Performance management: Western universities, Chinese entrepreneurs and students on stage

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At the start of the 2013 film *American Dreams in China* (Chan, 2013), we meet an ambitious youth named Cheng, and watch as he fails to obtain a visa to attend graduate school in the US. Cheng is a fictional version of Yu Minhong, founder of China's largest private educational company, New Oriental. We see Cheng wandering the streets of Beijing, his dreams crushed, reading Dale Carnegie's seminal works of self-help psychology. In the film, as in reality, the frustrated student transforms into an educational entrepreneur. Cheng founds a chain of English schools in which teachers address packed auditoriums with the enthusiastic performances of self-help gurus. These teachers model a passionate, confident style of self-presentation, a performance that might help some of their students gain admission to universities in the US. We see Cheng, now comfortably seated in his executive office, advising a student that 'Confidence is the most basic requirement of American Culture' (Chan, 2013).

Social theorists have described self-assurance and internal motivation as key characteristics of the entrepreneurial (Bröckling, 2016) or enterprising self (Rose, 1999). This neoliberal figure takes risks, invests in themself, and builds a personal brand. In this chapter, I suggest that the ability to perform this kind of subject is valuable less as an entrepreneurial asset than as a form of cultural capital. By examining how students from China learn to perform for US universities, we can reveal how affects of confidence and passion are not only embedded in neoliberal ideologies of self-making, but are also written into cultural scripts for performing one's identity. The ability to put on this performance has become a global currency, and, for many students worldwide, it is a precondition for receiving an elite education.

Studying how Chinese students learn to sell themselves to foreign universities can also illuminate forms of affective work that academics perform on a daily basis. In classrooms on and offline, at conferences and in grant applications, academics are performers. Academics are not only called on to perform well on quantifiable metrics of academic productivity,

but also to perform their 'academicity' (Petersen, 2007; Brunila, 2016) in everyday settings by displaying qualities that mark their belonging and their worth. Academics also perform for the public, giving short presentations on stage or in front of a video camera. As they sell themselves and their ideas, enterprising academics become adept at a particular affective repertoire. By regularly 'staging academic identity', scholars exercise the 'affective musculature' (see Chapter 9, this book) needed to convey their solid scholarship and social impact in the accepted language of visible confidence and enthusiastic passion.

In China, secondary and tertiary students who want to study abroad are training these same affective muscles. College application consultants and programmes run by foreign universities are teaching Chinese students how to construct their identity in terms that are legible to US institutions. In addition, a cohort of young Chinese entrepreneurs, often returned from studying abroad, is teaching their peers how to embody personal qualities that can help their academic careers. I classify these young educators as social entrepreneurs, since they seek to address social problems through for-profit enterprises. Although these entrepreneurs are in the business of education, they view themselves as cultural activists and modernising reformers. By promoting an entrepreneurial individualism, they set themselves against Chinese families and schools, and a cultural tradition that they view as inimical to personal autonomy. Because autonomy signals modernity and membership in an international elite, Chinese youth are susceptible to interpellation as insufficiently confident and passionate. This post-colonial and class-based shame provides revenues for Western higher education institutions as well as opportunities for educational entrepreneurs.

This chapter will introduce several young Chinese entrepreneurs, who I met between 2012 and 2014 while conducting ethnographic research on self-help psychology in Beijing. Educational entrepreneurs in China often have links with self-help culture, which provides arguments for the importance of inner passions and personal convictions. In addition, popular self-help training programmes teach techniques for developing a confident style of self-presentation, often through public speaking. My research focused on why youth in self-help groups are trying to become confident, extrovert and 'interesting'. I discovered that group members often discuss how the flaws of Chinese education have stunted their own personal development. They often contrast their experiences with a foreign, Western education that they imagine could have nurtured their individual passions, thus helping them to develop self-confidence (Hampel, 2017, 2020).

In this chapter, I focus on several episodes from my fieldwork, all of which centre on educational entrepreneurs. These figures model the kind of subject that US universities are seeking to recruit, and they illustrate the kind of affective training that Chinese students undergo as they prepare to study

abroad. Many Chinese students appear as neoliberal subjects: they are adept at self-management and invest in themselves. However, they lack forms of cultural capital that appear as objectively valuable affective registers. Affects produce economic effects not only because discourses of passionate, engaged work can be used to extract labour, including from idealistic or alienated Chinese youth (Zhang, 2015), but also because these discourses entrench social privilege and Western cultural hegemony. Critics have analysed how discourses of self-realisation are closely tied to social class (Kusserow, 2004; Tokumitsu, 2015). In addition, scholars have shown how US educators regard certain ways of speaking (Cameron, 2002) and feeling (Jung, 2007) as more rational or professional based on their cultural biases. This chapter will show how US universities seek students who can perform entrepreneurial selfhood not only because they are greatly influenced by capitalist ideology, but also due to cultural frameworks that value liberal ideals of authenticity and autonomy, and also specify what these qualities should look like.

This chapter highlights how students and academics are evaluated on their ability to present themselves using a standardised affective repertoire. Since a confident and passionate style of self-presentation signals belonging in a liberal and Western elite, the ability to display these affects shapes college admissions and academic careers, as well as how people view themselves. Additionally, I hope to draw attention to how this regime of subjectification is spreading worldwide as US higher education institutions, and their graduates, work to reproduce the value of particular affects. Because forms of self-presentation vary widely, asking a seemingly simple question, 'Tell me about yourself', can be a form of cultural imperialism.

Entrepreneurial students as academic commodities

As the largest market for international education, China plays a key role in academic capitalism. Universities are busily setting up study abroad programmes and branch campuses worldwide. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed this global expansion, branch campuses have continued to operate in-person or online. As of 2017, universities had established at least 249 international branch campuses: institutions from the US and UK have established the most, while China hosts the greatest number of campuses (Escriva–Beltran et al, 2019). In addition to 12 foreign universities with campuses in China, approximately 1,000 foreign higher education institutions are operating academic programmes in cooperation with local universities (Mok, 2021).

Most of these programmes have opened since 2010, as the Chinese middle classes expanded at the same time that Western universities were seeking new sources of revenue and prestige. Although there are geopolitical motivations for international educational expansion (Wilkins, 2020), Western university

leaders generally view internationalisation primarily as a source of income (Waters, 2006; Robertson, 2010), a tool for branding (Kleibert, 2021) and a platform for recruitment. Branch campuses often direct undergraduate students back to the main campuses for part of their programme, or for graduate studies (Wilkins, 2020: 316). Thus, international campuses are potential sources of academic talent, and they also help generate a cosmopolitan identity that has value for the home institution and its students.

China is not only the top site for branch campuses, but also by far the largest source of international students. Every year hundreds of thousands of Chinese students study abroad, with large numbers going to Australia, the UK, Canada and especially the US. These countries attract students because English is commonly studied in China, and because the US and UK dominate university rankings, which are themselves the products of national and institutional power (Pusser and Marginson, 2013; Ordorika and Lloyd, 2015). Over a third of study abroad students in the UK, Australia and the US are from China (Altbach, 2019). Because these students typically pay full tuition, many university budgets now depend on them (Bound et al, 2020); administrators are anxious about demographic, political or technological developments that could reduce these enrolments (Altbach, 2019). As cash and intellectual talent flow to Western countries, international education reinforces international hierarchies (Hansen and Thøgersen, 2015) while deepening social stratification within the sending countries. Many students who enrol in foreign universities or programmes are not only looking for quality professional or academic training, but also for an education that marks them as members of the social elite (Waters, 2007; Fong, 2011; Tsang, 2013).

As Chinese students compete for admittance to selective universities abroad, they are both consumers and commodities. Educational consultants in China teach students how to market themselves by crafting personal narratives that are easily intelligible to admissions officers abroad. These consultants instruct students to demonstrate their internal motivation and authentic enthusiasm through their personal statements and in admissions interviews. These performances draw on subjects' capacity to be affected by their own ideas, morals and convictions, and to respond to display these affects vigorously and visibly. Thus, as they write their admissions essays, students are already anticipating forms of contemporary academic labour that involve selling one's personal passion and social consciousness.

As academics scramble for jobs and grants, they sell themselves as confident innovators, eager to change the world. These sales pitch are moral claims, declarations of virtuous and hard-working, idealism. Popular advice on writing US research statements and grant applications tells applicants to position themselves as 'heroes' (Kelsky, 2015). To borrow from Erving Goffman's analysis of everyday life as a performance, academics are regularly called on to act as 'merchants of morality' (1959: 251). As academics are called

on not only to reflect on, but also to publicise their social impact, academic work draws close to social entrepreneurship. For social entrepreneurs, idealism is both a source of conviction and a marketing strategy. The social entrepreneur is a recent figure; however, the practice of presenting passionate convictions to an interlocutor has a long and complex history in Euro-American culture. Through this history, public speaking has become linked not only to entrepreneurship, but also to liberal ideals of citizenship (Boromisza-Habashi et al, 2016). Carefully managed self-presentation, often focused on innovation and social impact, has become integral to academic careers in an age of mass media and personal branding.

The TED Talk is a paradigmatic example of a contemporary academic commodity, a format enabling scholar entrepreneurs to sell their ideas in an easily consumed package (Shumar, 2016). Universities encourage academics to produce extremely short presentations of complex research. For example, since 2008 competitions for 3-minute research presentations have become popular worldwide (Rossette-Crake, 2020: 576). Competitive speakers not only sell their intellectual achievements, but also usually refer to a higher justification for their work (Rossette-Crake, 2020: 580). Scholars are pushed to polish their work down even further, to an elevator pitch. At conferences, as the number of participants has boomed, the time for presenting and discussing research has shrunk (Parker and Welk, 2014: 175). Ideas and topics become taglines in these crowded markets. These forms of public self-presentation, by academics, administrators and students, have a clear affinity with capitalist logics of commodification, competition and branding. Universities are extremely concerned with their image (see Chapter 1, this book), and advertising research findings is beneficial for the university. Thus, academics' efforts to present their research to a broader audience advance both their own careers and their university's image.

Subject to similar logics, Chinese youth who want to study at competitive international universities realise the importance of staging a confident, passionate identity. If they have difficulty performing these affects on cue, they often regard this as a personal failing. There is a huge market for teaching entrepreneurial, Western styles of self-presentation in China. Steep social hierarchies and intense educational competition lead Chinese students to anxiously search for competitive advantages, including the cultural capital needed to perform their identity to foreigners in an intelligible and appealing manner. In addition, for urban Chinese youth, autonomous, passionate self-making appear modern and cosmopolitan. In Western countries, passion for one's work is a mark of social distinction (Tokumitsu, 2015; McRobbie, 2016), as is the confidence that comes from privileged belonging: while both of these affects figure prominently in normative therapeutic discourses, their relation to social hierarchies is often disguised. In China, however, discourses

of modernity and progress explicitly align these elite forms of selfhood with a moralised project of national rejuvenation through self-improvement.

Educational entrepreneurs in China often regard themselves as cultural reformers, since they hope to teach creative expression and personal conviction in a culture that they see as inimical to individual autonomy. In foreign, elite forms of self-presentation, these entrepreneurs see empowerment and liberation. On the other hand, when foreign institutions address them as lacking in creativity or autonomy, post-colonial shame in relation to imagined, confident Westerners make Chinese youth eager to reform themselves. Like youth in self-help groups, by focusing our discussion on affects we risk mystifying social class and neocolonial relationships. However, by viewing affect as a form of cultural capital, we can analyse how class is reproduced through everyday, embodied experiences of anxiety and power that support industries including self-help psychology and college application consulting, industries that are explicitly selling affective training. First, we examine a conference where Chinese students were preparing to apply to US universities. Then, in order to get a sense of the cultural politics that are attached to self-presentation within China, we meet two young, US-educated entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs are referred to by pseudonyms.

'Tell me about yourself'

In the summer of 2013, I attended a conference in Beijing that was organised by several Chinese undergraduates. They put together this two-day event with the aim of helping outstanding high school students apply to foreign universities. The organisers invited several speakers, and enlisted the services of a large educational consulting firm that helps students apply to study in the US. Over lunch, I ask one of the main organisers of the conference, a college student back from the US for summer vacation, why he wanted to put together this event. He tells me that Chinese students are poorly prepared for studying abroad. He says that because they often don't choose their field of study, Chinese students lack passion and therefore don't excel in their studies. The organiser explains that he is particularly concerned because his peers lack the 'soft skills' to succeed abroad, both socially and academically; he notes that he himself studied public speaking as preparation for going abroad. By analysing this conference, we can see how Chinese students who want to study in the US are taught that they should craft a clear and easily communicated identity, built around their personal, interior and explicitly justified passions.

The first invited speaker demonstrates how educational pursuits in China are fuelled by post-colonial shame and nationalist pride, and shaped by Confucian moral frameworks. Fifty students are sitting in the large, new auditorium. They are wearing formal clothes, the boys in shirts or suits,

the girls in professional dress. The speaker wears a shirt with a Chinese collar and buttons. He tells the students to study hard, for the nation, and so that they can repay their parents, who have sacrificed so much to raise these little 'pandas'. The speaker launches into an extended discussion of the dragon, the totemic symbol of the Han people. It's time, he says, for Chinese people to stop 'being cows and horses' (an idiom referring to hard labour), and to become dragons. The filial pandas and nationalist dragons are conjured in order to motivate these students to study hard, for their parents and their nation. As the speaker infuses individual educational careers with collective ambitions, local affective structures are channelled into reproducing globalising, entrepreneurial forms of subjectivity.

As in the first speech, the next speaker presents personal and national success as closely intertwined. However, this speaker spends nearly all his time on stage explaining to the students that their future depends on learning to control their image. The speaker is a Taiwanese man who presents himself as an entrepreneur, and claims to have had a distinguished international consulting career: he drops the names of some prominent world leaders he claims to have advised. Later on, he tells me that he runs a corporate self-help psychology training centre. In his lecture he describes a previous life as a Taipei taxi driver: how he kept his taxi clean, and how he wrote 'Taiwan's best taxi' on the window. He offers students a somewhat redundant, three-pointed formula for success, based on self-presentation, image and exposure. One must not only be self-assured, he says, but also attract attention. In fact, echoing personal branding coaches who promote 'the unrelenting pursuit of attention' (Hearn, 2008: 205), this enthusiastic speaker states that a person must talk on every possible social occasion: he explains that speaking allows people to benefit from feedback, to build social connections, and, above all, to be visible.

That afternoon and the following day, the conference events are run by educational consultants, who are former admissions officers and doctoral graduates from top universities in the US. Many people working in educational consulting companies in China have themselves been involved in Western academia, and many have turned to consulting because of the precarity of academic jobs. Some have decided that consulting is more lucrative and secure than academia, while others work for consulting companies part-time as they struggle to establish academic careers. These consultants, both foreign and Chinese, teach Chinese students to present themselves to universities in the US, performing cultural scripts that display their confidence and passion.

After lunch, students flit around the conference centre carrying poster boards and markers. The consultants have divided them into teams that are competing to design a product, a logo and a sales pitch for imagined investors. This game creates an entrepreneurial fantasy, within which

students practice corporate 'social skills' of collaboration and presentation. The exercise is also supposed to promote creativity, and it is common in the creativity competitions and classes that are proliferating worldwide. In the pedagogy of creativity, now a priority for Chinese universities as for their counterparts elsewhere, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship are consciously intertwined (Sun, 2011). Universities value innovation as they seek to collaborate with industry, as do academics who are called on to attract funding; however, innovation is often about packaging rather than substance. Ulrich Bröckling, a sociologist who studies entrepreneurship, suggests that what is perceived as innovative largely depends on manufacturing distinctions rather than on actual invention or discovery (2016: 104). Bröckling suggests that in order for an idea to be recognised as creative, 'Being decisive is the element of difference' (2016: 111). This analysis suggests that to a large degree, in a competition to be perceived as innovative, confident presentation skills are key to success. Just as contemporary academia often encourages innovations that that are clearly legible and easily marketable, US universities are teaching students to perform their creative individuality in a highly standardised manner.

In between sessions of group work on marketing a product, students are learning how to sell themselves. The students are split into several groups, and shuffle into conference rooms to receive lessons on interview skills. The consultants teach them that they need to speak up, to leave an impression, and that they need to be interesting. During the first session, a former admissions officer from an elite US university tells the students that when he examined applications, it would only take him 'five seconds' to determine if a student was interesting. He then explains that the answer to the question 'Tell me about yourself' should never be a life history; in China, a common approach to self-introduction involves discussing one's hometown, education and workplace (Hampel, 2017: 450). The consultant wants students to articulate a more individualistic and interior form of identity, explaining that they should present their personal interests and passions. He also guesses out loud that many of these students can't explain what their interests are, or why these things interest them.

The next day, during mock admissions interviews, the consultant displays a particular, liberal theory about personal interests. He tells a student 'You never had to choose', explaining that this is why he doesn't know his own passions, or perhaps doesn't have any. This assessment may seem presumptive, but it is presumably based on the consultant's professional experience. In his work helping Chinese students present themselves to admissions officers, he has interpreted cultural obstacles using a liberal framework in which personal interests emerge from individual autonomy. Through the work of admissions counsellors, students are taught, both implicitly and explicitly, that they must present themselves as affectively engaged and consciously self-directed. In

this, they are not unlike their professors, whose managers address an essential self that is both emotionally sensitive and rationally controlled (see Chapter 1, this book). The splits between feeling and thought, outer behaviour and inner self, are some of the most enduring, and criticised, features of Western thought. These dichotomies remain foundational to liberal understandings of authenticity and agency. As they learn to construct their identity within this largely foreign cultural framework, Chinese students are instructed to draw on both affective and intellectual resources.

For the admissions counsellors, a convincing personal narrative requires both a pathos and a logos. The counsellor explains that students need to demonstrate emotional engagement with their work, but also that they need to provide explicit justifications for liking certain subjects. According to the consultants I spoke with, it can be difficult to elicit these accounts in terms that are culturally acceptable and recognisable. For example, on their admissions essays Chinese students may say that they like a subject because they had a good teacher, or because they have an aptitude for it; consultants judge these as insufficient reasons, because they do not demonstrate the students' pre-social, interior and therefore authentic interest. At another extreme, in an attempt to please US audiences, some students write unrealistic narratives of personal triumph and individualistic self-realisation. Consultants recognise that a convincing performance of self is more nuanced. Logically, performances may be more successful when students can become proficient in a kind of 'deep acting' (Hochschild, 1983), managing their emotions to match their role. If students want to sell themselves as interesting individuals, then they should try to be authentically affected by their own passions and ideals, at least for long enough to put on a show.

Students are not only learning that they must have passionate interests, but also that they must perform them. At this conference, the students have received a consistent message that they need to appear confident, whether before admissions officers, taxi customers or judges in the creativity contest, playing the role of potential investors. Students are told that they must attract attention in the classroom and indeed in general. Despite this pressure, or because of it, many of the students doubt their ability to put on the required performance. One after another, students in the conference room describe feelings of social anxiety and ineptitude. One engineering student says "I want to be more comfortable in groups", and another says that he is troubled by his inability to talk to strangers. As one student talks about his shyness, the consultant interrupts and tells him to make eye contact. Another student expresses a common sentiment: "I need to get more social experiences because I focused on study too much." Several students say that they came to the conference in order to improve their confidence.

One rising eleventh grader, who tells us that he had worked on a television production, is not like the others. He states that he is very confident, saying

"I like to talk with strangers, so they can feel my confidence and comfort." But for him, no less than for the shy students, confidence is an important key to his identity, not least in the eyes of the Westerners who will decide if he can fly abroad. If articulating what you love has become a requirement for admission, or for employment, then anything other than passion and confidence feels like a problem. You are not supposed to experience quotidian confusion, or have difficulty in formulating clear and easily explained goals. Lack of confidence on stage might stem from shyness, from an understandable fear of powerful interlocutors, from cultural unfamiliarity and from social experiences of marginalisation based on gender, ethnicity, class or immigration. Regardless of the complex social factors that underlie personal confidence, once people view a confident stage presence as the key to success, they easily perceive everyday experiences of doubt and anxiety as critical threats and personal challenges.

The very young event organiser, who expresses concern that his peers lack passionate interests and confident social skills, is one of many Chinese reformers returned from overseas who are teaching their peers how to perform their identity. In the following section we will unpack how the kind of performances that they promote encode culturally bound, liberal ideas as well as social privilege. We will also examine how Chinese social critics articulate affective critiques of educational practices. Educational reformers in China, influenced by Western psychology, regularly state that confidence and passion should emerge from classroom discussion and from participation in extracurricular pursuits. Since Chinese students have fewer opportunities to engage in these activities in comparison with their imagined peers in Western countries, critics allege that Chinese students fail to develop healthy and valuable affective capacities. Thus, while foreign consultants perceive that Chinese students lack personal autonomy and that this grievously hinders their development, Chinese social reformers are often inclined to agree.

Imagining confident students

Xu, a woman in her twenties, founded an educational company after returning to China from her undergraduate studies in the US. She tells me that her company works with top middle schools in Beijing, running programmes in which students develop their 'creativity' and 'leadership' by studying social issues. Xu shares a parable with me. Some of her students needed to develop research projects in order to apply for an educational programme in the US. One mother planned an elaborate project for her son. When asked why she didn't let her son create his own project, the mother flatly stated that her son has no thoughts of his own. Xu sees a clear message: "If the kid really has no thoughts, it must be because of parents who never let him do what he wanted to do!" Xu tells me that Chinese parents

are 'over-protective', using the English word. She explains that this is why their children fear failure, don't know right from wrong, never grow up and lose the ability to think independently. Against the background of Chinese government policies promoting innovation, and the emergence of new labour markets that encourage individual initiative, educational reformers in China often express concern that children are not taught how to think and act for themselves (Naftali, 2014). Due to these national projects, structural changes and professional concerns, affective aspects of education play an important role in contemporary Chinese cultural politics. For their part, when they feel confused or anxious, rather than passionate and confident, youth often blame Chinese families and schools.

In the US, Xu tells me, children have time to play and do what they want. In China, many teachers, parents and students reflect on Chinese education from the perspective of an idealised West, where children are autonomous and therefore confident. Books on North American and European education are popular in China, including a bestselling book in which the author argues that US schools promote the ability to express one's inner self, thus leading to confidence, entrepreneurship and happy self-actualisation (Woronov, 2006: 44). The concept of self-expression has complex cultural roots that intertwine with romantic movements and with democratic models of public participation. In addition, in the US the value of self-expression is most strongly endorsed by the middle and upper classes (Kusserow, 2004), where it is associated with autonomy and individuality. Particular understandings of autonomy have derived their currency and value from specific cultural and social backgrounds. Largely heedless of these origins, psychologists and educators in China generally associate autonomy with modernity, and many are trying to reform parenting and educational practices that they perceive not only as shamefully backwards, but also as national liabilities. Popular parenting and education materials circulating in China typically assume that Western children, and especially American children, are all confident.

An article from a parenting blog titled 'Why is every American child so confident?'[1] begins with this assertion: 'American children, no matter if their grades are good or bad, if they are ugly, tall or short fat or skinny, every one struts arrogantly, is spirited, anyone at all thinks they are very special, is a character. In other words, these children are all extremely confident.' The unnamed author of this article suggests two reasons for this confidence: first, children in the US have ample opportunities to perform in front of others, and second, they receive a lot of praise. The author incredulously recounts how she saw American teachers encourage children that blabber on, telling them that they have unique views. The author associates confidence with an individualistic, liberal, democratic American culture, telling her readers to allow their children to make choices and to include them in family decision-making. Again, we see a liberal theory associating autonomy with confidence.

The author describes her shock at the indiscriminate encouragement that she sees in American schools. However, she depicts such instruction as a refreshing alternative to Chinese education, which she depicts as a nightmare of being disciplined by parents and shamed in front of classmates. Social critics, such as this author, allege that Chinese culture shapes children's affective dispositions in ways that reduce their competitiveness. These critiques often mobilise the concept of self-esteem, which is a major concern in recent Chinese literature on parenting and specifically on producing high-achieving students (Kuan, 2015). As Chinese educators discuss the role of self-esteem in learning, they continue historical debates about the use of shame in Chinese parenting and formal education (Fung, 1999). Today, these cultural critiques gain urgency because they implicate children's futures, imagined as unfolding in a global arena. By focusing on the perceived affective deficiencies of Chinese children, educational reformers easily lose sight of the fact that particular affects have value largely because they are embedded in middle and upper-class American performances of the self.

US classrooms are a key site in which cultural differences in self-presentation become identified as problems. Educators in the US have been concerned that Chinese international students have trouble participating in the classroom (Ross and Chen, 2015). Although dialogue undoubtedly has didactic value, styles of learning vary individually and culturally, affectively and cognitively (Kim and Markus, 2002). The idea that education best proceeds through dialogue reflects egalitarian and democratic ideals, with classroom discussion modelling a form of citizenship centred on participation in public debate. When students from China and elsewhere have difficulty participating in class, some American instructors view them as the voiceless products of illiberal, authoritarian, hierarchical societies (Siltaoja et al, 2019: 88). However, when students from China are reluctant or unable to participate, it may be because they are encountering foreign models of education, because they face linguistic hurdles, and because of the personal risks inherent in expressing their views in front of their classmates (Siltaoja et al, 2019). Classroom participation grades make a virtue out of confidence, and confidence often comes from cultural belonging and from privilege.

Although it is common to speak of self-confidence, confidence not only comes from within; confidence is an index of security and belonging. In order to perform confidently for others, people need cultural familiarity with their audience. Even if they have access to an audience, not everyone is able to express their ideas in a manner that will be favourably received and evaluated, or even understood. These aspects of habitus, often misidentified as personal traits, not only affect student participation grades but also the ability of many academics to effectively give talks, to network or to present their ideas in writing. Furthermore, styles of self-presentation are shaped by gender, class and ethnicity. Women, minorities and immigrants are especially

affected by the fact that cultural and social variation in self-presentation affects life chances. They may be less comfortable with self-promotion or with public confrontation, unable to pursue these effectively, or ignored when they do speak. It is difficult to be confident in a world where you cannot unreflectively perform as expected, and where you have not had opportunity to polish your stage presence.

The article about American children imagines that students in the US all have access to 'platforms' (*pingtai*) on which they can develop their enviable self-confidence. In the article, public performance appears as an oddly reified, aspirational commodity, and performance is imagined as a key part of egalitarian, democratic American education. The author claims that institutions in the US strive to provide equal opportunities for students to participate in all activities; they say that in America anyone can play on the team or act in the play, and everyone will cheer for them. The author's perception of American inclusivity is the exact opposite of what Korean anthropologist Hyang-Jin Jung notes in her study of a US high school. Jung saw that most students were excluded from activities, and she perceived that self-expression was primarily encouraged in classes for gifted children (2007: 154). Furthermore, participation in extracurricular activities has long been correlated with social class, and, as school budgets are being cut, this trend seems to be deepening (Snellman et al, 2015). The article about American children is describing a fictional place, but it does reflect American's fictions about itself, aspirational visions of inclusivity that endure even in schools that are organised around competitive and institutionalised individualism.

Beginning in the 1950s, if not before, college deans in the US hoped to recruit extroverted, gregarious people, qualities that they associated with students who participated in athletics and other extracurricular activities (Cain, 2012: 28). This emphasis on extracurricular activities not only represented mainstream corporate anti-intellectualism (Whyte, 1956: 105), but also expressed the ideals of a liberal education that could create broadly informed, well-rounded democratic citizens. However, this ideal undermines itself, insofar as not everyone has a chance to develop their confidence, or their passions for creative pursuits. The opportunity to practise non-academic skills is unequally distributed, and these skills are crucial for college applicants seeking to differentiate themselves from other students. There may be justifications for admitting students with diverse talents; however, the requirement that potential students describe their personal interests and passions undoubtedly presents a class barrier to an elite education, disguised by moral ideals about liberal education.

In China, perhaps even more than in the US, access to extracurricular activities depends on social class (Ma and Wright, 2021). In fact, educational competition in China is so intense that in July 2021 the government

announced a set of restrictions on education companies, in part because expensive private classes and tutors are fuelling social inequality. Programmes such as those run by Xu, who teaches social engagement at top high schools, may be conveying important lessons about social responsibility, but they are definitely perpetuating Chinese class hierarchies while teaching elite students how to please liberal Western sensibilities. None of this is to discount the concerns of Chinese parents, psychologists, as well as many teachers and even national leaders (Kuan, 2015: 67) who lament the narrowness and competitiveness of Chinese education. Young adults often complain to me that Chinese schools have not provided them with platforms for practising self-presentation skills. Large numbers of students are actively seeking out such platforms. Between 2011 and 2013, debate leagues expanded into cities all across China, organised and sponsored by American educational companies in cooperation with the Communist Youth League. Companies selling debate pitch their product as a way to increase confidence and creativity. In the popular self-help groups that I studied, young professionals practise public speaking, usually in English. In recent years, China's two most popular educators have both been unconventional English teachers: Yu Minhong of New Oriental and Li Yang from Crazy English.[2] Both like to tell triumphant narratives of overcoming their shyness in order to achieve success. In Li Yang's mass classes, students are encouraged to shout loudly in English (Woodward, 2008), practising confidence more than vocabulary. In these varied settings, studying English is not only a way to acquire cosmopolitan linguistic skills, but also a kind of dramaturgical and affective training. Chinese students' eagerness for this training suggests how affects can serve as proxies for, and mystifications of, cultural capital and social privilege.

Let us meet one final US-educated entrepreneur. His example will demonstrate the broad appeal and wide reach of interventions that aim to teach confidence and passion in China, and illustrate the role of US universities in promoting a particular, culturally contingent affective constellation.

Dancing on dreams

I first met Li Bo when he came to a public speaking club in Beijing, where I was conducting research on youth in social skills training programmes. Li Bo was born in China but spent much of his life abroad, and holds a US undergraduate degree. As the founder of an educational company, Li Bo embodies the cosmopolitan and entrepreneurial aspirations of many of the young professionals in the audience. In his speech at the club, Li Bo presents a rapid succession of loosely associated ideas from psychology and behavioural economics, centring on the theme that the key to success is controlling one's mind. His explicit messages are that we must have dreams and a sense of purpose, be creative and be confident risk takers. In addition, Li Bo shares

an affectively charged personal narrative of developing confidence through an artistic performance.

Li Bo recounts how, during his undergraduate studies at an elite US university, he participated in a volunteer programme funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This brought a dozen students to a high school in China, where they taught various subjects using art. More importantly, Li Bo explains, their mission was to impart lessons about self-confidence and the importance of having dreams. In Western countries varied social interventions have aimed to increase individuals' confidence, motivation and self-esteem in order to increase economic productivity and to address social problems (Cruikshank, 1999; Davies, 2015). In China, I encountered numerous charitable organisations that reproduce neoliberal ideologies of personal enterprise, identifying economic initiative with psychological traits such as autonomy and self-realisation. As a student volunteer in China, Li Bo himself was both an agent and a subject of these ideologies that view confidence as a key measure of the self. Li Bo participated in a dance performance: he describes dancing on stage as psychologically transformative, taking him out of his comfort zone and thus liberating him. He encourages the audience in the public speaking club to 'use art and develop your confidence'. Li Bo also explains that goals are easier to achieve if you really believe in them, demonstrating that he regards authentic passions as vital to achieving success. In this speech, public performance, confident risk taking and authentic ideals appear as mutually reinforcing and ultimately, as entrepreneurial assets.

When Li Bo and I meet for lunch, I realise that he has carefully studied the craft of selling his ideals. Like his personal narrative, his mannerisms suggests that he was not born a confident performer. At first his eye contact is fleeting, his awkward gaze perpendicular to mine. His style of conversation is choppy, punctuated with non-profit buzzwords and meta-linguistic: he explains what he's going to say subsequently, although usually these bullet points are lost in a rapid flight of words. It is clear that he has experience pitching projects, and that he reflects extensively about himself and how he might be perceived. He seems to always be thinking about what other people might be thinking, and has justifications for his views and actions ready at hand. Any inquiry I throw out immediately bounces back in the form of a carefully rehearsed answer. In this manner, Li Bo shares the development of his ideology and his career, which are centred on his interest in using 'art and science for unleashing human potential'.

Li Bo maintains that personal passions are key to creating a better world. He says that because China does not have a reliable rule of law, the 'human factor' has an especially important role to play in improving society. As an example, Li Bo offers the idea that if people valued work as a creative expression of the self, this would help to alleviate China's food safety

problem: at the moment, he says, "people who make food don't really care about making good food." Li Bo sees individual responsibility as a way to address social problems, even though he obliquely recognises that this logic absolves the government of responsibility for regulating the food supply. Scholars have framed volunteerism and civil organisations within a neoliberal shift in governance in which social issues are to be addressed with private solutions, absolving the state of responsibilities (Fisher, 1997; Lacey and Ilcan, 2006). Critics have also pointed out that moral affects are political resources that governments can use to promote volunteerism, making up for cuts in social services (Muehlebach, 2012; Hoffman and St John, 2017). From these critical perspectives, the social entrepreneur appears as an ideal neoliberal agent, depoliticising social problems.

In addition to directly running social interventions in China, US universities are supporting Chinese social entrepreneurship in several ways. First, the US college curriculum increasingly emphasises innovation and social engagement, and the idea that social issues can be entrepreneurial opportunities. Some Chinese students in the US, or enrolled in US academic programmes in China, absorb this lesson. Second, US universities are directly teaching students soft skills, such as presentation skills, with which to market their innovations and interventions. Third, within China, the massive market for overseas education produces subjects who are eager to study these foreign moral scripts and forms of self-presentation. When they graduate from US institutions, people like Xu and Li Bo return to China to promote social entrepreneurship, presenting confidence and passion as a path to individual success and a mode of modernising cultural reform. Within China, various actors regard these affective capacities as vital to a project of improving the nation, both materially and morally, to create a modern, developed country that can catch up with an imagined West. Thus, ideas about work, citizenship and personal identity that have liberal cultural roots are being used to address Chinese anxieties and aspirations, gaining new meanings within a history of modernist reform and against local moral horizons.

Social entrepreneurs can certainly help people, and, within limits, they may even contribute to building China's civil society. Officials in China are promoting civic consciousness, but they fold volunteerism and social entrepreneurship into state projects (Zhao, 2012; Lai et al, 2015). Educational interventions that teach students to be entrepreneurial are well in line with official interests. Thus, even as educational entrepreneurs view themselves as liberating young people and as cultural reformers, they reproduce exploitative, neoliberal logics, while reinforcing the central value of education as a form of social distinction in China. Chinese officials, educators and parents want to promote innovation and confidence. Li Bo and other educational entrepreneurs bundle their concerns into neat, actionable pedagogical programmes. Li Bo's company works with top high schools in

Beijing, including experimental high schools that are supervised not by local authorities but directly by the Ministry of Education.

Li Bo learned the importance of confident expression through a dance performance, and, no doubt, by studying business at a university in the US. He now has audiences at the highest levels of the Chinese government, and his pedagogy of self–confidence and passionate dreams could reach the 200 million students in Chinese primary and secondary schools. He has also helped to design a training course on social engagement for the China branch campus of a US university. Li Bo's activism is highly recursive: he is an entrepreneur selling entrepreneurship, an innovator teaching innovation. He finances his own autonomy by selling the ideal of autonomy, while obscuring the linguistic, cultural and financial capital that has enabled his freedoms. Young, international and entrepreneurial, Li Bo knows the power of confidently constructing an identity around clear propositions and ideals. Many young people in China are prepared to hear his message: that you need to know who you are, and you must be ready to tell the audience.

Captured ideals

In an age of global markets and attention economies, confident passion can bring economic reward. However, since Western countries control enormous cultural, financial and symbolic resources, it is easy to lose sight of how particular affects gain value. Ironically, liberal ideals of self–determination undermine themselves, as people worldwide are told that they must be confident, innovative and engaged, that they must be authentically themselves by conforming to liberal, or neoliberal, understandings of agency and citizenship. When students from US universities return to their countries of origin, they find people eager to learn how to put on entrepreneurial performances that index Western culture and social privilege. The pandemic and political tensions have reduced the global flow of students; the long–term consequences of the virus and of anti–globalisation are difficult to predict. However, travel restrictions may herald a world with more international branch campuses, so that students can study in their home countries, as well as even more online education. Ironically, reduced physical mobility may allow Western norms of self–presentation to expand even more efficiently. A perspective from China highlights how forms of self–presentation are shibboleth that excludes people not only from the global South, but also within Western countries and within academia. Somewhat ironically, if Chinese international students return to China as academics, their performance of autonomous conviction may become a liability. Chinese performance management regimes are intense, both in terms of quantitative output and in demands for controlled self–presentation. However, in Chinese educational institutions, confidence is often less important than tactical

use of relationships, and passions must often find their outlet through official channels.

A view from China can also highlight how the neoliberal, entrepreneurial self builds on affective structures that have deep cultural foundations. It is especially worth investigating the many links between performances of self and liberal understandings of personal autonomy. Confidence and passion are intertwined with widely held ideals of democracy and of self-determination; as these affects become instrumentalised through managed performances, academics are indeed being 'governed through freedom' (Rose, 1999: 72). Furthermore, in an age of extreme politics and existential threats, the imperative to change the world seems pressing: cloistered scholarship is not enough, and public engagement feels vital. Because of these dense entanglements of habitus, neoliberal ideology and liberal ideals, it can be difficult to challenge the affective standards by which universities recruit students and manage academics. There are many reasons to muster our confidence and seize the stage for our personal projects. After all, we are acting on our convictions. Aren't we?

Notes
[1] 'Meiguo Haizi Weihe Gege Zixin', *Xuezuo Wanmei Fumu*, WeChat public account (accessed 24 November 2015).
[2] When Li Yang admittedly beat his wife, Kim Lee, in 2011, his image suffered, but his schools still survive.

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