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Tragic Stability and Elusive Selfhood: On the Drive for Self-Development in Contemporary China

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Abstract

The requirement for "self-development" through the ceaseless acquisition of skills and credentials has long been central for young adults in China. However, due to the multiple and unpredictable demands of social institutions, many social actors also prime the cultivation of a self that does not succumb to immediate occupational and material impositions. In this article, I describe how young adults in a second-tier city pursue a model of personhood that brings together socio-economic competence and singular individuality. These individuals aspire to expand their range of experiences and their spatial mobility, thereby reifying an image of a self that transcends narrow social roles and networks. Drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre's dualistic philosophy, I analyse young adults' attempts to realise individualised selves by destabilising their ontological ground. I argue that this phenomenon is magnified in China through widespread notions of a "moral crisis" and its supposable suppression of social actors' agency.

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Introduction

Young adults who pursue self-development in urban China do not like to conceive of themselves as "flexible" and "adaptable" subjects, malleably adjusting to changing conditions produced by the political economy. They prefer to envision an unyielding "self" that can resourcefully respond to different social contexts while sustaining an inner core. Although contemporary expertise in self-cultivation in China is often oriented towards proactive engagement with a market-driven society, whether it focuses explicitly on employability (Yan, 2008), therapeutic personal growth (Zhang, 2014), or even on renewed application of ancient philosophies (Yang, 2017), practices of self-making also seek to foster *personalities* that are irreducible to individuals' immediate relationships and career paths. When expanding their pedagogical gaze towards their personal qualities, young adults wish to foster capacities for diverse usage, while also perceiving themselves as more resilient in the face of potential contingencies. Ultimately, self-development is not treated as a mere means for identifiable goals but takes shape as an ongoing puzzle where what is at stake is as much the perception and reification of a model of personhood as it is about palpable rewards.

This article is based on a study of young adults who pursue self-development in the city of Jinan in northeast China. My interlocutors are participants in privately run workshops for emotional and interpersonal skills that draw on globalised expertise in public speaking, positive psychology, and management theories. Participants in these workshops, who are mostly in their twenties, aim to foster skills for diverse usage while also enjoying enacting themselves in new ways through workshop exercises in correspondence to images of market-driven morality. Elsewhere, I have elaborated on the image of the ideal person heralded in these workshops, who displays imagined virtues of individual autonomy, emotionality, and sincerity (Hizi, 2021a, 2021b). I have demonstrated how instructors and participants index these qualities in workshops as socially advanced virtues, antagonistic to widespread norms that involve rigid hierarchies, saving face, interdependence, and social connections. In the current paper, I shift my focus from the dynamics and affordances of these pedagogic spaces to the notion of selfhood that practitioners try to cultivate as they configure this ideal more closely with the ethical challenges of their social worlds.

I use "resilience" in this article to describe a pivotal agenda of self-development. A near-synonym of "flexibility," "resilience" also signifies, according to the Oxford Dictionary (2019), a "capacity to recover" and "maintain shape," which is crucial for individuals who wish to experience a sense of autonomy in an unpredictable socio-economic environment. I identify this objective of resilience in Chinese individuals' pursuit of a singular self that does not alter across social engagements or materialistic incentives. Yet, because this selfhood is experientially intangible in most everyday practices, my interlocutors, in addition to attending designated workshops, try to reify this selfhood through enhancing their range of experiences and mobilities. Many of them advocate travelling to unfamiliar locations, stepping outside social "comfort zones," and, more broadly, pursuing a life trajectory that does not succumb to an imperative for "stability" (穩定, *wending*). Thus, self-development, while aimed at career achievements, also involves

for my interlocutors acts that destabilise their ontological ground with the aim to counteract these perceived norms. I draw on Sartre's (1966 [1943]) dualisms of *existence–essence* and *being–nothingness* to depict this pursuit of substantial selfhood (or, in Sartre's terminology, they are in the modality of the "for-it-self," which strives to achieve a consciousness of "in-it-self"), in an attempt to transcend the contingencies of lived realities. The perception of selfhood as a real entity allows individuals, as Jackson's (1998: 8, 15, 23, 27) ethnographic application of Sartre indicates, to make sense of and experience greater mastery over their social worlds. Yet the constant pursuit of this elusive entity, and moreover through mobility, makes this quest laden with a feeling of groundlessness, or "nothingness," ultimately reproducing individuals' anxieties about lacking such selfhood.

This Sartrean dualism is not a universal ontology. The fact that Sartre reifies a dichotomy between the *lived* and *perceived* world may indicate a limited outlook on human phenomenology (Barret, 1958: 260; Zahavi, 2001: 162). However, his analysis nonetheless corresponds to an existential drive that is informed by individual-centred worldviews. Thus, I do not treat this Sartrean viewpoint as the predominant perspective in China, but rather as one that comes alive through the interaction of self-development with person-centred discourses. Outside activities associated with self-development, individuals are preoccupied with, and often ascribe virtue to familial obligations and social networks, while in workshops they tend to identify the seemingly self-inhibiting aspects of these responsibilities (see more in Hizi, 2021a). The Sartrean dualism, which I apply as an etic interpretation of my interlocutors' concerns, captures a mindset that treats the present–local sociocultural influences as morally insufficient that seeks to reify the "self" as an entity that can determine its way of living, and that must remain resilient in the face of future contingencies.

Seeking a Unified Self

The post-1978 epoch of economic reforms in China has led to new forms of citizenship and social relations, thoroughly informing the meanings of personhood. As individuals enjoy less welfare protection, they face new challenges of adapting to new social settings (e.g. Ling, 2015; Zhang, 2001), job allocation (Bai, 2006; Hoffman, 2010; Woronov, 2015), and realizing familial responsibilities (Fong, 2006; Zavoretti, 2014). Global capitalism has also prompted the circulation of new objects of desire and values, which led scholars to identify the rise of the "individualised" person (Yan, 2010), or the "self-governing" actor (Anagnost, 2004; Ong and Zhang, 2008), embodied through person-centred expertise, figures associated with Western "modernity" and the ascending prestige of entrepreneurship. Individuals who are socialised in this context, in one way or another, become more apt to a dynamic and fitful trajectory of skills and employment. When couched as an ethos, they often construe this path as "self-development" (自我發展, *ziwo fazhan*) (Hsu, 2005).

The emergence of new dominant subject positions in contemporary China, notwithstanding, has been accompanied by contradictions, insofar as this individualisation of

social life must be negotiated with the command of state institutions (e.g. Hansen, 2015; Kleinman et al., 2011), familial institutions, or more longstanding cosmologies (Ma, 2012). These tensions have been central to common perceptions of a "moral crisis" throughout the period of economic reforms. Yan (2021) overviews public debates on this matter, identifying how the notion of "crisis" has been fundamentally tied to conditions of rapid change and moral pluralism. He pinpoints the incommensurability of communal and individualised priorities, whereby individuals identify the latter with egotism and self-interest without offering a socially cohesive "moral framework" (Yan, 2021: 109). This, according to Yan, has led to various corruptive social phenomena, as well as to widespread critique on the morally "shapeless" and "hedonistic" Chinese person (e.g. Wang, 2002). In response to this seeming alarm, many Chinese individuals today seek to engage with the market economy while sustaining a sense of consistent moral selfhood, as well as preserving a more community-oriented perspective on social development. For example, volunteerism has become a site where many young adults try to bridge between priorities of self-improvement and social contribution (Fleischer, 2011; Ning and Palmer, 2020; Sum, 2017). In my research, I similarly came across individuals' reckoning and puzzlement about how to fulfil multiple ethical priorities. At the same time, I also encountered multiple discourses about the so-called contradictions and moral crises in contemporary China, which emerge at different moments and social interactions. The tension between the more individualised and more communal or nation-oriented subject positions, weighty as it may be, is hence not solely the *root* of moral problems, but also a perception that is constantly reified through Chinese citizens' and observers' preconceptions about the distinct cultural and political predicaments in China (often combined with positivist views on the emancipating and moral potential of market-driven and liberal values). In other words, in addition to the moral frictions evident in China, it is important to recognise how and when ideas about moral decay emerge and are uttered in social life (a point also emphasised by Yan, 2021: 99). Elsewhere, I described how extracurricular pedagogical techniques ritualistically and momentarily activate participants' perception of their self-transformation (Hizi, 2021b). This article focuses on how widespread ideas about individual and social morality in China prescribe and define the priority of self-development.

A more general framework for the contemporary crisis of morality in China today focuses less on specific discursive practices and more on actors' sense of agency. Ci (2014) recognises a problem where the properties of individual agency do not correspond to the morality stipulated, rewarded, and exemplified by the Chinese ruling elite. Whereas in Mao China political control, and the subjectivities produced through various mechanisms were congruent with an ideological model of a future social order, today such coherence does not exist. Ci focuses on "freedom" as a notion that informs individuals' perception of their agency and their becoming of competent persons, but at the same time is not established as a *value* in the constitution of society. For Ci, the problem is not the existence or lack of "freedom" per se, but a gap between perceptively desired conduct and moral authority. In drawing on Ci, I again do not seek to ascertain the relevance of one "crisis" to all Chinese citizens all the time, but I recognise that this

touches upon an existential impetus that corresponds to dominant narratives about self-development. My interlocutors associate the fundamental elusiveness of their selfhood with their demanding familial responsibilities or gendered entities, the discipline instilled through the Chinese education system, and their obligatory adherence to state slogans. Therefore, in moments when they reflect on their self-development, they tend to conceive of a crisis in their social system and political regime. At other times, they may rather enjoy social engagements that prompt interdependence and the denouncement of their individual agency, ascribing to them virtues of familism or friendship, as I frequently encountered in the time I spent with my interlocutors with their family and friends (for additional examples, see Harmon, 2014; Strickland, 2010).

Individuals who pursue self-development in China frequently reflect upon the outcomes of their endeavours in terms of both palpable rewards and their ability to reify an enduring "inner" essence. For example, Sum (2018), in a study of extracurricular on-campus activities for university students, records student views that classroom activities lack "substance" because they demand memorisation without fostering life skills oriented to the changing economy (see also Hizi, 2019). My interlocutors express similar concerns, hoping to foster qualities and skills that are consistent and transposable, thereby attaining mastery over diverse settings; inversely, it is through experiencing their resilience in changing circumstances that they can celebrate their inner essence. One of their inspirations was Liu Xingqi, a renowned figure in the teaching of interpersonal "soft" skills for university students in China, who runs camps in Changsha, Hunan, and delivers lectures throughout the country. In his authored guidebooks, Liu (2013) configures the morality of soft skills through his celebration of entrepreneurship:

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

Liu (2013: 39) conceptualises the "skills" he fosters as real, "actual abilities" (實際能力, *shiji nengli*) entrenched in personality traits that are essential for the market economy. These include emotional expression, communication, planning, and self-discipline, among other qualities. For Liu, the most intangible and immeasurable traits possess the highest moral and economic value. While Liu promotes his pedagogy through the reward of business success, the imaginary that links between inexhaustible abilities entrenched in individual selves and moral self-making extends in China beyond the spectrum of entrepreneurship. In an account of the incorporation of Confucian morality in psychotherapeutic teaching in Beijing, Yang (2017) reports how practitioners cultivate "virtuous power," that is, "a process through which one's inner moral core anchored in the heart directs and regulates spontaneous bodily responses to circumstance" (p. 183). Practitioners follow a Confucian cosmology by which self-cultivation resonates in and aggregates to an equilibrium in the family, the state, and the universe (Yang, 2017:

186). This idea also resonates with Chinese medicine's focus on bodily balance, whereby an excess of substances and unmanaged emotional expression can obstruct the flow of qi, thereby damaging the five major organs (Messner, 2000; Ni, 1995). At the same time, teachers of this Confucian therapy also draw on the existentialist therapeutic ideas of logotherapist Viktor Frankl (Yang, 2017: 188), a strong proponent of humans' ability to inject meaning into their lives and thereby enhance their resilience, in line with one of Sartre's (2007 [1946]) proactive manifestos.

Young adults in China, therefore, do not disavow means for immediate achievements, but they yearn for an experience of mastery and resilience, while casting adaptability and sheer instrumentalism as short-sighted approaches. It is a vision that undoes the mismatch between individual agency and socio-economic competence. In practice, however, paths of self-development tend to comprise scattered and inconsistent engagements. Many of my interlocutors moved rapidly between extracurricular courses, internships, volunteering projects, short-term jobs, and various other initiatives. They often lamented their inability to extend some of these activities, but they also saw this as evidence to their trajectory of "self-development," indispensable in their life stage, and thus constantly sought new projects. Ultimately, their ethical reckoning and self-cultivation do not reveal a possibility to design and navigate their engagements according to their will; nor do they suggest that Chinese individuals can simply reject material rewards for abstract ideals. My findings rather illuminate how a particular model of the person, circulated through globalised expertise, becomes a source on which Chinese individuals draw when imagining various paths to improve their socio-economic position amidst growing uncertainties. Next, I introduce some of the pedagogic sites that popularise discursive practices of self-making.

Fields of Self-Reification

This article is based on data collected during thirteen months of fieldwork in 2015–2016. I participated on a weekly basis in workshops in three privately run programmes for interpersonal "soft" skills. Here I focus on two of them, "Champion Training" and "Super Speakers," omitting a psychotherapeutic centre that runs workshops for people of an older age group. All workshops took place in the centre of Jinan, a city approximately 300 km (190 miles) south of Beijing at the heart of Shandong Province. Jinan, the provincial capital, is both an urban hub providing new labour opportunities and an administrative and educational centre. Jinan is located in the ancient states of Qi and Lu, a short train ride from the hometowns of Confucius and Mencius, which serve as tourist and research attractions. Despite the contemporary application of Confucian teachings, most of my informants and friends in Jinan regard this heritage as a cause for the relative conservativeness (保守, *baoshou*) of their region. This manifests, accordingly, in strict familial roles, social hierarchies, and avoidance of expressing sincere emotions. Self-improvement for them is to a significant degree an attempt to overcome these cultural tendencies.

The teaching in both sites used an umbrella term for "soft skills" (軟技能, *ruanjineng*), but more often the curricula spotlight particular immaterial abilities, including

"communication" (溝通, *goutong*), "self-expression" (表達能力, *biaoda nengli*), "leadership" (領導力, *lingdaoli*), and "interpersonal skills" (人際關系, *renji guanxi*), more broadly. Instructors and participants also regularly viewed their pedagogies as an antidote to "exam-driven education" (應試教育, *yingshi jiaoyu*) that supposedly inhibits self-expression. In this emphasis, these pedagogies echo objectives of Chinese educational reforms that focus on fostering well-rounded, emotionally healthy, and independent youngsters (Kuan, 2015; Naftali, 2014; Woronov, 2003). The Chinese state, particularly in the last two decades, has promoted these person-centred agendas through the education system and psychotherapeutic services. These initiatives have established a link between individuals' self-governance, self-realization, and economic productivity under the expanding market economy. These initiatives, along with the state-promoted "national learning" (國學, *guoxue*) of Chinese classics, also seek to combat the seeming moral decay associated with excessive materialism and self-interest. This is a recent phenomenon in a period where ideas pertaining to emotional well-being and sustainable development are combined in official and popular discourse with the ongoing promotion of the market economy. Many of my middle-class interlocutors view this development as corresponding to Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs," by which once they had established material security they could "advance" to aspire to wholesome self-realisation. Yet these influences have also diffused into lower classes through state propaganda and entertainment media. In this process, perceptions of moral problems and the impetus of self-cultivation are expanding as much as they are alleviated through pedagogical or therapeutic interventions.

The discourse of soft skills, as the quotation by Liu Xingqi indicates, exemplifies an imagined marriage between economic competence and individuals' well-being, configured through an entrepreneurial agenda where personality traits can be fostered and managed resourcefully. This view echoes the ideal of "immaterial labour" in the service and information economies, according to which individuals can coordinate their bodily and personality traits to produce value in commercial encounters and by this also advance their careers (Lazzarato, 1996). In practice, as Lazzarato (1996) comments, this ideal is a fantasy that presents congruence between market demands and agentic individualistic capacities, ignoring the power struggles at play. In China, the idea of soft skills is not tied exclusively to the occupational sphere and market value, but it is also a pedagogy through which "selfhood" is celebrated and identified through individuals' interpersonal and emotional expression.

Champion Training is a programme for university students in various interpersonal skills. It is a small enterprise run by a team of business-minded university students at a prestigious local university. These students, who themselves practice self-improvement through various workshops and internships, try to transmit their self-enterprising ideology to students across Jinan. They reiterate in their teaching assumption that Chinese youth are obedient, timid, and narrow-minded, thereby reifying an urgency for self-improvement. Champion Training's main product is a one-week training camp held in an office space and outdoors in Jinan that tries to mitigate the alleged deficiency of public education. Camps are each attended by seventeen to twenty undergraduate

students (mostly in the first year of their studies) from different universities in Shandong, many of whom have a working-class background. The long days of activities include public speaking, approaching strangers on streets, exercises of team trust, and "crazy dancing" (狂舞, *kuanwu*). These sessions aim to cultivate interpersonal skills while shaking participants' supposable habituated, predictable, and timid dispositions. The intensity of the camp (participants also reside together in a hostel) further leads to strong emotional attachments between participants that contribute to the sense of self-transformation. Yet these drills also gloss over participants' ongoing responsibilities. Instructors, while they are oriented towards the private sector, have been thoroughly committed to the requirements of the state's educational system to successfully enrol in a prestigious university. As for student trainees, they are not unequivocally aspiring to work in the private sector and have mixed objectives regarding this programme – becoming more competent for the job market, increasing their self-confidence, and making new friends. They are also largely ambivalent in their evaluation of the long-term effects of this camp.

The second programme I attended does not run workshops per se and does not have formal instructors. Super Speakers is a friendly public speaking club constituted of and operated by dedicated members in their twenties or early thirties, about half of whom are graduate students and half are working individuals with university education and a lower-middle-class income (CNY 3,000−7,000/month, approximately EUR 400–900). Meeting at a local cafe near Daming Lake once or twice a week, sessions include pre-prepared speeches, lighter improvised speeches, and evaluation of speeches by senior members. Yet despite the cheerful and amiable atmosphere, participants take their roles seriously, following a manual for speeches and evaluations and conceiving their participation through a trajectory of self-improvement. As Hampel (2017) describes, the socialising opportunities in "Toastmaster's" public speaking clubs in Beijing are seen by members as rare "platforms" for self-making. In a similar vein, members of Super Speakers conflate public speaking, emotional expression, and sincere evaluation. Speeches are, for them, opportunities to assert their individuality and affect the audience through person-centred messages. Evaluations are recognised by members as a unique form of communication in which they support each other while maintaining honesty about the merits and flaws of their peers' performances. Hence, the club presents a model of self-improvement in which individual performances are established through constant feedback.

Among the main tropes in speeches and conversations in club gatherings were members' commitment to expressing their "true self," finding joy in life beyond their supposable dull jobs, and seeking new adventures (romance, travel, volunteering, etc.). While these priorities resonate with youth culture and mainstream entertainment in China, club members considered their club as a space of unique values. Through members' accounts of their attempts to exceed their ordinary routines and responsibilities, they express their willingness to practice what they preach, inspiring their peers with the potentialities of self-making.

The above programmes indicate that self-improvement in China is increasingly expanding to a focus on immaterial capacities entrenched in the perception of individual autonomy. They also demonstrate how such pedagogies of self-improvement have

expanded well beyond cosmopolitan metropolises or middle-class lifestyles. Extracurricular activities that highlight the value of self-assertion through soft skills are now becoming accessible throughout urban China. Long workshops, a one-week camp, or annual membership in the above programmes cost USD 150–350, a considerable fee, yet not an absolute barrier for committed participants, even among the urban working class. Yet self-improvement through these programmes also relies on specific social settings, interactive dynamics, and positive feedback, opportune conditions that cannot easily extend to more ordinary circumstances. How do self-improvers, therefore, overcome this gap or attempt to reproduce the celebration of their selfhood beyond the pedagogic space?

Tragic Stability

For her third speech in Super Speakers, Xina, a twenty-six-year-old middle-class woman, spoke about her desire to live a stimulating life filled with adventures and interests. She expressed this vision in an attempt to compensate for her stable job in a local bank. While this message was far from novel on the Super Speakers' stage, her following anecdote still managed to surprise several pairs of ears in the audience:

> Did you ever hear about a tragedy in Jinan, called the "*Shanshi* [short for Shandong shifan daxue, 山東師範大學, 'Shandong Normal University'] tragedy"? You were born in *Shanshi* road, then you went to *Shanshi* kindergarten, then you went to *Shanshi* middle-school, then you went to *Shanshi* high-school, then you attended *Shanshi* University. Finally, you graduated and became a teacher in *Shanshi*. *Shanshi* tragedy … I have friends who live this tragedy. I was born and grew up in Jinan. I am terrified to be trapped in this city forever, would regret to have been wasting my life. Would love to go to a new city, different atmosphere, enjoy some changes in my life.

In urban China, large universities run primary and secondary educational institutions, which are usually quite prestigious. Shandong Normal University is ranked second in the province and its affiliated schools are highly sought by parents. In light of policies that restrict enrollment to registered residents in the adjacent neighbourhoods, the real estate prices in the area are disproportionably high. Schooling under the umbrella of Shandong Normal University is hence a solid affirmation of middle-class status. Xina's audience, including participants who grew up in Jinan, was not familiar with the "Shanshi tragedy." For those who moved to Jinan from the countryside or nearby smaller towns, it was difficult to associate Shanshi with an unfortunate fate. Yet Xina's message still tapped into a general appreciation of mobility. Remaining in the same comfort zone from birth to retirement inhibits a trajectory of progress, as well as an experience of oneself as an agent who purposefully navigates through the social reality. Her desire to avoid stability reflects to a significant degree a capitalist ethos that promotes risk-taking, initiative, and progress. Nevertheless, most members of Super Speakers held stable jobs as teachers, technicians, accountants, and bankers,

which they maintained even if they lamented that those jobs allowed them little room for "improvement." Xina herself found her job highly stagnating.

The peril of stagnation was expressed even more intensively in Champion Training, particularly in motivational speeches that instructors delivered to their student participants. Gao Rui, a twenty-year-old instructor and a student of accounting, was particularly fierce in her message, describing an attitude that she also fostered in herself since beginning her undergraduate degree:

> The first semester of your freshman year is about to end. I would like to ask you: except for your own university, which other campuses have you visited during this period? In my freshman year, I joined Champion Training to run activities on every campus in this city. Stepping outside my circle of classmates and meeting senior students from different places utterly changed my life.

A daughter of working-class parents from the city of Zhangqiu (章丘) in the outskirts of the Jinan prefecture, Gao Rui was indeed one of the most mobile individuals I met in Jinan. She moved constantly among extracurricular activities, internships, and work gigs, leaving little time for her actual classroom learning. She stressed to me that although she intended to complete her bachelor's degree in accounting, she planned a career in business or in teaching soft skills.

Gao Rui and her peers understood the imperative for self-improvement through the lens of mobility. Like young adults elsewhere in China, they respond to a demand of the job market to present themselves as self-improving (Woronov, 2015: 129) and as persons of "experience" (Liu, 2017). Accordingly, mobility is a quality coupled with self-improvement and incorporated into performances of self-presentation. Mobility, at the same time, serves more therapeutic cultivation of a competent inner self that can supposedly reject external impositions and choose its own paths. It is through movement that a conception of a "self" is reified.

Self-improvement for Gao Rui and my other informants is an ideal that fosters the individual "self" while also denying the fact that this self cannot exist outside the demands of specific social contexts. By maintaining an ideal of a mobile and substantial self through a quest to overcome social constraints, practitioners of self-improvement also denounce, in practice, any enduring self-awareness. In Sartre's (1966 [1943]) words, "the contingency of the world appears to human reality in so far as human reality has established itself in nothingness in order to apprehend the contingency" (p. 51). Through identifying opportunities to willfully exercise autonomy as an act antagonistic to a pre-existing social backdrop, individuals must also constitute their selves as a tabula rasa. By practising self-improvement and reproducing a market demand of self-reliance, risk-taking, and malleability, my informants identified contingencies that constantly alter the meanings of their personhood. This momentum that guides future-oriented self-improvement produces anxiety, as individuals perceive their lack of substance – that is the sense that "I am the self which I will be in the mode of not being it" (Sartre, 1966 [1943]: 68). Hence, the possibilities for self-making are also a reminder of one's

incompleteness, perpetuating the initial drive for self-improvement and for realising an elusive sense of self. This loop is particularly intense for individuals who treat the image of autonomous selfhood that is independent of social structures as a key aspect of a moral personhood.

Mobility strongly taps into the logic of self-making via soft skills – that is the idea that people possess unlimited resources that through the right sensibilities and commitment could be applied to triumph in different social situations. It is through mobility that inter-personal gestures can become practised and conceived as *skills of individual agents*, in contrast to ordinary and habituated behaviours that take shape in familiar spaces. If, for Giddens (1991), individuals in late modernity experience disembeddedness from pre-existing social institutions and as a result labour on reifying an ongoing inner self, for my interlocutors the process is somewhat reversed. While their ideology is similarly emerging through socio-economic transformations, they also intentionally prompt disem-beddedness precisely to experience a selfirreducible to limited social contexts. Similarly, in a study of psychotherapeutic workshops in Kunming, Zhang (2018: 49–50) introduces practitioners who aim at social "disentanglement" through which they could possibly redeem their sense of self. Some of these practitioners seek to temporarily step away from their social obligations to master their emotions better and, in turn, be more vigorous when returning to their social world. This also resonates with Moore's (2013: 265) study of amateur Noh training for women in Tokyo; by enacting new roles, women enjoy the "peeling-away of identity," which leads to new potentials for self-making. Through dis-entanglement and role-changing, individuals can adopt new perspectives while perceiv-ing a more authentic inner core. Just like various workshops activate unique spaces that allow participants to perceive and assert themselves as individual actors who can step away from their ordinary social world, so does mobility: movement allows individuals to find unique social spaces for self-making while also rejecting each space as condition-ing one's personality, in turn experiencing one's potential socio-economic competence. Mobility can manifest in different scopes and experiences, ranging from rapid shifts between projects, migrant work to extensive leisure travel – all practices that my interlo-cutors regard as conducive to their self-cultivation.

Seeing the World?

In attempts to become unyielding in the face of the contingencies of their social realities, many young adults in China cherish the opportunity to learn and experience different situations and attend various locations. For those individuals, travel serves as a pleasur-able method to instantiate mobility as well as expands the boundaries of movement beyond their ordinary life paths. Through travel, individuals can realise and imagine their identification with social milieus both inside and outside China, potentially bridging the gap between their social circle, Jinan, and a wider "world."

Two weeks after Xina's speech about the "Shanshi tragedy," she and two other members of Super Speakers mentioned in a club event a viral story about a middle-school teacher from Henan Province. Gu Xiaoqiang, a psychology teacher who started to work

in a middle-school in Zhengzhou in 2004, left a short resignation letter to her employer with the words: "The world is so big, I want to go and have a look" (世界那麼大 我想去看看, *shijie name da wo xiang qu kankan*). One member, Ling Shuai, stated in a short improvised speech that she was inspired by this story and wished more people would act that way. The audience seemed to agree, a few cheered, and later Xina and Ling continued to discuss this seemingly liberating act at greater length.

"The world is so big, I want to go and have a look" became a viral expression in Chinese social media in 2015, reflecting both courage and recklessness, and bridging between the real and the fantastic. On social media, some netizen responses pointed out the financial factor that makes such a bold act unrealistic for most Chinese, while other commenters were nonetheless inspired by the courage of a seemingly ordinary teacher. In one of the press articles at the time, a psychologist named Li Jing offered a moral evaluation of this case:

> People's nature always contains a pursuit of freedom and happiness. Under the pressure of contemporary society, teacher Gu's romantic behavior can receive strong sympathy from our society, but every person must make choices through a thorough consideration of his or her circumstances, they should not look to escape reality just because of pressure. (China National Radio, 2015)

Super Speakers' members echoed the first half of this message. The ability to abandon a stable position in favour of an open-ended adventure encapsulated for Xina and her peers an excess beyond their social roles and social expectations, so pivotal in their agendas of self-improvement (see Hsu, 2005). Mobility is exercised here through a resistance to follow a premade path. As for teacher Gu, she travelled across China, married, and had a baby since her resignation (Qu Nali, 2018).

Whereas mobility for my interlocutors combines the morality-laden sense of disembeddedness with individual resilience, "seeing the world" further emphasises an encounter with the contingency and diversity of the social world. Travel affords a perceived pleasurable and exhilarating channel for individuals to navigate purposefully through unfamiliar environments, while also equipping themselves with new knowledge and capabilities. Thus, my interlocutors cherished travel as a hobby that is not devoid of personal development. They often contrasted their appreciation of travel with their parents' generation, which is warier of movement. My interlocutors did not adhere literally to the objective of prolonged travel by renouncing their studies or jobs, but rather treated this message as a reminder for the impetus to expand and bolster their sense of selfhood by experiencing diverse social realities. The "world," whether it is overseas, wider China, or an unfamiliar site a short train ride away, could accordingly enable a person to have a better perspective on social issues and further reconfigure his or her position in relation to a dynamic "world."

My interlocutor who took this celebration of travel the furthest was Shili, a twenty-two-year-old student in one of the universities in Jinan and a member of the Champion Training team. Shili grew up in a middle-class family in the city of

Zaozhuang in southern Shandong. He studied politics, but aspired to start his own enterprise. Towards the end of his degree, Shili had more free time and he decided to use it to undertake workshops and pursue his hobbies. For him, this approach contrasted with most of his fellow students who remained entrenched in the university campus, supposedly obsessed with their forthcoming academic tasks. In his third year of studies, Shili also decided to take on a challenge: travelling to a new city in China every month. And so he did, documenting his adventures in a personal journal and colourful posts on his WeChat page. Travelling was also a repeated topic in my conversations with him. He mentioned the joy of going to a new place and "communicating" with people he would have never met otherwise, such as a host family in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia. Although he admitted that not every student had the financial possibilities to travel like him, he still associated his adventures with an individualistic approach rather than expenses or kilometrage. Travel for him was about truly getting to know other places, unlike organised tours that "take you to a place, allow you to take a photo, then drive you to the hotel to sleep." He also contrasted himself with Chinese students overseas, who supposedly barely immerse in their new homes or communicate with local people. Shili said that due to his journeys inside and outside Jinan, he is relatively familiar with the wider society. As a result, unlike his classmates, he does not look at foreigners (using the term *laowai* [老外], which normally indicates Caucasians) with awe or nervousness and can instead delve into a real exchange of knowledge.

Shili treated his extracurricular projects, travel included, as both joyful liberation and a type of training. He stressed to me that travel was first and foremost about "doing something he loves" (做我愛做的事, *zuo wo ai zuo de shi*) and an unmediated social encounter, but he also treated his project quantitatively – visiting a new place every month, usually for a weekend, and repeatedly posting his "achievements" through the number of locations covered. Travel for him about celebrating his individuality and mobility (through his own experience and others' recognition), while also a way to enhance his familiarity with foreign realities. While critical of his peers and widespread norms that supposedly suppress individuality, Shili was also certain that global market values (which he associated with the more person-centred and entrepreneurial spirit) would triumph eventually in China; hence, while he was casting himself as an outlier, he was also trying to become more competent for emerging social forces.

Agentic "Essences" and Chinese Society

The impetus for self-development that I presented above demonstrates young adults' anxieties, as well as thrill, when facing the vicissitudes of their social reality (including new forms of expertise), which are largely a product of the expanding market economy. In addition, Chinese citizens ascribe the challenge of exerting their agency to their specific political regime. As Ci (2014) argues, the moral crisis in China is also a crisis of authority due to the fact that the powerful political elites have little public credence when it comes to exemplifying moral standards. While state policies are coercive, people's moral

imaginary and behavioral codes cannot be guided constructively by state actors. To this problem presented by Ci, I add social actors' reflections on the inherent problems of their cultural and (at times) political systems with regard to prompting individual agency. It is through the idea that their social circumstances are particularly delimiting that they experience a greater risk of failing to realise their selves. Young adults who pursue self-development, in particular in the moments that they immerse in their various projects, frequently identify aspects of their cultural and political systems as alarm calls for further identifying and capturing their individual self.

Most of my interlocutors did not express to me coherent manifestos against their political regime, but at times they indicated their challenge in the face of the whims of the paternalistic party-state. For example, in December 2015, when the National People's Congress Standing Committee approved the relaxation of the One-Child Policy, Qingzhen, a twenty-three-year-old women member in Super Speakers, told me with a bitter irony: "First they tell us to have as few children as possible, now they tell us to have more kids fast!" Despite not having an immediate impact on her at her pre-marriage state, Qingzhen's words indicate alertness to contingencies and rapid shifts in the guidelines for good citizenship. In a more recent example, during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, television broadcasts in China followed the rapid construction of the two hospitals for patients in Wuhan's Huoshenshan (火神山) and Leishenshan (雷神山). These broadcasts represented the construction teams and vehicles with colourful images and cute names ("little yellow" [小黃, xiao huang], "little red" [小紅, xiao hong], "blue carefree" [藍忘機, lan wangji], and "mud vomit sauce" [嘔泥醬], ouni jiang), and requested viewers to click on their favourite team for support (打榜, dabang) (Sina Technology, 2020). Several of my interlocutors engaged in online debates about this initiative. Some of my friends identified this act as "infantilising" (幼化, youhua, or 幼稚化, youzhihua) viewers untactfully in a moment of crisis. Discussions on Weibo extended to highlight the marriage between commercial entertainment and political mobilisation. Most commenters, however, shifted the discussion from Chinese politics to depicting a *cultural* issue where superiors in general, be them employers, parents, or husbands (in relation to their wives), treat their "subordinates" as immature, thereby reproducing a problem where hierarchies suppress youngsters' healthy growth. While political critique is obviously limited on Weibo, this ascription of hierarchies, including those imposed by the state sector, to longstanding "culture" beyond the state's regime was a common theme among my interlocutors and in workshops of self-improvement. These ideas echo ongoing intellectual and public debates in the twentieth century in China on the link between the so-called Chinese national character and the local prospects of modernity (Anagnost, 1997).

This idea of a self-inhibiting and infantilising social system is not consistent across time and space among youth and young adults in China, but at times it escalates to an existential issue that influences people's choices and practices. Fleischer (2011) offers a revealing quote on this challenge by a young woman in Guangzhou, Zhang Peng, who explained her choice to become a volunteer. She does not comment explicitly on

social conditions in China, but nonetheless indicates a problem of actualising herself via ordinary social conduct.

> When I first became a volunteer I wanted to meet more people. Besides I wanted to fulfill my life. I read a book "Love and Will" by an American Psychologist, who says that *being is the essence of life* [emphasis added]. Things exist not only objectively but also subjectively in people's subjective notions. For example, I am a person in the world. But if I did not meet you today, I am nothing to you and I do not exist in your life. So to really "be" I have to develop relations with people. That's why I volunteer. I don't do it with the purpose of making friends. *I want others to feel my existence* [emphasis added]. For example if I did not join this organization, other volunteers would not know that I exist and therefore I do not exist in their minds. A person's existence is not only objective, it's also subjective [through others]. Some people say that one is living for oneself, but in my opinion everybody is living for others. I want to make people feel my existence. For my part, if I cannot exist in others' mind, my life is meaningless. (Fleischer, 2011: 315)

On the surface, Peng contrasts my research interlocutors by her explicit search for others' recognition and social connections. Yet she also looks to reify her individual "essence" by stepping away from her campus life or family roles. Interestingly, her inspiration is a book by May (1969), one of the founders of existential psychotherapy, along with Viktor Frankl. Her explanation reveals the theoretical depth of the duality of existence, even if she frames it within a positivist therapeutic agenda. Peng accepts that relational conditions are necessary for realising her existence, but she is still concerned with actualising her own "existence," hence not treating relationships as the endpoint for social interactions. Thus, she reiterates a problem that must be mitigated through purposeful action. Her words resonate with my interlocutors' impetus to perceive their "existence" and the problem they identify in doing so. Accordingly, it is only when relationships are perceived to emanate from the initiative of individualised persons on a seemingly egalitarian (and often ephemeral) social plane that they can be seen as conducive for self-realisation. When interactions serve hierarchies, households, enduring social networks, and even the imperative of citizenship, they thus risk dissolving one's "existence." Volunteering, among other self-developing projects, can sustain to some degree the imaginary of individualised existence for young adults, yet only insofar as these activities take place in a dynamic setting without crystallising in individuals' eyes into a narrower and static network.

This existential struggle of young adults such as Peng and my interlocutors demonstrates a problem of agency that constitutes part of the so-called "moral crisis" in contemporary China, pertaining to market reforms and the authoritarian state. At the same time, my findings demonstrate not a consistent and predominant lack of agency but rather how this issue is amplified through a self-developing perspective by which individuals seek to both embody person-centred expertise and better prepare for the contingencies of social life. Obviously, different individuals adhere to this perspective to various degrees: some become self-reliant without reflecting too much on moral ideals, some contemplate on their morality sporadically when encountering relevant expertise and some commit to

long-term projects outside their main life path while advocating existential doctrines. Some, of course, also lose purpose at times and feel they cannot influence their fates. What is common among them is that whenever they pronounce an ethos of self-development, they also lament the hindering influence of their sociopolitical reality.

Conclusion

This article introduced young adults in China who aspire towards self-development as an ethical pursuit in correspondence to the demands of the expanding market economy. If for previous generations in China discourses of self-making focused more exclusively on financial self-reliance and the striving for "success," in the last two decades, a flow of discourses that prioritise well-being and moral self-cultivation reconfigures these pursuits. The individuals whom I presented seek to foster an individualised self, conflating their moral standards with an attempt to enhance their competency when facing diverse social demands. Due to the ongoing command of relational norms and state institutions, as well as concerns about moral decay, individuals are wary of malleably adjusting to social demands. Instead, they seek to experience a consistent and resilient "essence" independent of external triggers. In practice, this endeavour often meets impasses in terms of either practical imperatives of economic security and stability, as well as the constant adaptation to various external commands by employers, teachers, family members, or state institutions, ultimately prompting, in their experience, a more "shapeless" flexibility.

In drawing on Sartre and Ci Jiwei, I have applied their theories as neither secondary nor primary sources but rather as a framework that corresponds to my interlocutors' worldviews and how they theorise upon their social reality and existence. The relevance of these theories is not contingent on their universality (or in the case of Ci, its consistency throughout China) but rather on their ability to spotlight pivotal existential concerns shared by many Chinese individuals. Furthermore, I suggest that many young adults in China accentuate the tenants of Sartre's philosophy. His idea on the elusive and paradoxical quality of the "self" is illustrated by my interlocutors' approach to self-development. They view the self as both an ontological condition and imperative, both an indisputable human essence and an exceptional virtue that is constantly oppressed by Chinese society and its dominant mores. They ascribe the elusiveness of the self to their cultural background and seek to combat such predicament through purpose, effort, and physical movement.

Much of the scholarly analysis of Chinese society – with its unique contradictions – has identified clear dichotomies and divisions in political and social life. Accordingly, Chinese citizens select or juggle between specific ethical regimes, acting through either agency or subordination. While these scholarly categories help delineate a complex picture of Chinese society, my findings also suggest that young adults perceive an existential puzzle that makes all forms of social action suspicious of becoming self-inhibiting. The contradictions that they experience are contingent not only on the specific prescriptions of social institutions, but also on the constant elusiveness of their intangible or changing objectives in front of more palpable concerns. From this perspective, ideologies of self-

development and much of the expertise that informs them, reinforce, de facto, impasses to their imagined agentic self-realisation.

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