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SPECIAL SECTION: THE POLITICAL WORK OF NEGATIVE AFFECTS: A VIEW FROM POST-REFORM CHINA

Shameless modernity

Reflexivity and social class in Chinese personal growth groups

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Critical scholars suggest that self-help psychology discourages political activism and encourages entrepreneurship by promoting a "positive" attitude. This article complicates this finding, arguing that for Chinese youth, self-help groups reproduce class distinctions, expressed through leisure and perceived modernity, and that these groups mobilize negative affects, particularly shame. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, the article shows how Chinese youth recount shameful experiences in personal growth groups, reflecting on their perceived failures and committing to redefine themselves. Their shame induces reflexivity, or self-awareness; this reflexivity helps Chinese youth to position themselves in a highly stratified society. Furthermore, reflexive self-definition indexes social class and personal fulfillment. Youth use self-help groups as spaces in which to align their personal identity with local moral registers championing urban consumer lifestyles and modern values. Therefore, self-help practices channel negative affects into reproducing social class and into constructing an imagined national modernity.

Keywords: self-help, affect, shame, reflexivity, China

When I was little, I was not confident with my face. So I kept asking my mom, "Hey mom, why am I so ugly. You and dad are both good-looking. Am I not your son?" And she told me, "Quantum, what a good question. You know what, although every part of your face is not that good, but when they combine all together, it's very harmonious as a whole. So look into the mirror." So since then, looking into the mirror has become my favorite hobby. Because the more I looked into it, the more I agreed with my mom.

So begins a speech by a veteran of competitive public speaking contests, an animated man in his early thirties whom I will call Quantum. Gesticulating to an audience of about fifty young professionals at a Toastmasters public speaking club in Beijing, he narrates his journey of personal growth as a series of embarrassing failures. Hoping to practice English, Quantum timidly approached foreigners at Beijing's Houhai lake. When he was mistaken for a salesman hawking cheap pirated DVDs, a downcast Quantum noticed his reflection in the lake, distorted. He narrates this vision as a turning point in his life story. In response to this rejection, Quantum considered what conversation topics would interest foreigners: Chinese food, Beijing traffic, Chinese classical literature, and contemporary television shows. And, he says, "You know what? from that day on my business in Houhai became better and better."

Quantum's speech focuses on his reflected image, a metaphor for the self-knowledge that facilitated his personal growth. When Quantum first spoke at a Toastmasters club, an evaluator told him that his style is great, but his English unintelligible: "Your accent is really . . . special." On his way home, he tells the audience, he saw himself in the subway window and felt like a "loser." But he realized that if he didn't embarrass himself now, in the future he might lose face in front of a bigger audience: "So I told myself, no big deal. For your face, just lose it." As an example of his newfound brashness, Quantum recounts how he began loudly reciting English texts in a public park, terrorizing the local retirees. Eventually, he

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tells us, he entered his first humorous speaking contest, in Malaysia. He found himself in front of an international audience, performing with his "donkey voice" and "monkey gestures." Quantum tells us that when he didn't win, he received a severe blow to his sense of self: "That night, I thought, I was nothing. Nothing." But the next day at the conference, people praised his performance. He saw "all of their eyes as most sparkling encouraging emotional mirrors I have ever met . . . I knew I was something."

Quantum moves through a series of social games, adapting to their different requirements: interesting conversation, clear pronunciation, and a humorous performance. Quantum gains both confidence and recognition by learning how he appears in light of these standards. Although they are varied, these social standards all index an imagined modernity. English language ability indicates access to education or to cosmopolitan lifestyles. Engaging conversational skills suggest cultural capital, while a sparkling personality may prove valuable in new social and economic markets. When Quantum fails to demonstrate these qualities, he is ashamed. And when foreigners assume that Quantum is hawking cheap copied Chinese goods, personal and national shame intertwine. Shame initiates Quantum's self-awareness; by sharing this shame, he signals his resolve to become a modern subject. In Toastmasters and other personal growth groups, young urban professionals like Quantum are busy figuring out who they are, for others and for themselves. The affect of shame can stimulate youth to look in the mirror, and to work on themselves until they like what they see.

Drawing on fieldwork in personal growth groups popular with Chinese youth, this article analyzes how psychological discourses can reinforce social hierarchies and contribute to nation-building. It argues that youth find self-help practices valuable in part because these practices induce, amplify, and channel shame: this powerful, self-conscious affect can help youth to become aware of how they are perceived and evaluated. By exploring their shame on stage, before a group of peers, youth can adjust their appearance and values in pursuit of material success, personal fulfillment, and acceptance in cosmopolitan cities. For young urban professionals, reflexive self-definition is both a strategy for adaptation and an icon of modern selfhood. Youth associate their former, unreflexive self with low social class, and also with a backwards, traditional China. Chinese psychologists and activists also connect modernity with autonomous self-definition, and therefore criticize Chinese society for a supposed lack of reflexivity. For these critics, shame appears illiberal because it conveys social evaluation, thus preventing individual autonomy and blocking the path to modernity. However, as youth recount embarrassing experiences in self-help groups, shame appears as a necessary step on the way to becoming modern: modern, and thus proud to see oneself reflected in the mirror eyes of the audience.

Orienting shame

In 2012 and 2014 I conducted nearly two years of participant observation in a range of personal growth groups in Beijing. I was trying to determine how and why youth are working to change their personalities, trying become extroverted and confident. My ethnographic work focused on Toastmasters clubs, affiliated with a century-old American organization that teaches "public speaking and leadership skills."[1] When I began my research there were forty clubs in Beijing, and there are now nearly seventy. The clubs mostly attract recent college graduates, who typically moved to Beijing for their studies. As "outsiders" (外地人), they generally have fewer social benefits and a lower status than locals. Many club members work in the technology industry, while others are students or teachers, and a few are entrepreneurs. Through my work with people trying to improve themselves, I met psychotherapists and activists who are trying to teach Chinese youth to be more self-aware, and analyzed how these actors use psychological language to articulate social critiques.

Critical scholarship has largely depicted self-help psychology as neoliberal in that it that encourages people to manage themselves and invest in their own productive capacities (Bröckling 2016; Rose 1998), working hard for their own self-actualization. Positivity, confidence, and self-management are central to this ideological program. Research in China has shown how the government uses psychology to make rural youth (Hansen 2012) and laid-off workers (Yang 2015) assume responsibility for securing their own futures. The phrase "positive energy" (正能量), taken from a self-help book, has become a key term in Chinese government propaganda (Hird 2018). Since shame and anxiety can sap confidence, self-help discourses frame them as the enemy. However, these affects

1. "All About Toastmasters," Toastmasters International. Https://www.toastmasters.org/about/all-about-toastmasters. Accessed September 6, 2021.

are key to motivating people to transform themselves through psychology. As Quantum's speech demonstrates, by confessing that one is fundamentally flawed one can signal one's commitment to self-improvement.

By offering techniques for self-knowledge and self-change, popular forms of psychology not only resonate with neoliberal ideology, but also with an imagined modernity. The "moral narrative of modernity" inevitably features "some version of the human subject that is distinguished by its heightened knowledge of, and efforts to realize itself through, its capacities as a self-aware agent" (Keane 2007: 54). Ethnographic accounts suggest that local expressions of shame are often articulated in relation to this ideal modern self. In the Czech Republic, for example, "shame is smeared over those who did not manage to synchronise their personal life trajectories with the hegemonically triumphant trajectory of post-socialist neoliberal transformation" (Reifová 2020: 15). In Ethiopia, young men feel shame at failing to seek opportunity abroad (Mains 2007), while migrant workers in Indonesia see their failure to succeed as a failure to live up to models of national modernity (Lindquist 2004: 503). In the case of China, shame can bolster official efforts not only to encourage entrepreneurial self-management, but also to build a modern, wealthy, and civilized (文明) nation. This is evident when, for example, rural-to-urban migrants are addressed as being in need of improvement (H. Yan 2003), so that they can contribute to national development.

Youth in personal growth groups measure their modernity along several parallel dimensions. First, they associate modernity with marketization and urbanization, and thus with the capacity to define oneself through personal choices and among strangers. Second, as youth seek appropriate ways to inhabit urban life, they try to adopt what they perceive as modern, usually Western, forms of sociality. Finally, these forms of self-definition and self-presentation serve as an index of social class: not in terms of material wealth, but because they demonstrate proximity to cosmopolitan cultural capital, consumer culture, and therefore modernity. Youth who move from less central cities to major metropolises, especially Beijing or Shanghai, not only face institutionalized inequality: they embody, and are ashamed of, the contrast between cosmopolitan cities and a hinterland widely perceived as backwards and in need of development. Given the scale and speed of social change in China, a layered history of antitraditional cultural politics, and a moral tradition that has used shame didactically, studying these migrants can yield insight into how shame can be used to construct self-consciously modern subjects.

As the quintessential self-conscious affect, shame plays a key role in socialization. In China, shame and self-reflection (反省) have been elaborated as fundamental twinned foundations of morality. Both Confucian and communist techniques of subjectification have raised moral exemplars and encouraged people to humbly reflect on themselves in relation to these idealized figures. Shame is complexly theorized in China. Among many Chinese words related to shame, the common term *xiu-chi* indicates both "affective shame" (羞, *xiu*) and "moral shame" (耻, *chi*) (Fung 2009): Chinese parents may use the first to inculcate the latter, which indicates an awareness of moral principles. However, Western psychological literature generally depicts shame as a harmful counterpart to guilt. In part, this is because psychologists have defined shame as a susceptibility to external social judgment, which does not involve a rational, individual understanding of wrongdoing (Wong and Tsai 2007). In contrast, guilt is supposed to involve consciously acknowledging that one has violated a rule: it preserves a rational subject with a critical framework that allows it to judge its own actions.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Euro-American critics have depicted Chinese culture as morally empty, based on the allegation that it relies on external sanctions rather than internalized principles (Hall and Ames 1995). However, these perceptions perhaps tell us more about Western culture than about China. By affirming that subjects are affectively entangled with social norms, shame undermines liberal pretensions to self-making, and subverts the Enlightenment project of rationalizing social mores (Shweder 2017; Hollander 2003). Chinese modernizers internalized these foreign views, depicting their compatriots as unthinking slaves to tradition. Thus, in individualistic or modernizing contexts, shame itself can seem shameful because it indicates an affective, prerational assent to prevailing standards of value. This disvaluation of shame is important to Chinese youth, in part because they can signal their embrace of modernity by displaying their shamelessness, especially where shame appears as an obstacle to self-definition.

When Quantum was shamed by foreigners who saw him as a cheap tout, he decided that "The skin of my face can be thicker." A thicker skin would not only protect Quantum's feelings, but also allow him to impose on others without worrying about damaging social relationships (Kipnis 1995: 131). Members of Toastmasters and

other self-help groups often endorse shamelessness as a virtue, encouraging each other to "not want face" (不要脸; *buyaolian*) (Hampel 2017: 452). The word *lian* (脸) indicates the moral aspect of face (Hu 1944). Chinese people may criticize each other for excessively desiring *mianzi* (面子), indicating face as a pursuit of social status, but to abandon *lian* is to act shamelessly. In self-help groups, youth share didactic tales in which shamelessness enables self-promotion and therefore economic success, or romantic success. Therefore, modesty and sensitivity to social evaluation are cast as cultural impediments to personal life projects. As Chinese youth act in individualistic ways, they are both challenging social mores and conforming to them, escaping from some forms of social evaluation while perpetuating others. But this tired framing of the issues doesn't exhaust these youths' dilemma. In a rapidly changing society, just specifying the terms by which one is evaluated can be difficult. I found that in the quest to gain self-awareness, some people take extreme measures.

Take Suli and Zhao, two entrepreneurs in their mid-twenties who met each other at an expensive leadership course. In a sunny Beijing café, they recount standing inside a circle of two dozen peers who criticized them from all sides. They explain that this exercise has made them more sincere; as an example, Suli says that if she doesn't like Zhao's shirt, she will tell him so. "People usually wear masks," she says, bringing her hand to her face. Exercises of self-objectification have played an important role in the history of self-help psychology. Writing about the Human Potential Movement in 1960s California, Tom Wolfe calls similar practices of collective criticism "lemon sessions" (1976). More broadly, the "encounter groups" popularized by this movement relied on social feedback to stimulate personal growth. Suli and Zhao's exercise also has clear echoes of Maoist "struggle sessions," in which public criticism was used as a tool of political discipline. Now, however, we see a technology of subjectification being mobilized in the service of individualistic self-realization. Although they attach great significance to social feedback, Suli and Zhao concur that we should care less about how others see us. And they both describe how honest feedback from their peers has helped them to peel back layers of illusion, to find the true self. If tearing into Zhao's clothing feels like truth and freedom for Suli, this criticism is also meant to liberate Zhao.

On his side of the shirt, Zhao is busy building a lifestyle brand. He talks about how entrepreneurship is ultimately about "selling yourself." But in fact, Zhao is rather embarrassed by his business, selling sex toys. He hasn't told his parents what kind of business he is running. Yet his brand relies on selling shamelessness. Zhao receives support from activists who are promoting sex-positive feminism to Chinese youth: they are fighting the shame surrounding sexual pleasure, but they also express shame at China's backwards lack of pleasure. Ethnographic reports from Indonesia (Lindquist 2004) and from China (Jacka 2006) show that liberal attitudes to sexuality can be a source of anxiety for rural women who migrate to major cities; conversely, some migrants embrace liberal attitudes as a marker of their belonging in the modern city (Jacka 2006: 240). We will see that among college-educated Chinese youth, sex is fraught, but fascinating. Although Zhao regards self-awareness as a commercially valuable skill, he was not drawn to personal growth groups only for instrumental reasons: he told me that he began attending these groups because he was lonely and because he hoped to become brave and confident. Zhao's contact with self-help psychology was occasioned by a search for his identity in Beijing, professionally, socially, and in relation to distinctively modern discourses of self-definition through sex and leisure.

Suli's friend has joined us; the conversation has moved on from the true self to the importance of making time for travel. Hobbies, fashion, and travel can serve as proxies for social class, obscuring the time and money that enable these pursuits; on the other hand, we will see how shame at lack of leisure can generate class consciousness. In China, talk of class is interwoven with discourses about *suzhi* (素质), a term usually glossed as "quality" (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006). This term indicates an overall moral and social status. Being wealthy, urban, and cultured is associated with high *suzhi*, as is upright and civil behavior. Social status and virtue are entangled, moralizing aspects of identity including education, etiquette, and dress. When young professionals in self-help groups try to adopt what they perceive as modern values and lifestyles, they are not necessarily trying to pass as wealthy. Rather, they are undertaking a moral project by aligning themselves, their views, and their fashions with the imagined requirements of personal success and national modernity.

For Chinese young adults, the need to position oneself within urban consumer culture is both historically and developmentally new. A life-course perspective on shame is relevant here, as is a sense of scale. If we are all concerned with how we appear to others, adolescents and young adults may be even more so; in China there are well over two hundred million people between the ages

of fifteen and twenty-nine (Ning 2019). In the recent past, these people would not have had many shirts to choose from. But over the past five years, cell phone-based e-commerce has exploded in China, and even lower-class youth have access to a great variety of fashions. In massive urban centers marked by great opportunity and institutionalized class divisions, material pressures and individualistic discourses, youth can struggle to orient themselves.

In her study of shame, Elspeth Probyn writes both of "cognitive shame" based on awareness of one's moral failings, and of "that other little shame that whispers in the habitus: the body calling out its hopes and discomfort because it feels out-of-place. This shame is the body saying that it cannot fit in although it desperately wants to" (2004: 345). In China, a great many people are out of place, or at least displaced. An ongoing process of urbanization is being supercharged by government programs that are relocating hundreds of millions of people to the cities. When self-help psychology took off in the early twentieth-century United States, similar processes of urbanization and marketization were generating anxieties about personal identity (Susman [1973] 2003). Ethnographic accounts have emphasized that people in China are turning to psychology in the context of a profound confusion caused by social upheavals (Kleinman et al. 2011; Kuan 2015; Zhang 2020). Authors describe an acutely felt moral crisis, in which individualistic aspirations are in tension with interpersonal demands (Bregnbæk 2016; Y. Yan 2009).

Youth in self-help groups evidently feel these tensions, since they constantly reassure each other that it is legitimate to spend time and money on leisure, and to pursue their own passions in work and in love. Nevertheless, individual aspirations and social pressures often appear less contradictory than complementary, as the signifiers of personal fulfillment are also the markers of class. Ethnographic research in personal growth groups allowed me to observe many confessional and didactic moments, providing valuable opportunities to study moral subjectivity. For youth who are seeking their place in a cosmopolitan city and a changing society, self-help practices can be seen as forms of "mastery play" (Jackson 2005: 16), ways of scaling down the chaotic complexity of life in order to create some sense of control. In personal growth groups, young adults confront their anxieties about personal identity, working to reduce their sense of confusion and vulnerability.

This article will first analyze self-presentation in Toastmasters public speaking clubs, indicating the techniques that club members use to increase their self-awareness, and the kinds of aspirations that they model for each other. In order to appreciate the role of self-awareness in modernist cultural politics, we will then see how Chinese psychotherapists depict their compatriots as solipsistically unaware. These critiques cast lack of reflexivity as a source of national shame, while positioning psychologists as agents of modernity. Finally, we will visit salons organized by activists who are explicitly trying to make Chinese youth more self-aware. We will see how these events are dominated by shame and anxiety about sex, leisure, and social class. Throughout, we will see that the self-making subject of psychology appears as an aspirational icon of modernity.

Changing momentum

Members of Chinese Toastmasters clubs largely identify as shy and introverted. The experience of giving speeches in the clubs is affectively intense: members report that their hearts pound, and their hands may shake visibly. However, they are often extraordinarily brave in sharing their vulnerability. In a Beijing conference hall, at an event marking the ninetieth anniversary of the Toastmasters organization, a speaker recounts a moment of shameful exposure. While he was changing into swimwear, his companions told him "You look like a pregnant woman." He tells the audience that this experience led him to "change momentum." He started to exercise and lost weight. In Toastmasters clubs, narratives of personal growth often begin with shame: failing at work, in love, or being mocked by peers. These falls from an unselfconscious Eden have an important role in theories of reflexivity (Keane 2016: 79): such experiences impress people with the importance of shaping their moral and physical self-presentation. Club members reframe shameful moments as awakenings that set them on the path to a new identity. They then affirm the value of self-definition through leisure, romance, and through reflexivity—however painful it can be at times.

Critical self-awareness is not only a constant theme of the speeches given in Toastmasters clubs, but also a structural component of club meetings. Toastmasters clubs gather weekly, generally for two hours on weekends or in the evening. Each meeting includes an improvised speech segment in which participants briefly respond to prompts, followed by several longer, prepared speeches. Finally, everyone receives feedback on aspects of their performance ranging from body language to narrative

structure. By far the most common criticism is that speeches should be more energetic, and evaluators also frequently tell people to emphasize their failures and frustrations. I heard speakers being instructed to "emphasize hardship," or that the structure of a speech "should be difficulty to triumph." Although club members positively evaluate high energy and dramatic talks, many speeches are delivered quietly, and are tinged with nostalgia, regret, and shame.

The cosmopolitan aspirations of Toastmasters members are evident in the fact that most clubs in China hold their meetings in English, and most club members go by their adopted English names. Clubs also promote modern codes for physical interaction. Handshakes are mandatory, and if someone forgets to give a handshake they will be pursued across the room. Members hug on stage, often very awkwardly, and sometimes as the audience chants: "hug, hug!" In part, these rigid rules seem intended to safely minimize the uncertainty of interaction. However, these rules are also ethical interventions that promote an imagined, singular, and superior Western etiquette. For example, club members perceive hugging as a largely foreign custom. At one club meeting, in a talk about listening to your heart, a speaker lamented how he didn't hug his grandfather when he was home for Spring Festival: "that kind of emotional display was too much for us," he says. Grandfather passed away, and the speaker never got a chance to embrace him. In this speech authenticity and filial piety merge into an affectively potent critique of Chinese culture, and shame is to be obviated through modern values and behaviors.

Toastmasters club members more often envision the modern self not in the family, but among strangers. It is in this context that handshakes signify civility and modernity. Driven by shame at the perceived rudeness and callousness of Chinese people, the government has promoted egalitarian interactions through a series of civilizing campaigns (Lee 2014). Other elements of comportment can also be read into the project of building a modern self and a modern nation. For example, anthropologist John Osburg has described government campaigns encouraging people to dress well for the nation (2013: 137), suggesting another surface of contact between shame as a personal affect and a collective one. Modernity is thus imagined through new forms of stranger sociality, nervous and alluring.

With hesitant curiosity, a Toastmasters club member asked me, "Is it true that Americans go to parties to get sex?" Most club members had limited experience with foreign forms of nightlife, but many were curious to learn more. Clubs and bars have served as a way for people in China to experience modernity and to acquire cosmopolitan cultural capital (Farrer and Field 2015). Many of the words that Chinese youth use to talk about leisure have been loaned from English: if you want to "*haipi*" (happy: it has become a verb), you can go "shopping," or to a "*pati*" (party). "*Hai*" is a transliteration of "high": and if you are having a really good time, then you are "playing very *hai*" (玩的很嗨; *wande hen hai*). In some cases, the desire to participate in this world of play serves as a direct motive for self-transformation. For example, after a Toastmasters club meeting one evening, a woman shares her concern that she misses social cues. Trying to reassure her, I suggest that it becomes easier to understand people over time. "But what about strangers?" she asks. When I wonder where she talks to strangers, she replies "At bars, for instance." Training programs such as Toastmasters directly address anxieties about new, consequential opportunities to socialize with strangers, whether at professional networking events or at parties.

"We all know the first impression is very important. A good beginning is half a success. Especially for a job interview or a blind date," says June. In halting, sincere English, this slender woman in her mid-twenties explains that if you don't have a "good appearance," then "the first date may become the last one." A few subdued laughs come from the audience. June goes on to reject mainstream and superficial standards of appearance, critiquing luxury brands and Korean plastic surgery. June reflects on herself as a visible object, but also on social norms. Although June dismisses mainstream ideas about beauty, she wholeheartedly endorses self-definition through fashion. With admiration, June shares her "surprise" that fashion models are so "different." With help from an "image design expert," she tells us, everyone can find their "suitable style in clothes, color, hair, and so on. It is magic and amazing trip to find themself. To know themself better." In conclusion, June repeats that outward appearances convey personal attitudes, "So it is not difficult to understand the reasons why good appearances can get much more respect." The speech trails off and comes to a halt, and the audience members applaud. June speaks about finding herself, and fashion can certainly construct a sense of self around personal choices. But club members discuss appearance less as journey of self-discovery than as a matter of immediate and practical concern.

"I think we can all agree that June today is so fantastic in her appearance, right?" the master of ceremonies

says with the polish of a practiced host. People raise their hands, eager to ask June questions: "Do you judge a man based on his appearance?" asks one woman, while another wonders, "Do you have any schedule to improve your appearance in the future?" June's peers are seeking instruction, not only in self-expression but also in pursuit of an ethically charged, urgent goal. June and indeed most club members are concerned with getting dates. In club meetings, men and women discuss their attempts to find a partner, and how this occasioned anxiety about their appearance, their weight, and their ignorance of the cool bands. Both men and women worry about their looks, although men focus less on fashion than on their bodies. At a Toastmasters conference I heard one man discuss his small eyes and "odd" head shape, while another speaker joked about his height, saying "I'm not Yao Ming, I look like a basketball!"

At this conference the district governor, a man in his forties, addressed an audience of about five hundred people. He tells us that he refused to learn how to swim because he didn't want to get a tan; he seems to be critically reflecting on the value of pale skin in China. When a girl invited him to go swimming, he was unable to join her. In Toastmasters clubs, speakers describe awkward first kisses and failed romantic gambits, sometime humorously and usually with regret. Men and women tend to express different temporal orientations to romance. Men, like the district governor, typically analyze their past failures to make a romantic connection. Women, who often face intense pressure to marry, are generally more forward looking. They sometimes directly state their determination to find a boyfriend. At a Toastmasters club meeting in the middle of October, people give speeches about how to use the remaining eleven weeks of the year. "I've never been chased by a boy," remarks one young woman. Another speaks more directly, stating that her goal is to find a man before the new year. Due to the pressure on young people to marry, I heard multiple speeches, mostly by women, in which romance appears as an unwelcome obligation.

In a Mandarin language speech contest at a Toastmasters club, a graduate student describes an ideology of "love-ism" (爱情主义) that she encountered as an undergraduate. Her roommates said one must date in college or regret it forever. She explains that this wasn't for her, but goes on to describe men whom she met after college. To appreciative laughter, the speaker animatedly depicts a series of failed romances. One man was socially incompetent and tried to stalk her. Another was intensely controlling. Imagining very traditional family and gender roles, he assumed that in the future the speaker would take orders from his mother. And a third man, from Shanghai, knew he could never marry an "outsider" (外地人). This last story sounds to me like a protest against social hierarchies linking class and locality, and also against people who weakly refuse to resist these standards. Finally, the speaker discusses being labeled a "leftover woman"; this label indicates women approaching thirty who have not yet married. The term derives from ongoing government campaigns urging women to marry, and has provoked extensive debate in China (Fincher 2014). Changing gender norms have occasioned widespread reflection among Chinese youth, and romance is a key place where they align themselves with modern values. Club members generally endorse ideals of romantic love. They repeat an individualistic message about following your heart, finding someone you like, and marrying them even if your parents want you to break up. However, this speech demonstrates that discourses and practices of dating are surrounded with much uncertainty and sometimes ambivalence. While this speaker rejects pressure to date, she expresses a modern sensibility by critiquing social hierarchies of gender and geography.

An improvised speech about the experience of giving a failed speech concludes, "Dare to lose your face, then you will improve little by little." This assertion elicits sharp intakes of breath all around the room: it seems like a fresh and needed message. By daring to share their shameful failures, youth try to clarify the frameworks by which they are evaluated. In their speeches, club members endorse modern forms of comportment, sociality, and lifestyle, and modern values, modeling them for each other. Simply joining a personal growth group can alleviate their anxieties about social status and moral worth. In an intensely competitive society, Chinese youth can feel comfort in joining a community dedicated to self-improvement. Furthermore, this community allows them to explore new forms of identity, such as the bar-goer, the fashionista, and the romantic, in a safe setting and without commitment. By turning now to critics who accuse Chinese culture of lacking reflexivity, we can trace intricate links between self-awareness and modernity.

Illiberal shame

In various ways, Chinese psychotherapists that I spoke with expressed a sense that their compatriots lack self-awareness. Sometimes they stated this quite directly:

"They have no self," two college counselors tell me. Drawing on psychologist Erik Erikson, one counselor explains that "People should develop an identity during adolescence." "Who I am?" and "What do I want?" The students can't answer these questions, she says. What are we to make of such claims? Certainly, these psychologists are expressing liberal and antitraditional critiques of China. After all, defining one's personal desires is a core concerns for a liberal subject, pursuing its individual interests. Furthermore, a common narrative of modernity describes increasing reflexivity, as people must make, and justify, personal choices in many aspects of their lives. In China, youth are certainly trying to defend their life choices to their parents, their peers, and to themselves. If self-awareness has become necessary, then it makes sense that psychologists would diagnose a lack of reflexivity. However, reflexivity has become a key concept for articulating a set of modernizing aspirations, embodied in modern citizens and modern families.

While some Chinese psychologists complain that their compatriots "have no self," others, in the words of a Beijing therapist, tell me that they "Don't have an Other." She explains that in the communist economy, "we didn't have interviews, our jobs were assigned . . . in interviews, there is an Other" (他人). In her view, networks of interdependence, centered on the family, make it unnecessary to consider people outside of these networks. Therapists blame this structured interdependence for a perceived lack of civility in Chinese society, which is a major concern in public discourse and official propaganda (Anagnost 1997; Lee 2014). When psychologists accuse Chinese people of lacking reflexivity, they seem to be making several closely related accusations. At one level, critics are indicating that their compatriots do not acknowledge reciprocal, egalitarian relationships with other individuals, with their fellow citizens in a modern nation-state.

At another level, reflexivity has been central to a local theory of developmental pathology: since Chinese parents don't treat children as autonomous individuals, children do not develop awareness of others or of themselves. This cultural solipsism was most extensively diagnosed in the 2016 book *Nation of giant infants* (巨婴国). The author, psychotherapist and columnist Wu Zhihong, claims that because of filial piety, Chinese people do not develop beyond a mental age of six months: seeking symbiosis with their mothers, they cannot tell the difference between themselves and their environments. Authorities quickly pulled the book from the shelves: perhaps it was too direct an assault on national pride. Wu relies on object relations theory, in which infants must decisively separate from the mother in order to develop consciousness of themselves as individuals. Again, we can see the normative liberal direction of these critiques. These allegations of solipsism operate reciprocally, condemning the entire family. For example, family therapists have alleged that Chinese parents don't know that their children have a separate existence (Naftali 2010: 590): they are just extensions of the self.

At a third level, psychological critiques suggest that Chinese people do not reflect on themselves because everyone is enveloped in a single lifeworld, with identical values, significations, and affective intensities. There is neither occasion nor need to reflect on oneself, because any vision of the self is already foreclosed. For example, in her exploration of shame as a technique of governance, Delia Lin presents a compelling analysis of civilizing discourses and modernity in China. Although she explores the role of shame in Chinese moral thought, she normatively defines shame as shameful: illiberal, intolerant, and backwards. She suggests that to make use of shame is to deny alternative conceptions of value. Lin champions guilt as a superior, more liberal, moral emotion, "based on recognition of and respect for the needs and rights of others" (2017: 40). Using psychodynamic theories, Lin explains that shame leads to self-hatred, and therefore to mutual disregard and abuse (2017: 42). These three charges of incivility, solipsism, and intolerance collapse into a common critical trope: the Chinese parent who harshly disciplines a child who brings them shame, perhaps by behaving badly in front of a neighbor. Thus, critics blame oppressive parenting on susceptibility to shame, which is also a love of face, and either way on parents' inability to separate their viewpoint from social evaluation. For these critics, reflexivity represents several elements of modernity: stranger sociality, personal autonomy, and liberal pluralism.

Their critical discourses have been conditioned by national aspirations and liberal ideologies. However, these accusations of solipsism or intolerance might tell us something about the psychological value of seeking, studying, and endorsing prevailing moral standards, especially in a rapidly changing society. Shame can create a sense of vulnerability. However, by blushing we signal our awareness of social judgment, and therefore our belonging. As Sara Ahmed argues, "individual shame is bound up with community precisely because the ideals that have been failed are the ones that 'stick' others together" (2004: 108). Therefore, acceptance of social evaluation can be

a strategy for establishing moral security. I do not intend to reproduce stereotypes of despotic conformity versus democratic rationality, of shameful shame and principled guilt. I am trying to undermine these distinctions. Although these psychological critiques are directed at China, they point towards uses of shame that are in fact found cross-culturally. Both guilt and shame can be understood as culturally formed reactions to social evaluation. However, guilt presumes a duality between the interior self and the visible self, a privileged distance that Chinese youth cannot always afford.

When Quantum talks about losing his "face," and when June critiques mainstream fashion, they are trying to escape from powerful standards of evaluation. Students in China not only know who has the best grades, but they often also suppose that one girl is objectively the most beautiful: they acknowledge her as the "class flower" (班花). They all know that she is supposed to have pale skin and a high nose. Social class is inscribed in body height and weight, and people on dating websites will list both as criteria for a partner. Toastmasters club members attack these beauty standards as signifiers of traditional values. However, they do so in an attempt to stabilize themselves within shifting frameworks for social evaluation. In these clubs, youth seek instruction on how to align themselves with concrete standards of success, beauty, and modernity. They reject some values as outdated or unjust, and complain about pressure from parents and peers. But they are constantly evaluating and correcting one another.

It may be that Chinese college students and young professionals, like those in Toastmasters clubs, are especially disoriented by changing values. Since they have followed accepted paths through life, they may be less individuated than their less conventionally successful peers (Bregnbæk 2016: 59). Since their lives have been in line with social values, they may be most in need of new ways to see themselves, and of being provoked to reflect on their identity. For these youth, as for psychological critics of China, liberal concepts obscure what is at stake. Although they give speeches about self-definition, members of personal growth groups are not so much looking for themselves as for the gaze of society. A language of self-discovery leads youth to misidentify their anxiety to study social values as a search for the self. This elision is easy, because authenticity is not only a pervasive theme in contemporary culture but also an index of cosmopolitan urbanity, social class, and national progress. Turning to young activists who promote reflexive self-definition, we will see how individuality becomes reified as a marker of status and modernity. Activists believe that they are promoting individualism as a value, but young people already evaluate themselves according to this value. The issue troubling urban youth is that they are anxious to operationalize individualism, and to be recognized for knowing how to be themselves.

Reflexivity as activism

Through my work in Toastmasters and other self-help groups, I met young Chinese activists and entrepreneurs who organize events promoting self-definition through work and leisure. Like Toastmasters club members, youth who attend these salons and workshops try to align themselves with what they perceive as modernity. As they do so, they merge a liberal discourse of self-determination with an anxious need to determine if they are successfully embodying individualistic values. These youth can sometimes lose sight of how self-definition is enabled by social class; however, Chinese youth do discuss the link between lifestyle and privilege. While there isn't room here for a full discussion of these social activists, one example may convey a sense of the kind of cultural politics that hinges on reflexivity.

More directly than anyone else that I encountered, one man has made it his business to teach young Chinese people that they must know what they want and what they believe. Liu, a college graduate in his mid-twenties, is the founder of ASK, a series of offline events and online media that promote self-definition. I first met Liu at a monthly youth conference sponsored by a qualitative market research firm: this month's conference is devoted solely to ASK. Liu develops a theme of brave self-determination. He tells us that Chinese youth are passive, frozen in fear; he says that because they never had a chance to ask questions, they don't know what they want or who they are. Liu is traveling to cities around China, video recording hundreds of young people as they ask any question that they wish to ask. Liu tells me that he is doing this in order to stimulate people to reflect critically on social values. The members of today's audience are already doing so. However, it seems that they are less concerned with defending individualistic values than with how to actually undertake the project of self-definition.

The moment Liu concludes his presentation, a lively discussion erupts. About sixty people are packed in short rows in a long, narrow conference room: most are college

students or recent graduates. Revealing what is at the forefront of their minds, the first several questions aren't directly related to Liu's presentation: they are about dating and sex. "When will I have a girlfriend?" asks a man in his early twenties. Another, bitter, question from a man in the audience: you people with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or married people, "Why do you think you are better than the rest of us?" A woman wonders why she doesn't have a boyfriend: after all, she says, "I'm quite open." This phrase denotes a liberal attitude to sex (Farrer 2002). "Why do you feel down (失落) after masturbating?" a man interjects: in my view, he is performing his shameless modernity at least as much as he is interrogating his feelings. These questions reveal how some young adults struggle with shame at their romantic frustrations, while simultaneously performing a modern, liberal, attitude to sex. When they openly embrace new values, but fail to be recognized for this, youth seem to experience genuine confusion.

The discussion soon turns to individuality, a topic provoking equally raw anxiety. Several people express a fear that they have no individuality, or *gexing* (个性). Others doubt that they can really be passionate about anything. This sense of bewilderment and lack is not universal. Several women in attendance resist the idea that they need to discover their true selves: "I don't have a problem," says one. But the audience members generally agree with Liu's depiction of Chinese youth as fearful and confused. A serious young man in a blue blazer feels compelled to say that there are other values in life besides good grades. And another says resentfully that because he is from the poorer interior provinces (内陆), "I didn't know what hobbies are." This comment resonated with a conversation that I had with Wang, a young psychotherapist from the countryside, who told me that grades are the sole pillar supporting the fragile self-esteem of Chinese students. He sees this as a source of psychological vulnerability that is unevenly distributed between the village and the city; he emphasizes that in rural areas, there are no extracurricular activities. When I told Wang that in America the best students are not necessarily the most popular ones, he immediately suggested another standard for evaluation: "Oh! They're seen as not having *gexing*?"

If the value of individuality is not being questioned here, the economic basis for self-actualization through lovable vocations and leisure activities is not lost on everyone at the salon. Indeed, in a society where inequality is institutionalized and geographically mapped, class consciousness can crystallize around modern lifestyles. Historian Steve Smith has argued that as Shanghai industrialized in the early twentieth century, young migrant workers in the city experienced their social class not only because their labor was exploited, but also through their aspiration for consumer lifestyles and fashions (2008: 109–10). Smith sees these migrants' struggle to be recognized as modern individuals as central to the emergence of their class consciousness. Grievances about lifestyle can also inflect national consciousness. Many Chinese youth share a sense that foreigners are better at having fun, and self-help materials in China often suggest this. These statements transmute personal longings into a collective shame. When the pursuit of pleasure becomes both legitimate and a mark of urban modernity, not having fun is shameful.

Over the next four months, I came to understand some of Liu's motives for teaching young adults that they need to define themselves, including his perception that Chinese people are shamefully lacking reflexivity. At lunch one day, I ask him why he founded ASK. "I have more self-awareness than other students," he offers, saying "self-awareness" in English. When I ask him what it means to know oneself, he gives me a definition similar to the liberal concept commonly mobilized by psychologists: he defines self-knowledge as being aware of one's strengths and weakness, and, above all, determining what you want. Liu tells me that even though his peers are confused and unhappy, they never question what they are doing. He says that he wants to help people to "actively choose" the kind of life they wish to live, a project that involves teaching them to reflect on their ideals and values.

Over coffee, Liu and his girlfriend, Xu, complain to me that their peers have only superficial hobbies. According to Liu and Xu, young Chinese people typically claim that music, movies, travel, or eating are their hobbies: but they haven't seen many movies, heard much music, or been much of anywhere. Liu says sardonically, "I like to travel: once in three years." I point out that many young people feel anxious to have passions and interests; I remind Liu of a woman who raised her hand after one of his lectures to nervously ask, "What's my passion?" Liu rethinks his attack, saying that in recent years people have become "aware that they don't have this thing." In my view, this awareness is a defining element in the subjectivity of Chinese young adults.

Liu and Xu continue to emphasize the superficial nature of their peers' attempts at self-definition. They buy brand name outdoor clothes, but they don't know how

to behave like "backpackers," says Xu, using the English word. Liu adds that in China, people just take care of the "surface kung-fu" (表面功夫). Reflecting on China from a foreign perspective, he says that Japanese people think that Chinese don't do their jobs well, that they just do things "close enough" to how they should be done. This language echoes a famous 1924 satirical essay by writer Hu Shihabout, "Mr. Close-enough," whose lazy flexibility is praised as selflessness: he never causes trouble for anyone. We can read Liu's complaints about his peers into a history of Chinese self-critique that has focused on a supposed superficiality and lack of principle. However, in his presentations and in our discussions, Liu seems to misrecognize his peers' search for cultural capital as posturing, and their lack of economic capital as shameful fear to take risks.

ASK's inaugural offline event was held in the winter of 2014 in Beijing's 798 art district, in a former factory converted into an art gallery. This postindustrial venue is fitting for a gathering devoted to self-realization. The gallery's tall shell echoes as over one hundred young adults discuss money, love, and purpose. Many are anxious to know how to defend their life choices to their parents. Those in attendance participate in Liu's video project, entering a booth to be recorded asking a question. And they answer questions, too, attaching stickers to large charts set up in the center of the space, marking their views on social issues: "How old is someone before they are 'left-over'?"; "What would you think if your boyfriend/girlfriend had slept with one hundred people?"; "Is work for money, or for fulfillment?" Liu tells me that the purpose of this exercise is to stimulate people to think critically about their values. At another youth salon, hosted by the market research firm where I first met Liu, I encountered similar boards on which people write answers to questions on sticky notes, and can see other people's answers.

A range of activists and social entrepreneurs are teaching Chinese youth to reflect, both on their values and on their appearance. Liu's girlfriend, Xu, founded a company that uses social engagement to teach high school students, in her terms, leadership, creativity, quality (*suzhi*), and "self-consciousness" (自我意识). Various social interventions are using theater to teach children how to understand the feelings and intentions of others, and to become aware of how others see them. I encountered many such examples, from programs run by state organizations to a range of activists who view themselves as charitably distributing psychological capital to "migrant children" (流动子弟) from the provinces, teaching them interpersonal skills that will help them to entrepreneurially manage their image. These attentions express a concern for social justice, but activists also see themselves as on a civilizing mission. They depict rural parents as enveloping, unreasonable, at times abusive, and as incapable of recognizing children as individuals. Thus, these activists conflate reflexivity as a skill for the economic and social markets and as an individualistic critique of Chinese families.

Although activists like Liu encourage independent rebellious thinking, their struggle to reform social standards partakes in an officially encouraged cultural politics of modernity. By encouraging self-definition through work and leisure, the government can stimulate both entrepreneurship and consumption. Furthermore, in the context of rising inequality, the Chinese government is trying to promote the idea that there are multiple standards for success (Woronov 2008). Finally, by framing individual discontent as the product of Chinese mentalities, social discourses in China channel negative affects into cultural critique rather than structural or political demands. When we see youth gathering to publicly discuss social mores, we can glimpse the political potential of aspirations to self-realization, not only to challenge social norms but also to generate new forms of class consciousness. Nevertheless, as youth struggle to become themselves, they acknowledge the affective power of the hierarchies that define them as lacking. They remain suspended in a search for a modern self, one to be proud of, shameless.

Mirrors to stand on

After stopping foreigners by the lake, after shouting English vocabulary in the park, after joining Toastmasters, Quantum has become an accomplished public speaker. Confidently, he is now concluding his speech about this journey of personal growth. Quantum knows to finish with a clear and powerful take-home message:

> It is the most important thing in your life, the mirror. Find your own mirror. Dig out your real you. After digging out, you can stand on it. The world is a mirror. The mirror is a belief that can give us power and confidence, and the mirror is a prediction which can move us forward or along. The mirror is an inquiry which can bring us hope, respect, and guts.

Finishing up with a softly spoken punch line, Quantum says that his "favorite hobby" is now "looking into the mirror," because "every time in front of that mirror, I keep telling myself, 'Oh yeah, what a harmonious face I have.'"

We can come to some conclusions of our own. Quantum's speech collapses distinctions between apparently opposed forms of selfhood. Quantum uses an individualistic language, describing a search for an authentic "real" self. However, he also has a deeply relational view of the self: Quantum's true self may be buried within, but it is visible to others, it is reflected in the mirror. Quantum gives us a message of self-esteem, but he knows that we need recognition too. In ways that challenge liberal frameworks, his narrative of personal growth has been a tale of meeting others' expectations. Ashamed and out of place, he set out on a journey that led him to this stage. Today he's in the spotlight, speaking in clear English and making us laugh. The more that Quantum looks in the mirror, the better he looks to himself. He sees someone who is aligned with the values of modernity, a recognized role model, advocating self-discovery to a rapt audience.

Soon others will take their turns on stage, giving talks about dating, about backpacking, salsa dancing, and marathons, modeling modern values and lifestyles for each other. For these youth, modernity stands for status and success, for fulfillment and acceptance—and its icon is the self-aware and self-making individual. For a few entrepreneurs and activists, like Zhao and Liu, heightened reflexivity may become a primary structure of consciousness, simultaneously a marketing tool and a moral performance. But it is likely that for many youth, anxious self-awareness will define a particular phase of their lives, as they seek to integrate in economic and social markets. As youth struggle to orient themselves in relation to discordant values and multiplying signifiers of status, the affect of shame initiates anxious monologues, self-presentations that often reproduce and consolidate social distinctions. In personal growth groups, youth iteratively conjure a shimmering vision of modernity. By sharing tales of shame, they begin to see themselves as others do, glimpsing a mirrored image that has real and immediate implications for our lives. By revealing this image, shame can enable us to seek security and perhaps success. Looking in the mirror, we hope to choose the right shirt, and perhaps even to string together a few of the right words.

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