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Practical Daydreams: Self-Optimization through Consumer Lifestyles in China

Amir Hampel *

Abstract: *»Praktische Tagträume: Selbstoptimierung durch Verbraucherlebensstile in China«.* The ethos of self-optimization calls on people to imagine a desirable future state of existence and to approach this desired state by adjusting aspects of their everyday lives. This ethos depends on a specific capacity for fantasy. Therefore, this article argues that the concept of self-optimization applies not only to entrepreneurial self-making but also to consumer lifestyles and that it provides a useful critical lens for investigating cultural constructions of labor, leisure, and desire. China has been depicted a place inimical to fantasy, where dreams are denied by social and political pressures. However, in today's China personal dreams symbolize modern subjectivity. Drawing on ethnographic and textual research on self-help psychology in China, this article traces links between self-optimization and various actors, including entrepreneurs, marketers, activists, and authors, who are teaching Chinese youth to craft explicit visions of their ideal life. The article contextualizes projects of self-optimization within China's exploding consumer culture, and in a society where markets are entangled with interpersonal networks and encompassed by state policies. Within these constraints, the logic of self-optimization shapes modest and often commodified pursuits of the good life.

Keywords: Self-optimization, self-help, subjectification, desire, consumer culture, China.

1. Introduction

Dorothy says that she used to be introverted. But she is now on stage, speaking to an audience of over 30 people at a Toastmasters self-help group in Beijing. Dorothy explains that she did not used to think her personality was a problem: she saw herself as "hardworking and diligent." In fact, she says, she was so studious that a classmate once suggested to her, "You should be an academic!" But Dorothy tells us that she replied, "No! I want to have a

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colorful and practical social life. I haven't experienced that, and I really want to have a taste." In Dorothy's narrative, she was motivated to try to change her personality by a desire for a life with some space for leisure, with time to sample unknown pleasures. Today, she tells us, she has learned to "like people." This evening, the gathered members of this self-help group, mostly young professionals, use the stage to share a range of modest but meaningful dreams: "I can't dance, but I will!" Some, like Dorothy, focus on developing physical and psychological abilities, including learning to swim or to feel gratitude. Others express charitable dreams, including hoping to help disabled children or to establish an orphanage with teachers who work with children to "help them be someone."

While conducting ethnographic research on social skills training programs in China, I heard many participants earnestly state the importance of travel, hobbies, and socializing, often describing their desires with the metaphor of seeking a colorful life. In Toastmasters clubs, members take turns giving speeches, a practice that club materials portray as a way to develop confidence and professionally valuable communication skills. However, I found that club members regarded economic success as only one part of a desirable future (Hampel 2017). While some Toastmasters club members give speeches about work, many more choose to talk about dieting and fitness, or else about hobbies such as dancing and photography. Rather than focusing on careerist visions of success, these speakers paint images of a future life that is more pleasurable, more interesting, and with more scope for self-expression. Club members are mostly young professionals who are building their futures in major cities. They assume that hard work is valuable, but they feel a need to continuously affirm and defend the value of crafting a desired lifestyle. Only when realizing a personal vision of a future life has become an orienting ethical goal does it make sense for people to dream of founding an orphanage where children learn to dream about who they want to be.

This article develops a concept of self-optimization as a logic of action that directs people to actively shape their routines and capacities in order to realize a specific, desired future lifestyle or identity (see Cabanas 2024, in this special issue). Actions are not oriented towards discrete achievements but rather towards crafting a state of being that will continuously yield desirable experiences. Many spiritual, medical, and ethical techniques focus on the self. What is particular about the logic of self-optimization is the vision of a future self who will experience a particular life, and that this envisioned self appears valuable not as an expression of conventional goods, such as virtue, health, or wealth, but of personal desires, such as having a colorful life. Because actions always involve multiple instrumental ends and moral horizons, this article applies the concept of self-

optimization in a diffuse way. Self-optimization is not a particular practice or set of practices, but a rationale for action and an ethos in which one should manage aspects of daily life in pursuit of future life experiences (see Binkley 2024, in this special issue).

Self-optimization is commonly associated with work-oriented entrepreneurs (King et al. 2019). In my view, entrepreneurs engage in self-optimization only to the degree that they understand themselves as laboring to craft desired lifestyles and identities (see Nehring, Esnard, and Kerrigan 2024; Krzeminska 2024, both in this special issue); not, for example, to make money in order to fulfill interpersonal obligations or to acquire conventional markers of status. The concept of self-optimization captures how actions are oriented towards a specific, envisioned state that is imagined to express and fulfill the self as an individual. This future self includes both your proud identity as founder of a social enterprise and the personal trainer who will allow you to enjoy the physical and moral pleasures of staying fit. The self is optimized by working on one's physical and psychological capacities, but also by shaping a larger self that includes the environment: the trainer, the exercise machine, and the new juicer that will enable a healthy lifestyle. Because self-optimization focuses on lifestyle fantasies, it can be applied not only to work but to leisure, and it has close affinities with consumerism. It is not defined by a particular lifestyle, but as the project of shaping everyday life so as to achieve a personally desired state.

This means that self-optimization is not the prerogative of entrepreneurial elites. However, it does involve a privileged ability to control one's everyday environment, habits, and routines (see King et al. 2024; Krzeminska 2024, both in this special issue). In China, young professionals, for whom self-optimization might be expected to make sense as an ethical framework, are often enmeshed in interpersonal obligations. Their jobs may demand significant overtime, and in many industries business relationships extend into dining, nightlife, and leisure activities. In addition, in the context of a highly unequal society, lifestyles are overridden with consequential codes of identity. Young professionals feel pressure to signal their urbanity, individuality, and modernity through consumption. Furthermore, in China family relationships are central to economic and ethical life, and filial relationships are integrated into state policies for social welfare: in an aging society, a generation of mostly single children will assume substantial burdens of care. These social pressures mean that youth do not assume their ability to create a bounded, discrete life that can be optimized to fit their desires. However, many young people in China do have a substantial capacity to define their lives, and many more aspire to construct a space in which they can do so. Since the workplace and many leisure activities appear as fraught relational networks, while the scope for political participation is limited, urban youth

attempt to center their identity on the private sphere of lifestyle consumption.

The lens of self-optimization brings our attention to individualistic and utilitarian constructions of the self: what counts as optimal depends on what one wants (see Brandt and Straub 2024, in this special issue). Therefore, this article argues that the concept of self-optimization helps us to understand cultural constructions of desire in different societies. Only when desirable life states are imagined in terms of personal pleasures, ideals, and dreams can we speak of self-optimization as a logic of action. Neither self-improvement nor hedonism are new in China, but the idea that one should craft one's life as an expression of uniquely personal desires is newly relevant to many young people. This article surveys a range of social theory to historicize and denaturalize the utilitarian and individualistic view of desire, suggesting that Chinese youth are being taught to desire and dream in particular ways. We will meet reformers and social entrepreneurs who aim to promote the value of self-realization to Chinese youth. Using material from ethnographic and textual research on self-help culture in China, the article indicates how individual fantasies about future selves are constructed within local class hierarchies, national projects, and the exigencies and pressures of life in contemporary China. It suggests that the concept of self-optimization may be helpful for understanding not only projects of entrepreneurial self-making but also everyday acts of consumption. As they craft personal lifestyles, Chinese youth can envision a discrete, bounded, and optimizable self.

2. Guiding Visions

In order to see how self-optimization captures aspects of subjectivity in contemporary China, it is helpful to first examine some of the Euro-American cultural contexts that frame self-optimization as an intelligible project. Self-optimization is often used to indicate a culture of competition and enhancement (Nehring and Röcke 2023, 8) and a related ethos of entrepreneurial self-making. Nehring and Röcke specify that "self-optimisation can be defined as a set of discourses and practices that encourage individuals to pursue the optimal imaginable version of their bodies, their mental and emotional constitution, and their conduct of everyday life" (2023, 2). Building on this definition, I emphasize that both "imaginable" and "optimal" involve particular cultural constructions of desire. As a logic of action, self-optimization is individualistic and utilitarian. It involves using technical means to approach a future lifestyle that one conceives of as a realization of personal dreams. Thus, the ethos of self-optimization depends on a liberal

culture that emphasizes satisfying individual desires and expresses a modern sensibility of progress. The concept of optimization requires faith that life and the world can be improved through personal effort, applying technical means to achieve calculable ends.

According to the Oxford Etymological Dictionary, the word "optimize" is a 19th century derivation from "optimist" (Harper 2023). This etymology reveals not only faith in progress, but also trust in a rational order through which one can know and work on the world. The word "optimist" entered English through Leibniz's *Theodicy* (Harper 2023), published in 1710, which argued that creation is the best of all possible worlds. By the age of the Enlightenment, European thinkers saw the world not as a fixed order but as one amenable to improvement: therefore, to use a technological metaphor, suffering became a bug rather than a feature. If people, particularly bourgeois men, could exert their wills on the world in a rational manner to achieve profitable ends, they expected no less of the demiurge. The world's imperfection posed a problem which necessitated a theodicy. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins indicates a link between optimistic faith in human action and visions of Providence, in which the creator is understood as a calculating utilitarian who has minimized evil and maximized good, as measured by human pain and pleasure (1996, 407). In parallel, the task of each person shifted from making the best of their circumstances to bettering their lot. Such faith in individual ability to reshape the world reflected class and gender privilege, in the context of colonial conquest. However, this elite conviction became a widely felt moral imperative.

While self-help messages of positivity can be used to reconcile people to their situation, they emerged from a providential, melioristic ethos of striving in which we can and must improve our lives if not transcend our station. In the 18th century United States, the new middle classes viewed positivity as a signal of virtuous effort, self-reliance, and emotional control (Kotchemidova 2005, 9); by the 19th century New Thought Movement, positivity was associated with both wealth and health (Ehrenreich 2010; Harrington 2008). Culturally, a romantic valorization of individual feelings and ideals made it an ethical duty to realize one's inner truths in the world (Taylor 1989, 376). More prosaically, urban markets incentivized people to stand out while selling them commodities and techniques for becoming themselves. Sociologist Nikolas Rose suggests that by the late 20th century, self-help programs assured people that "you can change, you can achieve self-mastery, you can control your own destiny, you can truly be autonomous" (1998, 158). Indicating how 1970s personal growth culture sought to enhance the "power of the ego" (Ehrenberg 2009, 121), sociologist Alain Ehrenberg notes that "It no longer acknowledged the limits reality imposed on all lives, whose recognition had been a requirement for any cure" (2009, 122).

Since self-optimization is about making the best of life in this imperfect best of all possible worlds, it is inherently linked to limitations: in passion, energy, and especially time. Any individually centered pursuits will be limited by the finitude of the individual. Even in a transhumanist fantasy, any ideal personal life state would by necessity be a compromise in which different elements, such as work and leisure, health and pleasure, must be balanced. Therefore, self-optimization builds on culturally and historically particular, individualistic views of meaning and mortality. People have always sought pleasure, and, for the foreseeable future, death remains a human universal. However, an ethos that centers on shaping one's own ideal life experience is culturally unusual and historically fairly recent. Tocqueville's observations are suggestive: writing near when the term "optimize" was coined, he remarked on Americans' restless, anxious striving to better their condition, and to do so as efficiently as possible. He saw this urge to satisfy individual, creaturely desires as spiritually corrosive: "The man who has given his heart entirely to the quest of the goods of this world is always in a hurry, for he has but a limited time to find, possess, and enjoy them" (Tocqueville [1840] 2004, 626).

In an individualistic and liberal culture, not only status but also dignity and purpose depend on one's capacity to articulate and fulfill personal desires. Self-work within the framework of religious traditions or communal obligations is not in the spirit of self-optimization: these horizons of meaning are not amenable to calculations of pleasure and pain, and they transcend the individual. As collective frameworks for action are attenuated, people increasingly rely on personal desires for guidance (Taylor 1989, 78-9). Philosopher Charles Taylor traces the historical emergence of what he calls "the affirmation of ordinary life" (1989, 23), in which meaning is to be found not in separate spheres of activity such as religious or public life, but in the way one handles quotidian daily affairs. By drawing our attention to an ethos of molding everyday life, the concept of self-optimization can help us to analyze liberal moral sensibilities in which individual desires have been made central to human identity and dignity, in which orphans need to be taught ambition. We will see that a range of social interventions in China are following this logic. In these formulations of a liberal ethos, the ability to craft specific dreams is absolutely necessary: failure to develop this capacity is not only pessimistic but also deviant, contrarian, backwards, and entirely illegible.

The centrality of individual desires differentiates self-optimization from self-improvement more generally. Nehring and Röcke indicate a key distinction by pointing out that self-optimization involves bettering oneself in an instrumental rather than moral sense (2023, 10). However, instrumentality as such is not sufficient to characterize self-optimization; furthermore, in

many contexts instrumental striving has itself become moral, signaling a skillful and positive embrace of market realities. Therefore, it may be useful to regard self-optimization as a species of self-improvement that moralizes the quality of personal experience. Rather than accumulating virtues such as wisdom or even wealth, self-optimization involves constantly tweaking the parameters of life in search of a set of solutions, continually modifying habits and techniques in order to realize a discrete state of being. A migrant factory worker in China may continuously adjust their habits in order produce more and earn more money. But if their primary motive is to send money home to support their parents, then we probably do not want to define these efforts as self-optimization. Being a filial child can certainly be desirable, and it can bring social recognition, moral pleasure, and perhaps even personal happiness. However, we are distorting things if we characterize the worker's search for efficiency primarily as a calculation focused on individual desires. If the worker understands their search for production efficiency as a way to make more time for leisure, or in which to pursue personal projects, then efforts to modify their bodies, attitudes, or routines better fit the concept of self-optimization.

Influential self-help texts portray desire itself as a moral capacity, one that not only sustains hard work and ambition but also enables pleasurable consumer lifestyles. Self-help texts have encouraged readers to believe in their ability to create their own destiny, and to formulate specific fantasies about their desired future. In *Think and Grow Rich*, Napoleon Hill called on people to cultivate an ardent, "DEFINITE DESIRE" (1983, 31). A similar message is central to the book *The Secret* (Byrne 2006), which was wildly successful worldwide including in China. The "secret" is that whatever you think about will manifest in your life: "You get to choose what you want, but you must get clear about what you want. This is your work" (Byrne 2006, 47). While mid-20th century texts such as *Think and Grow Rich* (Hill 1938) and *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Peale 1952) encourage desire, they center on ambitions for wealth and social mobility. But *The Secret* tells readers that they can arrange their lives to fit their personal image of happiness, and to believe they will have the cars, homes, and vacations that they want (Byrne 2006, 50). This shift in aspirations parallels the development of post-Fordist capitalism and its promise of self-realization through emotional management and lifestyle consumption. The reader is addressed as a consumer: "Attracting the perfect weight is the same as placing an order with the catalogue of the Universe" (Byrne 2006, 60).

The ability to consume, and to do so well, is of course a mark of social class. However, consumer lifestyles are not only moralized as expressions of wealth and cultural capital, but also because they indicate a drive to shape one's own experiences. Zygmunt Bauman argues that today the rich

are primarily admired for their ability to remake their lives at will to fit their desires: "Universally adored in the persons of the rich is their wondrous ability to pick and choose the contents of their lives" (2005, 40). This is a particularly individualistic, almost solipsistic conception of the good life. The capacity to shape life experience has in itself become an indicator not only of distinction but also of a virtuous devotion to self-care, aesthetics, and experience. Therefore, even small everyday acts of consumption can be moralized, read as declarations of a positive attitude, of faith in one's ability to iteratively approach a desired state of being. The perfect headphones, perhaps from the same brand endorsed by a celebrity, promise to improve one's daily commute. The process of shopping for the perfect headphones can express an ethos of crafting a desired experience of everyday life.

Sociologist Colin Campbell has highlighted the role of consumer culture in constructing the desiring subject. Campbell argues that consumer culture not only centers desires in subjectivity, but also changes the object of desire from the fulfillment of familiar pleasures to a perpetually deferred pursuit of phantasmagoric ones. Campbell distinguishes "traditional hedonism," which involves the arts of maximizing specific bodily pleasures, and a "modern hedonism" that attempts to continually optimize the quality of experience itself (1987, 126). Modern hedonism supports consumerism because consumer products promise to improve our experiences, and to offer us ever new experiences. Campbell argues that the pleasure of possessing a product generally pales in comparison with the pleasure of fantasizing about how a new commodity will change one's life. Consumer culture depends upon this imaginative capacity, which Campbell calls "daydreaming" (1987, 131). In modern hedonism, as in consumerism, pleasure is a continuous project and happiness is constantly deferred. That new sweater quickly grows old, so one just keeps shopping. Art historian John Berger's comments about glamour and advertising also indicate the future orientation of consumer culture. He suggests that publicity promises the consumer a better life: "It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be" (Berger 1972, 132). Campbell and Berger's theories illustrate an affinity between consumer self-making and self-optimization: both encourage people to habitually fantasize about specific aspects of their future identities and experiences.

This article draws on ethnographic research with groups in China for whom the idea that one should develop dreams and fantasies is particularly appealing. In addition to young professionals in self-help groups, the article introduces actors who are actively spreading the value of explicit self-definition: social entrepreneurs, cultural activists, and marketing professionals who are trying to teach Chinese youth to daydream. The article also

draws on readings of a genre of self-help texts written for Chinese young professionals, about how to become an interesting person with a colorful life. Between 2012 and 2014, I conducted participant observation in personal growth groups as part of a larger project on self-help psychology in China, especially as it connects with themes of autonomy, individuality, and self-expression in Chinese youth culture. My research on Chinese popular culture and self-help texts began in 2012 and is ongoing. All translations from Mandarin are my own, and all names are pseudonyms unless otherwise indicated.

My fieldwork was conducted mostly in Beijing, where I participated in a range of personal growth groups and also interviewed participants and instructors. I focused mostly on social skills training programs that are popular with young professionals, especially Toastmasters public speaking clubs. Hundreds of these clubs, which are affiliated with an organization from the United States, have been established in large cities across China. In order to understand the pressures and anxieties that shape young people's projects of self-transformation, I also interviewed psychotherapists who work with youth. My research in self-help groups led me to participate in a range of salons and workshops that were organized by young people who viewed themselves as cultural activists. They actively promote the values of individuality and self-expression to their peers, values that they associated with consumption and commodified leisure. In the years since my fieldwork concluded, these values have become widely accepted. Youth consumer debt has risen rapidly over the past decade, a phenomenon that is driven both by consumerist understandings of the good life and by status consumption in the context of increasing stratification. At the same time, social pressures including an aging population, slowing economic growth, and tightening political control have increased over the past decade. As youth have associated public and professional life with restrictions, their identity has become ever more centered on the details of everyday personal life.

Across my research sites, and in my work with young professionals, cultural activists, and therapists, I saw that personal objectives, ideals, and lifestyles were being constructed as ethically significant. In interviews, both psychotherapists and cultural activists defined having a self as knowing what one wants (Hampel 2021, 935-7). In self-help groups, I saw how young professionals practice fantasizing about their future lives, including details of their bodies, clothing styles, and leisure activities (Hampel 2021). Members of Toastmasters clubs share techniques for developing specific psychosocial or physical characteristics, such as confidence or slimness, and they manage their emotions, relationships, and bodies as part of a larger project of assembling a desirable future. Members of these groups are typically young professionals, most of whom have moved to major cities for study or

work. They may live in humble rented rooms, but they have the distance from kin and the financial ability, often limited but significant, to exert some control over their everyday habits, environments, and comportment. Members of this group not only have space in which to define themselves, but also feel great pressure to do so. They are trying to establish themselves in the urban middle class, both professionally and socially, while women often receive especially strong pressure to marry. Work and leisure are easily encompassed by these normative goals. So too, the pursuit of individuality can function as a class marker. However, by indulging in pleasurable lifestyle daydreams, youth can emphasize individuality rather than social pressures, claiming a physical and moral space for themselves by affirming the importance of personal desires and self-expression. These are also key elements in Chinese constructions of a valued modern selfhood.

3. Modern Desires in China

While self-optimization involves crafting a life that fulfills personal desires, popular and academic discourses have depicted China as a place politically and culturally inimical to self-expression. Stereotyped Western views of China are crowded with copycat brands and collectivism, Tiananmen and Tiger moms. Chinese intellectuals, taking liberal societies as a reference point, have also viewed Chinese culture as less conducive to individual dreams. Writing at the start of the PRC's reform period, anthropologist Francis Hsu argued that "Chinese children's dreams are far less grandiose and their fantasies are far more down to earth" (1981, 92). He argued that because children in China were not physically or psychologically separated from their extended family, were not encouraged to make choices, and did not have their desires centered in socialization, their bubbles of fantasy were frequently burst. Of course, people are grounded by material exigencies and social pressures in any society. Hsu's claims about Chinese children can be contested, but it is worth considering how strange and even disparaging his representation of children can seem. From a liberal, individualistic perspective that highly values ambitions and desires, something seems fatalistic, pessimistic, and even unusual about modest and practical dreams. Hsu's ideas are also important because such self-representations shape the meaning of desire in Chinese cultural politics.

Personal desires have been highly significant in modern and contemporary China in the contexts of nation building and the cultural politics of modernity. If deprivation and repression are identified with the tradition bound or Maoist past, then it follows that to desire is to be modern. In the early 20th century, modernist reformers drew on utilitarian philosophy to

reconceptualize happiness. Instead of a state of good fortune or a pleasurable experience it became teleological; rationality and virtue were unified and defined as acting to secure future happiness (Chen 2019, 32). Influenced by Freud, some reformers sought to liberate what they understood as sexual drives that had been concealed by Confucian propriety (Lee 2010, 178), and today sexual desires play a key role in progressive cultural politics including feminist and LGBT movements in China. Over the past few decades in China, the values of happiness and pleasure have become widespread and legitimate justifications for individual action (Rofel 2007; Farrer 2002; Kleinman et al. 2011; Yan 2009). In anthropologist Lisa Rofel's conversations with Chinese youth, they "quickly turned to the importance of having wide-ranging aspirations, hopes, needs, and passions" (2007, 4). Dreams signal positivity and faith in a new market economy, making them central to the ethos of young professionals as well as useful for producing complacence and extracting labor.

In today's China, personal desires are not only the foundation for individualistic values identified with modernity, but also an important ground for subjectification and governance. Desires may have subversive potential, but in official discourse individual dreams are easily reconciled with narratives of national progress. The government has been promoting positivity, and happiness has become a key metric in governance (Weilander 2018, 34). An ongoing government campaign, started in 2013, promotes the "China Dream" (*zhongguo meng*): in later official English translations this is rendered more individualistically, as "Chinese dreams." This campaign blends narratives of self-fulfillment and national progress, which is signified by economic growth. The state has invested in developing human capital, and by devoting oneself to career ambitions one can embody "patriotic professionalism" (Hoffman 2010). The pursuit of lifestyle aesthetics not only generates consumption but also supports high value creative industries. People who are focused on their own careers and lifestyles are not easily politicized, while both production and consumption create economic growth and therefore legitimacy for the state. Personal desires are not only useful for creating productive and governable subjects, but also responsible, healthy ones. The figure of a citizen who rationally optimizes their life quality fits easily into official campaigns to promote work-life, and study-life, balance, and thus into biopolitical projects of improving physical and mental health.

In China, asserting one's personal desires is part of a self-consciously modern morality. The educated young professional, crafting their own lifestyle, is both an embodiment of human capital and the opposite of a shameful past. The state has long tried to create modern citizens through civilizing campaigns, and it has made efforts to optimize the population not only by controlling reproduction but also by raising people's "quality" (s*uzhi*)

through education (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006). Participation in consumer culture is associated with being modern, urban, cosmopolitan, and a good citizen building the economy (Yan 2008, 156-8). For these reasons, people in China, especially in the urban middle classes, easily perceive those who articulate and act on their desires as modern and therefore good.

This is a significant change in moral subjectivity and personal identity. The idea that expressing personal desires is morally vital is a liberal one, and therefore it is worth considering where projects of self-optimization can take root in a non-liberal state that has built on Confucian morality to promote an ethic of self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice is difficult to moralize in a utilitarian framework. Confucian ideals of self-cultivation can support self-optimization in that they provide faith in human improvability, but Confucian values emphasize social duties. In both official and Confucian moralities, inner personal desires are important, but this is because they are to be molded to fit social goals. These non-individualistic conceptions of morality are not amenable to self-optimization: they aim at a virtuous state that transcends rather than expresses the individual. This is not to suggest that the optimal self can only be imagined outside of society. In their visions of personal happiness, good relationships are important to Chinese youth (Hsu 2019); however, youth are also claiming a private, personal space for their own desires.

This article does not approach self-optimization as a totalizing life project but as a logic that people take up and put down in various areas of their lives, and that intersects with other logics and ethical frameworks. Self-optimization makes sense to young people who have some reprieve from social obligations, as well as a system of values that attaches significance to everyday personal experience. This individualism carves out a space for imagining future selves who realize their desires at a physical, emotional, and moral distance from networks of familial and professional obligations and other social pressures. The true self at work and even in play is easily burdened with responsibilities and with overdetermined definitions of success and failure. But as consumers, one might, within constraints, purchase by purchase, fantasy by fantasy, realize a personal vision of the good life. While the current analysis focuses on young professionals, this group represents a wide range of income. In addition, consumer self-fashioning appeals to youth from across social classes. Moreover, youth working in service industries, from coffee shops to retail stores, may see themselves as experts on lifestyle aesthetics. Disadvantaged rural to urban migrants practice careful consumption to fit into urban spaces (Ling 2019, 151; Yan 2008, 145), but also as a form of self-expression and pleasurable fantasy. Today, highly developed e-commerce platforms targeting a range of consumers have made lifestyle fantasies very widely accessible in China. A colorful life is

more than aspirational: by imagining oneself asserting control over one's fashions, living spaces, and leisure activities, one can craft a modern, moral, and perhaps attainable fantasy.

Self-optimization can be characterized as the application of instrumental means to approach states of being that are understood as realizations of personal desires. This definition allows us to capture some key cultural elements that constitute self-optimization as a logic of action, enabling us to compare this ethos across socio-cultural contexts. Materials from China highlight the historical and cultural contingency of individual fantasies of lifestyle and identity as an orienting feature of subjectivity. Sociologically, self-optimization provides a lens to view constructions of class and citizenship in China, showing how individual dreams are shaped within and around Chinese political and social structures. The following section examines self-optimization as an ethos that thrives in transnational networks of technology and social entrepreneurship that are active in China. Building on Colin Campbell's concept of daydreaming (1987), it suggests how entrepreneurial discourses splice instrumental techniques and ethical ideals into visions of possible future identities. The section then turns to marketing professionals and cultural activists who are teaching people in China that they must have dreams. The next section investigates discourses of labor, leisure, and the good life among young Chinese urbanites. It suggests that self-optimization is a meaningful logic for this group, but that due to social pressures, people's fantasies of an optimal existence are pursued through colorful hobbies, modest comforts, and an intentionally circumscribed self.

4. Selling Dreams

In China, especially for young professionals, personal desires are already important sources of purpose and direction. However, a range of entrepreneurs, cultural activists, and advertising campaigns feel called upon to promote the idea that dreams are the key to success, happiness, and a meaningful life. They teach youth specific techniques to foster their dreams, including by developing hobbies, attending self-help groups, reflecting on their values and desires through online discussions and offline events, and by formulating explicit visions of future careers, lifestyles, and identities. The network of actors who are teaching Chinese youth to develop their fantasies centers on the transnational worlds of technology and social entrepreneurship, just those groups that have been closely associated with the ethos of self-optimization. In addition, marketing professionals, selling not only new products but new ideas and desires, have played a key role in spreading liberal values of self-expression in China. Focusing on the promotion of

dreams through youth entrepreneurship, activism, and advertising, this section considers the connections between idealism and consumerism, and their explicit intersection in social interventions that aim to teach Chinese people to dream.

The figure perhaps most associated with self-optimization is the high-tech or social entrepreneur, who has faith in achieving a more productive and pleasurable life through technical means, as well as a belief in market solutions to social problems. Historically, California has been a center for both techno-optimism and for therapeutic movements emphasizing self-discovery, expression, and realization, notably the human potential movement. California is the origin of a culture of "lifehacks" (Wajcman 2019), and for Foucault the home of a "Californian cult of the self" in which the true self must be discovered within (Foucault 2000, 271). Mirroring Silicon Valley, the Chinese technology sector is densely linked to self-help psychology. The leaders of top firms including Baidu and Alibaba have written best-selling self-help books (Hendriks 2017, 181). In Chinese cities, Toastmasters clubs, such as the one where Dorothy shared her dreams of a "colorful life," are densely clustered in technology and financial districts.

Wu Shi,[1] the founder of China's largest publisher of personal growth and new age magazines, had a career in information technology. He told me that he went into publishing in 2007 because he saw a need to teach young people in China how to find their purpose and hold onto their ideals. During my fieldwork in Beijing, I encountered young people who had similarly built their professional and ethical identities around teaching youth to find themselves. I attended several salons in which primarily middle-class youth discussed the meaning of life and work. These events were organized by young people who view themselves as cultural activists. They are not trying to change government policies, but to remedy what they see as a cultural deficiency that leaves Chinese youth unable to articulate personal interests and passions (Hampel 2021, 936). Through offline events and a range of online media platforms, which feature role models who have realized their dream lifestyle, these activists teach their peers that they must reflect on and define their personal ideals and desires. In the past decade, some of these platforms and organizations have opened physical spaces for workshops and activities. Young people seem eager for these ideas and for public venues in which to articulate and defend individualistic values and life choices. The events I attended were staffed by volunteers, and most were free. However, the organizers were generally associated with a media or marketing venture. These entrepreneurs are what Bourdieu would call an "ethical avant-garde" (1984, 367), members of a rising petit bourgeoisie that is "Seek-

[1] Real name.

ing its occupational and personal salvation in the imposition of new doctrines of ethical salvation" (1984, 367). In salons and online discourses, conversation about fashions blends into environmentalism, entrepreneurship into social enterprise, and innovation into self-expression. Since youth are looking both to define their ideals and for practical ways to realize them, helping people to explore the value of their dreams is itself a business opportunity.

One evening, a guest speaker visited a Toastmasters club in Beijing's Zhongguancun, a major hub for software and internet companies. Li Bo presents himself as an international entrepreneur who aspires to reform Chinese society. He tells club members that he founded an educational consulting service because he wants to make "not test-taking machines, but people." With a barrage of psychological terms and concepts, with videos and exercises, he wants to convince us that the mind determines our experience. For example, he gives several people a piece of chocolate, and asks them to rate their eating experience on a scale of one to ten: without waiting for their replies, Li suggests that for some people the chocolate is a two, for others it is an eight. His point is that the chocolate matters less than our perception of it, that external reality does not determine our subjective pleasure. As he begins to explain how our future self should manage our present self, he runs out of time and rushes quickly through Van Gogh as an innovator, the importance of punctuality to a pleasant meal, the power of "purpose" to enrich life, and the need to acquire "a wealth of experience." He concludes by urging us to "think like an entrepreneur, live like an artist." This speech demonstrates the way that positivity and striving are linked to a desired future life and exemplifies a technical approach to optimizing subjective pleasure: the flavor of chocolate, the quality of a meal. This somewhat frantic, utilitarian calculus of pleasure and pain centers on the individual, but it can nonetheless yield moral pleasures. Li Bo professes high social ideals, a personal vision for how to improve China's educational system: teaching students "to find themselves" by approaching their lives as personal creations.

In the PRC, social idealism has been the domain of the state (Lee 2014, 2), not individual initiative, and non-governmental organizations have been tightly restricted. However, entrepreneurs like Li Bo make neoliberal promises of market solutions to social problems, and they channel idealism into commerce rather than political organization. The Chinese government has encouraged social entrepreneurship, as long as it can be harnessed to state projects (Lai et al. 2015; Zhao 2012). In themselves, social entrepreneurship as well as volunteering offer models of service-based citizenship and ways to cultivate affective ties with the nation. Neoliberal states have been critiqued for exploiting individual sympathy to address gaps in state social provision

(Muehlebach 2012). In China, such a strategy is most visible when the state places responsibility for care on families (Zhang 2017), but it is also more widely useful. Although social entrepreneurs and volunteers can certainly benefit others, this does not mean that their endeavors are or should be selfless. Chinese youth often view volunteering as part of a search for self-fulfillment and authenticity (Sum 2017). In social enterprise, work is configured as a calling that comes from within. It appears as an expression of the individual: a personal vision of how to save the world, yielding the coy moral satisfaction of choosing to make a difference. In Chinese cities, deracinated young professionals may have few concrete social responsibilities or personal networks in which to enact the role-based ethics that have been so important in China. But they can center their moral subjectivity on individual self-realization through giving to an abstracted society. Social entrepreneurs can do so practically and profitably by offering solutions to social problems, including a perceived lack of dreams that they view as the outcome of unhealthy social pressures.

The connection between idealism and consumerism has been treated influentially by Colin Campbell in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987). Campbell offers a cultural and technological account of a distinctly modern relationship to pleasure that depends on the habit of "day-dreaming" (1987, 131). He argues that unlike traditional, conventional pleasures, modern pleasures are produced when people shape their own emotional experiences through the power of imagination (1987, 126-7). Campbell argues that daydreaming gradually developed over the modern period, as individualism and literacy separated emotions from shared rituals and meanings, giving people scope for "granting or denying symbols their power" (Campbell 1987, 126). In Campbell's theory, this unleashed imagination yields tremendous pleasures, as people fantasize of unknown thrills and play with possible identities. Campbell argues that daydreaming supports both consumer lifestyles and the narcissistic pleasures of idealism, with "an overriding concern with self-image serving to articulate the two" (1987, 316). Like Campbell, anthropologist Jonathan Friedman perceives a particularly modern affinity between imagined pleasures, moral heroism, and personal identity, emphasizing that this is a highly contingent configuration of the self: "The principle of the daydream, the Walter Mitty principle, the principle of alterity, of the construction of a social self, all are specific to the modern individual and cannot be universalized" (1994, 150).

In Campbell's narrative, print media played a crucial role in spreading the habit of dreaming about different possible lives. In China as elsewhere, lifestyle media seems designed to inculcate just such a habit. At the beginning of China's reform period, consumer media quickly emerged to stimulate and guide everyday fantasies (Davis 2000; Xu 2007). As the middle class

ballooned in the early 21st century, marketing materials and consumer guides became an ever-larger part of daily life, while social media influencers guided people on how to navigate the vast universe of commodities (Woronov 2016). Today, a wide array of fashions and lifestyle goods is accessible even for those with limited disposable income. And in major cities, China's highly developed e-commerce and logistics systems can feel like dream fulfillment machines that manifest whatever you want within days or even minutes. You just have to know what you want. In the new consumer culture, dreams have become specified and individualized. In the 1980s, people aspired to possess the "three big items": televisions, refrigerators, and washing machines. Today, desires seem limitless, and choices are imagined as expressions of personal identity. An influential market research firm in Beijing reports that Chinese people born in the 1990s have developed very specific aspirations for the good life; many can describe in detail the kinds of products that they want to buy, the kinds of house plants they will keep (China Youthology 2013). Marketing insinuates moralized ideas about self-discovery and self-realization into tiny details of everyday daily life.

At a conference about marketing to Chinese youth that was held in Beijing in 2014, an executive comes on stage and gives an example of a successful advertising campaign, one which he says makes dreams easy to identify with. One ad shows an overweight young man putting on athletic shoes to go for a run, while another depicts a child overcoming his fear and jumping off of a diving platform. Either of these visual advertisements could be narrated as a speech in a self-help group: in fact, I heard almost identical speeches in Toastmasters clubs, in which the speaker begins by depicting themselves as formerly fat, or fearful, and proudly tells the audience that they are now running or swimming (Hampel 2021, 934). Many marketing campaigns link commodities to transcendence, not only of class but also of emotional and physical limitations. By encouraging one to get fit, a new pair of running shoes can serve as a prosthetic that brings one closer to an optimal self.

In marketing discourses and beyond them, fantasy is itself moral, an affirmation of the importance of one's desires and therefore of self-worth. In a quotation well known in China, Hong Kong actor and filmmaker Stephen Chow quips, "If a person has no dreams, how are they different from a salted fish?" (2001). Once dreams appear as a basic requirement for human dignity, they can become a focus for activism. In addition to young cultural activists who organize salons and produce media about self-definition, a range of transnational and local actors are teaching children and youth in China that they must have dreams. Li Bo, the educational reformer, completed his undergraduate studies in the United States. He volunteered in an arts program in China that was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; in his understanding, their mission was to teach Chinese students to

be confident and to have dreams (Hampel 2022, 230). At a large workshop pitched as an opportunity for youth to explore life choices, I encountered representatives from a range of companies interested in creativity and innovation, as well as from Junior Achievement, an American NGO that is now teaching financial literacy and entrepreneurship in public schools across China.

Dreams are closely associated with career aspirations and aspirational careers. A foreigner working in Beijing tells me that she volunteers with an organization that takes trips to the countryside to teach children that they can be anything they want to be. Proudly, she recounts how one year they brought a pilot along: the following year, a child said that he wanted to be a pilot. During my fieldwork, I met local volunteers running similar programs. At the time, I was surprised to learn that cultural activists are teaching children to create themselves not only through work but also through leisure. For example, in 2013 I met a Chinese national who was then an undergraduate student at an elite US university. She was spending several weeks in Beijing teaching what she called psychology to high school students. She shared her lesson plans, which suggest to students that their parents are obstacles to self-actualization. Students are also encouraged to visualize how they will appear in the future: their hair styles, hobbies, and pets. Near the same time, I met a young woman from Hong Kong who was volunteering in a Beijing elementary school, teaching children how to plan vacations abroad: she told me that this intervention teaches creativity, critical thinking, and presentation skills. To use Campbell's term, these social interventions are promoting daydreaming. Students are taught to desire future identities and experiences, desires that are intended to motivate them to apply techniques including financial planning, emotional management, and research into consumer aesthetics and choices. These forms of cultural activism, like the salons described above, represent an identity politics that centers on having an identity, with identity having been defined in liberal and individualistic terms: as personal desires and ideals.

In China, the liberal subject, pursuing personal dreams, can justify itself not only as an ethical public actor but also because it resists social pressures. Even if this self may be depoliticized and centered on often overdetermined fantasies, it appears culturally progressive. Daydreams have become a key focus for cultural activism and youth social enterprise in China, as idealistic entrepreneurs champion idealism and entrepreneurship. Dreams are a politically convenient focus for social engagement. Furthermore, the idea that it is vitally important to fantasize about one's future life can easily translate between disparate personal concerns and official objectives: widespread pressure to perform one's individuality and government efforts to promote consumption, desires for a comfortable lifestyle and

narratives of national renaissance, career ambitions and state investments in human capital. In the sophisticated techniques of marketing agencies, dreams can be used to generate desires, while in state programs they can generate hope, striving, and economic activity. For therapists and activists, dreams are the key to health and happiness. This economic, political, and psychological messaging is ubiquitous, and many young people in China have become cynical about the idea that having dreams is the key to a good life. Nevertheless, this idea appeals to people because it reinforces the legitimacy of individual choices and pleasures. Furthermore, daydreaming can itself be pleasurable. Its pleasures build around and react to mainstream constructions of success and the good life and can be assembled even through small, tightly circumscribed projects of personal life styling.

5. Interstitial Selves

In China today, there is an apparent explosion of opportunities for self-optimization, as fitness centers, plastic surgery clinics, and lifestyle consultants proliferate. However, self-optimization is a logic of action, not a particular practice. The lens of self-optimization could easily distort projects of self-making that are founded on different constructions of labor, leisure, and the self. Nevertheless, the concept of self-optimization is helpful for examining moral subjectivity in China today. As indicated in the previous section, the ethos of self-optimization is firmly rooted in China's transnational circles of entrepreneurs and cultural activists. Defined as instrumental actions focused on future experiences and identities, the concept of self-optimization can help us to interpret how Chinese youth discuss the significance of personal desires. Using materials from self-help texts and indicating relevant contemporary social phenomena, this section points out that in China prevalent forms of labor and consumption are not conducive to liberal, individualistic constructions of the self. Since personal dreams are constrained not only by material limitations but also by interpersonal obligations and pressures, self-optimization in China might best describe a conscious retreat from social relationships and dominant values. Young people constitute a self that is amenable to optimization by attempting to distance it from society both morally and physically.

In China, labor and consumer markets, and related changes to values, families, and relationships, have created significant tensions between individual desires and social obligations. Most young people in China have pressure to succeed financially, not only for the sake of wealth but to establish themselves within networks of reciprocity and often to contribute to their families. Prominent anthropologist Yan Yunxiang has argued that in the

reform era, market pressures, state policies, and newly important desires for intimacy and mutual support have actually strengthened family ties (Yan 2021). In addition, the state, using a moral language of filial obligations, calls upon working-aged people to take up social responsibilities including caring for the elderly in an aging society (Zhang 2017) and raising "high-quality" children (Kuan 2015, 13). Many young people now entering the workforce have parents who are financially sound and determined not to become burdens (Zhang 2017, 241). However, parental pressures have not dissipated. One might spend evenings studying how to earn money online, while constructing a beautiful fantasy life of surfing in Bali. But perhaps mother does not want you to give up a conventional career, or to move to Indonesia. The self can become a discrete object amenable to optimization only to the extent that it is not entangled in relational webs.

Social pressures from family members are inscribed within structured inequalities that shape young people's life chances. Since both consumer lifestyles and modern, individualistic values are key class markers, it is important to question how much the idea of self-optimization applies to lifestyle aspirations in China. The pursuit of social status is not best captured through the lens of self-optimizing. The contestant on a dating show who famously said she would rather cry in a BMW than laugh on a bike (Kong 2014, 84) is not concerned with optimizing her life experience in a way that is legible within technical or utilitarian logics. While this individual should not be taken as typical, her comments do refract widespread concerns with the intersection of money and marriage in the context of glaring class and gender inequality (Liu 2023; Jacka 2006.) To say that this woman imagining herself crying in the BMW is on the road to future happiness, or that feeling high status is a form of pleasure, would be both ethnocentric and reductive. Such ambitions could be maligned as vanity or a desire for "face," explained as a reaction to gender and class inequalities, or even conceived of as a moral good, because high status can enable a person to fulfill social obligations: in any case, status and honor do not fit cleanly into calculations centered on personal dreams.

In order to see where self-optimization fits into the moral life of contemporary Chinese youth, it is important to examine the ethical significance of labor and leisure. Entrepreneurial discourses that construct labor as a site of self-expression are certainly available in China, as discussed above. However, labor has not primarily been moralized as a path to individuality. Labor has been viewed as a form of suffering for others, making work into a moral claim that remains salient not only for generations that grew up in villages or collectives (Lora-Wainwright 2013; Thomason 2021), but also for youth who have studied hard in the hope of social mobility. Hard work is a virtue that extends from the laboring masses to the anxious middle classes. In the

self-help groups that I studied, youth constantly invoked the value of persistent hard work. However, many more speeches were about the importance of having a colorful life. While leisure is an aspiration and a mark of status, labor remains associated with being not only lower class but also socially and politically backwards: in reform era China, the opposite of a "high-quality" person is the physical laborer (Anagnost 2004, 196-7). In addition, in recent years Chinese youth are reacting against a culture of overwork, and against work that does not promise them a desirable, modern identity or personal fulfillment. To official consternation, some are electing to "lie flat," exploring alternative lifestyles rather than entering the workforce (Gullotta and Lin 2022). For most youth, escaping conventional work remains more of a fantasy than a life plan.

The figure of the entrepreneur promises to reconcile between values of hard work and self-expression. However, the autonomous entrepreneur, hero of the markets, is perhaps further from most people's experience than the businessperson who works with or within "the system" (*tizhi*) of state organs, enterprises, and systems of distribution. Large sectors of China's economy are organized by patron-client relationships that bridge official and private networks (Osburg 2020). Businesspeople, mostly men, need to feel out delicate and changing regulatory environments, searching for tips on upcoming deals and allocations. Building a relationship requires more commitment than a business lunch or even a round of golf; it may involve long hours of banqueting and entertaining. Life within this highly interdependent world resist logics of optimization. Successful people become ever more enmeshed in interpersonal networks and accumulate ever more responsibility. I heard numerous young professionals express their displeasure with institutional and cultural norms that they view as impositions on their talents, health, and time. A young psychotherapist complained to me about how employees in Chinese companies are expected to perform personal duties for their bosses: taking care of their children, buying medicine for their parents, booking movie tickets for the boss, and even going on the date with him. Even more so than in other cultural contexts, the workplace in China is perceived as a constant negotiation of interpersonal relationships. However, within these constraining networks, young professionals can try to optimize their attitudes and emotions so as to claim more space for their own lifestyle.

Self-help books for Chinese youth are especially concerned with office politics. An entire genre of books tells readers to defend their personal boundaries in professional and personal relationships: as the title of a best-selling self-help book states the matter, *Your Goodness Must Have an Edge* (Mo Yange 2016). In these books, the primary obstacle to achieving a good work-life balance is not inefficiency but constant impositions. In the United States,

therapeutic discourses have encouraged employees to control their emotions in work relationships, justifying this as a measure to improve both cooperation and personal competitiveness (Illouz 2008, 104). Chinese authors instruct readers in a delicate art of managing relationships without being taken advantage of. They tell readers to have boundaries, but they cannot offer this advice without qualification. The books give contradictory exhortations: to reject others without fear, but not refuse people heedlessly (Mo Yange 2016, 13); to insist on leaving the office on time, but to go to the airport to get a client for your boss because your superiors must see you as useful (Mo Yange 2016, 255). For Chinese youth, assertive independence seems modern, but many embrace it with ambivalence because interdependence can be understood as intimacy, obligation, and security. However, advice books for young professionals in China suggest that youth are very interested in making space for their personal pursuits.

Some young people in China not only blame work pressures for denying them sufficient leisure time but also disparage Chinese culture as joyless. One particularly clear example of how the pursuit of happiness is mobilized in Chinese cultural politics comes from an article which I encountered when members of several self-help groups posted it on social media. The author of an article on "The Happiness of Foreigners" (Wuliao 2016) is concerned that her compatriots do not know how to enjoy life. Her article is composed of a litany of anxieties related to her inability to perform at work in comparison with her foreign colleagues. She worries about giving presentations and feels that she lacks the linguistic and cultural capital to fully participate in her international workplace. But the author's deepest doubt and self-loathing emerge when she turns to health, lifestyle, and leisure. She writes that when compared to herself or to Chinese coworkers, her foreign colleagues seem to be bursting with vitality. In her eyes, the foreigners present a lively, glowing, bright contrast to the Chinese "walking corpses" (*xingshizourou*).

Her German co-worker, she explains, is not only learning ballet, doing yoga, and going out with friends after work, even if it is late, but also flies off for weekend trips around China. Faced with this much energy, the author describes a sense that she is wasting her life. She seems stricken with a restless desire to recreate. Moreover, she sees her predicament as part of a national disgrace. For foreigners, she writes, every day is a holiday, without high expectations, with no desire for face, and with no concept of honor and shame. The language of face and honor suggests that she interprets her narrow, job-oriented existence as the result of a Chinese cultural pressure to strive for status. She writes that foreigners live freely and treat themselves well, and she supposes that they are not making five-year plans and worrying about buying big houses. The author does not mention that Chinese

professionals are often working long hours, typically for lower salaries than their foreign colleagues, and that only senior employees are entitled to more than five vacation days per year.

For overworked professionals, the idea of jetting off to weekend destinations may be alluring, but it may also seem exhausting. For Chinese youth, pleasure may be less strongly identified with intense stimulation than it is for many people in Euro-American contexts. In the United States, the terms "YOLO "(You Only Live Once) and "bucket lists" (things to do before you die) are associated with entrepreneurial lifestyles. These terms invoke activities like partying and skydiving and a sense that the good life, one worthy of aspiration, involves exchanging limited time for intense pleasures. The imagination of pleasure and happiness in terms of strong stimulation may be peculiarly Euro-American (Nylan 2021; Tsai 2007). Since self-optimization is guided by a utilitarian calculation, different cultural and social constructions of pleasure can reconfigure its formula. In a society where physical labor and overtime are common, pleasure may be more often associated with relaxation rather than exertion. Self-help books for young professionals linger on leisurely and low-key pleasures, framing even modest acts of self-care as parts of aspirational lifestyles.

As part of my research into youth, identity, and individuality, I surveyed a dozen books for youth from a genre that first emerged in 2016 about how to become an "interesting person" (*youqu de ren*). Books such as *Never Give up on Being an Interesting Person* (Mo Zhubian 2016) capture young people's desires for a colorful life as well as their anxiety to appear interesting to others. These books are addressed to recent college graduates, mostly women, who are imagined to be working office jobs in major cities. The books offer tips about navigating work, leisure, and relationships. They also offer stereotyped, accessible suggestions for experiencing the good life. Across different texts, one repeatedly encounters fantasies about buying a bean bag chair and relaxing on the balcony, sitting in a coffee shop with a novel, and small domestic acts such as buying some plants or cooking a meal. However, such relaxing pursuits are secondary to relentless self-improvement. The books are illustrated with images of low-key pleasures, of coffee shops and lazy afternoons, but the text tells readers that after getting home from work they must find time for yoga, English study, and French novels. Drinking coffee and traveling abroad appear as ways to align one's lifestyle and values with a modern subjectivity and middle-class identity. This endeavor is pervaded with a palpable pressure to become marriageable, especially for women. To the degree that consumer lifestyles are overlaid by intense social pressures, they are not the means or ends of self-optimization.

As social mobility slows down in China, it may be that lifestyle aspirations may express an ever more standardized idiom of class hierarchy. However,

consumer culture may also help youth to achieve a degree of symbolic independence that allows them to daydream about different future experiences and identities. Browsing online galleries, youth can imagine possible futures that are desirable in many ways. As consumers, youth have a wide range of choices; as they display their lifestyles on social media, consumer choice becomes a curated part of the self. While prevalent images of pleasure center on small acts of self-care, youth in China may imagine their ideal state as a bounded and private lifestyle: in both cases, consumer fantasies are configured as an escape from social pressures. The government has stated its aims to create a modestly prosperous (*xiaokang*) life for citizens (Hird 2018, 113). The state can deliver a satisfactory life more easily if people focus on small, individual pleasures rather than social mobility. Today, with a surplus of unemployed college graduates, it could be useful to promote the idea that one can succeed in any field of work or leisure, at least on one's own terms. However, despite official messaging, social competition remains fierce, and young people often face strong criticism if they decide to go their own way. Many young people in China are fantasizing about a space for the self, a utopia of self-expression, but they can only locate it outside of society and diametrically opposed to everyday morality and practice.

Starting in late 2017, young adults in China began to label themselves using a word taken from a Japanese magazine, which in Chinese is pronounced *foxi* (*fou-shee*): this term can be translated as "Buddha style." Young adults apply this label to those who are relaxed, whose personal interests are their top priority, and who generally view personal relationships as a hassle. Paralleling developments in Japan and elsewhere, in China there is a trend of singlehood and of people choosing to have few or no children. For someone *foxi*, as for some Japanese youth, dating may be "bothersome" (Allison 2013, 101). Daily intimacy may seem especially bothersome to a generation of single children. In addition, relationships in China normatively lead to marriage, and marriage is a prospect that youth, especially women, often regard with deep ambivalence (Farrer 2002, 114, 184; Hizi 2018): getting married may signal successful personhood and stop parents from nagging you, but it brings responsibility and limits personal freedoms. When youth do not pursue romantic relationships, they can interpret this as a strategy for cultivating individuality by resisting social pressures.

Young urban professionals in China are increasingly single, and they increasingly have a place of their own. Starting in about 2015, Chinese media outlets began reporting on the phenomenon of "empty nest youth" (*kongchao qingnian*): this term refers to the tens of millions of young adults living alone in major cities, reflecting the rise of a mobile urban middle class. Individuals have space for a consumerist life in which elements can be purchased, manipulated, and chosen with a logic of self-expression.

Anthropologist Maria Nolan notes that youth spend a lot of time and effort decorating domestic spaces (Nolan 2021, 1035). She suggests that for youth the home is an especially important refuge from the disorienting effects of alienating cities (2021). Enabled by online ecosystems for food and entertainment, one can have tremendous control over one's life experiences without leaving the house. The young single professional at home, gaming and socializing online and spending long hours with the dream fulfillment machinery of online shopping, appears as an unexpected icon of self-optimization. Rather than an entrepreneur working and playing hard, this is a consumer getting ever more comfortable in their carefully arranged room. With fewer social attachments, one might hope to control one's time, feelings, and finances. If the self takes up a modest space, perhaps it can be easier to arrange to one's liking.

As an analytic, self-optimization draws our attention to how people work on their bodies, emotions, and environments to achieve a desired life, within limitations. Self-optimization has often been associated with frenetic careerists seeking to maximize efficiency and pleasure. But for most of us, time is limited by work, and leisure by money. If one is to live as one pleases, it may help to focus on practical daydreams. In youth who have the luxury to become Buddha-like, we see a subjects assuming responsibility for individual happiness in a risky society; but we can also identify a particularly Chinese strategy of constructing a comfortable lifeworld within the constraints of social networks and an authoritarian state (Farquhar and Zhang 2005). Both self-improvement and self-optimization can be viewed as searches for control in an uncertain world. To the degree that precarity drives one to seek resilience, whether financial or emotional, or to invest in productive capacities that will allow one to thrive in a fluid world, we can identify self-improvement. In self-optimization, intimate anxieties about the future are steamrolled under the assertion of technical control over valued aspects of personal experience. This can feel empowering, a claim of agency and a mimesis of elite confidence. However, structural limitations delimit which parts of the self might be optimized. Particular forms of social obligation, cultural pressure, and public life are specific to China. But globally, an adequate life is difficult to achieve. On social media, images of daily life, of cooking or relaxing, are being presented as highly aspirational. Perhaps future projects of self-optimization will be guided by ever smaller daydreams and ever narrower parameters.

6. Foreclosed Fantasies

Motivated by dreams of a colorful life, Dorothy is working to become extroverted, imagining herself dancing onto the path of personal fulfillment. This foray is underwritten by moral codes of modernity, class, and self-making, but it proceeds through pleasurable fantasies that center on individual identity and experience. By investigating discourses about dreams and lifestyles in contemporary China, we can trace the cultural roots of self-optimization and identify the social contexts in which it makes sense to people as a meaningful rationale for action. The ethos of self-optimization depends on desires and ideals that are constructed as individualistic fantasies. Materials from China illustrate how contingent these kinds of daydreams are.

Personal desires and ideals serve as important guides for youth trying to live well in a society where widespread participation in labor and consumer markets is only decades old, and where social roles and moral frameworks are unsettled. The ability to craft one's life depends on urban labor markets that have given young professionals the spatial, financial, and cultural means for realizing personalized visions of desirable selves. This demographic overlaps with the entrepreneurial and aspirational group that has been closely associated with self-optimization in Euro-American contexts. Indeed, foreign entrepreneurs provide, and sometimes sell, models for self-making in China. However, projects of self-optimization in China are shaped by distinct cultural conceptions of labor, leisure, and pleasure; both work and play can easily be encompassed by social ends rather than understood as expressions of the self, while pleasure may be composed in a lower key. In local cultural and social conditions, the self-optimizing subject, shaping experience for their own gratification, may be identified less in the competitive entrepreneur than in the young consumer devoted to cultivating a personal lifestyle. Although lifestyle pursuits are shaped by social pressures, they can nevertheless create physical, moral, and imaginative space for the self.

As distinct from self-improvement, which actors understand as a process of developing valued traits, self-optimization involves using multiple means to craft future identities and experiences. In some ways, this definition limits the analytic scope of self-optimization. For example, self-help practices that involve managing emotions or increasing work efficiency may often primarily be ways to pursue ends, such as self-control or honor, that are framed as social imperatives. When actions are not oriented towards realizing desired life states as a form of self-expression, they are not fully captured by the analytic of self-optimization. This distinction is never absolute: personal ends are thoroughly social. Even acts intended to fulfill social

obligations or seek conventional pleasures invariably involve elements of daydreaming, imaginations of future selves who inhabit more perfected lives. Paradoxically, by narrowing the scope of self-optimization we can see elements of it everywhere, not only in personal growth or fitness culture, where the self is worked on in quite direct ways, but also when people decorate a living room or open an app to study nearby dim sum restaurants. These acts involve skilled labors of research, planning, evaluation, and reflection that aim to create a desired experience. The concept of self-optimization is crucial because it highlights how wide a range of activities are now oriented towards future life experiences and identities, understood as expressions of personal desires.

The analytic of self-optimization allows us to bring a utilitarian and individualistic cultural logic into clear focus. This logic of action tends to produce conservative effects, cutting off exploratory and non-instrumental orientations and experiences (see Nehring, Esnard, and Kerrigan 2024, in this special issue). The project of improving one's life is central to liberal understandings of rationality and value. In some contexts, including in China, fantasy can be a psychologically and politically important way to resist social pressures. A curated wardrobe, however shallow, can provide a valuable space for the self. But the self-optimizing subject is easily exploited as both laborer and consumer, squeezing time for money and pleasure. For all their talk of innovation, those most invested in self-optimization are those with the greatest faith in their ability to shape their futures, often those who have committed to mainstream careers in the fields of finance and technology. While they depend on visions of change, projects of self-optimization aim to achieve stability, to construct a micromanaged, homeostatic life in a mismanaged and unsustainable world. Because projects of self-optimization fixate on imagined future experiences, they are easily directed towards highly reified and commodified fantasies of the good life. Rather than the feast of life with its dropped dishes and unexpected guests, there is a neatly written menu and a ticking clock. At its limit, self-optimization describes life lived in pursuit of future perfection, with experiences endlessly improved as sources of happiness or efficiency. Coffee and breakfast are consumed either as fetishized pleasures or as caffeine and fuel, instruments that allow you to work faster to pay for an aspirational vacation with other people like you, who measure each other by what they do or do not do for you and how high they can climb the castles in their kingdom of dreams.

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