivation’ mentioned above had a distinctly ‘collective’ referent – the Olympians, the young girl swimming the Yangtze to please her father etc, to name just two. Those who ‘eat bitterness’ in their daily labour, moreover, do it for themselves, of course, not for their bosses, and the only reason that entrepreneurs’ profiteering is legitimized in contemporary China is because business is now seen as good for the economy as a whole, that is, the *right* thing to do. We might also consider once again the sense in which your ‘good moral character’ must be *shown* to such a degree in China (see last chapter), that is, that certain types of ‘morally correct’ control that in the West would perhaps only be enacted in response to *emotional* stimuli, such as that arising from the immediacy of the necessity to help someone, for example, in China become a traditional or habitual action, a *rational* rule that you *have* to abide by. You *have* to be proactive, you *have* to show consideration in certain ways, you *have* to be a good host, you *have* to send that text wishing your relative ‘happy mid-autumn day’, you *have* to profess your loyalty over and over in order to generate good will that will be reciprocated as favours, benefitting the ‘Self’ etc. Just as the affective behaviour becomes a rational imperative, the controlling, rational behaviour also becomes an emotional reflex, so that there is little distinction between the senses in which you *have* to take the initiative to act. All rationalisations are therefore forms of rationality, which is to say *intentionality*, which is existential, and *must* be exerted against something other than itself. Thus, *competitiveness* remains the essence of *self-cultivation*, and need not be of the direct or overt “I’ve got the biggest car” type, but rather “I am in control of myself and my behaviour, so that I control the rest”, so that your competition is a comparator, a shared reference around which distinction is indirectly contested. Indeed, provided an ‘opponent’ of this sense is present, social control may be commanded even through controlled bursts of being explicitly ‘out-of-control’, a logic very similar to the ‘drunken style’ form-for-formlessness discussed at ‘Sociability’ (cf. 118).

Consider this final field-note where a disordering of the 'Self' disordered the social world and at once exerted control over it, for the power of discourse and its consumption extends even to this. I was having dinner with my girlfriend, her parents, an aunt and an uncle at a hotpot restaurant. The uncle and I hadn't seen each other for over a year and he was very happy to see me. He controlled most of the ordering of dishes, and having done so, motioned to the waitress to let the restaurant owner know that he was there -- apparently the restaurant owner would know who he was. The waitress asked who she should say it is, to which the uncle, chuckling, replied that all she need do is tell her "boss" (*laoban*) that the "big boss" (*da laoban*) is here (The uncle holds a powerful position in a powerful arm of Anshan's State-owned enterprise structure). Shortly, the owner of the restaurant entered the room to greet the big boss. But unexpectedly, however, he sat down to join us for dinner, changing the mood immediately. It was not entirely clear that the others present approved of this manoeuvre. The rest of us had never met "Lin Wei" before, and were looking forward to a pleasant family meal without the 'business', or somehow *competitive*, dynamic. Predictably, the discourse became very much centred on me, the foreigner. Unaware of my role in the family and assuming I was an 'outsider', Lin Wei said to me: "Do you know, this is the big boss?", whilst patting the uncle admiringly on the shoulder and sloshing our glasses full of beer. Everyone except the uncle and Lin Wei were quiet except for the odd polite laugh. These two asserted that I was "good" because I was "a foreigner", that I was "formidable" (*lihai*). Then there was general agreement that I was "good" because I "study hard". But then another theme emerged as we became further engrossed in our hotpot and beer. I was also "good", apparently, because I liked to eat "a lot" (i.e. an *excess*) of meat, a bit "savagely", or more precisely, that these men liked eating with me because they could eat lots of meat and be 'out of control'. Normally the uncle must control his diet, but with me, just once or twice a year in this kind of situation, he can go "wild" and indulge himself to excess. Thus, we proceeded to make messy splashes as we ate, and the uncle, somehow orchestrating all proceedings, regularly performed a very random kind of swishing and swashing of the chopsticks in the hotpot, a behaviourism my wife (then girlfriend) had previously told me she was taught was "bad manners" as a child. Red-faced and virtually drooling, the uncle said to me, but also for the whole group: "It's best when you pick up a load of meat in one go so your *whole* mouth is *full* of meat!".

This same uncle usually refuses alcohol on account of needing to project the control appropriate to his position, but on this occasion drank many, many bottles of beer with Lin Wei and me. The uncle called the shots, and Lin Wei facilitated, ushering plate after plate of lamb to our table. I ate half a lamb or thereabouts. Lin Wei then splashed out books of vouchers on us for his restaurant amounting to ten thousand *yuan*, enough for around forty large-group meals here. Half were refused because his generosity, it was felt, was just too excessive, *out-of-control*, but that was the whole point. Of course, these kinds of excess behaviours can take a positive form when seen from the perspective of the 'Sociability' construct (chapter six). Here, however, eating as if out-of-control had a role in projecting a more overt form of social power. The uncle would possibly have been over-excited to see me anyway, but we have eaten many times with mirth and excess, and many other times in an entirely uncompetitive fashion too. In particular, there was something about these men finding the need for a worthy opponent in me – a young, carnivorous Western guy, an opponent around which the floor was controlled and the players elevated in the domination stakes. The women present were primarily the backdrop upon which the 'game' was played; their voices piping up only every time the prospect of eating more meat (or not) arose, that is, every time the competitive stakes of control-mongering amongst the men were elevated. The uncles' wife was especially quiet at the other end of the table opposite him. My partner's mother was also quiet and self-controlled, sitting straight and not at all interrupting. Similarly, my girlfriend's usual attempts to wrest control from me at times like this (i.e. 'don't eat too much'; 'you can't drink alcohol' etc), were completely restrained on this occasion. With the uncle calling the shots, nobody interfered: if he said it was 'out-of-control' day, then 'out-of-control' day it was. But although the women knew better than to make a real fuss about stopping us in public, especially in front of Lin Wei who was not family, the barrage followed later when we were home (we should control ourselves, we shouldn't overdo it, we should say "no", "enough is enough" etc), the price to pay or sacrifice, in this case, coming much later. That night, apart from the earache, I felt like I had been poisoned by the amount of lamb fat in my blood: I had the sweats, dizziness and light-headedness, had to sleep, and had a disturbed digestive system for a while thereafter. The uncle, apparently, had similar discomforts that he could not control!

Control and self-cultivation, then, though an existential logic, is always a question of *balance*, a practical logic always being worked out against the social world and its structures. "Power is nothing without control", conjectures the Pirelli tires advert, implying that control requires *traction*. Whether control be rationalized as 'ordering' or 'disordering', the will must be channelled, focused, tempered and disciplined for distinction, yet never entirely *tamed*. The pianist Langlang (cf. above) achieves greatness only by first internalizing the prior rules upon which he improvises, invents, and innovates: his self-cultivation is informed by the world. No doubt Farrer's dancers dancing 'individualistically' into the mirrors of Shanghai's dance clubs (Farrer 2002), that is, rather than dancing together in a "collectivist" fashion, are engaged projects of intense self-control, worshipping at the altar of the the god within, at "the site of the internalization of externality" as it were, ordering the self, imposing form on the formlessness of agency, and in a way that is no doubt called 'individuality', moreover, but in a way that need not necessarily be any more narcissistic than the guzheng player's painful ecstasies. The dancers dance thus because doing so accrues a particular kind of value socially constructed as a viable social expression in that context: it would certainly not be the same if the dancers took off their clothes and excreted on the dance-floor just to be 'different'. Only avant-garde artists can get away with that sort of statement, and their point is precisely this one: the dancers are no more 'different' than the respect accrued to a qigong master or ascetic priest for his efforts to transcend the subject-object divide. Art, like all forms of composure, such as the juggler who with only two hands creates the illusion of manipulating many balls at once, or the disc-jockey who flawlessly blends together two or more simultaneously playing records into a single sound-track, is what individual agency *makes of* all the various conflicting elements that life presents to it – which is ultimately to speak of what individual agency makes of its 'Self'. Individual mastery requires consistency *and* innovation, discipline *and* imagination (Weick 1989). Only in this way is it possible to project a *style* defined not by reference to any others but that can be called your *own*, and by which the complex, disparate, and apparently unconnected elements of your life are made subject to a golden, *authorial thread* by which you can be distinguished in a way that satisfies both yourself and other individuals. This thread, indeed, a line, a movement, a "trajectory" (cf. De Certeau 1984, xviii), is of course a metaphor for the operations in practice right now.

### Part 3

By way of setting up the analysis to follow, the two remaining constructs abstracted from the discourse of social distinction, 'Materialism' and 'Status', are briefly introduced together, both of which are less irreducible categories of judgement and practice like those constructs elucidated thus far than that *in which* the other constructs are crystallized. 'Materialism' is of course a massive concept which we will not try to define here. For our purposes, let it simply be noted that 'Materialism' concerns the 'Self' that projects itself onto and over material objects as consumption, which need not at all be necessarily understood as consumerism, which is simply a pattern of practice which borrows meaning from the conflation of 'Materialism' and 'Status' (see below). 'Materialism', that is to say, is an 'objective' projection of the *whole* discourse, all the other 'rules' already elucidated bearing on a material projection. It is that *place*, indeed, where the metaphorical relation which first emerged where 'Self' was recognized as having the agency to contribute to discourse *in principle* (cf. chapter three, 50) now opens up onto the totality of the physical world, all the previous constructs having progressively hollowed out the discourse, leaving only the material 'thing-in-itself'. This is not at all to say that material is 'outside' the discourse unaccompanied by the subject, of course, or that the 'Self' asserted through the other constructs is somehow not engaged with material. Quite the contrary, 'Materialism' is that *necessary condition* of all the other constructs where individual agency *recognizes itself* in discourse, intelligent self-awareness and the senses appropriate to an *embodied* agency being *given together*. 'Materialism' is thus even more 'existential' still than the previous 'Personality' construct, and to this very *real* extent *completes* the epistemological perspectivism sustained throughout. Insofar as 'Materialism' traces a sort of oblique 'fit' with the formal structures of subjectivity iterated at 'Authenticity', indeed, it turns the core relational theoretic of this research backwards *upon itself* towards an almost *Cartesian* 'objectivity'. Thus far, the construct is almost infinitely broad in its scope, concerning the 'visual' topography of the entire 'objective' sphere. When seen from an *analytical* perspective, however, and indeed somewhat *by virtue* of these latent spatial and visual metaphors (see also chapter three, 48-56), this discursive 'space' is actually quite narrow, so much of this scope having already been 'mapped' in the process of elucidating the previous constructs. That is to say, that with 'Materialism' the entire analysis can now be seen to take a *particular form* actually presupposed by the authorial agency and material facticity of the researcher undertaking it. If the elements of a system have no positive content (as maintained by the Structuralist approach) but are rather defined by their differentiated relation to everything they are not, that is to say, *any* analysis could continue to identify ever-increasingly small elements of the 'whole' before a 'construct' was introduced about which there would be nothing left to say, the capacity to impose structure on a discourse having collapsed into the instantiation itself. Put another way, though we now demarcate a *place* we call the 'Materialism' construct', a place that should 'logically' be 'filled' by analysis, this 'space' has become increasingly redundant having already been handled in conjunction with the other issues this 'space' is inseparable from. Even more figuratively put still, 'Self' cannot possibly apprehend itself as material thing-in-itself, since all objects are by definition apprehended only *perspectivally*, which is to say within always still *social* discourses – through, as it were, the eyes of the 'Other' (Ci 1994).



For this same reason too, 'Materialism' is brought together with the 'Status' construct, which concerns the judgement of the individual as a socialized category, a construct which is also, though in another sense, that *in which* the entire discourse is crystallized. 'Status' may be thought in two ways: Firstly, as an objective grid, like a hierarchical ladder of statuses where individuals are identified by and/or identify with a label ('urban', 'Chinese', 'worker', and so on); and secondly, in terms of the immediate situational relation to others, where speaking and action will change according to whom is being addressed and so on, the 'rules' determining how exactly being highly conventional. 'Status' is therefore less a mode of judgement in which individuals can 'transgress' as such, than a synonym for the distinguished individual per se; it is that final structural principle of this analysis, where although there will always be some outlying points in instances of judgement that remain distinctive for their apparent 'randomness' and lack of fit with social structure, every boundary judgement distinguishing validity from invalidity must necessarily be seen in terms of its *duality*, that is, as the judgement 'in-itself' (as part of a continuum of judgements), on the one hand, and as the measure of the judgement's social credibility (contingent on its fit with similar judgements and with the 'status' of its maker), on the other (Lamont 1992). Quite the *opposite* of the agency first granted the autonomy to make classificatory judgements at 'Authenticity', 'Status' is where individual agency is 'consumed' by the categories of social structure even as it consumes these in judgement. This means that 'Materialism' and 'Status' need not be fully explicated in terms of their conceptual genesis as has been done with the other constructs, but can be much better understood when examined in conjunction *with* those other constructs. Since both constructs come so close to the practice of distinction, that is to say, there is proportionately greater analytical value in pushing the analysis towards the pursuit of the 'grammar' of how individuals consume these constructs differently in their actual instantiation. It may as well be made explicit here, however, that 'Materialism' and 'Status' are perhaps most relevant where they are *made to converge*, that is, at that point in discourse where the judgement of the individual (as it were) *an sich*, and the judgement of the social classification of the person are arrived at each through the prism of other, 'horizontal' expressions of individual difference having been colonized by 'vertical' references to forms of subjectivity that can only be paid for with *money*. The following analysis thus allows this conflation of 'Materialism' and 'Status' to be drawn out in conjunction with the other constructs of this analysis as the research moves to understand how judgement is configured within social categories; to understand, indeed, how social categories are configured by judgement. The following analysis does not pretend to be an exhaustive account of Chinese or even Anshan society, but is rather intended to best reflect the wide range of individuals who informed this study (cf. chapter two, 40). Chapter nine examines the rural-migrant workers with whom I worked at the 'Lamb Buddha' restaurant, a large 'hotpot' (*huoguo*) restaurant with about fifty staff, most of the data coming from young men. Chapter ten brings together a swathe of broadly 'working class' middle-aged urban adults, drawing out the grammar of the instantiation along the vectors of age and gender. Finally, chapter eleven analyses a range of middle-aged adult individuals all of whom are distinguished from those analyzed in chapter ten by a rough composite of occupation and professional status, discretionary income, educational level, and family background. Each analysis similarly shows how discourse is consumed by different individuals in different ways, but in ways nevertheless approximate to individuals of similar 'objective' positions in society, thus charting a 'third-way' between prior social structure and individual agency.

## Chapter 9

### Rural Migrants

#### 1. Crossing Boundaries

This chapter analyses migrant workers with whom I worked at 'Lamb Buddha', a large hotpot (*huoguo*) restaurant with about fifty staff. The majority of the data comes from four young men, making this analysis distinct from other scholars who have mainly examined female migrant workers (Pun 2003; Hanser 2005; Yan 2003; Hsu 2005). These migrants came from rural homes all over China, often via a hop-scotch of similar jobs. Most worked in the kitchen; indeed all but one of the kitchen staff, who performed menial and monotonous labour twelve hours per day, seven days a week, were rural migrants. One or two female migrants of reproductive age joined young women from poorer urban families serving customers on the restaurant floor; all of the serving staff being young women (cf. Hanser 2005). The clerical and administrative workers, and those involved in the purchasing and transportation of goods, a role that affords considerably greater autonomy, were of urban registered household status (*hukou*) without exception. These operated something of a clique by gravitating to the office end of the restaurant premises, avoiding the hot and sweaty kitchen, and would joke that the difference between them and the kitchen staff was the same as the distinction between cadre and worker from the SOE era (cf. Status). Nevertheless, some of the lower-ranking urban men would occasionally come by the kitchen to 'hang out', perhaps reflecting the fact that the character of masculinity seems better able to break down social boundaries than femininity (cf. Sociability); but perhaps only as a foil for cheating some leisure time on-the-job out of their employers (cf. De Certeau 1984, 24-28). This limited interaction was entirely harmonious, though the urban men would notably be louder, confident and laughing, and the migrants always quieter and more careful. Even those urban staff working at the same wage-level as the migrants would occasionally make statements belittling the peasants (*nongmin*) when in conversation with me. Correspondingly, many of the migrants volunteered that they were of the "lowest level" (*zuidiceng*) in this urban context. Thus, the categorical urban versus rural household registration divide, as well as age and gender, were highly significant dimensions of difference here (cf. Status).

Most of the young men analysed here, named Zhang Jili, Lin Chuan, Xue Liang and Wang Cuihua, characterized their rural familial origins as the source of authenticity, moral purity, and social belonging, positives that they felt the urban environment was either devoid of or actively denied to them (cf. Hansen and Pang 2008). Consider Zhang Jiali, the doorman, for example, twenty-years old, who had moved with his family “out from” countryside climes elsewhere in Liaoning three years ago, where he “had a simple life, close to nature, working as the sun rose, and resting as it fell”. Whereas Zhang found the people from his home “sincere (*shizai*), plain, simple, and true (*pushi*)”, he finds city people “fake”, and “two-faced” (*xuwei*) (cf. Authenticity). “The city is competitive”, Zhang explained, “It follows the laws of the jungle: whereas the countryside is relaxed, the city is extremely tense (*tebie jinzhang*); I must work hard, or be eliminated through competition (*taotai*)”. Other migrants made constructions almost identical to Zhang’s: Lin Chuan, aged twenty-two, similarly found the city ambiguously immoral. Lin prefers the “simple, fun (*wanr*) and free” countryside and the socially open and friendly people there too:

“In the countryside, we set up a table in a big yard, start the barbeque, drink, take our clothes off, get bare-chested, and drink. Oh my, it’s really good, enough to make people really envious! Our neighbors are all extremely exuberant (*reqing*). We get everything together from around the village to eat, and everybody sits in the same place; it’s extremely lively, buzzing with excitement and exhilaration (*renao*), not like in the city. People in the city are complicated (*za*). It’s like we can’t make head or tail of what they’re thinking: what are they thinking in their hearts? Sometimes we’re scared of losing things; if we put our things down, they’ll take them and use them. We need to be really guarded against this, not like in the countryside, where we don’t even lock our doors when we go out. The neighbors can just come in, but they don’t take anything, and nothing is lost. Here, in the city, we fear robbers at the door and thieves coming in; we have security bars. We’ve got to be really careful. In the countryside you don’t need to be careful: if you want to go to someone else’s house you just go in; if you want to watch T.V. you just switch it on, and when you’ve finished you go; it’s really relaxed like that. Not like the city where it’s really tense and everyone is different, and everyone needs to be really guarded (*fangzhe*). When you put your things down you need to hide them. I feel it’s really bad.”

Thus, the urban sphere was constructed as a place of uncertainty and mistrust vis-à-vis opposing virtues that these migrants believed were embodied in themselves (cf. Authenticity; cf. Sociability).

Xue Liang, the youngest migrant at sixteen, responded to my asking whether his family is from the city or the countryside, by stating “countryside” with a proud assertion. Xue left for the city because his family was “comparatively poor”; he didn’t want to leave, but wanted to take responsibility for alleviating the burden on his overworked and aging parents. Xue has older siblings (who, the implication is, would have been responsible in the first instance), but he wanted to do his bit to contribute too, thus revealing a first strong configuration of the ‘Moral Character’ construct. With Zhang and Lin (above), Xue maintained: “Generally speaking, city people are not as good as people in the countryside”, then made further bold and somewhat naïve-sounding statements about the status of his family:

“Yes, they’ve always been peasants. I like the countryside. I don’t like the city, because I can play when I’m at home, and pick vegetables, kick a ball around and do as I please. I can go to the mountains and catch a chicken, catch a fish, and catch a fish with crude nets (*laoyu*), and go fishing (*diaoyu*) in the reservoir.”

Xue thus conjured a life of simple pleasures and simple gradations connected with nature and feeding the family (he was probably telling me that as well as fishing with nets he has also done the ‘even better’ fishing with *rods*). “In the countryside”, Xue went on, “You can play as and where you like, you can tread (*cai*) wherever you like, but you can’t do this in the city. You can play, but if you make the city dirty, or break something, people will tell you off”. Thus, the city was spoken of as if it were an object that doesn’t belong to these migrants, one that bites with only limited provocation. City people had sworn at Xue for preparing the wrong vegetables as is the trend to abuse newly State-sanctioned consumer rights to bully serving staff, who will have to pay for any mistakes or breakages from their own already meagre salaries. Despite their underprivilege, however, not one of these migrants made the slightest apology for the urban disdain for the countryside. Both Zhang and Lin volunteered the perception that the countryside was a place of natural tranquillity, quiet and with clean air, and contrasted this with the pollution and noise of the city. Zhang believes people live longer in the countryside too. And, in defence of his roots, Lin was eager to stress that the countryside is developing now, “With mobile phones, roads, and city people visiting in their cars”, thus walking a fine line between the competing constructions of the countryside iterated in the elucidation of the ‘Authenticity’ construct (cf. 63).

That is to say, that although these migrants wanted the countryside to be pure, unspoilt, and fundamentally *sustaining* in contrast to the 'inauthenticity' and unnatural façade of the city, they also wanted to project an image of a countryside that somehow conjoined the best of all possible worlds (cf. chapter three). They took what little they had and found a way to put a positive spin on it in order to compete socially. Indeed, though all these migrants were similarly loyal to their local roots and, thrown together, formed a temporary unity of identity around this shared basis (see below), not all expressed an anti-urban configuration. Wang Cuihua, the fourth migrant, the oldest of the four and the one who has been the longest "out" of the countryside, didn't complain about the urbanites at all; indeed Wang likes the city and wants to develop himself here:

"How can I say? In every respect, the environment is cleaner; the city is cleaner than the countryside. The conditions in the village are not good, and the city has parks. There are no leisure places, karaoke and discos in the village".

Lin Chuan, too, though he did not explicitly side with the city over the countryside, drew several distinctions between himself and members of his family who have never left the countryside, intended to elevate himself in my perception. Lin has grown used to the city, and finds that there's "nothing to do when he goes home except sit around and watch television". He is aware of having been changed by his exposure to the urban sphere, an experience that has come with the need to acquire a taste for economic and symbolic intricacies. As he reminisces:

"In the beginning, I couldn't understand why the clothes I wore in the countryside could be worn for many years, but here I needed to change clothes every quarter; and why I had to buy bottled mineral water, when the water in the countryside I could drink straight from the well: everything in the city required money".

Although these young migrants originate from the countryside, therefore, their identities were similarly characterized by a fundamental ambiguity arising from increasing integration into urban ways of life. Lin Chuan, indeed, already five years out of the countryside, has learnt to handle the complexity of consumption and has become fluent in the dynamics of identity; he is quite adept at making the best use he can of the range of goods and cultural products around him to compete socially, and in many respects indistinguishable from urban-registered men of his age.

The fact that Lin buys “fake” branded products is more a source of pride than shame: of course, he is aware that his ‘Nike’ training shoes are not the ‘real thing’, and that he is light-years away from the same distinguished position he would be in if they were – *everyone* knows that only people with money buy the ‘real’ product (cf. Authenticity). What is more important to Lin, and the people around him of about his “level”, is that he had shown sufficient control of his environment to *know* what the top marks are, to have surveyed his available options, and to have had the *ability* to find himself a good quality counterfeit without getting ridiculously out of pocket (cf. Knowledge and Ability). When Lin showcases his skill in the kitchen, his friends laugh openly along with him, laughing at the rule, admitting, boasting even, that their trainers and clothes were counterfeit too, positively revelling in a mutually recognized craftiness as the ‘unspoken’ rules of the game were spelled out: in the city, *you must be competitive*, and so long as you do so in order to survive as a player, to remain on top, and are not held in contempt of the other rules structuring the logic of judgement, the ‘arts’ of the ‘inauthentic’ are entirely legitimate; indeed, it was precisely through the *confessional* acknowledgement of inauthentic tactics that a sense of authentic identity and belonging was evoked and shared. In exactly this way, too, the migrants were quite happy to gather to watch me do *taiji* in the kitchen, forging solidarity from our rapport and mutual insubordination of the system. These situations were about ‘us’ in the kitchen versus the urban staff ‘out there’ in the restaurant. While one or two urbanites would occasionally join in the mirth, others would skirt away to ensure that their participation was not seen by the manager. All such jollies were immediately suspended at the slightest hint of her presence, just as I was once scolded for breaching the boundary by venturing across the restaurant floor without first removing my apron. In the end, it was of course *only* the manager who represented the system: some of the urbanites would have happily joined in had they not been so afraid of her. But if she were to betray even an inkling of the delight in symbolic insubordination herself, the entire system would be lost. Her role was essentially to keep up the appearance of an ‘objective’ system that existed only insofar as she had to respect the owner. Indeed, this might be a poignant (if somewhat exaggerated) metaphor for all of Chinese politics, with its transcendental signifier outside the discourse somehow beyond all accountability (currently called Hu), and 1.3 billion plus individual subjects each of whom are only accountable to the system insofar as they report to the “level” above.

## 2. Experience is Everything

Lin Chuan, Wang Cuihua, and Xue Liang all failed to complete the mandatory nine years of middle school education, all offering a combination of failing to study well and the costs of further education as reasons for dropping out (cf. Knowledge and Ability). Zhang Jiali began the first year of high-school before dropping out, he says, for similar reasons: “My father really didn’t want me to continue studying because he could see I was so tired”. Zhang nevertheless attempts to claw back some of the social capital education would have granted him, however, a reflection of the deep regret he later admits to me: when he quit, he makes sure to add, his teacher and all the other students came over to his home to try to persuade him to stay on, “because at that time I was the one in the family with the brightest hopes of going to university”. Xue Liang, the youngest, explicitly states that the decision to drop out was a *sacrifice* made for his family, against their wishes: he knew his parents needed him to earn a wage (cf. Moral Character). Wang Cuihua explains that he was “kicked out for fighting”, which is probably as much a glamorisation of his failure as it is true. I ask him straight: “You weren’t good at study?” to which he replies affirmatively whilst trying to avoid being explicit; he later admits that he “couldn’t memorize the words”, and “couldn’t handle physics and geometry class”. Zhang Jiali says *exactly* the same, indicating that these young men have worked out how to justify their predicaments through close negotiation with each other. Since coming to ‘Lamb Buddha’, however, Lin and Xue Liang have developed skills that distinguish them from many of the other kitchen workers. Whereas most of the others merely sort and chop vegetables, or wash dishes, Lin has been trained to prepare herbs, and Xue to operate the meat cutter. But neither of these are really an “ability” (*nengli*), they say: “Anyone can do it if they’ve been shown”. Zhang Jiali, too, knows enough Chinese kungfu to win him the doorman’s job, but his skills are only rudimentary. Even so, he clearly feels that his brief stint at a youth military training academy is a valuable form of social capital, and wears military clothes with his jeans, consciously identifying himself with a particular sector of the lower reaches of society (cf. Materialism; cf. Status). Interestingly, unprompted by me, Lin chides urban people for not knowing about the ‘Local Products’ (*tutechan*) that have recently begun to be sold around the city, quite missing the point that urbanites now reappraise these products as desirable precisely because these products are to be considered *backward*, i.e. *tu* (cf. chapter three, 59-60).

Acknowledging this lack of formal education, these migrants emphasize the value of their practical knowledge, and of the experiences they have gained through travelling to many different places to work. Coming to the city, and the process of self-transformation undergone, is asserted as a socially competitive asset in a way that provides an interesting counterpoint to scholarly types and those who invest everything in their children's education (cf. Knowledge and Ability). Zhang Jiali, for example, at twenty, has an age "suitable for accumulating experiences":

"From the North to the South, from Shenzhen to Liaoning, the restaurants are often very different; the style of management is different. From the north to the south all the people I see are different and all the things I have seen are different".

It emerges, however, that Zhang has never in fact been to the South himself; indeed he has never left Liaoning, only recently moving to Anshan from the countryside with his parents who now work in a factory in the suburbs. When Zhang speaks of collecting experiences, therefore, he speaks collectively for the migrant workers as a group, as if this is *their* capital, as if this is the kind of person he is becoming:

"Our ways of doing things are all different. I just diversify (*duo yuanhua*) more and more. For example, take a problem: normally speaking, there's only one way to solve it. But after you've travelled extensively, you've seen the same problem dealt with in different ways in different places: there are many ways to solve the problem. So, the young amongst us ordinary Chinese people travel extensively. Just like us in this restaurant who have come from all over the place, from every place in China, and get along really well together. This is a kind of fate. That we've come together is a kind of fate, so we get on really well together. We're all harmonious".

Telling it just how it is, but with laudable optimism about the transferability of different kinds of capital assets, Zhang wagers:

"Urban people compete using a different kind of competition: they rely on their brains (*kao da nao*), but we only have the ability to work. They develop their knowledge to get from 'white collar' to 'gold collar' to 'CEO'. We must hoard experiences: save, save, save (*zanzu, zanzu, zanzu*). Only by collecting enough experience can I finally do some business I like. These are the only choices I have: this or return to the countryside. We just do our work well; the 'white collars' develop their minds after they've done their work well. We very seldom use our minds. I'd really like to use my mind, but it's not yet the time."



Of course, competing socially through strategic experience accumulation is a necessity, and acknowledged as such in its construction: these migrants admit they cannot compete on the same grounds as educated urbanites. And yet, this admission marks the beginning of the counter-tactics they surreptitiously hatch, for without this these young men have only their productive young bodies to offer in service to those who profit from their labour. Coming to the city is expressed in terms of a highly *individualizing* emphasis on self-cultivation (cf. Personality). Once again, Zhang Jiali is especially strong in these respects:

““Because the city is so competitive, I must incessantly strengthen myself... I’m reading now; this is a kind of study. I’ll prove to them that I was right, I’ll start up a business, and that’s why I’m travelling around now collecting life experience. When I’ve accumulated enough experiences, I’ll go and do what *I* want to do. Because everyone has a dream in life and I’m running along in accordance with my dream, waiting for the day when I grab hold of and realize this dream, and then I’ll be really satisfied, and will have a rich life. I’m just not like some other people. Some people think like... (he hesitates and then goes on) .... In China, because of the depression of where their names are listed in the high-school entrance exam results tables, great numbers of students commit suicide every year. In fact, if you add them all together, there are loads like this. The pressure is too great. And nowadays, there’s no guarantee they’ll be able to find a job good even when they do graduate. There are too many university students now. The population of China is increasing, now it’s at 1.4 billion. There are more than ninety million graduates.”

The “depression” and “pressure” Zhang says university graduates suffer from of course probably says as much about the dark undercurrent of his “dream” as it does the overstretch Chinese students are widely supposed to be subjected to. Zhang’s pride in making his own path in life stands in tension with the gnawing certainty that having *chosen* to drop out of high-school all he can do now is graft it out as a laborer and cultivate the hope of one-day starting a business. In just this way, all these men, except Xue, the youngest, articulated entrepreneurship as the paradigm of success. Lin Chuan aims to be able to arrive at work on a motorbike: he must “rely on himself” and “hard work” to get there. He aims “to have the things that other people have”, and is “developing” towards this “target” now. He will soon leave his job and help his sister sell fruit in the city markets, a move which many peasants and migrants see as a step-up possibly within their reach; in the future, he will “do a little business, exercise the brain, and buy a car”.

This shared entrepreneurial streak and all-round excellent grasp of the internal dynamics of self-cultivation (cf. Personality) makes these young migrants quite distinct from the older migrants in the kitchen who grew up in the planned economy. Whereas the younger migrants are “incessantly striving to develop” (*buduande zhengqu*), and “learning from going to many different places” (*zounanchuangbei*) to work, and so on, the older migrants see themselves as resigned to work hard in the city, but remain still essentially *peasants* first and foremost. The younger migrants are highly competitive, in a sense a force to be reckoned with in the city, drawing strength from their youth, their mobility, and strategic community of other migrants (see below), factors which equally distinguish them from Anshan’s many laid-off urban workers, who scarcely evince positives of the self-cultivation imperative, and who offer instead a discourse characterized, amongst other things, by a distinct malaise (cf. following chapter). The older migrants in the kitchen, mostly women a full generation older than the young men analyzed here, encourage the younger migrants to learn some English from me, and emphasize the value of having a character that will “push on and up” (*shangjinxin*) and never be satisfied, but nevertheless indicate the awareness of an age divide in these respects. They all say that they themselves are generally “satisfied” (*manyi*) with the way things are now, and glad that things are no longer like the past, a vague gloss that masks the acceptance that they will never now transcend their lower working-class status, the promise of enterprising projects of individuality applying only to bright, young, *productive* migrants. Indeed, insofar as these younger migrants’ narratives are characterized by this very strong dual emphasis on gathering experiential knowledge and on the importance of incessant striving as the means to success, these men trace a trajectory through the axiomatic constructs of this analysis remarkably similar to those entrepreneurs examined elsewhere, who likewise defined themselves against people with formal, cultural knowledge, and emphasized the value of their own enterprising initiatives vis-à-vis this perceived deficit (cf. chapter four, 83; cf. chapter eight). There are further similarities, too, between the younger migrants’ discourse and that of the entrepreneurs’: in much the same way as his own boss, Lin Wei, who likes to tell the story of how they made their fortunes “from nothing” on account of his own effort and personal control (cf. chapter eight, 165), Zhang Jiali defines himself against what he perceives as the laziness of those born to and spoiled by privileged parents:

“In fact, the opportunities a person has are not fixed from birth. I can strive for my opportunities. If I’d been born into a family with lots of property, I reckon I’d be really spoilt by their indulgences; little by little I’d become lazy, because I could rely on my family, because they had a lot of money. But we have to rely on our own strivings. We strive for ourselves. And through this unceasing striving we can gain more experiences for ourselves, gain more strength, and understand another aspect of this society. But they do not understand this aspect; they are unable to go and compete: they only know that when their food is ready, they can come and eat; that they can just buy clothes whenever they like. They haven’t a lot of social experience.”

In this way, these young migrants are considerably more independent than the pampered offspring of urban elites, who tend to be heavily reliant on their families, and are often comparatively lacking competitive edge. These migrants’ lives may be bitter, but their narratives are their own. Zhang sets this independence strongly against those who exercise power through personal political connections, believing that if he relies on his own efforts he’ll “always be stronger than those who rely on dodgy networks”. Lin Chuan likewise connects a strong discourse about inequality with scorn for corrupt officials, and more generally links “laziness” and “avarice” with a lack of success. He dislikes those who “loaf about”, and believes that people should always “strive onwards and upwards”. But wealth and luxury consumption are entirely validated for these young migrants if the wealth has been earned through individual skill as opposed to corrupt means: if someone has earned their wealth, Zhang Jiali explains, “I will emulate his successes and aim to overtake him” (cf. Authenticity). *Emulation*, indeed, probably explains much of the similarity these migrants share with entrepreneur discourse: they do of course *know* that this is the ‘right’ tune to be singing in the contemporary era (cf. Knowledge and Ability). But more than that, these migrants’ narratives cast themselves as *extracting* from their urbanite entrepreneur employers the means to become successful and supersede them one-day. Even as they give themselves over to the extraction of surplus value, that is to say, which is alone what legitimates them in the eyes of those who see like a State, these migrants aim to usurp the alliance of State and capital interests that presently exploits them from the inside, a stealth tactic of “poaching” (De Certeau 1984) upon this discourse without being seen, or at least that is how they construct it (cf. Authenticity). Lin Chuan, for example, talks of “borrowing strength” (*jieli*) from people he most admires, “people with knowledge”, but nevertheless concedes that he only rarely actually meets anyone like this.

Indeed, the essentially *improvisational* nature of how these migrants insinuate themselves into the constraints of apparatus defined for them largely by others is also reflected in the balancing of this strong and rather serious emphasis on self-cultivation with an equally strong *playful* and leisurely dimension, and this in a way which seems quite genuine, that is, not simply as a ploy to mask the reality of their exploitation, but a highly self-realizing and self-actualizing inflection of discourse quite unusual in China, and not at all dissimilar to the way in which students in the West “go travelling”. The term that Zhang Jiali and Lin Chuan most use to refer to their incursion into the urban sphere is *chuangdang*, meaning “to charge about and loaf around”, a word which casts the experience as at once imminently purposeful, but also as random, carefree and fun. Zhang explicitly talks about coming out to work as “play” (*wanr*), making the point in his explanation that: “We come from afar, walk around, go everywhere and turn around”. Though he must work hard for the privilege of this frivolousness, Zhang positively delights in his project of individuality-making, evidently believing that a unique value accrues in the process quite distinct from the capital he generates for his boss. Xue Liang, the youngest and a newcomer to the city, explicitly does *not* share this inflection: though he responds to my asking if he likes his job by saying he is “incessantly improving my abilities” every month, he also stresses that the ‘experience of coming to the city is not about enjoying charging around and loafing about like it is for the others’. Rather, this is a harsh exile Xue has imposed upon himself to contribute to supporting his family, an expressed function of his strong filial piety (cf. Moral Character). It might be reasonably surmised from the fact that the other migrants also demonstrate a strong link back to the family, but to a much lesser extent than Xue, however, that Xue will become adjusted to enjoying charging around and loafing about with his colleagues, and become more independent from his family as his labour forces him to find his freedom within it – self-cultivation is a logic which thrives on the necessary; if you don’t work on the world to develop yourself, the world works on you. A young lad new to the kitchen from Shaanxi Province, indeed, tells me how he ran away from home to come to Anshan against his parents’ wishes, quite the contrary of the filial demands that all ‘good’ Chinese are supposed to abide by: “coming out” from the countryside was entirely to “play”. Thus, although these young migrants *know* the ‘rules’ for practice, they aspire to redefine these rules as they take control of their lives, changing established orders as expressions of their individuality.

Once again, the migrant most different in all of these respects is Wang Cuihua, the eldest 'young' migrant, and the longest out of the city. Wang is not only sad that he dropped out of school, but angry. "If I was a university graduate, maybe with a masters or Ph.D, I wouldn't be in this kitchen today", he says: "I'd be working for a firm, in management". Wang, indeed, has an overwhelmingly strong 'Personality' construct to which all other constructions are subordinated, and this in much the same intensely *vital* way as was the case with the ex-migrant-turned-entrepreneur Zhang Xiuzhen (discussed at chapter eight). Had the gods rolled the dice differently for him he no doubt would be in a very competitive position; and indeed the Gods yet might, for whereas the others seem resigned Wang seems to recognize that his fate not written in stone (cf. Personality). Wang will *fight* to get back in to social contention, and no amount of "loafing about" about with his colleagues is going to get in the way. In this respect he is sharply distinguished from Zhang and Lin, both of whom have very strong 'Personality' constructs too, but both of whom allow this to be subordinated to an emphasis on competing socially by having good social rapport with people of a similar social position (cf. Sociability). Zhang, for example, reads a bit to "improve himself", but nowhere near as much as he invests in "loafing about" with his colleagues during and after work. Lin, too, seems to *talk* more about self-cultivation than he actually acts to cultivate himself, and what positive 'Personality' constructions he does make, moreover, though strong in themselves, are matched by an equally powerful sense of resignation to a life of being poor and underprivileged expressed in narratives of inequality of resources and opportunities – "If you have resources, you have the opportunity to develop more resources" – a defeatism not at all shared by Wang who would not entertain the notion of being so easily beaten for even a second. It is as if Zhang and Lin are just showing that they *know* what is required for them to succeed (indeed one wonders if they have Wang Cuihua in mind as a role-model for their ideas), but do not or cannot practice what they preach. "It's not yet the time", said Zhang about wanting to "use his mind" (above). Thus, the "aims" and "dreams" of "starting a business" and taking narrative control over their lives that most of these young migrants share remain in most cases somewhat ethereal; but this may of course also be what binds them so closely together (cf. Pun 2003, 486).

#### 4. In it Together, For Themselves

These migrants also consciously lever the feeling of good social rapport and community shared between them as strategic asset (cf. Sociability). No doubt this too is brought on by necessity and consciousness of the lack of being able to succeed independently. Zhang Jiali's investment in competing in this way is huge, his exuberance of 'innate' social character somewhat accounting for the strength of his instantiations of other constructs. His discourse is littered with inclusive gestures and exclamations that "we" (i.e. me, him and our other colleagues), are "brothers", a "team" (*duiwu*), a "family", and so on; and terms such as "harmony", "peace" and "happiness" are also prolific in his repertoire (the *duiwu* Zhang uses for "team" can also mean "rank and file" as opposed to leaders):

"We're all working together. After work we play games, you know computer games. We formed a team (*tuandui*), and this team is just like a big family. We're like brothers. We all like each other. We're really willing to buy these clothes, because we're all together; in fact you could say that he is me, and I am him. We are all like this, so we all wear the same clothes. When we go out we're all the same. We set-up this team (*zujian zhege duiwu*) and we all really like it. We've all come together from every place to 'Lamb Buddha'; and at the same time we really like this game. Now, after we've got along with each other for a while, we really understand each other. And, after we understood one another, we set up a team, and became brothers (*xiongdi*), really good brothers, just as if we were family. It's just like this. We, this band of buddies (*gemenr*), so-called 'brothers' (*xiongdi*), we've all left our homes, we've all only got one child at home. We're all single-children. We've all left home, you know? China has a saying: 'Having one more friend is to have one more road' (*duo yige pengyou, duo yitiao lu*). One more friend is to have one more road, and so we like to make friends, good friends; bad friends we don't like, so we've all made friends together. We go out and drink, drink together, we're happy and open-hearted (*kaixin*), very happy. Then, we go singing, or playing. We also chat, and when we're together it's 'freedom of speech' (*yanlunziyou*): whatever you want to say, you can just say it; if you don't want to talk about a particular problem, and I ask you, there's no need to answer it. Everyone's really happy together, it's really good. If today we want to drink some wine, we'll go out drinking together, and everyone will play until late at night, drinking, happy, and free of constraint. ....These waitresses, we've got pretty good relations. For example, if we want to drink today, we'll go out and drink, and they'll come with us. But they only drink a little bit – us men drinks loads – after all drinking's not too good for the body. As long as everyone's really happy together at that time, that's fine."

Note how Zhang's enthusiasm makes his talk of "work" immediately turn into talk of the "game" and the "team", spilling on from there into talk about the other kinds of "play" his band of "brothers" indulge in. Work and play, fiction and reality, are all blurred by the metaphoric of sociability based on 'innate' character. Note, too, that drinking is a huge part of Zhang's construction of good social rapport: he mentions alcohol twenty-five times during a two hour interview, and nearly always in the content of friendship and belonging. Note also that the importance of social rapport is not just about being friendly or liked: there is a highly *strategic* nature to Zhang's competition that he does not attempt to disguise. As with the conflation of experiential accumulation and incessant self-cultivation discussed above, Zhang sees it as *necessary* for him to compete through social rapport: this is the only way he can avoid being "bullied" (*qifu*) by those more powerful than him, he says, and if he has more friends he'll be "happier and won't be eliminated by the competition (*taotai*)":

"Although I have no money, I've got lots of friends, and they are true (*zhenxin*) friends with me. For example, if I'm in real trouble, they'll help me out of their own initiative, but he (i.e. the hypothetical privileged urbanite he is defining himself against) won't. And when the day comes when he's got no money, his friends will all leave him".

Xue Liang shares with Zhang the view that his colleagues are "like a family, brothers and sisters", who protect him from being "bullied" (*qifu*), and help him get over the intense homesickness he feels at being separated from his family. Lin Chuan, like Zhang, frequently uses "we" as if speaking for a community of migrant workers, and likewise complains of urbanite bullying. Quite distinct from middle class students in a university dormitory, who will of course form hierarchies almost immediately based on all manner of variables and dimensions (class-background, social popularity, fashionability etc), these migrants would not allow hierarchy to form between them (cf. Status). But the sense of belonging they articulate is not at all altruistic (cf. Hansen and Pang 2008); there is little thought for the self-sacrifice and the 'good of the people' common to the older, pre-reform morality (cf. Moral Character). Though the "collectivity" (Pun 2003, 486) remains the source of moral integrity, the belonging asserted is a proximity bond defined against the urban sphere that surrounds them. This is how solidarity is formed, and individuality is articulated as the free choice to identify with similar others.

Material consumption plays an important role in binding these migrants together (cf. Materialism). In the large excerpt above, Zhang Jiali makes reference to the fact that all the young migrants from 'Lamb Buddha' have bought the same T-shirt, a printed design from a store that trades, without shame, but with considerable irony, on the name of the successful Hollywood movie 'Pirates of the Caribbean' (cf. Authenticity). Every month, on the evening of the day they get paid, the kitchen and waiting staff go out eating and drinking together wearing these T-shirts. Some blow their entire salary in a single night. Some, Zhang says, borrow and blow so much that they have to hand over their wages to their creditor the day they get them. Lin Chuan, who's 'Sociability' construction is strong, but not as strong as Zhang Jiali's, doesn't always want to go: he would like to save some money, but fears that if he doesn't go all the others will think him "stingy and ungenerous" (*linse*) (cf. Sociability). When these migrants consume together they share the costs precisely between them, a practice they call "AA zhi". There is no concern to outdo each other in generosity because of 'face' issues. The exception, for Lin Chuan, is when he consumes with his girlfriend, in which case it is expected that he will pay for everything, an expectation thrust upon him by the demands of 'responsibility' (cf. Moral Character). As with all these four migrants, finding a girlfriend and his poor home condition are expressed as the two imperatives that drew Lin Chuan into the city to work in the first place. These two themes are importantly linked: Lin couldn't find a girlfriend in the countryside because he "hadn't developed", had "no future" (*qiantu*), and "no money" – "marriage and all that requires money" – yet the reason he can't save much money is because he has found a girlfriend and must spend so much to impress her. In these respects, with his (fake) Nike sports wear and stylish jeans, Lin is as concerned to look trendy as any middle-class adult of his age. It is significant moreover, that these young men have consumer behaviour concomitant with their boundary management: Zhang Jiali, single, describes his consumption as "carefree" and "easy-going". This "really suits my personality", he says, "I'm not like those who plan and calculate what to do with their salary every month, whether to save or spend"; but then, as if Zhang is aware of how these statements elevate his primary competitive element, sociable character, over his also strongly espoused self-cultivation, he adds that although he can be impulsive, he will save for things he really likes, possibly with Wang Cuihua in mind as a comparator here again, who earns more and saves more (see below).



And this is also where Zhang and Lin most differ from most of the entrepreneurs referred to in this analysis: Wang Cuihua has a sense of control and cultivation to his consumer behaviour that without exception my businessperson informants all say they had in their youth. Wang will only keep a little money in his pocket, but plan to buy larger purchases. From Zhang's strong 'Sociability' perspective this is considered "tight" (*kou*). Zhang concedes that age may be a factor here, now referring to Wang Cuihua explicitly, who at twenty-four must "find a girl and buy a house and so on". Indeed, whereas Lin Chuan is motivated to earn and spend primarily by the immediate 'prize' of having his girlfriend (the daughter of a urban family struck down by the SOE lay-offs), Wang is single, more focussed on developing himself and realizing long-term gratification, on the look out for a girl he can grow with. Almost needless to say, however, alongside the excesses of affable comradeship and "playful" self-actualisation that bind these migrants closely together, another major part of how these persons strategically 'compete' is a firmly frugal inflection of the 'Materialism' construct. Though an excess of exuberant consumption between friends is important to Zhang, he also thinks that designer brands and "luxury" consumption are "wasteful". I am to understand a reference to Zhang's boss, here, who has spent several thousand yuan, "even as much as ten-thousand", Zhang claims, on T-shirts and shirts. Zhang professes to prefer substance to form: "In fact, I may have a shirt just the same, but without the brand that is not inferior, and mine will be longer lasting, more durable". Defining himself against such "wasteful" excesses of the rich he asserts:

"They haven't learned how to manage the money, but *we've* learned how to fully bring the money into play, so that it's not dead but alive, and will become a lot from a little, and enable me to live on – only then can I say I have the ability to create my own road... If you give them one-hundred *yuan* and give me one-hundred *yuan*, I may be able to live for a month on this one-hundred *yuan*, but they can only live for a day".

But Zhang will not be pitied by any narrative of inequality, contending that his own competitive configuration levels the playing field. Indeed, it is not merely the value of *economy* that Zhang is keen to impress, but the moral purity and fibre that attends a frugal life, defined against the superficial emptiness of wealth. Of those who believe that their money makes them powerful than him, he says:

“There are some people with money who always think they’ve got money: if you’ve no money they’ll despise (*bishi*) you. He (i.e. they) thinks he can use his money to make you do anything. But he doesn’t know that money can’t do everything. There are some things that money can’t buy. He doesn’t understand these things. He’s always thinking: ‘this money of mine can do anything; I can buy anything; I can have a woman, a car, a house; and everyone is embracing me’.

Both Zhang Jiali and Lin Chuan seem to settle for a life of ‘second best’ in material terms, and find a kind of nobility in that: “If everyone else had a house worth several million yuan he’d be satisfied with a house worth several hundred thousand, and he wouldn’t draw invidious comparisons with them”. They draw comparisons, too, against another new kitchen-hand from Jiangsu province whose parents supplement his income allowing him to spend “every fen” he earns on fancy haircuts, clothes and arcade games. Zhang says the new arrival’s parents are also poor, ordinary workers, but don’t discipline their son like his own parents do. Predictably, the most frugal of the group, Xue Liang, is also the one who invests most in the ‘Moral Character’ construct. ‘Moral Character’ is not especially strong in any of the other young migrant workers, except where it is employed to derogate the city at the expense of the countryside, or as explicitly to document filial piety by dutifully remitting part of their income to their families. But ‘Moral Character’ does not form a major organizing principle in the narratives of any of these migrants except Xue. Xue’s mother is old; he cannot allow her go out earning all the time (*laozhengqian*), so he has “come out” from the countryside to work for her. His parents work, too, in a factory, and save every single *fen* they earn: “not like me”, says Xue, “wasting money”. Xue feels guilty for the very little he spends, even though he is actually far more sparing than any of his colleagues. As soon as Xue saw the “bitter work” (*xinku*) his family were putting in to help him through school, he dropped out and worked the land with them for a year before coming to the city. Of the eight-hundred and fifty yuan Xue earns per month, he lives on one-hundred and fifty yuan and saves the rest for his parents. Xue says his parents save all their money for his future anyway, so he gives everything he can to them now. Thus, moral sacrifice repays moral sacrifice. Xue misses them terribly and is only very rarely in contact with them because they’re always at work in the factory “where there are no phones”. Like Zhang and Lin, Xue says he’s not bothered by inequalities of wealth so long as he is cheerful, and so long as his parents have money to spend and are not worried about food and clothes”.

## 5. Making It: Distinction within the Group

As maintained throughout, the fourth migrant, Wang Cuihua is different on nearly every account from his colleagues. A closer discussion of his trajectory through the constructs sheds further light on those he is so different from. Having ardently worked his way up, acquiring new skills at restaurants around the city since first arriving from the countryside seven years ago, Wang is now the supervisor of the kitchen staff. At nearly two-thousand yuan per month, he earns more than twice as much as Zhang, Lin and Xue, enough to launch him into more 'middle class' levels of discretionary income. Wang articulates his difference from the others very keenly, drawing up his relations with his colleagues only in order to distance himself from them:

“I have no way to talk with the others about the things I think about; they are mindless, playing and gaming. I am thinking about work, and moral things, how to be a person (*zenme zuoren*), how to earn people's respect, how to improve my quality of life, how to give more significance to my life, and how to make my own ideals closer and closer everyday. They only think about playing, eating, and drinking”.

The main difference between him and the others, Wang says, is that whereas they waste time and talk about useless things, play on the net, play cards, and go drinking in their spare time, he cultivates himself. When he was younger, Wang used his spare time to research things on the internet that would improve his abilities (cf. Knowledge and Ability), “never telling others about it”, strategically avoiding competitors who would trip him up. “I read and apply what I learn to my life”, he explains. His favourite book is the biography of Li Jiacheng, Asia's richest man, whom he admires for his self-cultivation and control. Concomitantly with this emphasis, and quite the contrast of Zhang Jiali (above), Wang drinks when he goes out but only one or two bottles: it's “sickening” to drink lots, and “bad for health”. Of course, this saves him money too. Though Wang lives in the same dim dormitory as the others, this is by no means a necessity for him, but a choice. Besides, Wang has been in the dormitory long enough to commandeer the best space, a room which he shares with his junior apprentice (*tudi*), a recent migrant. The other migrants have to share at least four to a room. Wang keeps (*yang*) a fish, and a plant in his room. He likes to come from work and see the results of his cultivation swimming to and fro, and the plant sprouting leaves (cf. Personality).

Wang says that doing this “greatly improves my environment and moulds and shapes me character and taste” (*taoye*), instilling “a great sense of achievement” in him. Wang is the only one of these migrants who uses any such cultivated lifestyle concept; in the other migrants’ narratives, self-cultivation is limited to hard work, perseverance, and vague economic ambition. Wang tries to improve his “personal quality” (*suzhi*), a term that the others don’t use at all:

“I don’t want to be mediocre (*pingyong*); I don’t want an ordinary (*pingpingdandan*) life. If this year I don’t have enough money to realize my dreams I’ll just keep working on for another half year, a full year”.

Wang’s future is just to “work, marry, and save money for this”, he says. But saving for, and indeed buying expensive clothes, is an important part of this, because Wang has no girlfriend at present. Clothes are the only thing he spends on. Despite his earnest self-cultivation, Wang buys “leisurely” clothes, “like the Kappa brand”, as if to make it appear that distinction comes easily to him. But particular brands are not as important to him as a “novel and original style”, and whether or not “the product suits him” and “his outfit”. This form of consideration is entirely absent from the other migrants interviewed here. Lin Chuan may be proud of getting his knocked-off Nike’s for forty-five kuai, but this is only about the mark itself rather than any sense of his *own style*. Wang admits that the sense of expressing his individuality through clothing has been an acquired taste:

“My thinking has changed since I came out of the Shandong countryside. I used to only require that clothing was warm in the cold, but now I also want it to look good. Perhaps in another few years my requirements will change again, so that not only is it good looking but that I also pursue the latest trends. That’d be even better”.

When Wang goes to discos, he goes with other people, not his colleagues from ‘Lamb Buddha’. Wang has had these other friends for many years, he says, before eventually admitting that they are also other migrant workers in other restaurants. He didn’t want to make this explicit at first; wanting me to think he was entirely integrated into the urban sphere. Realising that I was aware of this, Wang added that he has urban mates from Anshan also; he goes to the clubs because these friends “invite” him there. Wang also gives the impression that these friends are older than him, and that he can learn from them.

But the consumption (*xiaofei*) level is too high for Wang in the clubs, he says. I ask him if he goes to the clubs to find a girlfriend. He says not in a way that perhaps implies that the girls there wouldn't be interested in him because of his rural migrant status (cf. Status). He describes this situation as "chaotic" (*luan*), possibly to disguise this implicit admission. Somewhat contradicting himself, he then says that he doesn't often go to the clubs anyway, as if he has just been telling me he goes there only because he perceives that doing so casts him in the light of a higher status. He then betrays himself further, trying to 'save face' as he ducks away from the charge I have drawn: the high level of consumption in the club has nothing to do with his not looking for a girlfriend there; it's just that he prefers to save his wages. None of the female waiting staff at 'Lamb Buddha' have taken Wang's fancy; he has higher aspirations. He eventually volunteers that wealth and status are directly related to your chances of finding a girlfriend in China (cf. Materialism; cf. Status). "Players look for someone at approximately the same level; only the very rich can afford to take someone without thinking of whether they have money or not", he explains. But Wang is confident about his chances of finding a bride to match his self-perception; he has proved to himself that he can hit his self-imposed targets. He once promised himself he would buy himself a chunky gold necklace when he first earned two-thousand yuan a month. He saw others wearing them and envied them. At that time he only had six-seven hundred per month, so he saved. In fact, he had enough money saved years ago to buy one, he says, but he had set himself this target, and wouldn't buy it until he earned two-thousand per month (cf. Personality). In this way, Wang describes how he has climbed steadily up the ladder, target by target, constantly applying himself to learn new skills. Thus, in him alone amongst these migrants is the 'Personality' construct narrated retrospectively; the others, Zhang Jiali and Lin Chuan, still speak as if they have yet to achieve. Wang also wants to "buy a BMW, and have his own company". He has a "plan": he will save till a certain amount and then start up. He doesn't think it at all strange that some of the other migrants subordinate to him are forty-fifty years old, but get paid only half of what he does, when I ask. What exactly is it that you have and the others don't? I ask him directly. "They lack a heart for striving on and up" (*quefa shangjin xin*), he answers (cf. Personality). Wang says that he must "lead them by example", by not eating and smoking on duty, for example, documenting the awareness that personal development comes with responsibilities.

Wang's emphasis on civil behaviour also sets him interestingly apart from his colleagues. Civility is not high among most of these men: Zhang Jiali always has filthy hands and finger nails, for example (cf. also Materialism). But all these young migrants are much more cognizant of civility than many older peasants, and indeed many urbanites; working in an industrial kitchen that must be meticulously cleaned once a week and inspected regularly no doubt raises civil consciousness, and Zhang Jiali, after all, works on the door. The fear of urban customers, who will complain if anything is found dirty, is no doubt also a factor here. Wang, however, is the only one who draws on civility as a major competitive construct. Again he confesses:

"I'm not scared of you laughing, when I first came out from the countryside I didn't even know to wash my feet before I slept, I only washed them once a week. This was really dirty (*maitai*). Later, slowly, after a year, I realized that other people washed them everyday, and so I tried it a couple of times. Ah! My feet felt so comfortable! After this I slowly began to change in other ways too".

Wang, apparently, also didn't use to often wash his clothes before, and his skin would itch because they were dirty; later he began to change them every day or so. He also began to wash his socks and change his underwear everyday. At this point, it seemed like Wang was going through a mental list of all the hygienic things he does, unprompted by me, as if he was especially keen to show me he appreciated the importance of this, as if I might think otherwise, and as if these behaviours were perhaps not quite as second nature to him as he was making out. Feeling the need to justify himself in this way had no doubt come from the exposure to his urbanite friends. Sure enough, in due course Wang began to moan about people throwing things out the windows without caring whether people were below or not, and so on, typical urbanite civil grievances. While Zhang Jiali, on the other hand, expressed a concern to keep the restaurant peaceful, this was more about his duty (cf. Moral Character), and ultimately masculinity, than it was about civility. And though Zhang, like most young people, was quite considerate in civil terms, and polite, he made no judgements of this civil form in his boundary management. Xue Liang mentioned in passing that he washes feet and body before sleeping, but otherwise, like Zhang and Lin, mentioned civility hardly at all. Wang, moreover, is the only one of these four migrants who evinces awareness of the shift from the spatial sense of civility to the *aesthetic* aspect (cf. Civil Behaviour, 106), indicating the extent of his appreciation of and allegiance with the gloss of urbanization:

“Not only is this a kind of respect to other people, but also a kind of respect to yourself. If you go out with your friends when you’re dirty (*maitai*), and see a friend, and your body is dirty, and your clothes are worn-out and shabby (*polan*), this is disrespectful to others.”

Thus, looking at the patterns of discourse and behaviour revealed across and between these young migrants, it might be supposed that there is a certain typical trajectory that these migrants take through the constructs over time. Those very young, naïve, and still strongly attached to the countryside home, like Xue Liang, in whom the familial inflection of the ‘Moral Character’ construct was by far the most dominant, may likely become more like Zhang Jiali and Lin Chuan as the distance from the family grows and they enter their early twenties. For those of Zhang and Lin’s age, for whom the ‘Moral Character’ construct was notably less significant, however, girlfriends seem to become a demanding reality, and the pressure of having to compete socially for a positive future means that earnest application (cf. Personality) and experience accumulation (Knowledge and Ability) emerge to take a significant place in these migrants’ narratives, at least insofar as these are espoused. But insecurity and youthfulness mean that this is subordinated to the importance of good social rapport between the colleagues and other similar persons that they have been thrust together with by the experience of migration, who effectively become the surrogate family. At this stage, material resources still prevent these migrants from breaking into competition in the urban sphere, though they do mix as more-or-less equals with lower-ranking urbanites and similarly youthful urbanites, blurring boundaries. Wang Cuihua may be exemplary of a further stage of evolution where, several years on, and with several more years of maturity under the belt, the tension between the imperative to cultivate and maintain good inter-collegial social rapport (cf. Sociability) and personal achievement (cf. Personality) has been resolved to the considerable benefit of the latter, and these young migrant workers become single-mindedly focussed on their own achievements. Those who are unable to make this transition are faced only with return to the countryside, or perpetuity in the kitchens, often alongside eventual sons and daughters as was the case here in ‘Lamb Buddha’. Many, if not most migrants, of course eventually return to the countryside. For those who sense the promise of avoiding this trap, the preference for the countryside as the locus of morality, authenticity, and hope for the future evidently shifts towards the city too.

At this stage, finding a mate, securing and keeping a higher income, saving money, thinking about owning your own house, and caring for your material presentation and style, and so on, all become much more important in inverse proportion to the fading importance placed on collegial and family relationships, though this cannot of course be professed in the China context. Wang Cuihua says he will help his family if they need him, but strongly emphasizes that he must achieve his own success first before he can really be in a position to help others, a distinctly *modern* discourse that only other competitive, middle-class urban people seem to share (cf. chapter eleven). At this stage, cultural codes of civility are highly invested in as a marker of increasing urban belonging, acquired perhaps through alternative, inspirational, and openly strategic friendships sought with quite possibly older, wealthier and more powerful persons that these migrants can learn from and grow with. While gross leaps on the social ladder remain prevented by social stigma and familial pressure to marry at approximately the same “level”, it is not entirely inconceivable to see that at this stage the fate of rural migrants may blend with those urban families heavily affected by lay-offs from state-owned-enterprises. In every case, these migrants will have undertaken a journey epic enough to provide them with richly original raw material to consume as projects of individuality. As rural migrant-turned-entrepreneur Zhang Xiuzhen put it in chapter eight: “By moving you can live” (*rennuo nenghuo*). This may likely be the way of things to come in an ‘individualizing’ China. For it is highly significant that for all the intensity of feeling and belonging shared between the young migrants, this was all to change almost overnight as they found their individual destinies. Within just a few months of the data for this analysis being collected, Wang Cuihua never returned from what was supposed to be only a brief trip home to see his family in Shandong, where he found his girl and stayed to get married; no-one knows what he is doing now. Zhang Jiali moved on from ‘Lamb Buddha’ even before I did, when the urbanite lad who had previously held his job on the door returned and took over again – it was understood that stepping down was the proper thing for Zhang to do. In time, Xue Liang and Lin Chuan had moved to different restaurants too, cashing in on their mobility and networking skills for a tiny raise in pay at jobs scouted for them by other migrants. Almost all of the older migrant kitchen staff, on the other hand, remain at ‘Lamb Buddha’ to this very day, washing up dishes and peeling vegetables, day in, day out, with little hope of moving anywhere else.



## Chapter 10

### Urban Workers

This chapter analyses a range of men and women who were once “workers” at Angang Steel or one of Anshan’s other, affiliated, State-owned enterprises (SOE’s). “Worker” (*gongren*), the state-ascribed category of the Maoist era into which all the informants examined in this chapter were born, was of course a privilege very much reserved for the class supposedly “leading” in Socialism, the “masters of the house” (*dangjia zuozhu*) epitomized in the State-owned-enterprises and federation of trade unions. In the wake of massive State-owned-enterprise restructuring and the rise of the private sector in the reform era, however, “worker” status has become somewhat the mark of a curse (Solinger 2002). Official references to “worker” (*gongren*) have accordingly been replaced with less politicized forms (such as *laodong qunzhong*, *laodongzhe* etc), but many working people still identify with the category for its association with a particular set of moral qualities, very similar to the authenticity invoked by the colorful posters of the Daqing oil field, and for the urban household-registration that comes with the territory. Use of the term “worker” in this analysis therefore reflects these informants’ use of the term in self-reference. Nearly all the informants analyzed here know each other. All the men are skilled manual workers at a steel machine-roller repair factory owned by a Mr. Zhao. All the women, bar one, are either cooking staff at this factory or otherwise wives of these steel workers. Many of the men were in fact Mr. Zhao’s workmates at Angang until he “took the plunge” (*xiahai*) into private enterprise just a few years before the first wave of mass industrial lay-offs (*xiagang*) swept through Anshan in the late 1990’s (cf. Hung and Chiu 2003). Those of Zhao’s workmates too old to compete in the ensuing scramble for jobs sent their sons to him while they eked it out on meagre compensation until they could claim their pensions. Some of Zhao’s workers still receive various state subsidies themselves. Indeed, some still have full-time jobs in the State sector and work with Zhao in the evenings and at weekends. Since Angang is by far Zhao’s biggest client, moreover, his entire business is still highly dependent on the State. These workers are therefore state-market transients, who still have one foot stuck in the planned economy, yet work out the ramifications of Anshan’s reforming ‘rust-belt’ infrastructure in the private sector.

## 1. Limbo

In some important respects, many of these workers trace a similar trajectory through the constructs as deployed by the migrants examined in the previous chapter. None are particularly secure in their place in the urban economy, and none is any more than a generation or two away from life in the fields themselves. Nearly all spin narratives characterized by a profound sense of social inferiority, matched only by differentiations from the countryside, which they construct as inferior in ways which reflect their insecurity. It is as if these workers are caught between town and country on a journey of 'migration' that has begun, been interrupted, reversed and started all over again over a period of several decades thanks to State projects of social engineering. In particular, the formational experiences of being "sent down" (*xiaxiang*) to work in the fields as youths during the Cultural Revolution that nearly all these workers share means that even those with no immediate familial links to the countryside exist in limbo between there and the city. This period is spoken of as if hanging like a millstone around these workers' necks, occupying a large place in their discursive apparatus, loading them in particular with an acute consciousness of being unable to compete in terms of knowledge and ability (cf. chapter four). None of these workers read much; some have difficulty writing. Those who have only mandatory education work side-by-side with those with some tertiary education, a situation very distinct from current high-school leavers who are virtually guaranteed better possibilities for employment if only their families can pay for the privilege. By way of introducing some characters, consider Fan, for example, a welder of fifty-two years of age who was laid-off from Angang very early on, and has worked at Mr. Zhao's factory for the last decade. Fan and his wife bring in a total of seven thousand rmb per month, which is not bad at all in Anshan, but Fan must work six days and complete six shifts of sleep-in night duty before he can return to his wife, and unlike those still working in State sector jobs who receive substantial subsidies on housing, medicine, and children's schooling, this income has to cover everything. Fan is in fact a distant relative of Mr. Zhao's, but remains acutely aware of the vast social difference between them:

"Zhao is a boss (*laoban*), I'm just a worker (*gongren*); our status is different. I'm just a pauper, a wretch. The contrast between us is too big. We have different positions; it's unequal. The difference is massive. Everyone has different positions".

Born in the countryside himself, Fan doesn't feel the need to condescend to the countryside. When he happens to mention thieves coming around the factory from rural climes he calls them "outsiders" (*waidiren*) in a manner that simply indicates that they are not from around here. Fan's wife, however, a recently retired high-school educated middle-school teacher of urban origin, refers to these same people as "peasants" (*nongmin*), sneering visibly (cf. Status). Fan's colleague, Xu Dongbin, a welder of approximately the same age, professes "emotions" (*ganqing*) towards the countryside: his father "came out" of the countryside in the 1950's. Like many of the rural migrants examined in the previous chapter, Xu feels that "peasants are more honest than urban people" and that "city life is too quick": "The countryside follows the Confucian ethical code", Xu explains, "It's simple, plain, and boring" (*danyi*). And indeed this is what Xu is like as a character too (cf. Sociability). But Xu wouldn't like to go and live in the country: "Some conditions are not so good; the city environment is better, and information and shopping are more convenient". This positioning is supported by Chen Qian, one of two female cooks at Mr. Zhao's factory. Chen was born in the "suburbs" (*jiaoqu*): "Yes, near the countryside", she reluctantly admits, but she wouldn't like to return to there. Chen came to the city to marry a "worker" (*gongren*) who worked with her father at the age of twenty-three, but she cannot help but come down on the 'wrong' side of a discussion about coarse and fine grain cereals, revealing her rural roots:

"When we were young we all ate coarse grain (*culiang*). We only ate fine grains (*xiliang*) when guests came. When we got ill we could have better food. But I really liked coarse grains. Occasionally I still eat them now. But back then it was tough, I had no choice, whereas now it's because I like it, just occasionally. Most of the time I eat fine grains now, but I also mix them together. Now that people have a better standard of life they can eat whatever they like. In any case, coarse grains are no cheaper than fine grains these days".

Despite an adult life in the city, Wang still thinks in 'coarse grain' ways, still eats mostly 'fine' grains, and believes she should align herself symbolically with the latter. Therefore, although some of these workers lever their urban status as a social advantage over their countryside cousins, none have the sufficient mastery of the discourse that would allow them to consume as if 'disowning' their urban status in favor of 'rediscovering' the virtues of the countryside, as some more 'middleclass' people have recently begun to do (cf. Authenticity, 63).

Xu Dongbin took high-school but says he's "got no culture" (*meiyou wenhua*). His knowledge has "only reached a certain level", he's "very ordinary", he says. Xu reads newspapers and magazines in his spare time, but no other literature. Fan only had primary schooling; he says he's "lacking" (*cha*). His wife may be a recently retired English teacher but cannot say more than a few words with me. Her reading is limited to fashion magazines; she watches television a lot. Mrs. Zhou, wife of the "senior driver" at the factory, herself laid-off and long-term unemployed, says that her limited middle school attendance during the Cultural Revolution "wasn't real education"; like many of these workers, she put all her energies into being a Red Guard. Xu Xiaoyan is the other cook at the factory, no relative of Xu Dongbin. Xu was born in Anshan in 1959. She is a "very ordinary person", she says. Her husband is a middle-level worker in the security department at Angang. Their total family income is approximately six-thousand rmb, but her husband is entitled to benefits that many of these workers forfeited when they took up jobs in the private sector. "Knowledge was not respected then", Xu says of the Cultural Revolution:

"The best thing was to take part in social movements (*shehui shejian*). So many were 'sent down' when they were young; their culture is lacking and they went through great hardship. I finished middle school but didn't learn much".

Xu feels the crucial factor in her fate is her age: neither she nor her husband, she explains, "had a chance":

"Like China's national leaders, all leaders (*lingdao*) are either all older than me, or younger, and graduated from university with new skills. People of my generation are stuck between elderly parents in their seventies with pensions but without a lot of money, and children who must study very hard; we can't find jobs or earn much money because we've no education. Many of us are unemployed and without skills. Only a few can use their skills to fix cars or do electrical jobs for others; most have to become housemaids (*baomu*), cleaners (*dasao weisheng*), cooks or babysitters. We can't get pensions from the State-owned-enterprises. But the really rich people of my age are the exception. People born between 1955 to approximately 1979 were all born quite poor. People born before 1955 could get pensions. So many people suddenly came back from the country in 1976. The oldest ones went to jobs in State-owned-enterprises, but the younger ones were assigned to whichever work unit (*danwei*) their parents were working at, but without any rights, pensions, sick pay, or minimum wage. Many 1980's children, by contrast, have gone to university, and have money, lots of money".

Xu spins a narrative highly apologetic and confessional in form, as if wanting to show that she is aware that acknowledging her 'ignorance' is a first step towards distinction. Though she has "no high-study level" (*gao xueli*), and "no career", she most admires people with "cultivation" (*xiuyang*) and "culture" (*wenhua*). But it is very important to Xu that this "academic record" (*xueli*) isn't shown off in front of others: "people must be modest" (*qianxu*), she says. Xu doesn't like to have her ignorance pointed out: she likes people with very "civilized (*wenming*) manners, who are very modest, easy to get along with (*pianyijinren*), polite to younger people and people of lower classes, and treat everyone the same". Apparently Xu finds these values in me:

"When these people talk with younger people no matter if they are an MA or a PhD, they won't make others feel uncomfortable, it's the same as meeting normal people. But after a while when they get on with each other, they'll show many unusual and surprising things about themselves that others can learn from. These people have ability (*caigan*)".

The ability Xu applauds here, of course, is not only that of "cultural capital" (cf. Bourdieu 1984), but of demonstrating knowledge in a manner compatible with creating social rapport, or more specifically, knowing how to appear knowledgeable whilst saving others 'face' (cf. Sociability). A similar perception is made by Zhang Jie, the only woman in this group not connected to Zhao's factory, but whose retired father was a "worker" at an Anshan state-owned electricity company and whose husband remains a worker at Angang today. Zhang "likes people of culture, but not too high; because I can't communicate with them": she had a high school education but still "feels ignorant", she says. She was once disgraced at a job interview when she was told she had "no education" (*meiyou wenhua*). What constructions such as these really mean, of course, is that these essentially working-class individuals find it a bonus that a foreigner they perceive as of higher status, a concept intimately closely linked with my "academic record" in the Chinese construction, is prepared to speak with them as equals. Of course, the fact that I am a foreign Ph.D candidate probably makes these informants feel especially conscious of their comparatively limited education no matter how hard I might try to avoid this; yet this positioning nevertheless indicates a highly significant dimension of difference from other more middle-class persons (as analyzed in the following chapter) who do not so willingly defer to me in the same way.

## 2. Stuck

Being “stuck” (see Xu Xiaoyan above) is of course a major negative of control (cf. Personality). But although these workers develop narratives that highlight their lack of control over their circumstances, precisely the acknowledged source of their mutual disadvantage is also given a competitive edge in an attempt to get ahead. In defense of the lack of knowledge and education, the practicability of the Cultural Revolution experience is drawn on in a manner that approximately parallels the rural migrants’ similar practical emphasis: essentially, they use what they have. After valorizing peasants as “plain and simple, honest and hardworking, and able to eat bitterness”, Xu Xiaoyan also identifies herself with these virtues. “Managers”, she says, “appreciate staff of my age because we too can eat bitterness (*chiku*); we can get things done” (*nenggan*). Indeed in this respect, though urban, these workers actually draw on the countryside as a platform for strategic competition *more* than the young rural migrants, because while the migrants stress the familial countryside home as the source of their moral integrity, they are too optimistic, too proud, and too vital to reproduce the urban disdain which denies their genuinely competitive edge over many of these low-skilled, laid-off and dilapidating workers. Notably, not one of the rural migrants used the term “eating bitterness” (*chiku*) to describe their experiences, or indeed emphasized any other kind of “bitterness” in their lives (for example, *xinku*, which means “hardship”). Both Lin Chuan and Xue Liang (see previous chapter), however, did use the term “hardship” (*xinku*) to describe the fate of their relatives back in the countryside, that is, precisely the fate Xu Xiaoyan seeks to manipulate to her advantage. Sadly for Xu, as the State increasingly emphasizes bitterness-eating capacities to reconfigure the boundary between its allies and non-allies in terms of marketable productivity and raw effort, many of these older workers find themselves over the hill and more bitter than bitterness-eating, many sharing an apathetic, pessimistic, and even fatalistic inflection of discourse quite far removed from the dynamism necessary for the practicability so starkly evinced by the migrants’. Even where the control of the ‘Personality’ construct is manifested as actively *working* in these workers’ narratives, it is primarily the sense of working *for others* that is expressed, a somewhat stifled sense of self-control that rings to the moralistic tune of the socialist planned economy rather than of entrepreneurial self-cultivation as such.

Take Mrs. Zhou, for example, the fifty-two year old wife of the “senior driver” at Zhao’s steel-roller machine repair factory, who spends her “spare time” cleaning, eating, and occasionally playing mah-jong with friends; she evidently watches lots of television too. Mrs. Zhou doesn’t really have much to do, she says. At one point, she documents the awareness that, “those people who have money rely on their own effort and struggle to succeed; if you’re lazy you’ll never have a chance to earn money”, but she immediately qualifies this by saying that you also need “good fortune” in the Chinese market, fortune that she believes has been denied to her (cf. Personality):

“Society has changed. When everything was run by the State-owned enterprises it was easy to slack off. But now, at the private firms, it’s one-hundred percent effort. Most people who’ve been laid-off are now doing *ad hoc* work, and get a base salary of five to six-hundred renminbi per month. Those who are aged twenty to thirty can easily find work, but for us older people it’s really difficult. The work unit doesn’t want us; society doesn’t want us. We are the laid-off, the *really* laid off (*zhen xiagangde*). The young people don’t want to go to State-owned enterprises. They go directly to recruiting agents to be placed in private firms. If you’ve got a specialism, it’s easy to find a job; if you haven’t it’s very difficult”.

Like Mrs. Zhou, Fan’s wife also hangs around the house all day, watching her daughter who is home from studying “metal” (*jinsu*) at university in nearby steel-capital Shenyang (because her mother “saw on television that this was an area China was looking to educate people in”), play seemingly meaningless computer games. Fan’s wife brings up a particular recent television program, showing that she is most motivated by an especially *frugal* kind of self-control (cf. Materialism):

“There was a young girl who arrived in the city straight from the countryside. Her parents were unlucky with no money. The family had only a few hundred kuai per month. The girl never spent any money, never bought any food, ate the minimum possible, only drank water she boiled herself, and so managed to live on less than two-hundred kuai per month. She made a list of everything she spent for a year. To earn a little extra money the girl looked after suitcases for other students when they went home, earning twenty kuai per day this way. The journalist asked her if there was any money she *shouldn’t* have spent that year, and the girl replied that she once made the superfluous purchase of some bananas. This was *really* eating bitterness (*ke chiku*). I was so moved by this. I think more programs should be made like this to show students that their lives are so comfortable and teach them to cherish their lives”.

The girl in the T.V. program endures such a sparse life, of course, as a form of 'self-sacrifice' for her family, endured in recognition of the sacrifices they have made for her (cf. Moral Character). Fan's wife clearly admires the technology and thrift with which the girl controls her expenditure (the lists etc), as well as her resourcefulness (the tending of the suitcases etc), but it is primarily the girl's resilience, indomitability, and capacity to *withstand* that most earns her esteem (cf. Personality). The suggestion that narratives such as these are useful for teaching the "comfortable students" of today about the value of life only further furnishes Fan's wife with a pre-reform era mentality. In these ways, these worker's projects of 'existential' control are somewhat static, inhibited by the insecurity that comes with poverty, and are characterized by a typically 'working class' respect for hardship, a virtue made of necessity, and an essentially *ethical* discourse that consolidates their consumption of the core constructs of this analysis. This morality, moreover, is also tinged with a proximity-type defensiveness which fails to disguise the resentment these workers feel for privileged people born to more affluent times. Within minutes of these iterations, for example, Fan's wife was making similar judgements with a harsher edge, condemning in the same breath as "gangs of criminals and robbers on the streets":

"Those young people about twenty years old, who hang around on the streets in cars. They don't study; they don't work. They have bad habits. When they're small they get whatever they want. They don't want to contribute; they don't want to make an effort (*buxiang fuchu buxiang laodong*). They've learned bad habits from the internet. These people have never learnt anything, so they're terrible (*kepa*). They come from families with comparatively good economic conditions; they're not poor. It's not money that decides they turn out this way; it's their family upbringing. The parents spoil them. All the children have mutated; their thinking is sick (*bujiankang; youbing*)".

The accused here, of course, lack a typical 'working class' work ethic. That is, they neither work hard (cf. Personality), contribute to society (cf. Moral Character), nor understand the value of money (cf. Materialism), and this on account of an upbringing which is set in direct contrast to these older workers' bitterness-eating background. Thus, in the absence of so much that China's emerging middle class are acquiring, these workers seek an anchor in the familiar, altruistic root of socialist morality, and those powerful enough to affirm themselves in their own 'goodness' are damned.



### 3. Bitter Ethics

The distinctly *moralistic* tone of these workers' judgements is perhaps the strongest theme to emerge from their analysis. The frequency with which these individuals speak as if they define morality absolutely, without reflection or irony, is remarkable (cf. Moral Character). Even as they make harsh moral judgements about others, moral supremacy is asserted explicitly, without disguise or sophistication, and once again this is part of a strategic positioning within the broader discursive shifts of China's reforming economy and society. Fan explicitly links economic reform with moral decline: "There were no bad things before – no prostitution, no gambling, and so on. But now we have lots of bad things everywhere. This is all connected to economic development". Fan is adamant that he won't "drink wine" and "play around". He shuns "high level cheer" and unrestrained mirth" – he "needs money". He doesn't "go to pubs, dancing halls, or singing halls". I ask him if the people who do so are "good". "Only if they have a reason to go", Fan replies, "like business where they have to treat people". Thus, just as where the rural migrants' in the previous chapter maintained that the personal effort and entrepreneurial logic of the 'Personality' construct made inequalities of wealth legitimate, here business is seen to validate action that would otherwise be judged as immoral. No doubt the fact that I also know Fan's boss, who supports Fan's family, shapes his judgement here, but the moral position is clear: "If you've no reason to consume like this, it's a waste: pleasure just for the sake of it". Fan then brings up two much younger men from the factory, Guo Jiale and Chen Dehua, and tells me they go gambling and whoring: "Everyone's got their own lifestyle, but if you've got a wife, you shouldn't go out". I ask him if he ever did these "bad things", when he was young. He replies not: "No, because I'm from the countryside where the economic conditions are extremely hard". When Fan got married, he and his wife had a total of only five-hundred kuai to their names; he understands the value of money because he's "eaten bitterness", he says. It is significant that Fan's colleague, Xu Dongbin, also has a powerful sense of the 'Moral Character' construct, and links this with self-seeking consumption in just the same way. Fan and Xu identify with each other through their construct configurations, each staking a strong morals-versus-money position, distancing themselves from the activities of younger men with more profligate and hedonistic spending.

Suspecting this, I try a question on Xu that I rarely used precisely because of its explicitly *moral* implication in the Chinese context: “How do you live like a decent person?” (*ni ziji zenme zuoren*)<sup>10</sup>, to which Xu replies:

“The most fundamental is that you are honest and straight. You must be wholeheartedly sincere, just and righteous. The opposite of this are false people: whatever they do or say, they do it in dishonest and twisted ways. We have a tradition in China: if you have money, you shouldn’t just buy whatever and everything you like; you must have responsibility to your family and to society. You should consume only according to your income capacity. I look down on those who don’t care about their kids and family and serve themselves instead; they eat, drink, play and entertain”.

Feigning ignorance, I enquire as to what kind of “play” Xu was thinking of exactly; his reply confirms that he is probably thinking of the same people as Fan:

“Drinking, dancing and playing around with other girls. They’ve got good clothes and good food but don’t give a damn about their family, wife and kids. But these people are not necessarily young, and they do not necessarily have money: they borrow money to play. Money and moral quality (*renpin*) are not necessarily related. Earning money is not the most important in life. Fair competition is also important in earning money. Some people don’t give a damn if their money is good money or bad money”.

Since Dongbin’s investment in the ‘Moral Character’ construct is clear here, I try a reverse tack by asking him directly if anyone “looked down on him” (*kanbuqi*), to which he confirms that some people say he is “too conservative” (*tai baoshou*), and that, “yes”, this was often these other people who drink and play. Dongbin is reluctant to accept the idea that he is a “really moral person” (*hen you daode de yige ren*), recognizing that to inflate himself in this way would be contrary to the good moral character he evidently wants to be known for. Instead, Dongbin would rather be thought of as “traditional”, an attribute he explains by reference to the way he tends to his family, as well as by reference to his ‘innate’ personality (cf. Sociability), which may as well amount to saying the same thing: he is ‘good’, whereas those who are not “traditional” are ‘bad’.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ni zenme zuoren?* is a highly loaded question, disposed to return answers congruent with the ‘Moral Character’ discourse, which is why I couldn’t use it as a primer in fieldwork. I wanted to open up informants without predisposing them to make any particular kind of judgements. The question translates awkwardly into English, as ‘How are you a good person?’, or ‘How are you a better person?’, but none of these really captures the sense in which the question refers only to the individual’s actual social relations, rather than to a quality supposedly inherent in the individual.

Xu Xiaoyan explicitly romanticizes a nostalgia for an innocent Socialist paradise, a purity beyond judgement spoilt by the immoral “flies” that Deng admitted might come in the ‘Open Door’, contending of the Cultural Revolution:

“Back then, there was no invidious judgement of others in people’s hearts (*meiyou panbi xinli*) because everyone was of the same level. We were very carefree, and happy, because we just lounged around without anyone to learn from, and played with the waste from the household or a box or whatever. We had no toys. There were no well built houses. There were no pretences because everyone was poor. There was never any comparing between us. Our clothes had patches. The older children brought up the younger children. We were happy. There was no pressure to make invidious comparisons because everyone was the same”.

Xu says the “pressure to make invidious comparisons” has come from the fact that she struggles “to satisfy monthly (economic) requirements while others have cars, motorbikes and nice homes”. When invited to describe these “others”, Xiaoyan breaks into a sweeping judgement against all those who: “Get a certain position, or career, but not on account of their own ability, and still think themselves great; who have money and power but don’t know how to use it”. Suspecting a personal grievance, I ask Xiaoyan if she is thinking of anyone in particular. “A friend”, she explains, “has a very small business; they have slightly more money than me, and already think they are great”. Explicitly, it is the lack of moral character she levers: “Some people with some power are scared that people will find them to ask for help: they don’t want people to call. People with power should be willing to help those who call for their help”. Thus, true to this form, Xiaoyan makes her construction centre on *altruism* (cf. Moral Character). Xiaoyan herself is altruistic, I am to understand: “I want a good family and do my work well. No matter who I’m working for, I need to do good work. People like me can’t make much money, so we try to do our best in what we’ve got”. Thus, Xiaoyan is aware that she must *use what she has*, and ‘good’ moral character is right there along with “work” as a last resort. Her creeping use of the plural “we” reflects her identification with a social category even though she would actually like to distance herself from this wherever she can. She then proceeds to develop this inclusion-versus-exclusion dynamic from the explicitly moral to the less abstractly social, still speaking as if money has hollowed out a past morality borne of collective hardship, and caused particular problems in terms of the reciprocity that ‘proximity altruism’ demands (cf. Moral Character):

“If someone with memories of the past (*huaijiu*), who now has money, invites a poor person to eat, it means they’re good, moral. I have no money to invite others to eat so I must choose an inferior place to eat, or struggle to pay. Courtesy demands reciprocity (*lishangwanglai*). In the end I stopped accepting other’s offers to eat out, making excuses not to go. The others talk about things over dinner I don’t even know about. Now I don’t now know them anymore. When I invite my old friends to dinner they make excuses not to come: they don’t like it because it’s not up to their standards. It’s all to do with money, and power. I don’t want to hang out with them; I like to be with people of approximately the same level. Some people who did the same work as me before now have cars, two-storey houses, and a maid doing all the work. Some found a good husband with money and power and therefore had a good life. After going once I wouldn’t dare go again, and didn’t sleep for many nights”.

Xiaoyan extends this same line of discourse into a discussion of courtship and marital relations that links the reforms with moral ineptitude in ways broadly approximate to Fan and Xu Dongbin’s judgements of whoring (above).

“Most people of my age were still introduced by their parents to get married; we did not freely choose. Nowadays, you look for someone with money, but then you looked for a husband in a State-owned-enterprise, with a room on their own, or with their parents in two rooms. Some people are economically active now (*jingji huoyue*). Before, finding a partner, I was concerned to look for someone sincere (*shizai*), someone straight and honest (*laoshi*), with working ability (*nenggan*) and a job. I didn’t think about money, rich or poor. As long as they had a house of some sort, or a room with parents this was fine... separated by a curtain. People with their own rooms were very few. I didn’t think about wealth (*caili*) at all. My husband used a bicycle to take me to our new home. Women only had basic bride clothes then. Divorce was very rare. But many married people from my generation have divorced now. Then, it was hardship (*kunnan*). Now there is a difference between the rich and the poor and it shows in emotional (*ganqing*) and love (*aiqing*) respects. People’s thinking has changed, and what people are looking for in a partner has changed. Nowadays it doesn’t matter if men and women are looking for someone with money, like a boss, or someone with power. If you’ve no money, no-one’s interested. You need money, a car, a home, and some power. In my era, the maximum age gap between partners was four years, but now large age gaps are quite permissible. Lifestyles have changed; young people treat marriage like a temporary thing; like young girls who take money from old men and then break up. Before, people used to help each other more, their colleagues and neighbours and so on, but now people with money stick together. Rich people used to help the poor but now there are different levels. People with money don’t like to be around poor people now, they can’t get along. Nowadays, there’s lots of pressure. They mix with people of their own level; we mix with people of our own level.”

It is perhaps significant that the way in which the 'Moral Character' construct is made to consolidate these workers' narratives is notably different in both Zhang Jie and Chen Qian, both of whom were born in the same year the Cultural Revolution began (1966), and were thus too young to be steeped in revolutionary fervor. The difference is most clearly seen in these worker's attitudes towards child-rearing. None of these workers' children are doing especially well academically, which somewhat distinguishes them from children of more 'middleclass' parents, who generally achieve well, school for longer, and sometimes school abroad. But where Xu Dongbin, for example, wants his daughter to "to have a good income and to grow up to make a good contribution to society", and where Xu Xiaoyan wants her daughter to "do good things, to go to university, to find a job, have a good future, and "make steps that fit into China's development", the younger Chen Qian only emphasizes the importance of her child's development and her role as mother. That is, she makes no emphasis on altruism beyond the remit of her immediate family – she would like to watch T.V., but doesn't because it would interfere with her son's studies. The younger Zhang Jie, too, wants her son to "go to university, read for a Ph.D, and have a stable family", but makes no mention of "contribution" and "responsibility" and so on. When I ask Zhang what were the values she believed most important to instil in the raising of her son, she tells me: "We don't have too high demands, she says: "As long as he can find a job...so they can have a basic salary to have a family. Our way of thinking is really simple". Struggling to get her to open up into narrative, I ask her if she can give me an example of something that happened recently that she really didn't like. After a delay, she begins to talk about her son again as if she can think of nothing else – she doesn't like it when he's "naughty". But then she begins to expand: she says she wants her child to be "hardworking", but has "no specific target" for him. It is only after she says that she wants her child to have "moral quality" (*pinzhi*) that she has significantly more to say, spinning a narrative about once meeting desperately poor boy who's father had left and who's mother had been left penniless, stressing the importance of being "responsible" as a parent. It is perhaps remarkable that not only are Zhang and Chen the least discursively competitive of all the workers interviewed here, but that they are also far less bitter than either the elder Xu Xiaoyan or Fan's wife from the 'sent down' generation. A certain amount of aspirational invidiousness might therefore be necessitated for those older workers with few other resources.

#### 4. Aspirational Moves

Indeed, despite Xu Xiaoyan's identification with a past socialist moral paradise, and her drawing on the Cultural Revolution as a source of practical capability (above), she elsewhere makes equally strong statements about how awful the 'sent down' countryside experience was, and how ugly her rivalry with the local peasants was. She looked down on them as "country-bumpkins" while the peasants called her a "rich princess, unable to eat bitterness". This discourse resurfaces when Xu is off-handedly invited to comment on rural migrants to the city:

"They're extremely disorderly, lacking in education and 'personal quality' (*suzhi*). They don't pay attention in public. If speaking on the phone, they're too loud. They don't pay attention to hygiene. Their clothes aren't tidy, so as soon as you see them you know they are peasants. Their appearance, their clothes, their skin is black from exposure to the elements. Basically they're not used to decorating themselves, and they can be distinguished by their behaviour."

Xu Xiaoyan thus seeks to splice the best of the revolutionary morality with her 'distinguished' urban status. But the privilege of mastering discourse in this way comes only with a certain level of urban security Xu does not have. This privilege, moreover, somewhat requires that you do not so openly make the strong "invidious comparisons" Xu says she overtly opposes, but cannot in fact help but do so when she is offered the chance. Although Xu makes upwardly aspirational moves in her narratives that necessarily entail the acquisition of a certain discursive fluency, that is to say, correct judgement, which includes how to judge, and indeed *judging without seeming like you are judging*, is a further distinction denied to her. Though it is not in the interest of this research to prove a single causality, let it be noted that the disposition to make especially *moral* judgements, and to focus in particular on judgements of others' moral character, makes these workers quite different from more 'middle class' informants, who themselves speak as if aware that the nakedness of judgement is uncivil in exactly the same way as is not wearing clothes in public (cf. the following chapter). For now, let it be noted that Xu's aspirational invidiousness has nevertheless managed to convince the comparatively simple Mr. Fan that she received a high-school education, when in fact she had only middle-school and did not complete that because of the "learn from industry; learn from the countryside" movement.

Fan and his wife have recently made an aspirational move of their own too, however, spending their life's savings on a sixth-floor flat surrounded by plush but dilapidating detached and gardened houses built during the Japanese occupation, where old party cadres have long been allocated privileged residence. "It's healthy around here", Fan says: "There's none of the big trucks and street-side lamb-kebab traders sellers around here causing noise; they're banned from this area." But this 'move up' in the world is only a superficial make-over, and cannot in itself resolve Fan's inferiority:

"I'm not like the cadre neighbours. Their cultivation (*xiuyang*) and education is higher. I never come into contact with them. Their life patterns are completely different. I'm just a proletariat (*laobaixing*), an ordinary proletariat (*putong baixing*). Cadre's have knowledge. Our status is different. We never come into contact. They don't really understand me and I don't really understand them. These other guys relied on their parents to bring them on – they have no experience of real poverty. I only had my mother; my father died early of illness when I was three years old leaving four children. In Anhui, in the 1950's, that is, in approximately '58, '59, and '60 when there was nothing to eat, me and my family would eat grass and tree bark to stay alive. It was very good to eat; we liked the kernels in the grass best".

It is highly significant that the cadre category is seen as the clincher in this neighbourhood: none of these workers can be described as cadres, and none are Party members. The discourse here is therefore as much about division in terms of allegiance versus non-allegiance to the State, that is, despite these workers' urban status, as it is about age, education or anything else. Fan's wife also never comes into contact with her neighbours: "I don't understand them; their way of thinking is different. They are a different level, I evade them". My wife (then girlfriend) then puts it to her that the place they now live is very good, which isn't taken at all condescendingly. Rather, Fan's wife agrees, and adds of her own accord, "even when we lived in a noisy place we just got on with it", and then further, "I don't like to harm other people; I don't want to look down on others", that is, an assertion of her 'good moral character' that nevertheless reflects the perception that moving to this more distinguished area is somehow attended by the need to condescend to others. By contrast, of all these workers, Fan is the closest to the countryside, and most obviously seeks to compete *only* in terms of 'Moral Character', unlike his wife seeing things only in the somewhat naïve terms of 'good' and 'bad'.

In this respect, Fan shares a very similar trajectory through the constructs as Xue Liang, the youngest of the rural migrants discussed in the previous chapter. 'Innocence', therefore, accompanies proximity to the land. We might also make the observation explicit here, that the invidiousness of judgement is much more the province of the women in this group than the men, who tend only to make *moral* judgements when encouraged to do so rather than of their own accord, and then only in the abstract, *impersonally*. Whereas Fan and Xu Dongbin are quite accepting of their social position, offering only moral judgements of more or less hypothetical others to illustrate that they are themselves good husbands and fathers, the more aspirational women, on the other hand, Xu Xiaoyan and Fan's wife in particular, actively volunteer moral judgements designed to "socially climb" (*panbi*) wherever they can. And yet, some of these male workers are more competitive at bending the discourse to their advantage in the first place, though they do so in ways very distinct from their female counterparts. Though both are in their fifties, Mr. Huang and Mr. Zhou, thus far not discussed, both juggle full-time jobs in the state sector whilst working for Mr. Zhao every spare minute. Huang describes himself as "a technical worker, a high worker, not a cadre (*ganbu*)", an emphasis quite distinct from his colleagues who described themselves as "wretches", "ordinary", "lacking" and "stuck" (above). Both Huang and Zhou strongly emphasize their practical value (cf. Knowledge and Ability), not in a wistful, desperate, hark back to the Cultural Revolution, but in current projects. Huang compares the SOE system "where people moved slowly", with the private system "where people move quickly", marking himself as one who has been successful at changing with those changes. Huang is very proud that he can do eight hours work in four hours. He drops a reference to the U.S.A, the U.K. and Germany where he *knows* people have "high skills", where "one man can do any job". Huang says he has no time to drink water whilst working, not as a mark of his 'oppression', but of his earnest: he wants to be seen as industrious and hyper-productive. He has "no time for exercise", "of course!", but he's "very strong" nevertheless. Thus, the 'Personality' construct takes a much more expansive and cultivating form in his discourse. Related, and quite unlike the less competitive workers and their families discussed here, Huang "hasn't got the time" to make moral judgements about those others who pursue "entertainment"; and besides, he doesn't "have the inclination", he just wants to earn money. Huang paints a picture of his worldview for me:



“There are two types of boss-to-worker relations. The first just makes it perfectly clear what he wants you to do, and then pays you precisely according to the task or the hours you put in. But the second kind of boss, like Mr. Zhao, will let you do two days work in six hours and still get paid for two days. We don’t talk money before the job. We just do it as quickly as possible even when we know we would get paid less. But I can’t do it all for no money, so Mr. Zhao still gives me the full price. Mr. Zhao has a big heart (*dadu*)”.

Underscoring the reciprocity element in Huang’s narrative is the awareness of the malleability of the discourse, the guile shared by the rural migrants analyzed in the previous chapter and the bending of rules (cf. Knowledge and Ability). As if deflecting the implicit attendant charge of moral bendiness, Huang lays ultimate responsibility for this reciprocity with fate: “If Mr. Zhao tells me to be there at eight, I’ll be there at six. I love Mr. Zhao. Love doesn’t come without a reason”. Huang’s affection for his boss is explained by the loss of a finger at the factory ten years ago: “It was my own fault”, he admits, “but Mr. Zhao bought me some really good painkillers which I refused because I didn’t feel he should have to pay when it was my own fault”. Huang could not possibly have afforded to have bought these extra-special painkillers himself, but he turned them down because by “eating” this “bitterness”, suffering the pain, and making the moral self-sacrifice of *not* taking advantage of Mr. Zhao’s generosity, Huang institutes himself as of excellent ‘Moral Character’ and can expect Mr. Zhao to reward him accordingly in the future. Indeed, there was extra money to pay even so, and hospital fees, and Mr. Zhao covered it all, though he was under no formal obligation to do so: “This brought us close together, emotionally (*you ganqing*). So, whatever Mr. Zhao asks me to do, I will do it. We trust each other very deeply”. Thus is it clear how the affective element of behaviour becomes explicit and rationalized as a kind of moral control, as explored at chapter eight. Strongly emphasized here too is Huang’s *service* as a worker, a competitive stress quite different from Fan, Xu Dongbin, and some of the other men and women discussed above, who only make *defensive* constructions of ‘Moral Character’ about serving the family and not the self, and so on. The less competitive informants only articulate a moral cause greater than that of serving the immediate family via their hopes for their children’s future (i.e. “contribution”, and so on), hopes that have an air of hopelessness about them. Nevertheless, Huang stresses this last prerogative, his role as a parent, in just the same way that nearly all Chinese parents do. His first priority is his son, who must get married one day:

“In China, the money to marry must come from the man’s side. The last ten years expenditure has all been about spending on my son. When my son marries and leaves home I’ll have a pension and live a simple life. I won’t be bothered about buying seafood and expensive foods. I won’t give this home to my son; I’ll decorate this house and renovate it. I’ll have to buy a house for my son when he marries. I can’t afford a very expensive house. If the boy doesn’t have a house no-one will marry him. If you’re a worker the girl you marry will also be the daughter of a worker. If you have high education, an MA or PhD, you will also find a girl from the same high level to marry. After my son marries, my home will be like a restaurant for my son and he can drop in whenever he wants, eat and go. I do everything for my son. All Chinese people are like this; whatever they earn they give to their child. No matter the child’s age, they are still our offspring”.

Huang is showing me that he ‘competes’ in terms of being a very good father. All his efforts are exerted for his son’s future; and he will give ‘everything’ to his son. We might note once more here, how easily the affective or moral becomes a rational imperative (cf. Personality). Huang then creates for me a three-tier model of how the world is segmented according to his point of view:

“First there is the management level (*guanliceng*), the cadres who don’t work (*bu ganhuo*); then there are the skilled (*jishu*) workers who do high scientific research, some here can earn more than the managers. Mr. Zhao is like this. Then, the third level is like me: a worker, repairing equipment, maintaining, doing the things that the others cannot do”.

The simple fact that Huang conceptualizes himself at the bottom in terms of three hierarchical levels makes it unlikely he chooses to be there (cf. Status). But he nevertheless highlights his unique value: “doing the things that the others cannot do”. It is further significant that he puts the official cadres at the top, even though the highly skilled and entrepreneurial may earn more: allegiance to the State is the real clincher in the distribution of power here, without this wealth makes you a liability. Huang’s probable sleight that the official class does not contribute (“work”) itself makes him more competitive than most of the other workers analyzed here who evince little such skill, tact or ambiguity in their judgements. Huang also *talks more*, simply put, and excels at it, two factors which make him in these ways much more similar to the more middleclass figures analyzed in the following chapter. Indeed, there is further *explicit* acknowledgment in Huang’s narrative that mastering the discourse requires being malleable with the rules:

In a hushed voice, Huang says he will tell me something that bonds him and Mr. Zhao together: “Because I’m still in a state-owned company, I can still make stuff disappear. If I can get some materials for free from that company, I’ll give them to Mr. Zhao for free. Yes, basically I take them. Mr. Zhao knows, but I don’t tell him the details”. Thus Huang is something of a player in a way that some of the other men analysed here are not: he uses what he can, because he has to; such is the way of making it in Anshan’s reforming economy. In just this way, a further major part of what configures some of these workers as ‘true players’, again related to being malleable with the rules, is a highly typical use of the ‘Sociability’ construct. Though their constructions are nowhere near as potent as constructions made by the younger male workers from their factory (cf. Sociability, 121), Huang, Fan, and Xu Dongbin all invest in the typical North-Easterners versus Southerners discourse of regional authenticity in a big way (cf. Sociability, 125). Again, this construction is highly gendered, and centred on a highly individuated form of self-expression. Fan describes his personality as “speaking directly” (*zhilaizhiqu*). He speaks whatever he thinks, he says: “Others can’t judge me because I speak from the heart (*xin*); I’m frank and honest (*tancheng*)”. Fan says his friends are important to him, but that these are not his work colleagues: his friends live where he used to live, but for four or five years now, since working for Mr. Zhao, he has had no time to contact them. Fast-talking Mr. Huang (above) describes himself as “very proud and cool”; he has a big smile, and laughs a lot. His discourse is full of markers such as “don’t be polite”, and “chill out a bit” (*suibian yidianr*). He says he is “open and bright” (*kailang*), volunteering a contrast between introversion and extroversion, saying he himself is the latter: “extroversion is good; I love to chat”. Huang is as heavy on the smoking as he is on sociable character, but only drinks one bottle of beer a day, because there must be control “for work” (cf. Personality). Nevertheless, he makes frequent hearty motions for me to “eat more”, and although it is the first in-depth conversation we have had, he feels that we should “be at ease” (*suibian*) with each other, “we have bonds” (*guanxi*). He expands: “When people get to a point, they can be very much at ease; if you haven’t got to that point, you can’t be at ease; being at ease means that whatever you want to eat, you eat, and whatever you want to say, you say, and you needn’t ask permission to go to the toilet (*shenqing qingshi*). We’ll go out eating and drinking and I’ll pay for everything”. Friendship, comradeship, and trust are thus equally and especially important for Huang – *his being is true*.

When offered the chance to define his personality, Xu Dongbin says he is: "An introvert, not an extrovert. I don't like to show myself off; I am steady, sedate. Extrovert people act differently; they have different deportment. Being more introverted is more traditional than modern". Yet Dongbin nevertheless thinks he should be considered "proud and cool" (*haoshuang*) when I ask, underlining the inclusivity of the construction of 'innate character' (cf. Sociability). Some of the women in this group draw on the same discourse too, even though the *character* of the construct is typically masculine in nature. Zhang Jie says she is "extrovert" and likes people she can have a good talk with (*tandelai*), which is of course a comment as much about her ability to maintain rapport with others as it is her 'innate' personality. Zhang Jie encourages her fourteen year-old son to study the guitar as a function of 'innate' character: "The guitar is more suitable for a boy's personality than the piano. Boys who play the piano are like... elegant (*youya*). For boys it's better to be a bit wild (*ye*): men should be like men; women should be like women". Thus, these characteristics are highly heterosexual also (cf. Sociability, 125). True to this form, this highly gendered emphasis is inverted in these workers consumption of the 'Civil Behaviour' construct too: 'Civil Behaviour' does not feature as a priority amongst this group. The construct is almost entirely absent from Fan's narratives, that is, Fan who is closest amongst the group to the countryside, highlighting again the distinctly *urban* nature of the 'Civil Behaviour' discourse, though Fan makes no notable transgressions in my presence. Xu Dongbin builds no constructions in these terms, though he is nevertheless concerned to bring up his son with "good habits", but in a way that makes "manners" (*limao*), "respecting elders", and various other such constructions, fit well with the good moral character discourse rather than with civil behaviour. Mr. Huang has a curious habit of putting his hands on my shoulders and arms as he welcomes me into his home, and proceeds to touch my hand a lot during our conversations; neither he nor any of the several other people present seem to think this strange. He evidently does it for emphasis and sincerity. When a juicy mess from the watermelon Huang had excitedly bade me eat began to drip off the tabletop onto me and then over his floor, Huang was not at all bothered to stop its flow or clean it up, an observation that brought back memories of eating in peasant homes where the hosts would spit out unwanted pieces and cast their chicken bones directly onto the earthen floor of the room to be swept out later. Though the men here spit at work, they do not do so at home.

## 5. Gendered Inflections

Where the 'Civil Behaviour' construct *is* consumed for strategic purposes amongst these informants, it is only really the women, second generation urban residents all of them, who obviously compete in this way. Zhang Jie most hates "spitting, the throwing of rubbish, and the wearing of clothes in a disorderly way". The gender factor immediately emerges as explicit: "It is hot outside, but some men don't respect others and take their shirts off. People should choose the situation; it's not a swimming pool around here". Zhang Jie also doesn't like people "without manners", "who don't say 'excuse me' when asking the way": "they just say 'a!', or 'uh!', and never say 'thank you'". "Many Anshan people have no manners", she goes on, fusing 'Civil Behaviour' with the moral imperatives of being a good mother and altruistic regard for society:

"When I'm on my bicycle people in front just spit without looking behind them. Others just throw rubbish out of the window from high up without looking... When I brought up my son I needed to be really strict on their manners. If my son had a lollipop he would have to carry the wrapper until he found a trash can; and then the stick, he couldn't just chuck it on the floor. If your home is clean and there's no dirt etc, it should be the same when you go out in the residential district: you must be clean; people will think the people in the area have higher personal quality (*suzhi*) or civility (*wenming*). People are like this because of their parents; they weren't brought up so well. I have a neighbour who cleans her house, but just brushes the rubbish outside onto the street; she has bad hygiene habits. Habits are very important. I taught my son to cut his nails into a bag, not to do it onto the floor. You need to protect the environment in these small ways; you must pay attention to controlling your behaviour beforehand, not just clean up after. Anyway, my son isn't too messy a person in the first place. If you protect the environment every minute you won't need to have a massive clean-up. Take the people in the street cleaning up; they have to always clean up because people keep making it dirty."

Xu Xiaoyan similarly brings up "uncivilized manners" (*juzhi bu wenming*), explaining that this refers to people who "sit incorrectly in a public place", who "speak loudly because they think they have money", who "gesticulate excessively", who "think they are the centre of everything and don't consider other's opinions". True to the strength of exclusive judgements emergent from women throughout this analysis therefore, 'Civil Behaviour' also plays a much bigger part in these women's narratives than the men's.

We might also observe that these latter two iterations are congruent with Zhang Jie's younger-than-average age for the group (civil behaviour is of course a discourse generally speaking stronger in younger persons than older), and Xu Xiaoyan's generally socially aspirational profile (she wants to be identified with more knowledgeable and cultured types and elucidated above). Other women in this group, however, aspire to be civil but also make considerable transgressions without knowing that they do so (cf. Knowledge and Ability). As soon as we are in the door, Fan's wife offers us fruit, speaks with her mouth open, full of food, and burps out loud without any disguise. Mrs. Zhou, similarly, burps twice without disguise and coughed three times directly into my face during a conversation in which she nevertheless said things like this:

“Everything is better than before. Urbanization: better, taller buildings; wider, better roads. People's personal quality (*suzhi*) and civility (*wenming*) are better than before also. Before, people could just spit wherever (*suiditutan*). People put litter in the bins now. Before, they just randomly chucked it on the floor. The fighting is less now, too. Before, around about the eighties, there was a lot more fighting everywhere, but after the nineties it all changed. The people had no personal quality (*suzhi*): whenever they spoke it was to swear at people (*ma ren*)”.

Playing devil's advocate, I put it to Mrs. Zhou, “Aren't people still like this?”. But she was adamant: “No, only a few; if you are someone who does this now, you're certainly immoral (*bu daode*)”. Thus we might note also that not only is the ‘Civil Behaviour’ construct an important part of the way that the women in this group compete, even if they do not understand it, these women do not separate civil behaviour as a construction from their assessments of ‘Moral Character’ (cf. chapter five, 108). Ultimately this is a question of politics: The State, of course, deliberately manipulates the explicitly moral (that is, *altruistic*) angle to the civil behaviour discourse because this is what the masses most respond too, as evidenced earlier in this analysis (cf. chapter five, 109). In the following chapter, however, we will see that not only do more ‘middle class’ types compete much less urgently in terms of ‘Moral Character’, but that they also tend to separate their judgements of ‘Civil Behaviour’ from their judgements of ‘Moral Character’, no doubt both consciously and unconsciously defining themselves *against* these workers and their conflation of these logics.

The gender divide in the consumption of the core structures of the discourse is also evident in the use that the 'Materialism' construct is put to: essentially the women in the group compete much more in this way. This is a divide that is not evinced in younger people such as the migrants discussed in the last chapter or their middle class urban counterparts, where both genders seem to care a lot, though perhaps not equally, about their image. Neither is this gendering so immediately obvious in elderly people either, where often it seems both males and females care similarly less about their material appearance than younger people generally. The men in this group only treat materialism as important in order to distance themselves from it as a function of 'Moral Character' as shown above. Xu Dongbin dresses in a scrubby white vest and pagama-type shorts, and is not at all concerned to present himself differently even though he was expecting my visit to his home, which is of course congruent with his use of the 'Civil Behaviour' construct, and welcoming me as a member of the intimate rather than of the public. Fan says he is aware of the importance of "dressing according to the situation", but only wears shorts and sandals when he is out of his overalls, and happily sits with me in his stained white vest and boxer shorts, smoking. Fan professes respect for Zhao because: "Although he has money, power and influence, and economic strength, he doesn't show it off. This is "neihan' as opposed to 'waibiao'", he says, where 'neihan' "comes from the heart", and 'waibiao' is "just about boasting, blowing your own horn". Xu Dongbin spends on "practical things", "not fashion", which "passes quickly". "Young people go with the flow", he explains, "but it's more important to me to look after my child". Those more competitive men in the group have a slightly more enhanced sense of competing in material respects, however. Both Mr. Zhou and Mr. Huang are rarely seen without a collared shirt and the once obligatory combination of black leather shoes, dark formal trousers, and thin white socks, a clash now widely regarded as *tu*. Zhou sports a shiny leather belt with conspicuous buckle of the same symbolic order. This is of course how lower-level government cadres have typically dressed, and these gestures towards formality distinguish these men from those who don't make the effort like Fan and Xu, who subsequently share more in common with unskilled manual labourers, or those on the peasant-fringe, like migrant-worker Zhang Jiali in the previous chapter, who will often be seen wearing at least one item of military camouflage clothing, identifying with a former, Socialist ideal, where everyone dressed more or less alike.

The women analyzed here compete much more in terms of Materialism' in configuring the self. Zhang Jie, again true to her form, understands that this is linked to the aesthetic of civil behaviour. It is important to her that she is seen as presentable, even though she is quite poor:

“When men and women are on the street they should take care of their appearance; this is respect to others. Even if you don't wear make-up, you must do your hair, wash your face, dress tidily etc; you must respect others and they will respect you. Education and insurance are the first priorities. If you don't have money, don't buy luxury things. If you haven't got enough money, don't chase fashion. But fashion is extremely important to me. Everyone has a heart to be beautiful. Fashion symbolizes that you have a young heart. If I wear a more beautiful necklace I feel like I'm not old. Some young people don't care about their appearance, and so they are already old. Some people wear clothes that look really beautiful; others look very backward”.

Mrs. Zhou, too, who also evidently wants to talk about this, also has a strong sense of why a person's “external appearance” (*waibiao*) is important:

“It reflects personal quality (*suzhi*) and individuality (*gexing*) very deeply. Dressing appropriately for your position in public places is very important. I like to dress up so that when I go out in the evening my friends say to me: “You look very beautiful today”. If this happens my heart will be really comfortable”.

Mrs. Zhou has a small and attractive, cloth, necklace in blue. I tell her I like it, and she tells me she has a gold one but doesn't wear it “because this one is more out of the ordinary” (*yuzhong butong*). Clearly eager to develop this theme she produces a pair of trousers with many handmade beads and colors on them. “See”, she says:

“Very unique (*hen dute*). It's important to express uniqueness and individuality through's appearance. Chinese society is very realistic (*xianshi*) now. If your family looks at you and thinks you look very ordinary, this is not good. If you look very modern, people are more inclined to want to get along with you”.

Thus, contemporary realism, which we might well understand as *competition*, is implicitly contrasted with Maoist politics. Though it is important for Mrs. Zhou to be “out of the ordinary” as a function of individuality, it is also important to look good for her family, overlapping ‘Materialism’ with the ‘Moral Character’ construct, a facet of ‘face’. Spotting the tension in Mrs. Zhou's statements, I challenge her by asking: “So it's important to be individual *and* to do what others like too?”



Mrs. Zhou replies affirmatively to this, prompting me to immediately follow up by asking her whether there is a contradiction here. She laughs wryly, pauses, and says there is no contradiction. Thus, I choose a different tack, asking: "If this is so important to you, how do you judge others in terms of their external appearance (*waibiao*)?" At this point, Mrs. Zhou brings up that word "neihan" again, precisely the concept that Fan uses to *oppose* "external appearance" (see above). Sensing an insight into the formation of individuality that might help this research, an insight quite contrary to the received wisdom of the China-watchers in the business and management worlds (cf. chapter one), I inquire further after her precise meaning: "Does 'neihan' mean liking different things to other people?" "No, this is not correct", Mrs. Zhou replies, thus putting a simple individualism out of the picture, immediately adding the following as if to confirm the relational value of the concept: "If you go to a public place looking bad, if they don't understand you, people won't respect you". "Neihan", Mrs. Zhou ventures, "is an individual viewpoint" (*geren de guandian*). Inspired, I check with: "Is the meaning of 'neihan' the same as what you said about uniqueness of individuality just now when discussing your necklace?" And further, "Is it about expressing something from the inside that is individual and personal through an appearance on the outside?" Mrs. Zhou affirms "Yes" to both these questions, explaining: "Just like my necklace, I'm the only one who's got one like it". She then produces a ring from somewhere, saying "Everyone else's rings of this style have only one decorative bead on it, but I thought it didn't look so good, so I put two on it. I like to do things differently to other people". Mrs. Zhou has of course just told me that 'neihan' is not to be simply understood as "liking different things to other people", so there seems to be something especially important about the *externalization of internality* to her definition. Mrs. Zhou understands "neihan", a concept initially understood as "inner", as a metaphor for the subjective attribution of value to an "external" object (a necklace, a ring, a person), an attribution which is somehow *constitutive* of the perspective (the "individual viewpoint" as she puts it) that attributes it, the value thus remaining imperfectly understood by other such perspectives in discourse (cf. Authenticity, 50). Thus, to paraphrase the opening passages of the ancient Taoist classic the 'Tao Te Ching' (*Daodejing*), "From one there came two, and from two there come many", an observation that should support the perspectivism sustained throughout this research, as well as the *gendered* self emergent in this analysis.

## **Chapter 11**

### **Professional Households**

This final empirical chapter analyses a number of broadly middle-aged adults from households where the primary breadwinner is or had until recently been a professional at one of Anshan's major public enterprises, or at affiliated businesses. All of these individuals are distinguished from the workers in the previous chapter by a rough composite of occupation and professional status, discretionary income, educational level, family background, and their consumption of the core constructs of this analysis. Some are senior-level engineers or technicians at the higher-end of the scale, with some sort of oversight for junior staff, others hold 'white-collar' professional office jobs, and others are purely managers. None are official State functionaries, and none are to be thought of as having significant status as such, although the fact that these individuals hold professional *positions* situates them in discourse in a way denied to those individuals analysed in the previous two chapters. Though some of these individuals know each other, they are much less intimately involved than either the rural migrants and workers were; neither do they share the same sense of belonging within a group or identify so readily with a social category as those individuals. This chapter is therefore structured somewhat differently to its predecessors, as a series of thematically-connected portraits of individuals taking up different positions within a loosely-defined 'field' of practice characterized firstly by a distinct *diversity* of individuality rather than as a comprehensive analysis of a 'group'. The chapter is structured to begin with individuals who are not entirely different in their dispositions to the workers in the previous chapter, and ends with individuals who are very different indeed, thus showing how a more 'middle-class' disposition emerges from the 'working class' disposition just developed. By the end of this chapter, therefore, the analysis becomes almost tautological in form, 'simply' iterating the ways in which, to greater or lesser extents, and in different ways, these individuals collapse the core constructs developed throughout into the form of their 'legitimate' instantiation. Wherever possible, the data are allowed to remain close to the empirical context in which it was collected, facilitating comparisons with family members across age, gender, political affiliation, and so on, further drawing out the 'grammar' of articulation across these.

## 1. Party-Line

By way of introduction, consider Mr. Zhou, a forty-nine year old neighbour of ours who can be interestingly compared with his wife, forty-eight, and his mother, Grandma Liu, who lives in the same home. Zhou's SOE salary is actually less than Mr. Zhao's workers', but Zhou enjoys substantial benefits on healthcare, rent, and so on. Zhou introduces himself as a "high-level engineer", his mother immediately parroting the words "high-level!" (*gaoji*) for emphasis. When I pose the matter for confirmation, Zhou cannot resist asserting that he is of "high knowledge and ability (*hen you zhishi; hen you banfa*)", no doubt further intending that I notice his explicit linking of knowledge with practicability, the implication being that he can 'work anything out', a stress not dissimilar to that of the more competitive male workers just analyzed. Grandma Liu again immediately butts in to reiterate this stress – "My son can fix anything" – with a stark, unguarded nakedness of assertion that places her closer to the workers in the previous chapter than to her son. Rather than boast, indeed, and as if to demonstrate he has more to offer in discursive contention than the average 'handy-man', Zhou prefers to let his knowledge speak for itself: though I have only asked a few banal questions to get him to begin speaking, he launches into a highly strategic narrative, referring knowledgeably to political history, foreign theories of population growth and of economic stratification, making all manner of comparisons with the West left and right, sustaining this for quite some time. Notably, both of the women present seem to assume that this is the kind of knowledge I have come to hear, and almost entirely defer to Zhou as I listen to him. Evidently they are very proud of him. But while Grandma Liu constantly interjects with chatty and opinioned commentary, Zhou's wife seems to have very little to say for herself, a somewhat subservient gendering pattern repeated in every household where the male was the primary breadwinner here (see also below). Of significance, perhaps, is that while Zhou managed to make up on lost schooling part-time after his time in the fields during the Cultural Revolution, a factor of the cushioning effect provided by the relative comfort his family enjoyed at the time, Zhou's wife did not supplement her limited basic education, which perhaps accounts for her relative 'inarticulation' now (cf. Knowledge and Ability). It is necessary for me to interview her alone on other occasions, where she reveals a 'habitus' not unlike some of the less competitive women from the previous chapter.

Despite the enhanced knowledge and skills that distinguish Zhou from his wife and mother, however, Zhou is in many respects very similar to some of the workers analyzed in the previous chapter himself. Of particular similarity are his use of the 'Moral Character' construct and his contrast of this with the logic of money and materialism (cf. Materialism). Zhou is not at all poor; his family lives comfortably enough in one of the better parts of the city, a site granted to Grandma Liu on account of the fact that her long-dead father was a military General (cf. Status). But Zhou nevertheless agrees with my tentative suggestion that China's society is becoming less and less moral because of the economic reforms and refers to people he knows who have "divorced their wives, left the kids, and shot off to the South to earn money" in just the same way as those divorced wives do themselves. "We're not like that", says Zhou in sum. He also scorns wealthy people devoid of knowledge and ability, giving this a moral twist too: "Some of these are moral (*daode*), others are not". Zhou explains that he just doesn't have the urge to earn enormous amounts of money like some do because he's "already comfortable", and "doesn't care much for clothes" and for "specially" dressing his appearance. Zhou's son, at university in Shandong, absorbs much of the household expenditure, but he doesn't care for the latest fashions and trends either Zhou explains, thus reinforcing the impression that they are unable to afford him anything above basic consumption anyway. Unlike the workers' very similar money-versus-morals moralities, however ("No commerce, no evil", Zhou maintains - *wushang bujian*), Zhou's morality takes a much more explicitly partisan form quite absent from the workers' discourse, none of whom were self-professed allies of the State in any sense other than that in which their working was a 'contribution'. Zhou is "very proud" of being a Communist Party member, believing that it's "good for society", "like Christianity". He cannot be provoked to express any ill of the Party or government at all, and this despite his father dying as a result of Mao's purges. Zhou and his mother speak almost as if with one voice in these respects, as if uniting to provide a record of what they stand for. Grandma Liu has an excellent "moral reputation" I am to understand; though she is not the party representative in our community she makes up for this 'deficit' by volunteering harder and longer than anyone else. She would like to be thought of by others as of "moral quality" (*daode pinzhi*), to which she adds "comprehensive quality" (*zhengti suzhi*), explaining that this may also be understood as "political cultivation" (*zhengzhi xiuyang*).

While Zhou works, Grandma Liu spends her days scouring the six different newspapers delivered daily to their home for instructions from the government which she cuts out and displays around the neighbourhood as posters. These include: “Love your country; build up Anshan”, “Arduously struggle, be hardworking and thrifty”, “Don’t throw rubbish or dirty things about”, “Don’t make a lot of noise in public places”, and so on. Cut out too are those sections on “Family Health” and “health knowledge” (*baojianzhishi*), which are sewn together in little books for keeping, the remaining paper being recycled once every three months for five-and-a-half mao per jin, perfectly congruent with this distinctly *Socialist* blend of altruistic service, rule-governed technocracy, and material frugality. “Health is important so I won’t be a burden on my family”, she explains, naming the exact times and places of everything she does throughout the day: “I have a strict routine, a particular time for doing exercise and for eating every meal. Being a little bit more casual wouldn’t do at all”. I ask Grandma Liu if she ever does anything for herself, and not for others, to which she replies: “Not much, not really, I’m all about serving the people because I’m a member of the Chinese Communist Party”. It is quite notable in this context, however, how the ‘Civil Behaviour’ construct emerges as a factor of Zhou’s morality in a way that it does not for his mother: where Zhang identifies people who spit on the streets with a “lack of knowledge” and explicitly pours scorn on people with cars who blast the horn at pedestrians as an indicator of their status, Grandma Liu makes no constructions of ‘Civil Behaviour’ in her boundary management at all, preferring instead only to use the explicitly altruistic terms of ‘Moral Character’ as many of the workers in the previous chapter were apt to do. Zhou thus demonstrates the ability to *separate* judgements of ‘Civil Behavior’ from judgements of ‘Moral Character’ in ways that his mother cannot. Although Zhou agrees with his mother that the “good” officials of yesteryear are different from those “bad” officials and businessmen of the contemporary era, the importance of not “carelessly spitting phlegm or urinating” (a command from one of the government mantras his mother cuts out of the papers), is not necessarily *equivalent* to other, overtly altruistic imperatives such as “Serve the people” and “contribute to society” as it evidently is for her. A much more recent discursive paradigm than China’s ‘proximity altruism morality, if ‘Civil Behaviour’ is carving out space for individuality amongst even amongst the most die-hard of Party supporters, then it certainly is for other individuals of this approximate social ‘class’ as this analysis will show.

## 2. High-Tech, Low-Cash

A visit to Mr. Bin's home takes a similar form, though without the partisan emphasis. At seventy-one and sixty-eight, Mr. Bin and his wife are not far off the same age as Zhou's mother (above). A retired "high grade engineer", Bin likes to compete through "learning" (*xuewen*), just like Zhou (cf. Knowledge and Ability). Repeatedly using the word "calculation" (*suan*) to describe his work and skills, Bin evidently likes to recall "competing" on the grounds of professional knowledge with "foreign engineers", reminiscing for me on how they would try to get one over on one another in terms of knowing about this or that technical aspect. Bin seems to feel that this gives him an element of international credo: he also wants to make sure I know he went to Japan on work in 1990. Bin then wants to document that he knows about the U.K., about Tony Blair's retirement and Gordon Brown's succession and so on, the 'War on Terror' and the corresponding tension in the U.S., broaching all sorts of strategic comparisons between China and the West in ways comparable to Zhou (above), though I am happy just to listen. Bin's wife, however, who used to work in a non-managerial capacity for the City Administration (the same place as Zhou's wife, and at a similar level), does not engage in this kind of discourse at all. She does, however, let on that she's been to Beijing, and then later that she's been to Shanghai, as if she wants to document the fact that she has first hand experience of central and advanced places too. In this case, it is clearer that Bin and his wife feel the need to signify that they are *capable* of communicating with me, whereas others, it is implicit, would not necessarily be able to. Their greatest problem is that their wealth doesn't live up to their perceptions of Bin's technical expertise. As soon I arrive, Bin mixes apologies for his home not being more luxurious – "it's just so-so, a little bit lacking" – with demonstrations of knowledge as if he is trying to show me that he knows he has an intellectual capital more than his means suggest. Being an engineer has not earned him enough money, he says, both he and his wife making numerous similar 'admissions' throughout the interview (cf. Materialism). Bin and his wife have three children, reflecting their age, since younger urban people usually only have one. Their son, they are keen to tell me, "has a 180 sq metres home in 'Green Intelligence City'", an up-market newly built out-of-town housing estate. Their own flat, they tell me, is "only 70 sq meters" (cf. Materialism). Their front room is small but cosy in appearance, with a welcoming-looking but aged and not especially well-built sofa.

Bin and his wife have little option but to pursue reflected glory through the success of their children, a function of showing that they have excelled in their role as 'good' parents (cf. Moral Character). They bring up their aforementioned son again, telling me that he works for the 'Bank of China' and has recently been to France, the U.K., and Sweden on work, elements impressed upon me quite early in our encounter as if to counter any misconceptions I may otherwise have inferred about them from their material surroundings. As with some of the less competitive female workers examined in the previous chapter, the success of their children is a source of pride invested in more by Bin's wife than Bin, for she does not have the option of competing in terms of technical or intellectual expertise as he does. Again pursuing reflected glory, both Bin and his wife talk a lot about other people who they think have lots of money, apparently assuming that I will think this worth talking about. Bin mentions various celebrities and foreign expats; his wife mentions Da Shan the Canadian man famously adopted by the Chinese nation and Da Niu his younger and much more recent British equivalent. Thus, they betray a knowledge-base informed primarily by television. Like Zhou (above), Bin does not have a car but both he and his wife talk of others who have one as if they think that having one is a symbol of wealth and status; the pride is evident when they tell me their daughter drives one (cf. Materialism). Thus, having evidently figured out more or less why I am interested in them, both Bin and his wife seem to want to talk about ways to make money too, putting it on record that they are 'fluent' in the 'language' of business, but always with an apologetic tone for their own 'lack' of success. Bin's wife tells me of her younger sister who "has a business; they have money and their child is in the U.K. studying", once again as if she simply wants it to go on record that their family has overall garnered an above average success, though the evidence to support this claim is in fact elsewhere. Beyond this systematic refrain, but again perhaps because they cannot afford much by way of material pretension, Bin and his wife evidently want to project a message of 'simple but friendly' to me, a function of competing through the 'Sociability' construct (cf. chapter six). Bin's wife claims that they are "relaxed" (*suibian*) vis-à-vis the formalistic (and wealthier) Japanese, thus excusing any sense I might have had that they are too "relaxed". Although very kind and generous, however, neither Bin nor his wife are especially strong in terms of sociable character, a form of competition which tends to be the preserve of more *vital* men and women (cf. chapter six, 123; cf. chapter eight, 171).

As with Grandma Liu (above), age is probably an important factor structuring the fact that neither Bin nor his wife seem especially concerned to compete in terms of 'Civil Behaviour' either: neither make any boundary judgements in these terms at all, though neither make any obvious transgressions in front of me, a comportment which is of course quite distinctive in itself vis-à-vis individuals from the previous chapter. Indeed, this is quite different from, say, worker Xu Dongbin's father, the 'General Manager' of Mr. Zhao's factory (mentioned in the previous chapter), for although Grandpa Xu is only slightly older than Bin, and has an approximate base of technical and engineering skills that distinguishes him from Mr. Zhao's other workers too, he spits terribly, even in his boss's office, which is probably a function of the discursive proximity he and his family still retain to the countryside (cf. 204). On the other hand, whereas Grandma Liu feels the need to actively distinguish herself from China's peasants to secure her urban status, Bin and his wife do not, emphasizing instead a quite antithetical focus on the modernizing and international sphere, only mentioning the countryside in order to demonstrate awareness of living standards and the evolving situation there, that is, primarily as a function of competing through knowledge. Indeed, attitudes towards the countryside are quite a significant factor of difference between nearly all the individuals analyzed here and those workers from the previous chapter. Though the countryside features no more than two or three generations ago in the lives of most of the people analyzed here, Grandma Liu aside, these more self-affirmed individuals do not feel the need to actively differentiate themselves from the countryside. In this respect, Bin and his wife are much less inward-looking than Grandma Liu who for all her aspirations of urban status has an ideology and world-view still very much rooted at the time at which her husband passed away, at the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. Also unlike Grandma Liu, neither Bin or his wife make any strong moral judgements in front of me, evincing a certain control in judgement more familiar to Grandma Liu's son, Zhou (above), though without his Communistic moral politics. True to the gendered form that emerged in the last chapter, however, Bin's wife was slightly harsher in her moral judgements than Bin, showing visible disdain on her face in relation to various topics from time to time in a way that Grandma Liu and Zhou's wife did too, but that Zhou did not. Lower levels of education and proximity to the countryside are thus greater determinants of civil behaviour and overtly moralistic judgements than is age alone.



### 3. Café Control

Consider next, Mr. Cao, another “high level engineer” at Angang, whose rank is somewhat higher than Zhou and Bin at “section-chief” (cf. Status). Both fifty-four years old, Cao and his wife, Zheng, were amongst the first back to university in 1974, and were classmates there with Mr. Zhao, the boss of the workers analyzed in the previous chapter. Cao’s father died as a result of “criticism” in the Cultural Revolution, as did Zhou’s (above) and Mr. Zhao’s too. It is curious that having a parent who was either killed or severely suffered in Mao’s purges is almost socially distinctive: a sign of some noteworthy family background that none of the workers in the previous chapter shared (cf. Status). Cao and Zheng have translated this form of inherited symbolic capital into developing their intellectual potential. Both read history, foreign affairs, English language fiction, and so on, literatures quite distinct from the technical and partisan readings that fill Zhou’s house (above) and that Bin is versed in too. They have several hundred books on display in a smart but not opulent cabinet, and frequently make off-hand references and gestures towards them, intending for me to notice and comment something about them. Zheng coarsely cackles that they’ve “got high culture!” mocking what she probably sees as the vulgarity of others who might say they have as such. Cao chuckles a little along with her at this but visibly maintains self-control as if aware that even this is bad taste. Cao and Zheng’s passion for reading was not so much inherited from their parents, they say, because there were no books around when they were children; rather they just “gradually acquired the taste of reading” in the “comfort of (their) own home”. Every time I visit, Cao positions his massive frame in the same grand, black armchair across the coffee table from Zheng’s, so that he looks upon this vast array of literature every time he looks up from reading. Zheng, on the other hand, looks up from her reading at him alone, framed only by the blank white wall behind him, her teenage sweetheart. They interface by means of the coffee station between them, which serves to stimulate discussion. They drink “real, fresh, Brazilian coffee” (cf. Authenticity), given to them by a “friend in Brazil”; but they have “many other kinds of coffee too”, just as they “have other friends abroad also”. Thus Cao and Zheng make knowledge take on a very different guise, crystallizing it with a highly controlled lifestyle concept (cf. Personality). Significant, perhaps, is that they never had children, and have therefore had lots of time for themselves; they did, however, adopt a son, a relatively uncommon thing to do at the time.

Cao percolates the coffee, every manoeuvre made with an accuracy truly striking for such a large man. Zheng places biscuits and other niceties on the table. It is unclear whether the biscuits are placed before us or before him as such, an uncertainty which seems to momentarily puncture the aura of exquisite control. As if by explanation, Cao proceeds to eat nearly all of the biscuits, consuming far more than both Zheng and I put together, whilst somehow maintaining the same precision. They say that they do this "all the time", so that I document the impression that a British guy popping around for coffee is not at all unusual. Both readily admit to loving the effects of coffee on the reading mind. I mention that my girlfriend's parents, much more typical of middle-aged Anshanites in this respect, don't like coffee believing it's bad for health, to which Cao contends that a little coffee is no problem, and "actually good for health". Both add two sugar cubes to every cup. These little habitual treats are evidently far more important to them than the rigorous self-controlled diet and health-monitoring that many adults in Anshan are given to. Exercise is not on the agenda for Cao or Zheng either, again something which not many people of middle-age in non-manual jobs would openly admit to. Cao and his wife prefer a different kind of control and cultivation, a cozy home hedonism centred on sugar, caffeine, and intellectual tidbits, that makes them feel refined and fuelled by a level of material comfort that exceeds by some measure the similarly cozy home Bin and his wife enjoy (above). Importantly, there is no shame in desire here (cf. Moral Character); their pleasure is no less sensual for being reified to the nth degree (cf. Materialism). This especially *civil style* is of course a function of Cao and Zheng's 'Sociability' too. They do not wish to appear 'stuck up' about manners, but rather as smooth as the coffee they drink. But theirs is a cultivated ease devoid of the coarseness and tactile intimacy common in many other homes in Anshan. There is no interruption or obtrusiveness in any sense bar the occasional sharp peak of laughter from Zheng. The three of us seem to share a mutual awareness of knowing exactly when to speak and when to be quiet, where to sit or stand and how to move. Indeed, Cao and Zheng successfully produce the feeling in me that out of all my Anshan informants, their home is where I feel most at home as a visitor. Every question and response is taken with discretion, tact, delay and measure. Hands are placed one on the saucer and one on the handle of the bone-china cup. Any movement from this position is made slowly and deliberately, cup and saucer touching down noiselessly, every time.

Even a little mess in the kitchen cannot upset Cao and Zheng's control. They are not the type to get agitated about someone coming over; they do not sterilize everything and arrange everything just so. I find myself wondering if it would not even have been beyond them to have consciously left a little mess around the kitchen thinking it would make them look more relaxed, reinforcing the easy-going impression they like to give. At any rate, they do not rush around to do the washing up while I wait on the couch, preferring to get right down to the important business of leisure. Of the two, Cao is the more composed than Zheng, leading in all matters of discourse. Zheng is for the most part happy to listen, rarely asking questions, only commenting on our discourse, and never interrupting her husband. I find I have to deliberately make the occasional glance over at her as I listen to Cao to ensure that I am not excluding her from discourse. Well-educated herself however, Zheng gives an impression quite different to Zhou's wife and Bin's wife: she probably feels that too much assertiveness is uncivil for a woman. Less a case of lacking the 'right to represent', as is certainly the case in the spouses analyzed above, and was also the case wherever I visited the workers in their homes, Cao and Zheng are actually quite equivalent in their discursive potency. It is no doubt significant that Zheng wishes to be known by her own name, whereas Zhou and Bin's wives (see above) are content that I know them as such. Of further significance is that neither Cao nor Zheng make any explicitly moral judgements, always approaching conversational topics as 'problems' to give their opinion about, balanced from various perspectives, and always to be made subject to the infinitely regressing features of differentiation. They do not doubt that they are 'good', they are positive and self-affirmed in their worth, thus do not feel the need to judge others 'bad'. Though both share a healthy respect for tradition, the morality they proffer is forwards-looking, modern and international, characterized by the consciousness of a responsibility to society that is not found in most people's personal and familial-centred moralities. Both Cao and Zheng, that is to say, consistently demonstrate the ability to *transcend their own predicament* as the problem in discourse, making morality subordinate to self-control and cultivation, which in their case emerges as the almost exclusive driver of individuation. Related, their politics are anti-Mao, full of praise for the reforms and current leadership, and pro-democratic, though neither is especially strident in their advocacy of these views, perhaps regarding expressed passion in these matters as itself somewhat uncivil.

#### 4. Rightful Resistance

The explicitly *political* dimension of discourse, however, emerges as a major factor attending the increased discursive capacity the professionals analyzed here have vis-à-vis the workers in the previous chapter, other individuals of otherwise highly approximate dispositions demonstrating a much more *public* inflection of Cao and Zheng's conflation of knowledge, civility and individualized control. Consider Du Bin, for example, where the essentially *critical* politics many of these professionals broadly share is much more clearly articulated, but where it is also equally clear that a position critical of the State can only be legitimately articulated from within the comfort of an essentially allied position when compared to the migrants and workers of the previous chapters. Du is another mid-level state-owned enterprise manager in his early fifties, of about the same as level as Cao. Du's wife, however, earns far more as "general manager" (*zongjingli*) of a major State-Owned-Enterprise in the region, meaning that Du's household should be considered "upper middle class" (*zhongshang*), he says. His wife's job is sufficiently powerful to make it politically problematic for me to visit them at home. Du, however, is a very down-to-earth, sociable, and assertive kind of guy, quite typical of the character-type 'innate' to the region (cf. Sociability 125), and in this *manly* respect quite similar to some of the male workers analyzed in the previous chapter. But although Du likes to emphasize that he can eat "four whole bowls of congee", and "freely expresses" his opinions on almost any subject, no matter whether we are in the park or in front of his colleagues at work, he is nevertheless always in control: he "only likes to drink to make friends", and "never gets drunk and shouts a lot", he says. Indeed, Du is very civil and modern in his masculinity, cooking daily for his wife for example, gendering unheard of in the families analyzed thus far (though Cao and Zheng – above – cook together). Du says he likes to "keep a distance" from people in public spaces because for the most part they're just interested in excess drinking: he is "really concerned about his rights" (*quanli*), by which I am to infer that he thinks in *civil* terms most broadly (cf. Civil Behaviour). This kind of excess drinking "comes from the government", Du explains, from those officials who believe that everyone must come to see their sons get married and *pay* their respects: "the waste; the noise!" What's more, "The pressure to do the same in reciprocation is immense", "Others accept the pressure to do it, but I've got my independence: if I don't want to do it, I won't do it".

Thus, Du articulates a strong sense of individual agency, making constructions of civility directly opposed to the corruption fostered by China's 'proximity' style morality (cf. Moral Character). His 'independence' is more important to him than the proximity binds that sustain so many other peoples' notions of the 'good' and the 'right'. Of further relevance here is the fact that Du likes to talk to his buddies in the park about engaging in "social contribution" (*shehui gongyi*) and "sticking up for your individual rights", the former of which is not at all to be understood as altruism, the latter of which is political dynamite. But his friends are not interested, he says: they only like talking with him about things like fitness, doing the shares, earning money, foreign education, the climate and the urban environment. Du likes all this too, but if he ever talks about "sticking up for your rights", they say he's "too over the top", and ask "Why would he talk about the government?" Let us examine an example of what Du means by "sticking up for his rights", in his own words, so that the internal dynamics of how these 'rights' emerge as a function of discursive competency can be better understood:

"I'm not optimistic for the future; in fact I foresee problems that fill me with dread. The main problem is the lack of the rule of law and social rules: law is the basis of morality. The one-party State is the real problem. The general mood is against them; most people are not satisfied. Corruption in the SOE's is rife. The Party representatives in the SOE's are only interested in the secret second 'wives' they keep for sex. The peasants and the masses are deeply disturbed. The difference between the rich and poor is huge. People can't get ill because they'll get very little help from the government. The cost of medicine is very high. The Western governments are concerned with welfare, sport, medicine, education and social insurance. This is scarce in China. Individual people must be responsible for things like medicine, education and social insurance in China. The people are tired because they have to spend much more. And they must get their children into a good job. And the young people find it very difficult to find jobs and buy houses these days. What's more, the environment is much worse than it used to be here. There's so much litter. The pollution from Angang is better than it was but everything else is worse. The medicines and foods are faked, which is a major safety concern. And there's deliberate cheating everywhere. It's all linked to economic development. I blame the party. I'm genuine: I speak the truth. The government doesn't want to hear the truth. They want supporters, not the truth; they want people to boast for them. I think the country could be on a collision course. We don't know who can change this situation peacefully. Society and law must be built on morals. But it's not, so everything gets harmed. There's no welfare. Take the beggars on the street, for example. The city management people get rid of them but it's no help..."

Du continues in this vein:

“Essentially, we must have harmonious development. There is a need to construct a spiritual civilization. There are no morals anymore (*daode meiyou le*). Since the 1990’s people don’t know the difference between good and bad; they don’t care about others; they know about commerce but not about society. People’s essence is basically good. But some leaders’ essence is bad. They tell everyone they’ll do good things and then they go and do bad things. They slowly become corrupt. Basically, the system is fundamentally flawed. It’s not just the kids who are influenced by this but their parents and the government officials too. In past people had traditional education – Confucius, Mengzi, Mao Zedong thought etc – but this is broken now. There is a church in Anshan, you know. People can’t fit in... The U.S.A. relies on religion and belief. What does China rely on? Nothing! Material life is better these days, it’s true, but spiritual life is much worse. Children are unhappy, they’re always over-studying. Peasants don’t know how to educate their kids, and don’t even know how to show them the difference between good and bad. They need to read books, but they don’t know how, can’t afford them, and have no interest in cultivating themselves. But there is hope because we are in the digital age where people can use the internet. There will be enough people who understand to help China reform peacefully. But even at university, the students have too much freedom: they don’t have to go to class; when they’re online they just waste all their time playing games. They don’t know about society, they think society has no relationship to them. They think this is a matter for the CCP. The CCP and the government are aware of this now and are trying to rectify it. Governance has changed from Mao’s stress on the “essence of the people” (*mincai*), the ‘grass roots’, productivity and quantity, to a stress on the “elite” (*jingying*) introduced by Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin’s “three represents” and so on. The two are not contradictory. Fusing the elite with the masses is China’s future. The masses are the body, the elite is the spirit”.

There can be no doubt who Du holds to account for the problems he articulates. He comes close to directly threatening the State – calling peace into question twice, for example – and quite openly suggests that the solution to all these problems lies overseas. And where he says there is “hope because we are in the digital age where people can use the internet” he can surely only mean that he hopes that Chinese will increasingly think outside of the ‘proximity’ box imposed upon them. But although his comments are enough to set alarms ringing in the nearest Public Security Bureau, Du cleverly couches his criticisms in terms of official state discourse, enabling him to move in and out of subversion.

Du is of course careful to cast a positive light on Mao's thought, and on "traditional education", thus marking his allegiance to his roots, putting it beyond question that he is a man of 'the people'. He also makes sure to mention the theories of Deng, Jiang, and Hu, and to apportion credit where it is widely acknowledged as due, for the way the government has addressed "pollution" and improved "material life", and so on. Indeed, Du cannot help but implicitly align himself with the "elite": he needs it to be clear that he is speaking from a position allied to the status quo, shouldering himself with part-responsibility for resolving the problems he describes. Less enemy of the State than deeply concerned stakeholder, Du is therefore able to probe the boundaries of legitimacy in ways that would quite likely get lesser-ranked people in serious trouble. But there can be no doubt that Du takes up the altruism and proximity of the 'Moral Character' construct in which the State is so invested ("the system"), and turns this against itself, taking from the discourse he opposes exactly what he needs to subvert it. He frames his criticisms in moral terms – "There are no morals anymore", and so on – but makes this subordinate to a different kind of 'responsibility', an *individualizing* agency that demands a certain civil concern for society and the voices of individuals speaking "the truth" as he puts it. This lends his discourse power, making his position more *rightful* than the ethically-inflected 'righteous' resentment expressed by some of the workers in the previous chapter. Essentially Du writes *himself* into a discourse which, as he portrays it, pertains to deny him this agency, and in a very skilful way. Elsewhere, and with equal significance, Du makes similar discursive turns that resolve the tension between self-sacrifice and self-assertion so that it is much more legitimate to express individuality in self-referential terms. He is openly explicit that "individuals must take responsibility for themselves before they can take responsibility for anyone else", an attestation that would be positively antisocial in many areas of China's contemporary moral climate. In a discussion of child-rearing, he says that "the traditional way of Confucian thinking is holding us back", thus further replacing the altruistic and proximity considerations of the 'Moral Character' discourse with more *modern* views of the subject. Yet for all the skill from which his legitimacy derives, it cannot be overlooked in the final analysis that much of Du's legitimacy derives from his wife's senior position in the State apparatus. Indeed, his identification with the "elite" serves to justify his exemption and social elevation from the problems he describes, even as it also shields him from official sanction.

## 5. Self-Conscious

Freedom, indeed, might not be free. *Legitimate* agency comes at the price of surrendering to that which is greater than the individual in order to get something back. The point is best made by further considering Chen Xueyuan (the intellectual first introduced at chapter four, cf. 77), an active promoter of “humanism” in whom the call for politics with an explicitly universal social referent to which Du Bin aspires is perhaps clearest, but who shares the same mix of formal education and civil disposition as the other professionals analyzed here, just without any affiliation to State resources at all:

“I believe all persons are equal. Whatever situation people are in, whether you are a beggar, or whether you are the chairman of the country, in respect of your individual personality you are all equal, and should all be respected by others. We cannot say that just because he is a beggar he is not a person; it might just be that he has no education. As a person he must be afforded respect by everyone. I often tell my daughter this. Because I am like this: if I see a person begging, I’ll give them some money, give them 1 kuai, 5 kuai or 10 kuai. If you want to be someone of high personal quality (*suzhi*), you can help them temporarily resolve their hardship, which can also help them relieve their long-term hardship – because they are beggars, they may not have any ability to work; they have to rely on these practices (begging) to survive. If you help him a little, he can buy bread, or a sausage, and make himself warm for a while. These are things I really think people should do. When I’m with my daughter and we see a beggar on the street, I often tell her, when you’re grown up like Dad, you must give the beggars a little money; don’t just look at them having nothing to eat without doing something, you must help him a little. There are many people who do this kind of thing in China, but they still do not understand universal consciousness (*pubian de yishi*): people are equal; all people are equal; no matter whether you’ve money or not, everyone is equal”.

Chen’s charge is explicitly addressed at the ‘proximity’ law structuring Chinese moral discourse. It is surely significant also that Chen frames his criticism not only in terms of the ‘simple’ proximity law but also in terms of status. It is not just the ‘stranger’ he feels empathy for, but the *beggar*, a person of the ‘lowest’ status imaginable in the contemporary era of capitalism, and a figure that Du Bin also ensured to mention with a similarly sympathetic allusion (above). The contrast of the beggar’s inherent moral worth with that of “the Chairman of the country” is of course a direct dig at the government’s manipulation of ‘proximity altruism’ as a means to sustain economic growth.



Chen's strong emphasis on charity and compassion for the weak speaks to all those who are unable to see beyond their immediate proximity obligations to their family, employer, and (where it suits) country, and so on, towards an independent and political consciousness that begins with the individual (cf. Moral Character). Unlike Du Bin (above), however, Chen has been made to pay a most unfortunate price for his individuality. Like every one of the breadwinners in this group except Bin (above) who were either born into or married into CCP power, Chen's father was an official of some status, a "national, high-level cadre", meaning that Chen had a good start in life (cf. Status). Chen himself trained at a college for government officials prior to joining Anshan's Environmental Protection Department; he has always been well-cultured and has a genuine passion for the environment, so he had every opportunity to succeed in his professional career. But Chen did not join the Party, and neither did his university-educated wife. Not only did this stop Chen progressing, he feels, but (as he says elsewhere) the "philistines" at work have "forced" him into early retirement at the age of fifty:

"I was looked on in a bad light, and they took their revenge on me. I wasn't willing to work in this corrupt institution, because this corruption ran counter to my ideology. When I was working I was extremely unhappy. There were many unfair things, and many unreasonable things. They began to look at me in a bad way, and took their revenge on me".

As a direct result, Chen's material predicament, actually, is no more comfortable than the workers analyzed at the previous chapter, perhaps even less so. Certainly he is worse off than Cui and his wife (above), who were also strapped for cash. Chen lives on a low pension and what his wife earns from her middle school teaching job; their combined income is less than four thousand renmibi, just above the statistical average for an Anshan household (cf. Materialism). Chen's material situation provides an interesting example of what happens when this politically active 'middle class' disposition meets with a tighter set of economic determinants than most of the individuals and households analyzed here enjoy. An education and an intellectualization of individuality is apparently a necessary but not in itself sufficient condition to divorce Chen from the workers' morality. A certain degree of discretionary income, if not other 'objective' factors such as political affiliation, is very necessary too:

“We don’t really consume much. We don’t pursue a luxury life. We pursue a high quality of life, but not that kind of luxury life. By a high quality of life I mean just buying a few things, comparatively safe foods, comparatively safe clothes etc. All the clothes I wear are cotton, just like yours, cotton, without any chemicals; this is advantageous to our health. This is my take on consumption: I don’t pursue luxury, but pursue a kind of safety. We spend most of our money on food, and some high quality health products; not luxury products, but high quality health products, the sort that can be accepted, like Amway. We spend about two-thirds of our money and save about one-third or one-quarter. We really pay attention, extreme attention. The foods are all chosen very attentively. Basically we are extremely attentive to this. But paying attention is no use: in China everything is chaotic; paying attention is no use. In this kind of situation you have to try to find the very safest of foods, the very safest. Take vegetables for example, you’ve got to choose the vegetables in season, and choose some produced not far from here. If you choose one’s from far away, they may have been polluted in transit, it’s only food, this can happen very easily. Even in the foods that are supposed to be safe, it is uncertain what the actual level of pollutants is; there’s no way to examine this. Even the government only very rarely announces the extent of pollutants in food. We ordinary people depend on a kind of awareness, a kind of feeling; but we can’t be absolutely safe; there’s nothing absolutely safe. Green foods: we don’t know whether we can eat them either. I don’t know about the U.K.: one gram of food is ten kuai, so it should be safe”.

Chen’s repetitive stress on “paying attention” is of course a strong inflection of the *mindedness* of the ‘Personality’ construct as well as it is a demonstration of his knowledge. But at this income level, after Chen and his wife have provided for their daughter, and without the spring of youth like the migrant workers who were especially given to this construct, self-cultivation *apart from* knowledge takes the same insecure, protective, defensive and stunted form as it did in the workers’ discourse. Chen is probably aware that he is revealing serious cracks in the wall of the ‘habitus’ he feels is rightly his, and makes such repetition on “paying attention” as over-compensation, as if he really is in control. Hence, although the juxtaposition of health and safety against luxury is still quite different to the workers’ essentially ethical judgements, all Chen can rely on is “a kind of feeling”, an “awareness” that amounts to little more than a glorification of mistrust and scepticism, the most resourceful and practical of logics common to even the most savvy of the socially low. Chen cannot set himself above the discourse as Du Bin does (above). He must ‘lower himself’ to the level of the same tactical disposition honed in swindlers and cheats in order to make do (cf. Authenticity).

## 6. The New Woman

This analysis has concentrated on men because the males in each household have tended to represent as if they have the right to speak on account of their education and professional position, and express a trajectory through the constructs more relevant to this chapter than their wives. By way of emphasizing the argument that China's 'proximity altruism' morality is eclipsed by a crystallization of formal education, constructions of civility, and the control and self-cultivation of the 'Personality' construct, consider now Yuan Liwen, a journalist and managing editor of a magazine, who not only complicates this analysis in terms of gender but also age. At thirty-nine, Yuan did not experience the traumas of the Maoist era first hand, and would have been too young to remember Deng's clampdowns; ten years younger than the next youngest person examined here, she has grown up in an age of reform. But Yuan is nevertheless old enough to remember real poverty, and is thus quite different from 'the youth' of today per se. Yuan takes a strong position in discourse from the very first moment we meet: When introduced, I approach her with "So, you're a journalist then?", to which she replies not: if she was a journalist she would be able to write whatever she likes, as it is, she's "the voice of the government". Her assertion of knowledge and culture emerges very early on in our meetings too. Her university-educated father was a journalist for the CCP, then an editor. Her brother is an internationally-trained scientist. She has hundreds of books around the house: economics, history, classics. When asked what kinds of people she likes, Yuan responds "people with knowledge", to which she adds as if by definition: "people who have pursuits" (*you zhuiqiu*), "people relatively with taste" (*you pinwei*). Noticing Yuan's conflation of knowledge with the cultivation of the 'Personality' construct, I check with her which version of 'pinwei' she means (cf. following chapter, 273). She is adamant that she means an individuating 'horizontal' version, though clearly she values this in a 'vertical' way too. I then follow up with: "And, what pursuit is that exactly?" to which Yuan replies with the individualizing emphasis I expect her to give:

"Everyone's taste is different, everyone's likes are different; I prefer that kind of intelligent woman, with knowledge, the sort of knowledge you get from everything you normally come into contact with; for example, from the influence of some works of literature that you like, from the influence of some works of art that you like, from fashion magazines, from your friends around you, these kinds of formations."

I give Yuan the opportunity to further position herself: “Do works of art have an influence on you?” “Of course they do”, she replies, clutching at the opportunity eagerly: “Of Western painters, Dali, Raphael, Raphael’s ‘Virgin Mary’, I really like it. Raphael’s ‘Virgin Mary’ is my favourite painting”. The competitive difference between merely saying that you like art, on the hand, and the reeling off of the names of particular paintings, one of which is your “favourite”, on the other, is self-explanatory. But Yuan then volunteers that not only does she like paintings but also painting. Her father, apparently, was an excellent ink painter. He painted Chinese-style paintings. She acquired watercolour skills from him at an early age. Yuan also likes music – “classical, I like the quiet” – and reading. Seeing where Yuan’s trajectory through the constructs is going, I am unsurprised at her response as she positions herself in discourse in relation to the question of what kinds of people she considers superior and what kinds of people inferior:

“I think that amongst those around me in my life, amongst those I come into contact with, their public morals (*gonggong daode*), the extent of their standards of public morals is severely lacking (*cha*)... Sometimes it can be those people with a comparatively high material foundation and social status. These should be those who have a comparatively high standard of social public morals. I often regret other individuals’ public morals. Some people, if you look at their success, at their social status, they can be rich, really rich, but in actual fact their level of public morals is not equivalent to the status they possess. In fact, Mike, I think that you coming to Anshan will have encountered many things that you cannot possibly bear. I feel that amongst my whole social circle I am a very self-disciplined person, someone with a comparatively strong ability of self-control, someone with comparatively high moral awareness (*daode yishi*). My public morals are comparatively high. In these respects my awareness and reactions (*fanying*) are comparatively high. I feel that you Mike are really enthusiastically and sincerely trying to understand how Chinese people (*laobaixing*) really live. In fact you can see this even from looking at children, children embody this, like taking the public morals thing we talked about just now. The most basic is that they should cross over the road at the zebra crossing. Sometimes when I’m driving, I’ll be deep in thought, clearly he can see that the traffic lights are red, that’s it’s forbidden to cross, but they will self-assuredly and self-servingly (*pangruowuren*) step straight out, giving not a thought for whether you are in a car or not. And in public places they’ll just chuck rubbish around as they please; as far as they’re concerned this is quite normal. But me, when I go out, I will take a plastic bag and bag up my litter and take it with me.”

It is overwhelmingly clear, here, that Yuan proffers a morality very much informed by civility, and by personal responsibility, quite at odds with China's 'proximity altruism' moral discourse. Essentially she makes a huge investment in the unique value of the individual, also articulating this position against moneyed but uncivil types. Though she does make explicitly *moral* judgements elsewhere, these all have a certain similarly *aesthetic* flavour to them too. I ask her why some people are like this and some like that, to which she replies:

"This is complicated; I think it's related to family upbringing. I think this is really important, because one is the internal self's self-control strength (*ziji neixin de ziwo yueshuli*). Self-control strength: just like I asked you before if you had any religious beliefs, I think that often people with religious beliefs, because every person is a biological organism, they will often have a comprehensive formation and cultivation of this kind of self-control strength. I've always thought about Western people's religious beliefs and Eastern people's beliefs; although there are so many differences in the field and so many differences in matters of culture, but jointly this kind of yearning for religion, respects and reflects the demands of the nature of the human self. People must have this kind of control, it is a spiritual control. I feel that as long as this person or this group actively pursues this kind of control, pressing upwards, and incessantly perfecting the self, then this religion is truly great. I expect you've been to many places in China Mike, you must have seen that Chinese people are really noisy when they eat. I don't know about your community but many residents just chuck rubbish around, chaotically chuck rubbish about, uncivilized behaviours are many, many. A philosopher once said: "material first, spiritual second". Material level; life level: because China is in the process of developing. Because I think Europe must be good, it has an origin of becoming civil than extends back to the middle ages? People's social morality and standards have been formed bit by bit. But China has experienced huge fluctuations, after a period of great social upheaval; many people's moral standards have formed to be nowhere near those of somewhere where they have properly formed. Here, we can only rely on this kind of family control. When you're in China you may often hear the word 'suddenly rich' (*baofahu*). A lot of people drive a Benz or BMW, but they enact many uncivilized behaviors. But they themselves think it's absolutely no problem. You can see this everywhere."

Yuan thus makes all sorts of "spirituality" versus "material" assertions which are strongly integrated by constructions pertinent to self-control and cultivation, the "self-control strength" of the "internal self" as she puts it. The assertion that inferior people can only share her "spiritual" concerns when they have first reached a certain level of material comfort is of course straight out of the State's play-book.

The State's manipulation of this discourse has somewhat successfully blunted 'spiritual' demands for political liberalism, but this belies the fact that the eldest, poorest and most partisan might have been little aware that individual freedom could be a *price-less* notion in any case (cf. Moral Character). But Yuan clearly adapts this discourse to her own purposes here: she is much more concerned to indicate that she *herself* has a monopoly on spirituality, others being almost inconsequential in the final analysis. As such, I test Yuan's boundary management for acquiescence to the 'Moral Character' construct, asking her: "So your "moral level" (*daode shuiping*) is comparatively high?" As expected, Yuan refuses this bait replying: "I'd say I was comparatively self-controlled". Even when she raises the explicitly *moral* subject herself, it is perhaps not so much the 'social referent' of morality that she values as the cultivation of individuality through it:

"I think my family origin is comparatively high, so the upbringing I had from an early age was comparatively good. I'm very grateful to my parents for this. And in addition, I feel that in the process of developing as an intelligent individual, I was someone who made comparatively strict demands of myself. For example, it seems that Western religion also says this: Jesus is watching you, so you can't do anything bad. I feel I am someone who really believes deeply in religion, someone who's always thinking people must do kind things (*duoxing shanshi*). People must have a kind heart facing the world, facing life around them and their friends. This is very important to me. Believing in religion is very important to me: be good to people, and don't do bad things."

Yuan is a divorcee. When we first met I allowed myself to deliberately trip into assuming that she was married, just to see what reaction I got, voicing this assumption in just the way that most Chinese do. Yuan was proud to say that she is a single parent, and is fierce in her independence: "I'm an independent woman; I'm in control". She has a great many books on being a single woman, and being strong and achieving as such. Although Yuan draws lots of moral boundaries regarding her ex-husband, judgements that include his not being "responsible", these judgements are always very explicitly underscored by the judgement that he was not responsible to himself. Over the course of several meetings, whenever this topic comes up, Yuan says that she divorced her ex-husband primarily because he would not cultivate himself: he did not share her ambitions and motivation for self-improvement. He was always loafing about, playing computer games, smoking and drinking, and so on (cf. Personality).

On the occasion I raise the issue of “responsibility” in the abstract to see what she thinks about this, Yuan is adamant: “You must be responsible to yourself, and always develop yourself”. Elsewhere she is explicitly disdainful for the notion of unmitigated self-sacrifice shaping China’s ‘proximity altruism’ too: only by first helping herself can she help anyone else. This same ‘habitus’ is further evinced in her expressed attitude to child-rearing: When I ask her offhandedly if she will send her daughter abroad to study or somewhere in China, her response is structured primarily by constructions of *personal* cultivation:

“This not only depends on my own extreme hard efforts but on the child’s efforts too. I have brought her up well, I expect her to have the same emphasis on effort as me; only then will this be a success. I think that when a person is grown, they must be mature; the experience of success depends primarily on whether she is willing or not, and further whether society is willing to her or not. I think that what’s most important is that she has a career that she really likes and has a complete and normal economic situation. And that she can make a contribution to society”.

It is of course further significant, here, that Yuan says she wants her daughter to have a “career”, rather than to just find “work”, as the workers in the previous chapter replied when asked similar questions. The emphasis on a “complete and normal economic situation” is also of course very different from the materialistic vein structuring many less cultured parents’ ambitions for their children’s’ futures. The “contribution to society” tacked on as an afterthought is perhaps only intended to document the awareness of the importance of the collective referent in this local context. Even though Yuan is very well aware of her moral responsibilities as a mother, that is to say, it is primarily the realization of her *individuality* through those responsibilities that she finds most stimulating:

“The best thing about having a child is that it makes your life complete. First you are your parents’ child. Then you are an independent individual, gradually maturing. Then you birth a new life, and you have a responsibility you cannot overlook; a responsibility that it is really not easy to give up. You must raise the child until grown, infuse them with a good upbringing, knowledge, opinions, make things convenient for them, provide them with a life environment where there is nothing to worry about, an environment to study in. This is a responsibility that as a parent you absolutely cannot shirk, a responsibility that you have to assume.”

Congruent with her emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of discourse, Yuan is in some ways quite materialistic. I first met her at a top-tier gym club to which my wife and I had been offered access for a limited period at the largesse of an interested informant. She drives a Hyundai, the brand-name of which is translated as “modern” (*xiandai*) in China. She has extremely white skin, obviously investing a great deal in skin care. Though she makes judgements of a form intended to show that she has a monopoly on the ability to use material products appropriately, she evidently thinks it is bad taste to be thought of as materialistic, repeatedly making efforts to avoid being documented in these terms:

“I just like what is comfortable and natural. Natural is beautiful, and it feels comfortable. I really don’t like that kind of magnificent stuff, and people who get really painstakingly done up. What do they do themselves up like! I really don’t like doing myself up too much, all done up like some kind of ‘look’. I think that for women dressing themselves up, everyone has their own likes. I like comparatively natural. As long as it suits, and is natural and comfortable, then that’s enough. Many women are done up like a flower (*huazhizhaozhan*), with make-up done really thickly (*nongzhuangyanmo*). You can see through (*kande chulai*) them on the street.”

Yuan asserts a “nature” which would be spoiled by any form of affectation. But we notice that in the last analysis that it is precisely the “thickness” of other people’s make-up that Yuan positions herself against, not the wearing of make-up per se. The “nature” she advocates is therefore not quite as “natural” as it first appears (cf. Authenticity). Though she claims purity for herself, all she can actually refer to is a more acute ability to distinguish between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ applications of make-up (cf. Knowledge and Ability). The appeal to nature thus serves to promote misrecognition of her privileged perspective, since in the cold light of day this is somewhat contrary to the Universalist logic of civility in which she invests so much. I let on that I have been to many homes and know that hers is comparatively good, trying to draw her out on this point. At this Yuan is suddenly more concerned about how her home compares to my in-laws. She has obviously paid a lot of attention to the interior design of her flat, but says not: “it was already like this when I bought the flat”. “I think many things: as long as you’re comfortable that’s ok. Perhaps you haven’t noticed but many things in my flat I have created myself.” Thus, she once again stresses the individual element of creativity and control over the material as such: *form of herself* (cf. 58).



“People should consume according to their requirements. I enjoy buying some luxury products, but I won’t helplessly give rein to inflating this desire, I’m a comparatively rational (*lixing*) consumer; yes, rational, very rational. The things I buy must all have a use (*youyong*). I won’t buy useless things, even if it’s beautiful and good and I really enjoy it. I won’t buy everything just so I can have it, I don’t enjoy consuming like that. My consumption is steady (*tashi*); I have a plan. Every month I have my basic consumption, I save a little, and invest a little. Then, with what’s left over, I buy my daughter some clothes, or some CD’s, go see a film and so on.”

It is of course the explicitly individual control rather than frugality per se that Yuan emphasizes here, a subtle difference from those less blessed with wealth, but a world apart nonetheless (cf. the discussion of Chen Xueyuan – above); she would certainly not want it to be thought of as unable to afford a comfortable lifestyle. Of further significance here, is that Yuan avoids referring to herself with any explicitly vertical metaphors such as ‘high’ or ‘high-taste’, though that is what she of course implies throughout: Though her every assertion of ‘horizontal’ individuality is also always attended by an ‘upper-range’ positioning on a ‘vertical’ axis too (cf. Status, 178), Yuan knows that to assert herself too explicitly in this regard would be distasteful. Her legitimate taste, that is to say, *her individual capacity to judge correctly* rather than an explicitly moralistic measure of her character, is deflected and deferred, accruing in direct proportion to her non-explicit self-depreciation, an artful and illusory device quite ironically the *opposite* of the rather more crude and egotistical boast informing China’s ‘proximity altruism’ climate: she is legitimately tasteful not simply because she says so (indeed she does not), but because everyone *but* her apparently says so. Of final further significance here, is that Yuan evinces absolutely none of the sociable characteristics supposedly ‘innate’ to people of the region: This is of course further congruent with her general distancing from Anshan, since she likes to stress she is from Shanghai even though she left there some twenty-five years ago. Though Yuan gives voluminously of her personal character in social interaction, she once more balances this with a large measure of civility and personal control. She doesn’t play mah-jong, although her mother plays all the time: “It’s unsuitable for me”. In these latter, most *feminine* of respects, Yuan shares much with Zheng (see above), who also has a professional job at an approximate level, but who is somewhat older, born and bred in Anshan, and lacks the strength of independence which is somewhat the condition and point of Yuan’s positioning in discourse.

With Yuan then, the discourse is laid bare in the form of its 'legitimate' instantiation. She takes from the *entire* discourse exactly what she needs to make it her own. And yet, even as she articulates a highly individualized and individualizing discourse, her narratives share a structural homology with many of the other professionals analyzed here. Without any obvious organizing intention, that is to say, and although these professionals assert themselves in very diverse ways, these individuals are shown to assert themselves in ways structurally shared with other individuals of approximate 'objective' positions in society vis-à-vis ways shared by individuals from very different 'objective' positions. But even then, amongst a relatively disparate range of individuals, who unlike the migrants and the workers already analyzed do not readily voice membership of a specific collective, the act of asserting individuality is shown to be structured by systematic recourse to the very same discursive axioms that individuals from very different 'objective' positions in society draw upon, just in very different ways. Thus, where individual agency is most alive, social structure is most immanent; and where social structure is most immanent, individual agency is most alive.

#### **Part 4**

This final part of the dissertation summarizes the findings of the preceding analyses and concludes the research. The chapter is post-faced by an executive summary.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Conclusion**

This research developed a (partial) grammar for interpreting the structuration of individuality in the contemporary People's Republic of China. The research has disaggregated the most elementary structures of individuation in their situational inflections and pursued the further rules and modes structuring their instantiation, effectively proving Post-Structuralism's inspiration to chart a methodological 'third-way' between individual agency and social structure in the assertion of identity. The research began by criticizing logical positivism for systematically denying Chinese individuals' agency, and for precluding the possibility of reconciliation between subjects and objects in consumption. From a critique of the fallacy consisting in conceptualizing identities in terms of division rather than in terms of relations, and of individualities as things-in-themselves rather than as socio-historical processes, the connections between the skeptical and reductionist roots of this approach and the crude Orientalist categories with which Chinese consumers are widely stereotyped were exposed. It was argued that this form of objectivism lent itself particularly well to essentializing China vis-à-vis some equally essentialized notion of the 'West' in a manner that casts Chinese as undifferentiated subjects, further denying them agency. Exposed too were the links between these essentialisms and the scientific-industrial bloc that supports them. It was maintained that positivism was just a self-centered subjectivism when applied to the question of human subjectivities, cannily in league with projects of economic exploitation. It was understood that attempts to measure the differences between the world's cultures were given to essentialism by definition, just as marketers must essentialize those individuals to whom they sell the one and the same product, but it was asked whether a far more nuanced understanding of Chinese individualities could be provided by an enquiry that began with the agency of individuals to manipulate the prior social structures with which they must assert themselves *qua* individuals as its first analytical principle. This analysis would make no assumptions about the essence of 'Chinese culture', but would rather be based strictly on the rigorous analysis of real-life data and the reconstruction of the first discursive principles by which individual agency negotiates its relation to the social world, offering this as a theory of consumption.

Criticism of positivism was extended to literatures where consumption is treated qualitatively, but still always monetarily, and where scholars operate with a watered-down version of social theory in order to suit their isolationist disciplinary ambitions, effectively pandering to the scientific-industrial bloc. Scholars here were seen to borrow from constructionist epistemologies and interpretivist methods of inquiry in order to enliven otherwise intellectually banal research agendas, yet to nevertheless fail to see that consumption everywhere reconciles subject and object, not just in their own marginalized enterprise. In similarly monopolizing fashion, this research agenda was also criticized for its distinctly Occidental perspective, again a function of essentialism and the Western marriage of 'science' with capital, meaning that research on 'developing' or 'newly-industrializing' countries was scarce and/or of dubious quality. Where it was thus found wanting, a measure of reflexivity was afforded here, admiring the key proponents of this agenda for the skill with which they make room for themselves within the limits of a constraining space, exemplary of the immanently practical and improvisational theory of consumption this research sought to proffer. Even so, it was maintained, however, that the *ad hoc* assimilation of concepts from the broader social sciences without properly reckoning with the epistemological quagmire underlying the fusion of commercial accountability with qualitative research had provoked a systematic distortion, where the primary role of individual agency in interpretation was in danger of being subsumed by the objectivist inclinations attending the positivist-inflected territory. Despite making all the appropriate references to developments in epistemology, that is to say, 'qual-light' researchers were alleged to still fundamentally believe that research can be conducted by simply 'following' a method, rather than by adapting researchers' intentions to the demands of negotiating such prescriptive constraints. Critically, it was argued that where would-be social scientists bracket questions about research per se on account of the alleged 'importance' of particular empirical issues, this was entirely insufficient for knowledge production, since research constructs objects of knowledge from the conditions of their possibility, the quality of qualitative research consisting precisely in the constant and ultimately unrewarding struggle to abstract those objects from the practices that generate them; research which fails to embrace this, it was implicit, seldom yields findings more than one or two steps removed from simple empirical fact. Thus, much of the groundwork for the action-theoretic informing this research was already laid down in the negative.

The ironic admiration afforded to the above researchers for their guile and bravura could not be extended to literatures on consumption inspired by the political 'left', though the charge of epistemological arrogance was. The very projects which sought to promote the subjective expression of individual agency in China were seen to be guilty of obscuring agents' differentiated subjectivities beneath the weight of pretension and moralism. Though the in-depth anthropological methods of analysis favored here were acknowledged as immeasurably more insightful than the crude categorizations afforded by positivism, the more-or-less (sub)conscious hypocrisy in claiming to better know what motivated Chinese individuals' practices than Chinese individuals could possibly know themselves was exposed. It was allowed that the academic enterprise was almost by definition disposed to deny the agency of the individuals it objectifies, and that the various ways in which scholars effect this cause were themselves informed by 'internal' disciplinary power systems, but it was argued that extant literatures on China had nevertheless failed to broach an impartial analysis of the structural genesis of individuality as a theory of consumption. Even where researchers had explicitly tried to resolve the stand-off between objective determinism and individual agency in the cultural critique of consumption, they were shown to have only documented particular *cases* of how individual agents struggle to individuate themselves against other agencies, rather than demonstrating how individual agency in contemporary China is *itself* systematically structured. Research from 'civil society', 'individualization', and in 'cultural sociology' were all shown to simply assume that individual agency is itself structured on the basis of relatively recent advances in social theory, but to still in fact operate with a fundamentally 'self' versus 'society' paradigm, the insight that identities cannot be made to fit into nice clean categories known *about*, but not necessarily understood. Indeed, it was seen that nowhere in the sociological or anthropological corpus on China was there a study which had attempted to re-trace the epistemological and analytical rigors that inspired the advent of Post-Structuralism from its predecessor, thus proving the courage of the conviction that individuals were co-constitutive of each other through the interplay of individual agency with social structure as a first methodological principle. Even so, it was seen that these latter literatures were those against which this research might be most usefully situated, not least since the results of this research can be drawn on to further explicate and to some extent even predict the internal dynamics of such studies.

A critical discourse analysis was proposed, inspired by Structuralism, where individuality was conceptualized as less thing-in-itself than as constantly asserted by recourse to systems of signification, and acts of individuation were seen as not only expressions of individual agency, but also as immanent in each other as expressions of discourses of social distinction. Where acts of individuation were seen as always already informed by *ontologically prior* structures legitimating practice, the research sought to demonstrate the interaction of those structures in their articulation, proving how the social and the political are brought into one another. 'Consumption' was chosen as an especially useful metaphor for the agency by which individuals make economies of social and political resources their own, and in doing so make themselves part of those economies. While it was allowed that individuals could act counter to social structure, it was maintained that individuals would be *disposed* to consume social structure in particularly structured ways, thus reproducing structure even as this was internalized. Both autonomous and (co)determining and at the same time, it was seen that if this interrelation could be systematically proved, Chinese consumers could not possibly be anything other than fully agentive individuals, and could not possibly be so radically Other as much of the literature implies. Thus, the research sought to disaggregate this relation into its patterns of modality and practical combination by analyzing data collected through ethnography in Anshan City, Liaoning Province, for the ways in which symbolic boundaries were drawn and managed through judgements of 'taste', 'purity', and 'worthiness' most broadly construed. This discourse was treated as a synchronic system and reduced into eight conceptually-rich categories, each of which was reconstructed in its 'internal' and situationally inflected logics. The interplay of these categories was then juxtaposed across a range of social fields as the 'grammar' structuring the ways in which individuals crystallized these categories in their consumption was drawn out. In each case, consumption was shown to result in diverse but structurally unified outcomes, so that where the first analysis charted the first discursive principles by which individual agency is structured *per se*, the second showed how the structure of society consists in the consumption of discourse. Thus the research proved its core methodological point with a processual analysis which added up to more than the sum of its parts. The practical challenges encountered during this research were iterated at chapter two, the research of course being an example of the agency it sought to deconstruct in its own right.

Chapter three laid down the fundamental *onto-logic* underscoring this project. This analysis was in many ways the most complex in the entire study, since the formal structures of subjectivity were shown to be also the limitations of social discourse, the essential ambitions of identity collapsing into themselves in their actual instantiation. In the first instance, it was demonstrated how individuality was configured by recourse to a series of linguistic metaphors that effectively 'fixed' agency in an ontologically exclusive manner. This assertion was shown to be a function of a prior relation, however, and therefore fundamentally flawed. The examination of further metaphors pertaining to spatial integrity and intentionality further reinforced the observation that essence was an entirely subjective notion, always contaminated by what it wasn't. Individuals were ambiguous by definition, both agents of discourse and subjects of discourse at the same time. Thus, these findings begged to be projected onto a temporal plane, moving from a static to a dynamic relationalism. Here, it was shown how ontological exclusivity was defined by reference to temporal priority, but that whether defined by reference to a past point of 'origin' or by reference to the temporal present, the process of assertion itself took priority over the 'point' in chronology. The temporality of self was thus shown to be a subjective function of the relation between individual agency and prior social structure too. In these ways, this chapter validated the action-theoretic chosen to inform this research and justified the criticism of positivism in its own right. Important sub-arguments were made in this chapter too: The first was that the flexibility of essential concepts was perhaps particularly salient in the contemporary Chinese context; the second was that individuals marginalized by the essentializing judgements of others were especially active in subverting such margins. The two arguments were related of course, having ramifications for Orientalism, as well for as the actual practice of doing this research. At a purely empirical level, arguments were broached here about the discursive reconfiguration of China's institutionalized urban-rural boundary. These cases conflated the various arguments made throughout by showing how individual agents draw on competing constructions of authenticity, simultaneously, in order to subvert prior socially constructed essential categories for different yet converging ends. The 'authentic' was thus shown to be the convergent construction of a multiplicity of agents, existent nowhere other than in the act of its own assertion, a point firmly reinforced in the conclusions where the arguments made throughout were shown to be the conditions of their own possibility!



Chapter four examined the same interrelation between individual agency and prior structure but this time from the perspective of the 'rule', a logic in a sense much simpler since there was from the beginning something to 'hold on to'. In the first instance, knowledge was defined as the internalized product of an economy of power relations: different forms of knowledge were socially valued in different ways, yet each had an institutionalizing function, functioning to exclude and include. The analysis showed how individual agents contest the validity of subject positions by asserting different kinds of knowledge in relation to other kinds of socially valued attributes. In the process of articulating the internal dynamics of China's knowledge economy it was shown how knowledge was a uniquely individualized logic, employed in situational ways that cut across other factors structuring social difference. In this way, the beginnings of the 'grammar' this research would pursue in its latter stages were revealed, consumption of this logic uniting individuals from otherwise very different 'objective' positions in society. From here, it was shown how individual agents not only compete socially by knowing, following and applying social rules, but also by taking prior social rules and making them their own, instantiating new rules within prior ones: a distinctly *practical* ability. Related to the malleability of 'truth' articulated in the previous chapter, this chapter argued that the Chinese might perhaps be especially disposed to creative consumption of the rule, the stark necessity of flexible interpretation salient in direct proportion to the imposition of law and governance by ruling authorities. Indeed, it was shown how the agency to subvert prior rules could actually be indicative of one's legitimate agency through forms of symbolic insubordination, again demonstrating the almost limitless capacity for individuals to reappropriate prior structure to their own ends. Thus, the analysis sustained two apparently contradictory theses: Firstly, that China is a place where rules were iterated by a strictly ruling authority; and secondly, that China is a place where no one rule holds for all situations. The chapter concluded by relating the argument developed throughout to the research problem per se, showing how the fallacy in stereotyping China as either 'unruly' or as a strictly rule-governed society where individuals play very little role in reproducing social order was a function of the linear logic of positivism and its dichotomous essentialisms of China vis-à-vis the West. Ultimately this chapter therefore represented a call for reflexivity in research, and stood further testimony to circularity of the overall argument this research sought to broach.

Chapter five projected the idea of 'rule' onto competing constructions of where the boundary between intimacy and social distance lies. China was argued to occupy the local and intimate end of a situational spectrum ranging from familial relations, through other less intimate relations, to strangers and the official, civic sphere, and ultimately to the cosmopolitan global community. The internal structure of this discourse was explored, revealing a tension between a humoric medicine view where the openness of the body to the social sphere was considered healthy and natural, and a modernity view of the opening of the body in public space which was an extension of urban society's enforcement of hygiene as civility. This *cordon sanitaire* was shown to be weak in China, where non-intimate interruptions into the private or intimate sphere were quite the norm, and the assertion of civil boundaries were actively barred from the intimate sphere. The situational lines of inclusion and exclusion were seen to be complex, however, with behaviours intended to exclude in one context intended to include in others, and those marginalized by civil discourse sometimes hijacking it for their own excluding ends, collapsing and inverting it. In respects of saying 'who' was civil and uncivil, this analysis further developed the 'grammar' of these constructs' consumption begun in the previous chapter. Age, gender, and international experience were all shown to be further structuring factors, as well as proximity to the land. But consumption of this construct was quite clearly divided between those for whom intimacy and privacy were coterminous and those for whom intimacy remained visible and not coterminous with privacy. This was most clearly shown in the analysis of people who 'spoke the language' of civility as a function of their social aspirations but who betrayed an insufficient understanding of its highly individualizing nature. Still other individuals were shown to differently confuse the aesthetic prophylactic with brute materialism and private ownership. These iterations led to an examination of the inculcation of civility in the populous as an exercise of State power, a point at which the analysis was related to academic literatures on discourses of 'civilization' and 'personal quality'. The analysis sought to tread a fine line between the symbolic and the real economy here, arguing that scholars had confused these as a function of a disposition to find the exploitation of individuals by capital everywhere. Ultimately the analysis came down in favor of civil discourse and free-markets since these were discourses that at least aspired to afford individuals universally accessible opportunities to advance themselves, even though this was also to implicitly support the idea of social hierarchy.

Chapter six was about how different personality types are constructed, and how individuals compete through projecting character amenable to social liking. In the first instance, it was argued that the Chinese discourse of 'innate' character was considerably more individualized than its counterpart in the contemporary West, where individual differences are subject to intensely normalizing pressures. It was seen that social interaction in Anshan was structured by a particular emphasis on the expression of 'innate' sociable characteristics and the acceptance of others doing the same. It was then shown how this magnanimity could conflict with other logics structuring practice, thus opening up discussion of the situational interface of this logic and the sense in which social interaction is often structured by the need for formality: formality could be invoked and yet othered at the same time, the balance between form and formlessness being negotiated in accordance with actors' demands for intimacy. Elements of the previous chapter were therefore relevant again, as was the idea of 'rule' too, consumption of 'innately' sociable characteristics somewhat opposed to the logic of competing through either civility or cultural refinement. Indeed, it was argued that people in Anshan use this discourse to articulate a shared identity in relation to people from other parts of China where social interaction takes a more genteel form. Once again, the internal dynamics of this discourse were drawn out, further exposing the grammar of this construct's articulation across dimensions such as gender, age, and so on, even as its form was elucidated. The chapter concluded by relating 'innately' sociable characteristics to other concepts better recognized to structure Chinese social interaction, such as 'face', and 'guanxi': Magnanimity was set against formalized and instrumental processes of generosity and reciprocity to argue that although these were important in China, these were underscored by a prior economy of social exchange that was primarily affective in form, emergent as the result of familiarity and geographical proximity. Thus, the analysis showed that Chinese individuals demand to be treated as having distinctly individual personalities even where ritual methods for cultivating social relations were extremely important too. The analysis then indicated that it was necessary to refer to the following chapter to understand why Chinese people sometimes expect formalized and material tokens of affection from those with whom they are already most intimate, and that it would be necessary to wait until chapter eight for an examination of the logic underscoring the overlap between rational instrumentality and affective action in the China context per se.

Chapter seven laid down a framework for interpreting the social construction of good moral character. It was argued that this discourse was entirely situational and relational in China, determined by a politics which demanded that actions take two major interrelating reference points, both of which meant that moral character was never simply assumed, but always remained still yet to be proved. The first of these demanded that 'good' actions have a highly altruistic social referent, serving as many people as possible, and the self last. The second demanded that 'good' actions first serve those in the actor's immediate in-group, with rapidly decreasing priority given to those further away from the intimate sphere, to strangers last. In respect of articulating how this construction was different to moral discourse in the contemporary West, this analysis sailed very close to the essentialisms this research sought to criticize. It was made clear, however, that the Chinese construction was a factor of a particular agency deliberately set against the 'free' agency supposed to structure Western discourse, and one that intends to deny individuals intrinsic worth. Indeed, not only did this analysis expose the Chinese discourse to be in important ways not what essentialist acolytes had understood it to be at all, it also represented an attack on the notion that the Chinese should be denied the agency to collectively determine their own future, an idea that the irreflexivity of the Western positivist-inflected scientific mindset was implicitly supposed to condone. Importantly, it was shown how the strong altruistic social referent was essentially self-seeking, and how the same proximity referent which binds Chinese individuals so closely together in networks of obligation also binds them so profoundly apart, except when stimulated to unite against foreign powers. From here, the Chinese discourse was seen to take an almost biological or genetic form that preserved purity in a way rather similar to the cordon sanitaire discussed at chapter five. This led to the insight that in a moral climate where there was no firm 'objective' standard for judgement, the fabric of morality was sufficiently flexible to legitimate 'sins' against non-intimate others if that benefitted intimates, and even 'sins' against intimates provided they weren't exposed. Though the analysis effectively showed that the Chinese were complicit in denying themselves the opportunity to enshrine individual agency in politics, the chapter concluded by arguing that Chinese moral discourse was changing rapidly, and that increasing numbers of individuals were willing to express the yearning for a more universalized moral discourse which would allow individuals to be individuals without the need to feel guilty and suffer social sanction.

Chapter eight examined a logic very close to individual agency's expression per se, a logic less a formal structure of practice than that which is immanent in the making coherent sense of the actual practice of those structures. This logic was identified in the Chinese semantic field, a process which revealed a complex causal tension where various modalities of being acted upon were seen as equally valid as those modalities of acting upon. This finding pointed towards the essentially dual nature of practice, and led to the further insight that even the most existential projects of personality were always informed by the social world. Thus the analysis pointed to what was intersubjectively-shared about self-cultivation, and drew out the internal dynamics of this across a wide range of technologies of control. In this way, a logic which at first seemed distinctly opposed to the requirement for self-sacrifice in the previous chapter was demonstrated to be informed by the same fundamentally *transacting* discourse by which moral character in the Chinese context consists only in explicit reciprocation; this analysis was less 'social' in its internal form than phenomenological, however, iterating this interrelation in a much more fundamental way. Importantly, technologies of self-cultivation which seemed quite distinct from each other were all shown to be expressions of the *same* existential agency, indeed all equally modes of *making sense* of this agency; to this extent, this analysis was about the 'Self' which consumes *itself* in its practical assertion, no matter whether that assertion was articulated through qualitatively 'pure' expressions of agency or through more disciplined, systematic expressions of that same agency. At this point, then, the analysis opened up onto all manner of further oppositions, showing how distinctions between the deliberative and the impulsive, the rational and the emotive, the conscious and unconscious, the fated and free, and so on, were all expressions of the *same* circular logic structuring individual agency's projection against the world. Control was ultimately shown to be a function of objectifying the limitations of this logic in the moment: though a perspective on oneself was only possible from within oneself, it was shown how embracing this impossibility, and the fact that discourse could be stretched to anywhere *but* this possibility, could be radically empowering; indeed, it was even shown how social control could be affected by controlled bursts of being 'out-of-control'. Thus, by the end of this chapter, the analysis of structure had almost completely collapsed into *narrativity*, the operations by which individual agency draws together a sense of identity from the chaos of possibility taking the form of whatever structure was needed in order to get by!

Chapter nine was prefixed by an identification of the final two constructs abstracted from the language of social distinction, and an explanation that these would not be elaborated in the same way as the previous six, since both were less irreducible categories of judgement with a either/or internal structure than that *in which* all the other categories were crystallized. The first of these, 'Materialism', concerned the self that projected itself onto material objects as consumption; the second, 'Status', concerned the judgement of individuals as a socialized category, so was a synonym for 'distinction' per se. 'Materialism' was seen as a prior condition of all the preceding constructs, an actual physical *place* where individual agency was realized as embodied, in a sense still more existential than the reflexive agency developed at chapter eight; 'Status' was seen to be that final structural principle of the analysis where every boundary judgement necessarily had to be seen in terms of its duality: that is, in terms of the judgement 'in-itself' (as part of a continuum of judgements), and in terms of the 'status' of the speaker. Both of these constructs were therefore important turning points in the analysis, in different ways *completing* the interrelation between individual agency and social structure: 'Materialism' was where the agency recognized to contribute to discourse by means of classificatory judgements at chapter three by its Other was now able to *re-cognize itself* in discourse; 'Status' was where that same individual agency was 'consumed' by the categories of social structure even as it consumed these in judgement, in this sense quite the *opposite* of the agency that had first been granted the autonomy to make classificatory judgements! The actual form of these constructs' iteration here stood testimony to the content of this latter point: It was recognized that the capacity to impose only so much structure on a discourse before that structuration collapsed into the instantiation of the discourse itself was a function of a materially embodied and therefore materially limited mind. In any case, the research saw that since both these constructs came so close to the actual *practice* of structure the analysis would be best served by now pursuing the 'grammar' of how these constructs were consumed differently in their actual instantiation. Before the analysis proceeded to explore how social categories were configured by judgement, however, the analysis identified the point at which 'Materialism' and 'Status' were conflated in consumption; that is to say, that point in discourse where judgements of individual difference are colonized by references to forms of subjectivity that can only be paid for with *money*, which is of course a function of consumerism.

Chapter nine then broached an analysis of the rural-urban migrant workers from an inner-city restaurant, which allowed the previous eight constructs to be crystallized in their consumption. Most of the data came from young men, making the analysis distinct from analyses of female migrant workers. These men of course all consumed the constructs in different ways, but their narratives were highly unified even though this structuring was also in another sense highly individualized. The urban-rural status categorization was a major factor here. But although these migrants saw their countryside origins as sources of purity the city was devoid of or denied them, their identities were characterized by marked ambiguities attending increasing integration into the urban sphere. Though the lack of formal knowledge was a major structuring factor, the 'inauthentic' tactics for social competition these migrants were shown to employ in order to survive, and their resourcefulness in subverting prior prohibitive rules, were functions of a highly *innovative* discursive competency. This was most explicit in constructions which combined practical ability with a distinctly *entrepreneurial* grain of striving, the experience of travelling to work and these migrants' earnestness levered in ways which demonstrated a remarkable capacity to *improvise upon the necessary*, broadly shared at a structural level with entrepreneurs examined elsewhere in the research. A further way in which this competitive configuration was emphasized was the way in which having little choice but to compete in these ways bound these migrants together in *solidarity*: some of the strongest instantiations of competing as a function of sociable character in the research were found amongst these young men, their youthful exuberance and the strength drawn from each other to some large extent fuelling their trajectory through the other constructs. Bonds of intimacy more traditionally associated with the China's proximity altruism moral discourse—family, nation, role, and so on—were moreover shown to be weak in direct proportion to the extent to which the will to self-cultivate was strong across these individuals. This, and the balance between investing in personal cultivation and competing through sociable solidarity bonds was shown to be resolved in favour of the former, a much more *individualized* inflection, in those migrants who had been in the city longer. Promotion at work and increased income were also shown to be factors tilting the entire configuration of the discourse towards a more *urbanized* inflection where civility and aesthetics emerged as structuring principles, and future prospects were undergirded by a retrospective narrative of having already achieved.

Chapter ten examined a range of urban workers, complicating the analyses broached so far in terms of age and gender. Like the migrants, these workers also consumed discourse in ways that were remarkably structurally shared between them, but with much less of an overall individualizing emphasis. Whereas the migrants were striving individuals in a fluid community of such striving individuals, these workers had a strong consciousness of being members of a social category or class defined by an earlier era. The most striking factor structuring their consumption was that lethargy and cynicism were present in direct contradistinction to the dynamism and positivism of the migrants. For every aspirational expression articulated in the previous chapter, these workers articulated expressions about being 'left-behind' in China's development or 'held-back' by the institutional baggage they inherited from the Maoist era. Primary amongst these was the lack of knowledge and skills these workers felt the Cultural Revolution era had loaded them with. In another sense, however, the 'sent-down' experience was drawn on to bolster claims to moral purity and a 'bitterness-eating' work-ethic that these workers asserted in opposition to their perceived lack. Claims to moral purity, however, were shown to be manifest mainly in harsh and insidious judgements of others, the overall tone of judgement leaning distinctly towards the *ethical*, and work-ethic was shown to be only distributed in direct proportion to the amount of work actually done. *Gender* was a major factor structuring here, with the women analyzed being much more given to morally-inflected judgements of others as a function of their social aspirations. Males, who were the primary breadwinners, made much less invidious judgements, and in some cases had a much more competitive inflection of discourse than the laid-off, recently retired, and informally-employed women analyzed here, who were not at all given to practices of self-cultivation. Some of these more competitive men were shown to practice the same highly resourceful self-cultivating logic manifest in the migrants' discourse, though this was not the norm for the group. Gender was also shown to be an important factor structuring consumption of the civil behaviour and sociability constructs too, these logics almost diametrically opposed in their distribution, with men investing heavily in competing through 'innately' sociable characteristics and women doing this far less in favour of somewhat ill-understood civil aspirations. Women here were also shown to have material and aesthetic ambitions quite foreign to most of the men here, whose down-to-earth projection of character was presented as somewhat antithetical to these.



Chapter eleven examined how the discourse was consumed across a range of individuals in professional occupations and their family members. These individuals were characterized firstly by a marked *diversity* of individuality, rather than by the consciousness of belonging to a group or class. The analysis was structured to reflect how social difference emerges in discourse by first examining individuals who shared a closer structural proximity to the workers in the previous chapter before moving towards individuals whose consumption took an almost tautological iteration of the discourse in its 'legitimate' form. Most importantly, objective differences between these individuals were shown to broadly approximate to structural differences in their consumption of the discourse's core axioms. Perhaps the most striking finding was that with individuals who were on the whole younger, better educated, more competitive at work, and had higher incomes, consumption of the discourse became altogether more *individualized* and *aesthetic* in ways which eclipsed ethical constructions of China's proximity altruism moral discourse. This was a matter of realizing individuality within and in relation to shifting discursive parameters in a way that testified to the political agency of the emergent 'middle class'. Males were of course still very different from females in many respects, with breadwinners asserting higher knowledge and more advanced political views, and women still placing much more emphasis on aesthetics than men; but if anything this chapter showed how the highly gendered consumption of discourse exposed in the previous chapter collapsed in proportion to the distance the analysis took from the workers. By the end of the analysis male dominance was quite inverted by younger professional women, who crystallized knowledge, civility, and a direct conflation of moral character with self-cultivation, to yield a distinctly *reflexive*, aspirationally *self-determining* subject, to all intentions and purposes (post)modern. Perhaps the only significant dimension of gender difference left at the end was sociability, which is only to speak of the character of gender in the Anshan context. In a final note to social reproduction, it was striking that the discursive competency these individuals had more or less achieved was articulated on the back of status in the family background and a social position fundamentally allied to the State. Indeed, in cases where these and a modicum of wealth were lacking but everything else was the same, individuals were shown to be much less competitive, critical politics reduced to the level if not of the workers' bitter ethics then certainly of the migrants' tactical takes on the necessary.

In these ways, therefore, this second stage of analysis showed not only how the instantiation of individuality was informed by the *particular* ontologically prior structures this research had already abstracted, but also how the grammar of those structures' consumption had a structuring effect on society: A range of objectively different individuals were shown to draw upon exactly the same discursive axioms in order to assert themselves as such, just in different ways, and those ways were themselves shown to be functions of structured dispositions to consume discourse in those particular ways. Specifically, it was shown how discourse can be consumed in ways which make its core axioms result in a highly individualized crystallization, where the emphasis was firmly on making one's own way through life, resourceful striving, independence of achievement, and so on, but ways which were nevertheless structurally shared across a fluid community of individuals and openly articulated as such in ways that bring such individuals together (cf. chapter nine). Further, it was shown how discourse can be consumed in ways that though unique to the individual by definition were strongly characterized by an emphasis on collectivized themes, the belonging to a particular social category or situational group, traditional points of moral reference, and the having of one's way through life determined by others, and so on, themes which were reiterated with remarkable homogeneity at the structural level across a range of objectively similar individuals (cf. chapter ten). And finally, it was shown how discourse can be consumed in highly differentiated ways which nevertheless unite individuals at a structural level, but where those individuals were otherwise disparate, do not know each other, and share very little consciousness of belonging to a group of individuals or social category, the sense of structural unity articulated primarily by reference to those other individuals and types of individuals which those individuals equally were not (cf. chapter eleven). Thus, the dichotomous binaries that positivism generates were shown to be obsolete: 'Individualism' versus 'collectivism' just doesn't cut it. For where the capacity of individual agency to consume social structure was made the paramount discursive principle, but instances of individuation were clearly informed not only by particular prior discursive structures but also by socially conditioned ways of consuming those structures too, not only was it shown that Chinese individuals cannot possibly be as over-determined by the cultural collective as Orientalists imagine, but also that Chinese individuals cannot be as self-determining as the positivists' rational-actor theoretic would suggest either.

It may seem tautological that the analysis finds that individuals consume the structures that the analysis had already abstracted to assert their selves. But it was of course made clear in chapter one that because identity is the consumed product of the interrelation between structure and individual agency, only tautologies are truly true, the dynamics of this interrelation otherwise impossible to capture in language. So, if the thesis takes a circular form of argument, this is to be expected. Indeed, that tautology—that identity is produced in the interrelation of structure and agency—runs all the way through the entire thesis: that *is* the thesis. What this research has done is to go beyond the Western roots of this thesis, and apply it to contemporary China, disaggregating this thesis in its patterns of manifestation, and reconstructing its paradigms to create new knowledge about the way individuality is asserted in the world. There may of course be other paradigms which this research has neglected to abstract, but enough has been done to show that those it has abstracted are extremely important structural features of the instantiation of individuality in the local context they were distilled from. Yet the thesis is ultimately that individuals cannot be made to fit into these categories—that they can't be classified, atomized, and so on, since they are themselves the agents by which these categorizations are produced. The constructs, indeed, are not perfect in their separation—there is conceptual overlap between them, a fact which itself stands testimony to this thesis. But the process of abstracting them is a highly useful way of interrogating discourse, and for further examining how their consumption functions to structure society. Of course, from a positivist perspective, it may seem as if the entire exercise is pointless, for in the end all that is left is the instantiation; but as made clear in the conclusion to chapter three, this is exactly where we should hope to be: *langue* crystallizing into *parole*. Though the 'result' enables us to see what is there, what we would expect to find, nothing especially out of the ordinary even, it is precisely by doing this that we can show that there *is* a structural determinism that motivates the instantiation of individuality above and beyond the autonomy of individual agency, an ordered and ordering force which orders society and self as epiphenomenon of each other. Indeed, the very fact that we are able to see the links between these structures and their practice, that we are able to follow the permutations of these constructs as they inflect and evolve into each other, and yet it is the same logic that is consumed, is evidence of the *existence* of these structures, not as things-in-themselves (!), but as nevertheless *ontologically necessary* features of negotiating social interaction.

And yet, though circular in this sense, the research is of course not in another, because it proves its methodological point with an analysis which adds up to much more than the sum of its constitutive parts. The research of course always demanded that readers expect its form to be open-ended, for it was made clear at chapter one that research which offers a 'final signified' can only be banal; indeed the analysis at chapter three which showed the self-referential ambitions of truth and identity to be unsustainable demanded that readers expect its ultimate meaning to derive not from its 'conclusion' as such but from their 'original' consumption of the entire thing. Those positivists who believe research should have a conclusion which somehow says everything the study has had to say again, so that readers in fact need only read the conclusion to appreciate everything that the research had to say, will therefore be thoroughly disappointed here. This is a very good sign, for where research does not have such a single, linear conclusion it means that there is the very likely possibility that something genuinely interesting has been said about the world in the process. But we can nevertheless of course relate the 'findings' to the thesis *per se*, as we are doing here: The analysis has shown that where social structure is most immanent, individual agency is most alive; and where individual agency is most alive, social structure is most immanent: there is, in the end, only these two principles. But the research of course has value beyond this meta-level conclusion—that which has been explicated in the process of iterating the preceding chapters. That is to say, that by demonstrating the almost limitless capacity of individual agents to take prior discourses and bend them to suit their projects of individuality, not only does this research broach an entirely new way of thinking about the structuration of Chinese society, but it also represents an especially useful 'launch-pad' for engaging Chinese individuals in their consumption. The research furnishes its consumers with a set of discursive axioms and rules, not a finite list of prescriptions but an *active grammar*, which taken together can be used to predict individuals' consumption from a range of objective factors (such as age, gender, education, and so on), and to predict from individuals' consumption a range of correspondingly likely objective factors. The individual *per se* of course remains almost impossible to predict by definition, but where we have not only the *langue* but also its "transformative grammar" (cf. chapter one), we have the tools to make insightful predictions into the way that individuality is asserted within social 'fields' or situations of practice beyond those examined here (see below).

Circular and non-circular at the same time, like all truly *political* acts, this research has consistently tried to have everything both ways. Like all truly political acts, moreover, the research doesn't stand for anything, except against other things. Where it has appeared to stand for something, it has only really stood for that one thing which simply *has* to be: the instantiation of individual agency. For once one has grasped the fact that an individuals' standing depends on what that individual is standing upon, there is nowhere solid left to stand, except to stand, and stand again, and keep moving. Thus, the research has never seen itself primarily as taking up an easily identifiable position anymore than it has seen itself as accumulating towards some singular grand conclusion. Rather, it has seen itself primarily as parsing down, splitting, interrogating that which is obviously variant for its invariant element, and then of that invariant element for that which is much less obviously variant about it! It has pulled apart things that might be best left together, and pulled together things that perhaps make most sense apart. It has spliced discursive logics meticulously, first apart, then together, looking for their internal difference, their points of overlap, reconstructing the internal operations of discourse, never taking anything for granted except the fact that the grounds for the ontology of individuality it sought would be *there* to be seen. Recognizing that the operations it sought to elicit would stand in direct relation to the operations necessary to elicit them, the research stood on what was seen and heard in the field, rather than on what had already been said. In the process, it has boldly tread across much hallowed academic ground, either implicitly or implicitly, refusing at every turn to light where other more plodding literatures have lingered, settling anywhere only long enough to allow that position to be itself undermined by the individual agents who informed its enquiry. Thus, though it has at times seemed to lean towards the Right with its emphasis on individual agency, enough should have been done to show that agency is itself determined by particular discursive determinants to satisfy the Left that the research does not harbour a rational actor theorist beneath its interpretivist garb. Indeed, it is only the sway of capitalism on science and the autocratic Chinese State that the research has come down hard on, both for denying individual agency, and rationality has been subject to a significant deconstruction in itself (cf. chapter eight). Certainly the research has pushed its analyses towards the edge of meaningfulness in the course of articulating this 'third-way' between revolution and evolution. But that's where research is most interesting, the clarity immanent in the chaos.

Overall, then, by looking at the field, and the data collected from it, and by objectifying not only its object but also the relation between itself and that object, the research has found that the grounds for an ontology of individuality in China are simply *different inflections* of the *same* discursive apparatus that structures the mind of its analyst. That is to say, that the research has found in the mind of its analyst and his capacity to explore language, and therefore thought, the very *same* structures that Chinese consumers use to assert themselves as individuals, thus proving beyond all doubt that Chinese individuals are as agentive, and as *individually* agentive, as individual agents everywhere. In all sorts of ways, the research has shown that Chinese individuals cannot possibly be the passive morons that their objectification by Western commentators would take them for: neither the self-less automatons that capital-inflected literatures stereotype them as, nor the helpless prisoners of more powerful people's projects that the social science Left would have us feel sorry for. Chinese individuals have been shown to be particularly eager to be individuals, to assert themselves as such, to determine their own lives, adept at drawing boundaries, and so on, even when doing so might also be understood as articulating assimilation or 'collectivism'. Indeed, Chinese individuals have been comprehensively shown to demand to be treated as having distinct personalities even as they seek intimacy and belonging with their fellows, and even as they conform to the socially constructed 'rules' of social interaction. Though they might in many ways be said to be rather 'traditional', they are not bound by tradition; unequivocally, they have been shown to have the agency to take all such prior rules and turn them to their own purposes, even where those rules intend to rule this out. Indeed, just like the agency of the analysis, Chinese individuals have been shown to have the agency to *be* two things at once: as disposed to take what they need to assert themselves *as* individuals from other individuals around them as are agents everywhere. Both underdetermined and overdetermined at once, therefore, by making their agency to hold this tension in the balance while they work out social practice, this research has shown how Chinese individuals are human: just like 'us' but with locally generated cultural differences. These differences have been shown to be profound at times, but ultimately it is the *familiarity* the research finds with Chinese individuals which is the most striking, a finding which of course points to that which is *prior* to social construction: that biological and evolutionary capacity to *be* structured by discourse which unites individuals everywhere regardless of culture.

At a more straightforwardly sociological, or shall we say political, level, the overall analysis also draws out the ways in which Chinese society is structured in terms of 'objective' factors such as age and gender. There is also of course a very clear 'hierarchical' or at least 'vertical' structuration in what might be understood as 'class' terms, which may be related to the sociological studies reviewed in chapter one. Yet this research has somewhat taken this for granted from the start, since where every instantiation of individuality is held to signify in both a 'vertical' and a 'horizontal' dimension, it is only to be expected that society will take a form marked by degrees of 'legitimacy'. But what is perhaps most interesting about the results is the way that this 'vertical' structuring conforms to the extent to which individuals are 'individualized' as per the processes of 'individualization' described by those literatures of that name discussed at chapter one: i.e. less a structure based on 'class' than a structure determined by individuals' capacity to effect themselves in response to shifting discursive and institutional frameworks for processing *responsibility* and *risk* (where the two are understood as related) that *demand* that they be individuals. The analyses of entrepreneurs, the youthful rural migrants, and the more progressive elements of the what we might call the 'professional class' show that discursive competency in the contemporary era emerges as a highly *individualized* conflation of "knowledge" (education), "civility", and the narrative logic of "personality" (self-cultivation), the consumption of which was shown to be distinctly opposed to those more explicitly inclusive logics of "moral character" (family, proximity etc), and "innately" sociable characteristics, both of which were defined by reference to the Socialist past and the collectivized/agricultural economy. Therefore, discursive axioms such as formal education, age/generation, proximity to the SOE structure, and proximity to the land (or rather the *non*-proximity of these), crystallize to produce a more individualized, reflexive, and existential subject, most immanent in those sectors of society most adapting to the demands of state-market transition and the responsibilities this brings. This is perhaps somewhat obvious given the meta-narrative of market reform, but it is all the more significant that this research finds this *diachronic* emphasis from a synchronic study which in no way assumed this at the outset. These findings also suggest that when Chinese individuals transcend the current fascination with urbanization and modernity they will increasingly demand equal stakes in democratic political reform: where the risks and responsibilities of an individualized society are matched in equal measure.

Space permitting, the research could of course have allowed its core axiomatic constructs to be crystallized across a whole range of other fields, further drawing out the grammar of the instantiation. A promising avenue for further research would be to examine a range of young urban adults, including the offspring of those mature adults examined in chapters ten and eleven, to see how these synchronic structures map out onto diachronic processes of social reproduction. That is, to ask how far young people *inherit* dispositions to consume social structure in particular ways and how far they make these their own. This analysis would draw out the diachronic dimension alluded to above. Another would be to examine how these discursive axioms are inflected in their consumption by individuals of a wealthier and more powerful persuasion than those examined in chapter twelve, a project which could be broached in tandem with a fuller exposition of the 'Materialism' and 'Status' constructs in which the others are realized. Indeed, once those constructs are more fully expounded there would be increased scope for analysing how the grammar thus far articulated crystallizes in material consumption alone. But this would be increasingly only to *show*, the analysis becoming almost repetitive simply in order to make its point, the conceptual roots of the findings already sufficiently laid out here. Here, however, there would be further scope for examining how the judgement of the individual as such and the judgement of the social classification of the individual are arrived at each by reference to each other (cf. 178: by examining the relationship between the two words for 'taste' both of which are pronounced 'pinwei' (cf. chapter two, 39), the first of which seems to perfectly correspond to the 'horizontal' dimension of individual 'taste', the second to that 'taste' defined by particular reference to forms of material consumption coded for status that can only be paid for with money, a particular 'vertical' dimension. Beyond this, the findings may be usefully applied to extant surveys of consumption in China, leveraging the analytical power developed here to examine why researchers have reached particular conclusions, or have neglected to do so, to explain statistical anomalies, and other irregularities in the data, and so on. Indeed, in this latter respect, the research should fuel all manner of further enquiries, relating its active grammar to social science research on contemporary China most broadly, and stimulating further such studies in its own right. Once further drawn out, the grammar might even be statistically tested, though it is perhaps doubtful if an appropriately 'objective' method could be found to operate this undertaking for reasons given throughout.



### **Executive Summary**

- This research broaches an innovative way of examining social interaction by treating 'consumption' as a metaphor for the dynamics of the formation, development, maintenance and transformation of individual identity.
- The research fulfils the postmodern challenge to prove that individuality is emergent from social interaction and from the judgements and positioning statements people draw, in the contemporary Chinese context.
- The research takes an in-depth ethnographic look at the social practices of Chinese consumers from a wide-range of social contexts and backgrounds in a typical 'third-tier' city in China's North East.
- The research defies the myth of the collectivism or non-individuality of the Chinese by showing that Chinese individuals are themselves the agents by which the culture they consume is generated.
- The research refutes positivist notions of individual agents as 'free, rational actors' by showing how acts of individuation are subject to determination by particular prior discursive structures.
- The research interrogates the 'internal' and situationally-inflected structure of a range of discursive themes, including authenticity, knowledge, civility, sociability, morality and self-control.
- The research shows how Chinese society is structured in terms of a range of objective variables including age, gender, occupation, income, formal education, political persuasion etc.
- The research shows how the 'vertical' structure of contemporary society conforms to the extent to which individuals are able to deal with changing institutional frameworks which demand that they be individuals.
- The research develops a set of interpretive tools which can be applied in Chinese contexts beyond those examined here and should therefore be of use to non-social science practitioners also.
- Ultimately, the research leads its readers through the discursive operations by which individual agents everywhere uniquely appropriate and reconcile themselves to the social world.

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