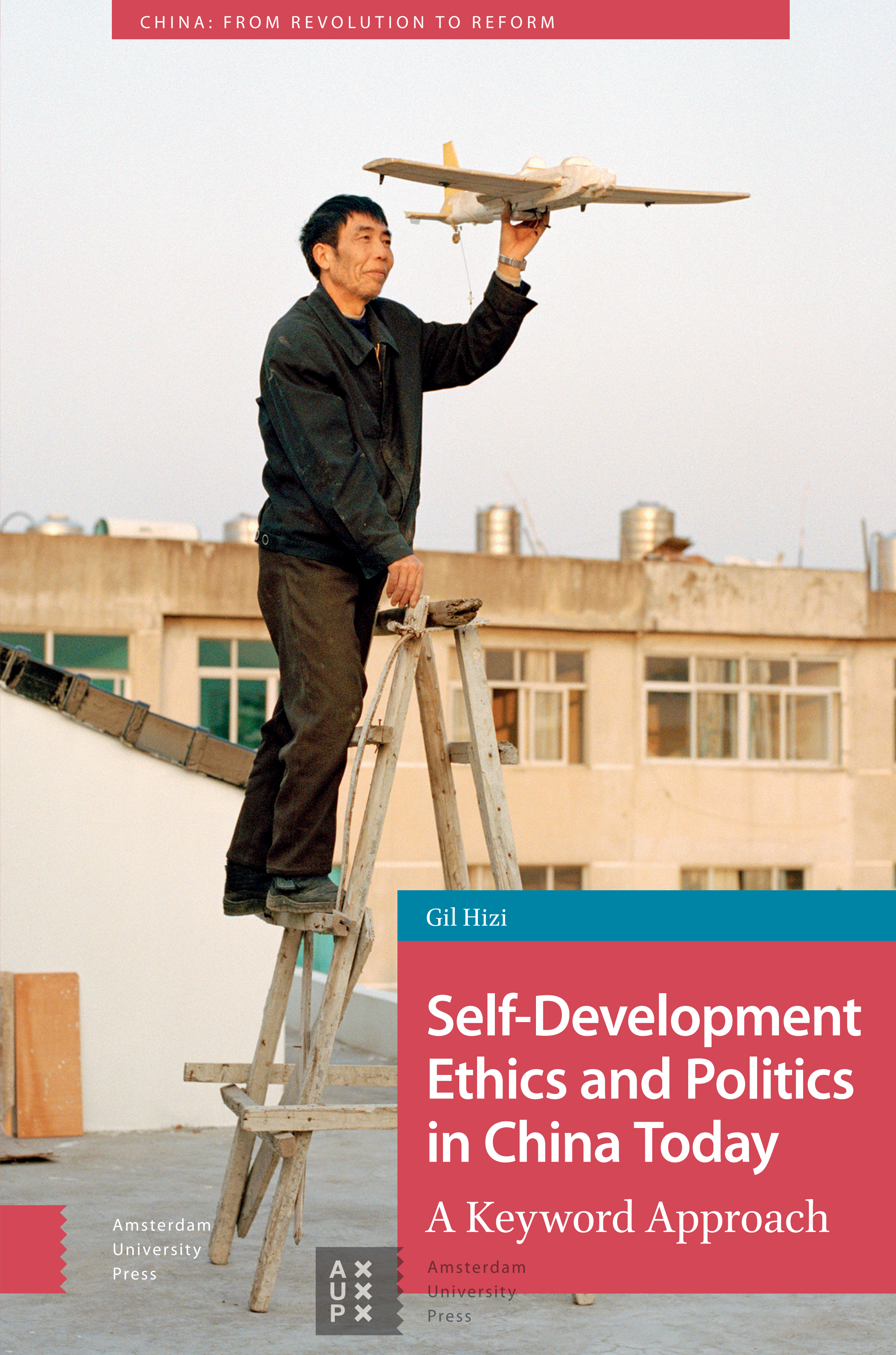
CHINA: FROM REVOLUTION TO REFORM
Gil Hizi
Self-Development Ethics and Politics in China Today
A Keyword Approach
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Self-Development Ethics and Politics in China Today

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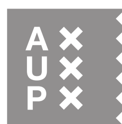

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Edited by
Gil Hizi

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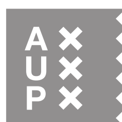

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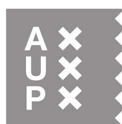

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Contributors

Barclay Bram is a doctoral candidate at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, Oxford University.

Jiwei Ci is a visiting professor of philosophy at the University of Oxford.

Marco Fumian is a faculty member at the Department of Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies at the University of Naples "L'Orientale."

Isabel Heger-Laube is a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Freie Universität Berlin.

Gil Hizi is a postdoctoral fellow and lecturer at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Goethe University Frankfurt.

Naja Morell Hjortshøj recently obtained her PhD at the Department of Global Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark.

Anna Iskra is a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Culture and the Mind at the University of Copenhagen.

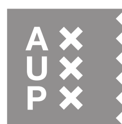
Liisa Kohonen is a Chiang Chin-kuo postdoctoral research fellow, Department of East Asian Studies (Sinology), University of Vienna.

Mieke Matthyssen is a researcher at the Department of Languages and Cultures, University of Ghent.

Marius Meinhof is a researcher in the Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld, and Principal Investigator of the DFG project "Civilized Families: Discourses on 'Filial Piety' in the Age of the China Dream."

Xinyan Peng is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the School of Sociology and Anthropology at Sun Yat-sen University

Linda Qian is a doctoral candidate in area studies at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, Oxford University.



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Canglong Wang is lecturer and co-programme director in Chinese studies at the University of Hull.

Dan Wu is a PhD candidate in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Yang Zhan is an assistant professor in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

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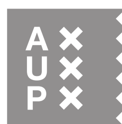

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Introduction

Gil Hizi

Abstract
This chapter discusses the significance of self-development in China today, as a phenomenon that lies at the heart of the process of becoming a person. Self-development carries influences of past practices of self-cultivation while also demonstrating the global capitalist imperatives of self-reliance, skill cultivation and individualized aspirations. The meanings of self-development in China are further shaped by the education system, the autocratic state and familial responsibilities, as people navigate between areas of perceived individual choice and commanding obligations. This chapter introduces our "keyword" approach, by which we examine the various ethical definitions of self-development expressed by people across Chinese society. These keywords illuminate visions of social development, psychotherapeutic sensibilities and indigenous values, as well as new forms of social critique.

Keywords: self-development, keywords, Raymond Williams, Chinese society, global capitalism, Chinese education

In the Chinese coming-of-age film *The Left Ear* (2015), based on a novel by Rao Xueman (2009), several teenagers from a small southern town seek to overcome their social marginality and their family misfortunes. They find themselves chasing success while also constantly figuring out how to maintain their personal integrity under social competition. Under the fireworks of Chinese New Year in a home visit,[1] protagonist Zhang Yang reflects on his time in Beijing as a university student:

> I used to dislike our town because it is small, that it offers no future, but when I arrived in the big city, I realized that this world is too big. It

1 This takes place in 2007.

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> doesn't matter how much effort you put in, all of it counts for nothing. I often have doubts about the future, but all you can do is go forward, never stop, because when you stop it feels like drowning.[2]

This film, which probably still overestimates the chances of rural kids to change their fates through the college entrance exam (*gaokao*) or professional talent, shows well how young people seek to escape failure without feeling they can navigate their life path. People in China move between moments of full-hearted optimism to what they perceive as more mechanical continuity in an endless race where they experience the finest line between the perils of standing still and moving too fast.

The imperative of self-development is relevant beyond high school and university years to dominant features of social life in China. It combines precarity and opportunity, extending through global capitalism while absorbing the systemic features of Chinese society, including the pressure of educational success, nationally binding social hierarchies and distinct generational gaps. In China today, there is an increasing social awareness of the impediments of this type of striving, informed by economic slowdowns and the priority of emotional well-being. At the same time, China continues to grow as an economic international power, which sustains the hope of many citizens regarding the elevation of their livelihood and global position.

This volume recognizes "self-development" as a central aspect of the subjective experience and moral priorities in China. Through qualitative studies of young adults' practices, along with various official and commercial texts, we elicit "keywords" that define the objectives and meanings of this pursuit. Self-development today takes shape through people's constant attempt to shape, rather than reproduce, their prospects and social reality. It involves wealth and reputation, but is not divorced from concerns with morality and social values. Interestingly, today, "self-development" is on the one hand a paramount ethos in Chinese society, and some of its parameters (education, profession, possessions, family) are widely shared, but, on the other hand, it entails reckoning with different life priorities. This includes navigating between multiple values while predicting how life in China may continue to transform and bring new requirements and capacities to the fore of socio-economic competence.

2 This quote does not appear in the novel. My translation.

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From self-cultivation to self-development

Practices through which people systematically foster and evaluate their capacities are of course not exclusive to the contemporary era. Innumerable political and theological traditions have produced guidelines for proper behaviour and virtuosity. In China, self-cultivation (most commonly termed as *xiushen* or *xiuyang*) has been an important aspect of influential philosophical schools since the Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu) period (770–476 BC), continuing during the establishment of Imperial China (221 BC) and the subsequent dynasties. Mostly ascribed to texts by Confucian and Daoist thinkers, self-cultivation was conceptualized in tandem with principles for governance for rulers, ministers and residents. To a significant degree, these traditions focused on exemplary virtues from the past and present, rather than seeking an unforeseen future. These virtues manifested in the world views and behaviour of ancestors, patriarchal authorities and notable "noble men" (*junzi*). On rare occasions, members of elite groups also practiced techniques such as painting and meditation to isolate themselves from what they perceived as immoral practices in the existing statecraft.

Throughout most of Imperial China, self-cultivation maintained traditional reproductive characteristics that were mostly defined by the literati, though at different periods these practices became more accessible to the wider population. One milestone was set by Neo-Confucian schools since the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD), which reinterpreted classical texts by emphasizing the moral potency of everyday acts of each individual. Self-cultivation gradually became more conceptually intertwined with the fulfilment of social roles and the life path of becoming a complete moral person (termed in China as *zuo ren*). The writings of Wang Yangming (1472–1529) pushed this logic a step further by highlighting possibilities for disaccord between individuals' world views and the social order, even if he was counterbalanced with more pragmatic political philosophies (Hao 1974, 47).

Another significant transformation in self-cultivation agendas took place during the last years of the imperial court (during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century) as new doctrines were introduced from Japan, Europe and North America. During this period, ideas about the individual's ontological status in society came about, conceptualized through emerging notions of "self," "individual" and "citizen."[3] Some Chinese thinkers

3 See Liu (1996) for the Chinese discursive terrain in translating these terms from foreign texts.

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of the time developed utopian visions of a world order beyond existing social categories, overcoming familial lineages, ethnicity, social class and even stark gender divisions,[4] while others focused on the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation following a rough period of submission to colonial powers. A common denominator among many reformist thinkers was a critical stance towards so-called traditional thought and its associated practices and social hierarchies. In terms of education and self-cultivation, these years produced an intriguing mixture of Confucian rituals, new scientific and psychoanalytical expertise, liberal education fostering individual creativity, as well as military training (Culp 2006), the latter extending through the Japanese invasion in the 1930s.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949 marks the turn from this heterogenous ideological climate to a body politic guided by class-based doctrines and authoritarian rule. The Mao regime established institutions and activities that were directed at a clear telos, ideologically and coercively minimizing gaps between people's identities or their cultivated skills and the national revolutionary project. The enactment of "correct" virtues and world views frequently took place through emotional group meetings, whereby happiness and self-empowerment were enmeshed with sacrificing one's individual and present concerns for a greater public goal (e.g. Wang 1997, 126; Wielander 2018).

Since the fall of Maoism and the expansion of economic reforms during the 1980s, self-development has emerged alongside new imperatives for social competence. Chinese people became motivated by a competitive drive for accumulation and social mobility, seeking to improve their livelihood while experiencing a dramatic break from the Maoist past. Under these conditions, self-development took shape to a large degree through discontinuities between the individual and the social order, thus becoming a more psychological and person-centred practice. To a significant degree, this produced the existential challenge of meaning-making of the capitalist actor that is described by critical thinkers since the 1960s. Due to the decline of traditional affiliations, promising ideological commitments and social solidarity, scholars coined terms such as the "homeless mind" (Berger et al. 1973), "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2013) and "reflexive modernization" (Beck et al. 1994) to capture an expanding subjective experience. For Anthony Giddens (1991), people's "identity" must be constantly remade through self-examination and support of psychological expertise to overcome their lack of

4 Notable examples are Kang Youwei (1979) and Cai Yuanpei (1996).

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substantial ontological ground. Due to the rapidity of social transformation in China and the lack of robust liberal traditions, some scholars of China diagnose an even worst predicament, leading to excessive self-interest and nihilism. Wang Xiaoying (2002), for example, identifies a "shapeless" "postcommunist personality" that is completely submissive to immediate temptations. This subjective stance is producing social distrust at various levels and a shared notion of a "moral crisis" (e.g. Yan 2009).

This global condition notwithstanding, most Chinese people today do not so much experience a lack of enduring social commitments as they identify contradictions in social life. Young adults, in general, perceive commanding familial obligations, gender-based requirements, highly prescriptive life stages, and political conformity to the CCP, while at the same time they have much more choice and uncertainty in their careers, spouse selection and social networks.[5] Moreover, it is difficult to diagnose moral decay as the primary condition in China when so much public discussion and pedagogical activities are devoted to moral improvement, extending far beyond CCP propaganda. Many of the people described in our chapters constantly reflect and remark on their behaviours and standing, not only as competitors over resources but also in constituting social milieus where self-interest does not set the tone. In the last two decades, new expertise in education, psychology and traditional knowledge has expanded in China in an attempt to move away from the narrow obsession with market-driven "success" to more comprehensive emotional and ethical becoming. While critics rightly note how these discourses can reinforce social disparities or autocratic rule (Woronov 2015; Yang 2015; Zhang 2014), many people nonetheless employ them within their ongoing negotiations about their evolving moral path.

Our chapters aim to examine a central phenomenon in Chinese society of the last few decades with attention to the current moment. We note continuities across the last four decades (and ideological influences that extend further back), but we do not gloss over changes within the period of economic reforms and we attend the present under Xi Jinping's leadership. Long-standing terms absorb new meanings while new terms can recycle older messages in a timing that can prove meaningful for both China's future and the prospects of the global market-driven order. Overall, we do not seek to pathologize the subject experience and impetus of self-development in

5 In line with this tension, political philosopher Ci Jiwei (2014) identifies the key moral problem in China to be people's lack of agency due to the gap between the market economy with its ideal of "freedom" and the ideological-political system where "freedom" has little currency.

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China in comparison with neighbouring countries or the capitalist West. Contributors are rather interested in how self-development is conceived as an ethos, corollary to the contemporary *zuo ren* (cf. Yan 2013, 164), as well as how it is practised in social life. As a defining feature of the contemporary moment, self-development enmeshes inputs from various periods and locations in the configuration of the Chinese person. It draws on markers of a type of prestige that was previously exclusive to a small portion of the population, such as educational success, in a social environment where expertise, knowledge and, to a significant degree, school enrolment, have become more democratic. At the same time, the more worldly value of meticulosity in China that was previously associated with securing a livelihood through the paternal household (Harrell 1985), has been channelled into striving for social mobility. Very few people in China, including those lacking resources, are immune to this impetus.

Moving fast, moving still

Following this overview, we define self-development as a range of activities and projects that individuals pursue to foster diverse capacities in becoming a person of resources, virtue and prestige. Self-development includes pathways central to life stages and livelihood, such as schooling and employment, and for some people can also encompass migration, home ownership and family life. Self-development expands to additional activities of learning, professional training, internships, self-help, volunteering, travel and physical exercise. An activity becomes part of this ethos when people identify it as conducive for their growth towards a particular model of a person, rather than simply a pastime engagement. In doing so, people may apply the literal term "self-development" (*ziwo fazhan*) in this context, or terms such as *ziwo tisheng* ("self-improvement," which has a more therapeutic connotation in China) and *tigao ziji de nengli* (improve my abilities), among other derivatives. Yet the lived definition of self-developing activities tends to be unstable, allowing people to interpret different endeavours as potentially valuable, hence continuously expanding their set of practices and transitioning between projects. This demonstrates a drive for capitalist accumulation amidst competition over resources, as well as the modernist opening towards a future that undoes the ways things have been and are done.

Self-development in contemporary China is laden with a sense of opportunity and anxiety. Any attempt to suspend self-development is often construed as a sign of incompetence and moral malaise. This is not to say

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that most people are disillusioned about their possibilities of social mobility, believing they can transcend class background, lack of social connections or the randomness of events; but resignation comes with a high price. Thus, people find strategies and justifications for "going forward" within the existing system, whether it is a conviction in the virtue of meticulousness, commitment to acts that can induce their inclination towards success (Kuan 2015), the impetus to please parents and superiors (e.g. Bregnbæk 2016), or the belief that a meritocratic and egalitarian social order will take over China in their future (Osburg 2013, 133). Moreover, despite the challenge of reaching their ideals, existing structures and technologies in China enable people to experience momentary accomplishments through various credentials and awards, as well as to enhance their recognition via online media.

In its temporal perspective, self-development is oriented towards the future but often sinks into the impulses of the moment. Anders Hansen (2015) identifies "restlessness" (*fuzao*) as the central feature in the experience of Chinese university students. *Fuzao* stems from a constant feeling of incompleteness along with the drive to generate value. This coincides well with the "presentism" of market exchange in Chinese cities, as people must respond to emerging opportunities, with little ability to plan, digest or fully estimate the outcomes (Liu 2002; Steffen 2017). Many young individuals in China do not simply accept their situations and try to actively mitigate them, for example, by adopting techniques that produce more purpose and continuity in their projects (Hizi 2021), with various degrees of success. This challenge shows that the term "self-development" is as much about reifying and perceiving a "self" as a consistent entity that is somewhat immune to the pull of demands and social obligations. Moreover, many pedagogical and therapeutic activities in China in recent years require individuals to purify their definition of themselves, thereby bolstering their individuality, well-being or accountability (Chumley 2016, 124; Hansen 2015; Zhang 2020, 121). Alternatively, as Matthyssen demonstrates in chapter 12, the challenge of identifying a self leads more and more young Chinese to prioritize "self-preservation" by slowing down and denouncing the *fuzao* predicament.

The combination of distinct ideals and elusive pathways in self-development is a prevalent phenomenon under global capitalism. Literary scholar Lauren Berlant (2011) coined the term "cruel optimism" to define the fragmented attempts of working-class individuals to attain a "good life" in the US, in a quest that promises much but seldom delivers. According to this concept, individuals are allured not solely by the ideal endpoints but also by the momentum and the vitality realized through the pursuit. From an economic angle, individuals learn to conflate production and consumption,

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treating commodities as opportunities for generating value, both in the future and in the immediate present. Two decades ago, Carolyn Hsu (2005) described young adults in northern China who regarded short-term labour in private enterprises as a form of "training" within a trajectory of learning, experience and growth, a phenomenon that has intensified since. Through this perception, individuals may identify lateral movement as possible "growth," even if this does not alleviate their anxieties. Such movement allows them to maintain a sense of opportunities, as well avoid some of the main predicaments of prevalent life trajectories.

Recurring concerns in Chinese life paths

The pursuit of self-development in China has its distinct tropes and concerns. Perhaps the most socially acknowledged among them is education, pointing to the command of educational success. In a stressful path towards the high school entrance exam (z*hongkao*) and, subsequently, the *gaokao*, youth in China participate in a ranking system that fortifies hierarchies of social class and centre-periphery (Howlett 2021; Woronov 2015). The preparation for the *gaokao* involves disciplined study and text memorization combined with high parental expectations and restrictions on leisure and romance. For many educators and households, the price of this system is its suppression of youthful interests along with the curbing of a carefree and playful childhood.[6] In the last three decades, the Ministry of Education, along with the initiative of specific schools, have experimented with new methods, but it has yet to produce a nationwide substitute for managing the population in a meritocratic fashion.

The critique of the *gaokao* system stems from people's experiences, while it also conveys changing ideas on self-realization and well-being. A dominant influence on public opinion has been reforms of "education for quality" (*suzhi jiaoyu*) that accompanied the expansion of public education since the late 1990s. These reforms, addressed by several chapters in our volume, have elevated model qualities such as creativity and emotional expression in the promotion of productive and self-reliant citizens. These reforms

6 As a professor of politics in Qinghua University named Li Yu argues, in a view that resonates well in Chinese society that this is an existential problem in China: Why do so many youths experience depression and anxiety? This is because the mismatch between their interest, personality, characteristics and the disciplines and jobs they choose. When one does a job that she or he doesn't like it is like "walking other's path and pretending this is our own."

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have also increasingly intertwined with the proliferation of psychological expertise in China, demonstrating what Nehring and Frawley (2020) term the "psychological imagination," namely ways in which social issues become interpreted as properties and responsibilities of individuals. In China, like several other societies in dramatic socio-economic transition, this ideology and its associated practices are also emblematic of "modernity" (e.g. Matza 2012; Vorhölter 2019). Yet new practices are also highlighting for many people a reality of social contradictions, as they identify enduring factors that suppress individual autonomy, including the *gaokao* and attributes of interpersonal ethics, such as *guanxi* (social networking) and maintaining "face".

Concerns about the education system prevail among young adults and further influence self-development agendas, which become a more deliberate and viable phenomenon after high school. Many individuals continue to distinguish between mainstream paths prescribed by parents or state institutions and their more individuated or market-oriented possibilities. University students, for example, increasingly engage in extracurricular activities such as volunteering, university clubs and internships as they are dissatisfied with the value of classroom teaching for their authentic learning and professional competence (Hizi 2019; Sum 2018). This situation combines a type of multitasking entrepreneurial attitude with the fear of unemployment among university graduates. In recent years, the number of graduates has increased by 10 to 15% yearly (Guo 2022), which led the Ministry of Education to form solutions as well as encourage student entrepreneurship (for more, see Fumian, chapter 2, and Morell Hjortshøj, chapter 3 in this volume). In other words, the economies of credentials and financial resources overlap only to a limited degree.

In contrast with employment uncertainty, individuals also experience social pressures and responsibilities in association with households and state institutions. Filial piety (*xiao*), for example, continues to guide the motivations of individuals in their attempts to climb the social ladder and achieve maximum prestige for their households.[7] While filial piety does not entail the same level of submission to authority as it was in the past, harmonious familial relationships are treated as central for people's well-being, seen as an indispensable virtue in social life, a unique site for social trust in belonging during an era of privatization (Yan 2016) and, since 2013, also as a legal duty (National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China

7 Susanne Bregnbæk (2016), for example, describes dilemmas between self-realization and self-sacrifice of students in elite universities who construe their pressures through their parents' expectations.

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2012). In the symbolic underpinnings of many young individuals, parental views are also seen as congruent with the state sector and its provision of "stable" employment, supposedly at the expense of individual "growth" and "self-improvement" (Hsu 2005). In practice, many individuals negotiate and combine different possibilities and credentials. For example, many high-achieving students in high school and university subscribe to Party membership to improve their resumes (Yan 2014), or take the examination for Party officials as a possible employment trajectory (Li 2020).

If the years of higher education and early employment bring forth a new form of navigation between different options and pressures, the mid-twenties tend to also incorporate long-term decisions of household ownership and marriage. Financial pressures rise with the imperative to purchase apartments for many individuals, particularly men. For women, this period often marks a shift from the self-making person who aspires academic and professional success to becoming a wife and mother for whom excessive individual achievements can become a flaw. Some women treat marriage and motherhood as paths for self-realization (Zavoretti 2014), while others try to find new activities to compensate for the possible restriction of their freedom in their new households. Another challenge shaping self-development, met by both men and women, is overwork culture, recently termed in China as the "996" phenomenon (working from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week). While some people experience the benefits of the market economy in terms of promotions, accumulation and a sense of innovation, questions on well-being and self-cultivation re-emerge. Within their limited free time, individuals often seek to nurture themselves with knowledge and capacities beyond their professional tasks. Sometimes, as Qian and Bram demonstrate in their chapter on "involution" (*neijuan*) (chapter 11 in this volume), the commitment to alternative practices and lifestyles may also entail new pressures.

Along with the challenges attributed to specific life stages, the current era is laden with everyday dilemmas regarding personal morality and value. Individuals cannot disavow the value of credentials in their mainstream pathways of education and employment, but often also seek more intangible and wholesome personal growth which they could carry across social domains and projects. The narratives of exemplary tycoons in China, Ma Yun (Jack Ma) being the most celebrated, emphasize that they were talented outliers whose triumph was independent of the Chinese educational system. These narratives thus combine standards of success and value with the psychological imagination. A related lived dilemma relates to forms of self-presentation. While young individuals are today

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more encouraged by employers and teachers to brand themselves assertively through social interaction and online media, there is a concomitant concern with superficiality and fakeness that accompanies these endeavours (e.g. Osburg 2013). *Zhilai zhiwang* (literally meaning "The job comes and goes" and officially called in English *Hired You*), a reality show about job recruitment that is co-produced by Jiangsu Television and the China Education Channel, illustrates this dynamic. In it the recruiting judges express contradictory views on the values of mainstream credentials, special interests, personality and presentation style in their evaluation of candidates. In social life, people in China frequently identify mismatch between cultivating their so-called authentic self and the requirement to signal their value.

The phenomena overviewed above are pertinent to most people in Chinese society, from children to the middle aged. Urbanization, the expansion of public education and the accessibility of entertainment and social media draw people from all walks of life to standardized forms of value along with the influence of new practices and expertise. At the same time, the glass ceilings and contradictions in paths of self-development tend to be more acute for individuals of impoverished backgrounds, due to issues such as residence permits in cities, lack of housing, generational gaps, linguistic capacities and expressive styles. These issues and others are captured by the terms at the centre of our chapters.

Keyword approach

Our volume is organized around twelve Chinese terms with which people in China express the features, meanings and objectives of their self-development and produce necessary commitments. The sources of these terms vary from state campaigns, popular entertainment, self-help expertise and internet neologisms.

The main inspiration for analyzing keywords as a lens for social phenomena is Raymond Williams's (1976) seminal work. Williams selected English nouns of wide usage across different historical periods, pointing out how meanings have changed and been enriched through various sociopolitical processes. He discussed terms like "culture," "work" and "aesthetics." The former, for example, has evolved from signifying a process of growth (as in "bacteria culture") applied to societies, to the expansion of certain features of the social organization across a given population, in turn becoming tied to the idea of "civilization" during the Enlightenment period. Later, ideas about the "diversity" of populations adjoined, later expanding to subcultures,

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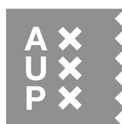
as well as to certain fields of social life (art, entertainment, gastronomy). Thus, "culture" has multiple coexisting meanings, which can also intersect, for example, when comparing the different societies' level of "development" or stating how communities imprint some fields in social life. To add to Williams's overview, in Anglophone corporate capitalism today, "culture" is also used to define the character and viability of enterprises, again merging notions of pluralism with value judgements. As this example illustrates, "keywords" are terms of social currency that absorb and constitute dominant ideological trends. This type of analysis prioritizes semantic processes through lived realities and material conditions over linguistic orthodoxies.

Two texts from recent years exemplify distinct types of keyword analysis of Chinese society. One is a historical academic volume edited by Wai-yee Li and Yuri Pines, *Keywords in Chinese Culture* (2020), which focuses on words that have guided political action and ethics across different dynasties. It is a volume on changing semantic fields, shaped by different schools of thought within the concerns of specific eras, while also "transcending" stark conceptual divisions between different historical periods in the analysis of cultural processes (Li 2020, 38–40). A second, non-academic text, is author Yu Hua's *Shige cihui li de zhongguo* (2010), published in English as *China in Ten Words* (2011). This book combines personal memories with social critique as it illuminates the unique combination of state apparatus and the market economy in a society fraught with contradictions. Yu Hua's reflections depict the hollowness and disenchantment associated with official positivism (in terms such as *lingdao*, "leader," or *renmin*, "the people"), along with colloquial commentary on corrupting habits (e.g. *shanzai*, translated in the English version as "copycat," or *huyou*, translated as "bamboozle").[8]

Our volume is academic in style but, similar to Yu Hua, it captures language as a mirror of the contemporary moment. Since we treat self-development as a central dimension for people's self-understanding and life trajectories in China today, we identify the relevant practices and the language at play as mutually constitutive. Our empirical attention to the lived reality prevents us from prioritizing a specific type of word, such as official slogans or media-friendly buzzwords; instead, we open our framework to various inputs. As in Williams's examples, some of our words extend from earlier periods to the present while others have a shorter lifespan as speakers

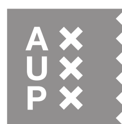
8 These examples, in a book that was probably more directed at foreign readers compared to his novels, introduce readers to "cultural rich points" (Agar 1994), which are terms with high local usage and elaboration and whose meanings depends on the distinct context of Chinese society.



try to highlight novelty. In political discourse, this variance can be seen in comparing the continuous usage in the post-imperial period of the term *fendou* (struggle) (see Fumian, chapter 2 in this volume), which signifies the proactive striving by citizens and the nation in a competitive social climate, and the term *mengxiang* (dreams) (see Morell Hjortshøj, chapter 3 in this volume), which gained currency through Xi Jinping's political campaigns, with attention to the timely value of happiness as a development goal.

Overall, we comprise an ecology of emic signifiers that tend to circulate through different groups and discursive fields. Although each author introduces a unique case study, our goal is not to classify words according to bounded social categories but rather to show tropes that cut across wide portions of Chinese society. While gender, age, social class, geography and ethnicity impact how people practice self-development, some concerns and objectives are produced by dominant state apparatuses and shared existential challenges. Keywords in this sense are not solely terms of high linguistic frequency in social systems, but also operate as symbols with practical deployment in understanding the social order and affecting it. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner's (1973) term "elaborating symbols" (within the wider category of "key symbols") illuminates this attribute. Such symbols, which include linguistic definitions, metaphors and ritual objects, assist in "sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to oneself" (1973, 1340). In self-development, terms that stress qualities of the person one wishes to become or the necessary procedures and attitudes in this path have this practical component. Compared to Ortner's emphasis on homogenous moral priorities within given societies, in today's China some dominant symbols are often in conflict with one another, and, moreover, terms can be deployed to reorganize, rather than reinforce, social categories. In fact, most of the keywords we present carry some transformative meaning in a period where the relationship between the individual and society is ontologically unstable. The words we present are communicated to envision social change, to constitute new educational practices or to promote values that are seen to be in social deficit.

By paying attention to emic social usage of terms, the authors of this volume describe people's experiences and values via self-development and how self-development is, in turn, constituted. These studies describe a dynamic application of terms, shaped by cultural complexity and change, as well as multiple inputs and media formats through which ideas and values circulate. The discursive limitations set by the autocratic state or standardized market mechanisms take place alongside a significant degree of creativity, reflection and social collaborations.



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Our chapters

The following chapters dissect different scenes and practices conducive to self-development. We mostly focus on individuals in post-childhood age groups who can deliberate and navigate their pursuits to a meaningful degree. We identify keywords and their hermeneutic and affective properties within self-development paths.

The volume is divided into four sections, which stand for the different types of keywords at play. Part I, "Developmentalist Thinking," presents terms that link China's modernization, as framed by official discourse and intellectuals throughout the past century, and individuals' striving for self-transformation. The first two chapters show the continuity and malleability of terms from the New Cultural movement through Maoism and the era of economic of reforms. In chapter 1, Marius Meinhof begins with the term "lagging behind" (*luohou*), which has served reformers throughout different periods in defining the underdeveloped aspects of the Chinese nation. *Luohou* illustrates an evaluative-comparative perspective that ranks groups, regions and nations within hegemonic models of modernization, which Meinhof terms "colonial temporality." Following the various deployments of the term, from seminal texts of the New Cultural Movement up to online debates today, *luohou* has triggered a drive for catching up through self-improvement to date. While *luohou* offers the diagnosis, chapter 2 by Marco Fumian highlights the revolutionary prescription—"struggle" (*fendou*). *Fendou* illustrates the social Darwinist logic attached to the colonial temporality described by Meinhof. Reformers such as Liang Qichao, Chen Duxiu and Li Zehou conceptualized a dynamic social body laden with antagonistic elements, some of which need to be eliminated in the rejuvenation of society and the nation, a logic that became ever more fundamental to political action during Maoism. Today, with the rise of individualistic concerns, *fendou* does not dissipate as a principle for action but rather captures capitalist competition via self-interest. Fumian looks at educational reforms and books of "success studies" (*chenggongxue*), identifying the extension of the Darwinist logic in the market economy. The final chapter of this section focuses on "dreams" (*mengxiang*), describing how an official slogan is produced rather than recycled, as in the case of the preceding chapters. More specifically, in chapter 3 Naja Morell Hjortshøj identifies how the discourse of *mengxiang*, as promoted through Xi's "China Dream" (*zhongguo meng*) campaign, brings together the contemporary importance of "happiness" (*xingfu*) with market-driven aspirations. This chapter describes entrepreneurship classes in universities in Shanghai and

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their messages that they convey through model teacher-businesspersons. *Mengxiang* is used pedagogically to catalyse students' self-discovery and individuation, while it also forms an imagined link between personal and social development.

While the first section examines the biography of terms that are embedded in official campaigns, the following sections expand our ethnographic attention to individuals' undertakings. Part II, "Transformative Frameworks," introduces keywords that define transformative processes at the centre of self-development, all of which take place to a large degree in group pedagogies. Chapter 4, by Anna Iskra, focuses on "emotional release" (*qingxu shifang*), a term that guides a genre of psychotherapeutic programmes named Body, Mind & Spirit (*shen xin ling*). The value and interactive attributes of *qinxu shifang* emerge in the intersection of globalized positive psychology with its focus on individual flourishing, the recent state discourse of "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*) that prescribes conformist-proactive citizenship and the legacy of Maoist group practices that produced emotional intensity. These emotional workshops risk becoming merely technologies of governance that deny systemic problems or, alternatively, bounded commercial getaways. Yet Iskra, through participant observations in such activities in Shenzhen, notes how participants' emotional experiences complicate these reductionist forces and bypass some of the monotonous attributes of self-development. Chapter 5 extends the importance of the body through fitness activities and the role of "exercise" (*duanlian*) among white-collar urban women. Author Xinyan Peng shows how *duanlian* fosters labour productivity, while it is also practised to sustain women's vitality and exceed their prescribed gendered roles in the household or workplace. For women, these workouts entail a thrilling, yet often impossible, quest of transcending predicaments imposed by the entanglement of the market and patriarchal forces, where strong core muscles mark their accomplishment. The final chapter of this section, chapter 6, moves from productive bodies to classical learning. Canglong Wang follows the alternative education movement of *dujing* (reading the classics), highlighting the term "education for transformation" (*jiaohua*) that captures for practitioners accomplished and moral learning. This pedagogical scene is characterized by its critique of public education, instead trying to promote Confucian virtue ethics which imprint more fully on the individual person. Wang shows how this logic expands in China to self-developing endeavours beyond education per se, while at the same time market forces also delimit some of its idealistic agendas.

After presenting frameworks for self-development, our volume moves to part III, "Empowering Ingredients" within people's ongoing pursuits.

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Following a metaphor expressed by a student interviewee of Heger-Laube (chapter 10), these are elements of "seasoning" (*tiaoliao*) that should be added in the right quantity to perfect one's self-development. Chapter 7 by Liisa Kohonen discusses "ability" (*nengli*) as a quality in which rural Chinese and, more specifically, middle-aged women from Yunnan's Tengchong County, identify their value within their marginalized social position. People in this setting express the term "having ability" (*you nengli*), often without naming more specific talents, to indicate a general sense of "craftiness," social influence and financial resilience, in contrast to the more urban-oriented parameter of "educational qualifications" (*xueli*). Thus, the language of *nengli* elevates the agency of rural groups as they reconceptualize the meanings of self-development with practical and locally recognizable attributes, even if it does not make individuals immune to more dominant hierarchies of value. Chapter 8 presents another moral ingredient, "loving heart" (*aixin*), which has become central in various practices of self-cultivation in China by combining ideas from Confucianism and Christianity. The authors, Dan Wu and Yang Zhan, describe *aixin*'s prominence among young volunteers in rural development projects. These volunteers illustrate a double process of expanding *aixin* through their deeds, which carry universalist-humanitarian undertones, while experiencing their own self-development by stepping outside comfort zones (a process which the authors term "deep travel"). This endeavour thus combines physical movement and interaction with strangers while prompting the individual self. Next, in chapter 9 by Gil Hizi, we turn to the related term "appreciation" (*xinshang*), through which educators and young adults capture an elusive sensibility that can supposedly make the difference between narrow-minded or mediocre lifestyles to a rich moral experience conducive of self-development. Hizi juxtaposes educational texts that promote artistic *xinshang* classes for children, the scholarship of Cai Yuanpei on aesthetic education and commentary by young urban adults who attend workshops for interpersonal skills. Accordingly, *xinshang* conveys a modernist enlightenment perspective, much in tandem with the official developmentalist terminology, but is also constantly applied to critique and divert from the seeming mechanical, conformist and materialistic features of Chinese social life. Whereas *xinshang* is seen as an intangible ingredient that enhances agency, the following chapter focuses on the deployment of an external factor—"fated chance" (*yuanfen*)—in the ways people reckon with their life paths, achievements and failures. Based on interviews with university students in Shanghai, chapter 10 by Isabel Heger-Laube describes contemporary understandings of *yuanfen* while noting its meanings in Chinese indigenous psychology. Far from being conducive to

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passivity, Heger-Laube shows how the ability to move between fatalistic and voluntaristic views can be seen as a form of agency, and, moreover, also allows people, at times, to overcome pitfalls in their relationships and self-development.

The role of "*yuanfen*" in young adults' self-understanding, albeit rather agentic in Heger-Laube's observation, still demonstrates limits to proactive design under changing and uncontrollable conditions. The last section of this volume, part IV, "Disillusionment," illuminates the growing doubts and despair among Chinese people, and their manifestations in public discourse. Chapter 11 by Linda Qian and Barclay Bram introduces the term "involution" (*neijuan*), which has become popular in China recently in depicting the dark side of "self-development." *Neijuan* captures the self-destructive consequences of aspirational pursuits, pinpointing emotional stress and restlessness, in affinity to the condition of "restlessness" (*fuzao*) and more globalized notions of professional "burnout." Combining two case studies, psychotherapeutic training in Chengdu and rural revitalization projects in southern Zhejiang, this chapter records people's commentary about their *neijuan* condition and its causes, as well as how they mitigate this experience, be it managing their emotions via psychology or movement away from cities. *Neijuan* here is accompanied by shifts in projects and priorities, while also paving way into new self-developing trajectories that can produce stress once again. Chapter 12 by Mieke Matthyssen, the final chapter of the book, introduces the most subversive keyword of this volume—"lying flat" (*tangping*), which has become synonymous with certain online groups. People who advocate *tangping* seek to realize slower life rhythms and suspension of various projects, even if their online representations are often more extreme than their actual lifestyles. This chapter provides an overview of the genesis and principles of this movement and the commentary about it in China. Matthyssen identifies in the *tangping* discourse new openings towards life balance that can enliven important principles from long-standing Chinese philosophies.

Our twelve chapters and keywords seek to unravel the multifaceted features of self-development, paying attention to the content of this ethos and how it takes shape through various social institutions and structural change. Clearly, these keywords are dynamic in lived meaning and communicative effects, able to absorb new purposes or associations with additional objects and terms. As Williams (1976, 22) suggests, keywords tend to appear in "clusters," forming linguistic nexuses that can signify values, identities and milieus. *Luohou* operates alongside "civilized" (*wenming*) and "development" (*fazhan*), *mengxiang* intersect with "happiness" (*xingfu*), *qingxu shifang* is

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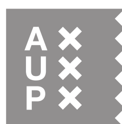
inseparable from "psychology" (*xinli*) and *zheng nengliang*, and in the current moment *neijuan* and *tangping* frequently appear together. Through our keyword-centred chapters we seek to illuminate the connections between meaning, communication and practice that underline self-development at this specific moment in mainland China.

The current sociopolitical landscape

As these lines are written in late 2022, economic slowdown is a prominent reality in China as the threat of the pandemic and lockdowns persists. During the 2010s, China experienced a slow decline in economic growth, but sustained an annual increase of 6–7% in gross domestic product (GDP) prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, before a drastic drop in 2020 and temporary recovery in 2021 (World Bank and OECD 2022a). A growth rate above 5% seems less sustainable today, even after all lockdowns dissipate. On a positive note, China still manages to grow in GDP while many other countries are undergoing recessions, primarily due to its internal production and consumer power. The downside, which is perhaps more significant anthropologically, is that China's GDP per capita, approximately USD 11,000 annually, remains well behind that of so-called developed countries (e.g. one-third of Korea, one-fifth of Australia, one-sixth of the US and one-eighth of Norway) (World Bank and OECD 2022b; World Bank and OECD 2022c). When considering, moreover, socio-economic gaps across regions in China, it is clear that the average citizen is far from wealthy by national, regional and global standards. In the current conditions, Xi and the CCP continue to promote their vision for creating a "well-off" (*xiaokang*) society where the middle-class population exemplifies for the rest the prospects of continuous reform. At the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017, Xi (2017) declared what has been called the "2050 China" plan: achieving "socialist modernization" (*shehuizhuyi xiandaihua*) by 2035, including providing "access to basic public services" to the rural Chinese population and, later, realizing "common prosperity" (*gongtong fuyu*) for the entire population by 2050. This, unsurprisingly, is accompanied in Xi's vision with advancement in science, military, governance, "civility" and China's "soft power." Xi buttressed this priority of domestic security further in his announcements at the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, leaving room for further speculation about China's economic prospects.

Overall, then, the Chinese population has experienced a unique combination of national pride and social development, along with inequality and



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the need to catch up with perceived progress. In addition to uncertainties regarding the economic dimension, in the last few years, the state has taken unprecedented measures against various components of the market economy. The year 2021 was marked as a state crackdown on the tech industry with new penalties, prohibition of stock offerings and curbing "monopolies" (see Wu 2022). This is interpreted in China as the suppression of tech industries that are less conducive to national development than scientific or military developers, and possibly also as an attempt to reduce the "996" phenomenon. During this period, state agencies also intensified regulation in other domains. For example, the phenomenon of Chinese online celebrities and their "fan circles" (*fanquan*) was criticized in a report by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and a campaign by the "Cyberspace Administration of China." This pertains to online commercial pages of stars and competition between fan groups, which can allegedly prompt "rumours," "online trolling" and unhealthy financial investments (Xinhua News Agency 2021). Another, more tangible policy for most Chinese households, has been the shutdown of most providers of profit-driven extracurricular education (*peixun*), within the agenda of decreasing the burden of school and extracurricular tasks on children (known as the goal of "double reduction," *shuangjian*). This new priority responds to the impossible-to-satisfy demand for educational success and the high costs charged by the afternoon schools, while at the same time risks the emergence of more informal practices due to enduring competition, not to mention the newly unemployed *peixun* personnel.

These various policies and reports are open to different interpretations from China and abroad, ranging from scepticism about their implementation to identifying a new "Cultural Revolution." While former Australian prime minister and scholar of China Kevin Rudd (2021) warns of an expanding "red thread" that bolsters authoritarian rule, some commentators in China envision less corrupted and more egalitarian prospects. Columnist Li Guangman (2021), for example, in a publication that spread via state media organs, celebrates "a return from 'capitalist cliques' to the People," where "capital markets will no longer be [a] paradise for get-rich-quick capitalists, cultural markets will no longer be heaven for sissy-boy stars, and news and public opinion will no longer be in the position of worshipping western culture." While this revisionist attitude is not rare in China, people of all standpoints need to adjust to these changes, including avoiding practices and products that were previously legitimized, and even promoted, by the state. Overall, capitalist models for profit and growth seem to continue to dominate Chinese society, possibly with greater inconsistency yet without a

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solid ideological substitute other than development, national rejuvenation and vague "common prosperity."

People in China, and especially the younger generations, are reckoning with recent developments, recalibrating their self-developing strategies when needed and, at times, also expressing more cynicism towards their position in the social order. Terms such as *neijuan* and *tangping* take shape in association with a wide phenomenon called "grieving culture" (*sang wenhua*), whereby individuals express their helpless state due to overwork and the false promise of social mobility. Literature scholar Liu Xinting (2020, 109) identifies *sang wenhua* as a form of resistance that involves self-mockery, where people "use creative culture as a form of social reproduction as a 'paralysed' attack against the success stories of effortful struggle" (*fenjin pinbo de chenggong gushi*). Online expressions of *sang wenhua*, according to Liu, embrace speakers' "loser" status as they realize that they cannot change value standards, but they still experience resistance through modifying their individual attitudes (2020, 109). This phenomenon thrives in China while facing criticism from state actors and educators. For some commentators, the problem lies in the moral void and laziness of youth rather than economic hardship. In an online article published in 2021 that went viral, Gui Yong (2022), a sociologist at Fudan University, identifies a problem that emanates from the fact that young people's basic needs are fully satisfied (*wenbao* and *fenyu*). He dissects the rise of ultra-individualism, where young people "not only 'live for oneself' but also approach and understand the world through the individualized experience." Gui portrays a picture that involves depreciation of hard work, inability to face social constraints and helplessness, combined with an ideological void that leads people to turn towards "extreme" groups (such as *fanquan*) in a religious fashion.

Sang wenhua and its opposing views are a characteristic of the current moment even if some questions about the morality and productivity of the young have re-emerged in different periods of social change.[9] Throughout the Reform era, positivism and self-development have been cast by official discourses and associated expertise as prerequisites for good citizenship, even if some implicit dialogue between grassroot voices and policymakers might be taking place. Individuals' happiness and desires are evermore

9 For example, in the 1980s social debates in China addressed the emerging *liumang* phenomenon, which literally means "hooliganism" but which expanded to capture urban rootlessness, drifters and a subsequent literature genre of escapism and social critique (see Barmé 1992). The *liumang* proponents responded to urban experiences of social alienation and moral corruption and were subsequently criticized in the state press for their lack of productivity as economic actors and citizens.

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central in mainstream discourse today, while new conservative trends emerge as many Chinese politicians and intellectuals seek to distinguish themselves from so-called postmodern and hyper-individualistic global tendencies. For Chinese people, this dualism can produce new forms of nationalism or, alternatively, different behaviours and values across different social settings.

Our case studies look at social phenomena in the few years building up to 2022, as well as incorporate additional findings. We bring forth ongoing and novel dilemmas within self-development, as well as a new attempt to define what type of lifestyles are worth pursuing under contemporary conditions. We hope that readers interested in China gain fresh insights from the following chapters and appreciate the opportunity, like we had, to feel the life pulse of many interesting and thought-provoking individuals.

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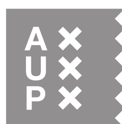
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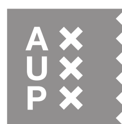

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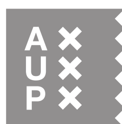
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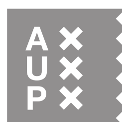

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Author biography

Gil Hizi is a postdoctoral fellow and lecturer in Anthropology at Goethe University Frankfurt. Work on this volume was conducted during his Humboldt Fellowship at the Global South Studey Centre, University of Cologne. He studies social change in China, focusing on the nexus of personhood, emotions and interpersonal ethics, and the ways it is configured by educational and psychotherapeutic practices.

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