

Learning Individualism: Hesse, Confucius, and Pep-Rallies in a Chinese Rural High School

Mette Halskov Hansen*

Abstract

In Chinese public discourse, it has almost become a truism that the generation born after the mid-1980s is more selfish, individualistic, and materialistic than previous generations. Consequently, an important task for public moral education is to correct this behaviour and to generate compassion for others beyond the family, to strengthen nationalist sentiments and to imbue a sense of duty to the greater community. Schools provide the Chinese government with a key opportunity to achieve this. Based on fieldwork in a rural high school in China, this article demonstrates how the official visions of the learned individual portrayed in textbooks collide with a more powerful ideology of individualism that is implicitly promoted through activities within the school, and is reflective of an ongoing process of individualization, not only in Chinese society, but also within state institutions, such as the school.

Keywords: education; individualization; high school; individual; China

“Today I start a new life: I believe in myself! Today I start a new life: I believe in myself!” Picture, if you will, five hundred enthusiastic rural youngsters repeatedly shouting out these words as a mantra to build self-confidence and promote a spirit of competitiveness. The setting is a high school in a small township in south China where a professional speaker, the 24-year-old Mr Zhang, had been hired to motivate students to work harder towards the ultimate goal of passing the national exams with high marks.¹ Taking the form of a curious hybrid of stand-up comedy and a religious revivalist meeting, this pep-rally emphasized to students that they were wholly and solely responsible for their own success or failure. Students, many of them overwhelmed and fed up with the pressures of studying, responded with almost ecstatic enthusiasm.

As discussed in this article, the pep-rally’s form and content constitute one example of how an ideology of the self-made individual is gaining a foothold

* University of Oslo, Norway. Email: m.h.hansen@ikos.uio.no.

1 Mr Zhang had himself been taught by a professional speaker, Mr Wang Guoquan, who ran a business organizing motivational courses and lectures for schools (<http://www.wanguoquan.cn/>).

not only amongst younger people and in broader society,² but also in formal settings within contemporary Chinese state schools. A vision of the self-reliant individual is celebrated in motivational activities and student election campaigns, and a new ideology of individualism underpins and supports the individualistic behaviours that prevailing pedagogical practices have implicitly been promoting for a long time, owing to the examination system's sole emphasis on individual testing of sanctioned knowledge. Students study scholarly texts about the collective responsibilities of human beings and the moral ideals of learned individuals, and they watch movies about self-sacrificing heroes such as Lei Feng and the Chinese Olympic athletes. Yet, at the same time, through learning practices and a number of organized activities, they receive strong and seemingly paradoxical messages about the need for self-promotion, self-reliance, and the need to embrace a utilitarian approach to life.

These different visions of morality not only reflect but inadvertently influence the changing moral landscape in China, as recently discussed by Yunxiang Yan, Everett Zhang, and Arthur Kleinman.³ Yan, for instance, argues that this moral landscape is undergoing multi-layered and multi-directional changes, and he refers to the parallel emergence of charities and collective rights movements alongside disturbing examples of utilitarianism, hedonism and cases of extreme extortion.⁴ He calls for more systematic studies of the moral discourse and practices in specific contexts, and the following analysis of the changing visions of the learned individual, as expressed in the Chinese rural high school, constitutes such an attempt.

I draw on three cases to illustrate what high school students learn about the role of the learned individual and his/her moral obligations to him/herself, to the family, and to society at large. All cases are based on fieldwork from one rural high school in a south China municipality where there is little industry but a long tradition of trade. Many farmers have left the township to engage primarily in small-scale business in larger cities elsewhere in the province, or to work in construction or factories. The majority of those who have kept their land lease it out to peasants from the mountain areas or from outside the county.⁵ The school attracts students from villages within the municipality and the surrounding mountains, and the majority of the teachers come from neighbouring rural areas. In terms of pedagogical practices, resources, and academic results, this school is a far cry from the prestigious Shanghai schools which have recently climbed to the top in the international PISA scores, and which were praised by some for their ability to promote individual "creativity."⁶ Nonetheless, processes

2 Yan 2009a; Pang 2011; Hansen and Svarverud 2010; Chang 2010.

3 Yan 2009b; Zhang et al. 2010; Kleinman et al. 2011.

4 Yan 2009b, but see also Yan 2003.

5 Fieldwork was carried out in the period between 2008–2012. I mainly followed two classes from their first year of studies. Fieldwork consisted of classroom observations, participation in school and extra-curricular activities, textbook analysis, interviews, and informal conversations with teachers, students, parents, and school authorities.

6 Dillon 2010.

of individualization are increasingly permeating all levels of Chinese society, although this is less obvious and less studied in rural areas compared to urban areas or Chinese cyberspace.⁷ My study of this rural high school attempts to highlight some aspects of how the processes of individualization are occurring in rural areas and more specifically in the field of state education, and some of the effects these processes bring about.

Scholars of Chinese education have already shown how, for instance, textbooks on the subjects of politics and moral education, and the prevailing discourse on *suzhi* (素质, personal and individual “quality”), promote an official version of societal morality that emphasizes self-sacrifice and obedience to the law and to the political system, while also promoting self-development in order to foster physically healthy individuals of high moral standing.⁸ I argue that the version of individualism encountered by students in school does not form part of the formal curriculum, nor is it formulated as an ideology as such. This version of individualism builds on some of the selfsame ideals prescribed as qualities worthy of a human being in the *suzhi* discourse. However, it is first of all characterized by its heavy leaning on self-reliance and self-responsibility, being developed in a period when changes in the labour market, career options, legal system, etc. have created what Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, and Edgar Grande have, based on Western European developments and experiences, denominated as “institutionalized individualization.”⁹

Broadening this perspective and applying theories of individualization to the East Asian and Chinese context, Sang-Jin Han, Young-Hee Shim, and most poignantly Yunxiang Yan, have argued that individualization is a global trend and therefore is not confined to Western European societies with long established democracies, welfare states, and a notion of the individual as being autonomous.¹⁰ Individualization in China, like in many other countries, is characterized by profound social transformations such as the increasing legalization of the desires of the individual; the intensification of individual competition; a surge of movements promoting individual rights; and a general shift in the balance between the individual, social groups, and modern institutions of the state.¹¹

Individualization transforms objective domains of institutions and people’s biographies, as well as subjective domains of consciousness and morality.¹² Thus, the individualization of Chinese institutions and society is changing the moral landscape of China. In the context of education, the vision of the

7 See, for instance, Pang 2011; Yang 2009.

8 See Woronov 2009 regarding moral education and *suzhi* in primary and junior high schools. On *suzhi* in education, see also Kipnis 2006; Kipnis 2011. On moral education curriculum, see Lee and Ho 2005. On teaching “thought and politics,” see Vickers 2009. On issues of morality and model behaviour, see especially Bakken 2000.

9 See Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck and Grande 2010.

10 Yan 2010; Han and Shim 2010.

11 Yan 2010, 507.

12 *Ibid.*

individual currently being promoted by a range of activities in state schools speaks more to the student's own experiences in a market-oriented competitive society than do the officially sanctioned texts about politically correct attitudes and actions of a learned individual. The individualization of Chinese society has created a widely accepted image of an "enterprising self"¹³ being responsible for its own failure or success, both in the labour market and in its personal and emotional relations, and this perception of the individual has unintentionally – and beyond the scope of educational planning – become an integrated part of academic education in China, as I outline in this article.

In my first case, I focus on how the official view of the value and meaning of learning and the learned individual is taught to rural students in order to build morality and to convince them to study hard. The example I use is classroom teaching. First-year students were studying two different texts on topics related to the value of learning: one was written by the German-Swiss Nobel prize-winning author, Herman Hesse (1877–1962); the other by the famous Chinese scholar, Han Yu (韩愈 768–824), who during the Tang dynasty was a spokesman for the cultural traditionalism later known as neo-Confucianism.¹⁴ The selective way of presenting Hesse's authorship and the way in which the two very different texts were taught to the students demonstrate some of the contradictions that students face when learning about morals as connected to the plight of being a learning, and eventually learned, individual.

The contradictions seen between the teaching of an idealized view of the self-cultivating and self-reliant individual and the demand for the individual's (in this case the student's) submission to discipline are reflected in the second and third cases. They are included as explicit examples of how students are confronted with an ideology of individualism that emphasizes the value of self-reliance and self-promotion within clearly defined limits established by (e.g. educational) authorities, rather than based more implicitly on the individual's or society's own standards of moral and ethical considerations. The self-promoting, self-reliant, and at the same time obedient, disciplined individual is promoted through various organized activities at school. It is both adapted to, and reflective of, the political vision of neo-socialist rule recently discussed by Frank Pieke.¹⁵ The one-party leadership requires loyalty from its citizens, while simultaneously it heads a modernized state in which the promotion of liberal economics depends on innovation and, to an ever-increasing extent, on the self-reliance of individuals. In this political landscape, the state school and the teachers and administrators running it struggle to find suitable means to define the moral person and to convey the message in a meaningful way to students.

13 See, for instance, Hanser 2009; Hoffman 2010.

14 Nienhauser 1985, 397–400.

15 Pieke 2009.

Herman Hesse and Han Yu – the Official Ideal

In the last ten years, the Chinese national education system has used different means to strengthen moral education in schools at all levels. Notably, educational reform in 2001 set standards for the integration of moral issues into *all* school subjects. Explicit goals related to the development of the student's values, attitudes towards life, and motivation for learning, were integrated into the curriculum.¹⁶ A selection of moral qualities were promoted as goals to be pursued, including the ability of each individual student to “think independently,” as stated, for instance, in the “emotion and attitude goals” of the national standards for the mathematics curriculum at the primary level.¹⁷

The teaching of literature at high school level presents itself as an especially suitable channel through which the authorities can disseminate views on morals as connected to the ideal and specific purposes of academic learning. Students in high schools are presumably familiar with the most basic moral obligations of the individual and citizen as a result of what they are taught throughout primary and junior secondary schools: to be law-abiding citizens, to be respectful to the elderly, to love the motherland, and to submit to the powers of the political authorities. When entering regular high school (*putong gaozhong* 普通高中), students are on track for the national university entrance exam, and, if successful, to entering university.¹⁸ They are, therefore, regarded as being ready to access the Chinese and world literature that emphasizes specific aspects of the *learned* individual's moral values, attitudes, and goals.

Just as the official curriculum in “thought and politics” (*sixiang zhengzhi* 思想政治) may be viewed as a benchmark for ideological correctness in China, as argued by Edward Vickers,¹⁹ the curriculum of the comprehensive courses in “language and literature” (*yuwen* 语文) expresses an official view of what should ideally add up to the young citizen's basic shared perceptions of Chinese culture and its place in the world. Texts have been carefully chosen at the national level, and some of them serve to create in students an “inner” motivation for studying, an alternative to the utilitarian motivation generated by external (examination) pressure. However, this vision of the learning individual is to a large extent distorted by the students' own experiences in learning, as shown in the following case of how students study both a Confucian text and a European text about the learning individual.

Texts by Han Yu and Herman Hesse are required reading for the final examination in language and literature, and although the two chosen texts cover a similar topic, they obviously form different roles in the curriculum. The text “Discourse on teachers” (*Shi shuo* 师说) by Han Yu is especially important owing to Han Yu's position as a famous intellectual in the long historical

16 Zhu 2006.

17 *Ibid.* 194.

18 As opposed to a vocational high school track discussed by Hansen and Woronov (2013); Schulte 2013.

19 Vickers 2009.

trajectory of the Chinese Confucian tradition.²⁰ Students throughout the centuries have read the text, and high school students today still learn it by heart.²¹ The text by Hesse, on the other hand, is included in the curriculum as an example of modern foreign literature that in many ways emphasizes some of the same values regarding learning and the learned individual that Han Yu stood for long before. The fact that Hesse is a Nobel prize-winning author is mentioned in the textbook, and it serves as a proof to students of his international standing and importance.²²

The teaching of Han Yu's "Discourse on teachers" was fairly straightforward when I observed classes in the rural high school in 2008. It was difficult for the 50 students in the class to read the classical text (in simplified characters), and the teacher therefore spent most of the lessons testing whether students really understood the words and were able to recite the whole text. During class, the young female teacher emphasized to students that they would be asked to recite parts of the text in their final written exam, and that they needed to study this text carefully because it was a vital example of China's Confucian heritage. In the text, Han Yu argues for the importance of lifelong learning, and warns against the kind of learning that is only for the sake of passing an exam (here, the civil service examination). Referring to Han Yu, the teacher explained that wise people "learn from their teachers," and that "a teacher" may be any person regardless of rank and official title. Even Confucius himself, as the text states, would learn from whoever had something to teach him. Students studied this message by memorizing and reciting Han Yu's text, but the irony was clear to the teacher herself: after one of the classes she explained to me that although she in principle found the content of the text about the learned person very good, it was simply "too difficult for rural students to understand what the author really meant." At the end of the day, they simply needed to learn it "*precisely* for the sake of the exam," she explained, shaking her head in dismay.

"Discourse on teachers" formed part of a larger selection of texts that students studied about the value of learning and the plight of the learned individual; moreover, it was one of the few that students were actually required to know completely by heart. During lessons, they would first recite the whole text together a few times, and then move on to the reading and discussion of other texts in the collection, for instance, Herman Hesse's "The way to acquire education."²³ Searching for the original German version of this text, I was surprised to find

20 See de Bary et al. 2000, 582–83.

21 This may not hold true in all high schools in China, but it is the case in the rural regular high schools that I know of.

22 The status of the Nobel *peace* prize came under fierce official attack after it was given to the imprisoned intellectual dissident, Liu Xiaobo, in 2010, whereas Mo Yan's literary prize in 2012 was acclaimed by the authorities. In general, the Nobel prizes are seen as highly prestigious in official discourse in China.

23 The title is "*Huode jiaoyang de tujing*" and it is part of the required first year course in language and literature (Ding et al. 2008, 40–44). The German term *bildung* (education, learning) is translated as *xüyang* in the article in *Dushu*, whereas in the school book it is translated as *jiaoyang*. For the works of Herman Hesse, see Michels 2007.

that the students actually studied a combination of selected excerpts from two different articles by Hesse, which were translated into Chinese and published in two different issues of the journal, *Dushu* 读书 (*Reading*).²⁴ The articles in *Dushu* were themselves translations of selected parts of *Eine Bibliothek der Weltliteratur* from 1927, and *Magie des Buches* from 1930.²⁵ Comparing the textbook version with Hesse's original work, it seems likely that the aim of composing a text based on extracts from two translated articles (that were themselves abstracts from the originals) under a new headline was primarily to create a clearer focus on how people (and especially students) should ideally acquire knowledge and become learned. The text was not placed in the specific context of European cultural history. Rather, like in the case of Han Yu, it was taught to students as an example of a universally "true" and indisputable text about how to learn, and what a truly learned individual is and should be.

The selection of bits of text, and the context in which they were taught, created a discourse on individuality that emphasized an autonomous learning individual while stressing the need to adhere to discipline. Without going into too much detail, I will just point to a few examples of this. From Hesse, students learn that "real" learning, especially reading, should not be for a specific purpose. It has a meaning in itself, and as such it helps to build self-confidence and create personal happiness:

Real education is not for any specific purpose; rather like any other effort to improve oneself, it is meaningful in itself.²⁶ The pursuit of the perfection of education, like that of the mind or the spirit, does not follow a difficult track towards any kind of narrow goal, but is rather a strengthening and expansion of our self-consciousness which enriches our lives and allows us to experience even more happiness.²⁷

In class, the teacher asked the students: "What is real education (*jiaoyang* 教养)?" and students repeated more or less exactly the words from the above quotation. Furthermore, they repeated several times, again based on the text, that the real purpose of education was "to perfect oneself" (*ziwo wanshan* 自我完善). Students were asked to discuss in groups of twos what they thought real education was, but the teacher quickly became frustrated with the students as they were unable to respond with anything other than the same expressions used in the Hesse text. She therefore explained in her own words that an educated person (*you jiaoyang de ren* 有教养的人) is not necessarily one who gets good grades in exams, but rather someone who "knows his own limitations, who loves nature, who learns from others, and who loves to study and to read."

This ideal, extracted from Hesse's text, clearly went against much of what the students had learned from their own experiences with the examination system. It

24 *Dushu* 1990, 4; 1991, 3.

25 In fact, *Dushu* does not state that the translation is from *Magie des Buches*, but based on my reading of the original text by Hesse, I assume that this must be the case.

26 Since I am primarily interested in showing what students actually read and study, the translations of text extracts are taken from the Chinese textbook version, rather than from the original German version.

27 The textbook here uses a sentence, which is a shorter version than the translation in *Dushu*; Ding et al. 2008, 40.

related to another strong moral lesson contained in the text, and which also contradicted the experiences of the students, namely that one should not limit children to reading certain genres because this may extinguish their desire to read, and block the road towards eventually learning from the “masterpieces.” Instead, according to Hesse, “Each and every one of us should start reading what we are able to comprehend and to love,” because “Reading without love, knowledge without reverence, education without the heart, is one of the worst sins against the soul.”²⁸ These views are studied by high school students who are themselves forbidden to bring in any other reading material to the school apart from their school books, and when they indeed do so, the reading material (mostly popular magazines) is immediately confiscated when detected by students or teachers in charge of discipline. While the textbook does not include much of Hesse’s original writings about the value of reading different genres as a doorway to more challenging forms of literature, it does emphasize a short moral paragraph written by Hesse in Europe in the 1920s. This paragraph fits well into a predominant discourse in China, especially in regards to youth being perceived as hedonists who lack the will to study for the sake of true learning.²⁹ Hesse’s disappointment with the youth in 1920s’ Europe – and their presumed lack of interest in reading but love of pleasure – resonates well with the concerns shared by many Chinese teachers and educators today:

In today’s world [Europe in the 1920s], literature is already somewhat despised. Among many young people it seems as if they find it ridiculous and unworthy to immerse themselves in reading rather than in a happy life. They find that life is too short and precious for this, although they do manage to go to the coffee bar six times a week and to spend time on the dance floor. Well, regardless of how lively it is in “real life” in the universities and workshops, at the stock market and places of pleasure, can this really bring us closer to genuine life than if we spend one or two hours a day reading the works of wise men and poets from antiquity?³⁰

The official vision of the learning individual, as taught through these examples from textbooks, is laden with such moral judgements about the real meaning of studying and the individual’s responsibility for following the true way. The idea that learning has a meaning in itself, and should not be pursued for simple utilitarian purposes such as passing an exam, is obviously not in harmony with the stringent examination regime that is used to govern Chinese students, as discussed by, for instance, Andrew Kipnis.³¹ However, viewed from another perspective, its emphasis on self-reliance and the moral duty of the individual to study and learn in certain ways does indeed fit into the pattern of a prevalent discourse on individualism that is permeating many school activities. Two cases regarding this will be discussed in the following section.

28 Ding et al. 2008, 41.

29 On the internet and in journals on youth and education, there are many examples of debates regarding the low moral standards and hedonism of youth. See, for instance, <http://business.sohu.com/s2006/chenlun/>.

30 Ding et al. 2008, 41–42. The translation is based on the Chinese textbook version, not the original German, which is slightly different at some points.

31 See especially Kipnis 2011.

Rallying for Individual Responsibility

It has long been commonplace for Chinese schools to organize meetings or lectures where teachers or school authorities encourage students to study harder for the final examination. The waning motivations of many students, and the pressure on both schools and individual teachers to perform well in national exams, have now forced many schools to experiment with new methods in order to engage their students more fully. In recent years, a private market for selling consultancy services to schools has emerged, and in 2008, the rural high school I studied hired such a private company to organize lectures for its student body of over a thousand. It was presented as a “large-scale motivational lecture” (*daxing lizhi yanjianghui* 大型励志演讲会) and the aim was to help students to “use the spirit of the Olympics to challenge your limits during the 2009 national higher education exam,” as a large red banner in the lecture hall read. Students I conversed with before the event dreaded yet another boring meeting with long moralistic lectures about the importance of studying hard for exams. They quickly came to life, however, when a young dynamic man entered the stage and started telling jokes at an incredible speed and in a very engaging voice. Mr. Zhang introduced himself as a student of philosophy, psychology, and religion, and as somebody who had spent a lot of time “abroad” (place or country not specified). He continued warming up the students by making them laugh at jokes with sexual undertones, and by telling funny stories about his previous mistakes and failures and those of others. He made them cheer, shout, and clap their hands, and when he had the whole audience eating out of his hand, he started to introduce a range of emotional appeals. Common to them all was the constant focus on what the students as individuals could and should do. The key to success in school and in life was “trust,” and Zhang exhorted them to trust in others, but first of all to trust in themselves. “You are unique!” Zhang explained in various ways, and he made individual students come up on stage and recite in the microphone:

Ever since God (*Shangdi* 上帝) created all things on earth, there has not been one person like me. My eyes and my ears, my brain and my soul, all are exceptional. Nobody speaks or behaves like me, no one before me and no one will after me. I am the biggest miracle of nature!

Having recited this several times, Zhang asked the audience: “Who is the biggest miracle of nature?” and the students cheerfully yelled back: “ME!” This was repeated a few times, and Zhang continued to explain to students that if they found it hard to study or suffered under the pressure to perform, the reason lay in their own mentality and the solution was to change their personal attitude. Zhang urged the students to “smile to the world,” and encouraged them to repeat the chorus:

I will smile to world. Smiling helps me to absorb. Smiling helps me to ease the pressure. Smiling is the secret to success in the national exam. From today on, I smile to the world.

The whole performance emphasized the individual’s responsibility, and it completely evaded any suggestion that solutions to crippling experiences of intense

pressure and lack of motivation may lie outside of individual mentality and decision-making ability. It tried instead to appeal to the students' feelings of *personal* moral responsibility towards their family, especially their parents. Throughout their education, students are imbued with a notion of filial piety that requires them to study hard in order to repay the sacrifices made by their parents on their behalf, and to bring honour and financial security to their parents in old age. Andrew Kipnis has, for instance, shown this while arguing that the very meaning of filial dedication has been transformed. Rather than studying out of gratefulness to parents and with the objective of looking after them in their old age, students must first of all attempt to perform well academically in order to live up to the educational desires that their parents project on them.³²

In the pep-rally, however, rural students were presented with, and drawn into, yet another version of filial piety that had a performative and entertaining purpose. Individual students were asked to come on stage to make a surprise telephone call to one of their parents. With the loudspeaker on, and with an audience of more than five hundred cheering fellow students, the one who was chosen first had to tell the baffled parent (who had indeed no idea of what was going on) that he loved him, "Daddy, I love you" (*Baba, wo ai ni* 爸爸我爱你), as instructed by Zhang. Whispers of surprise rippled through an audience unused to both this kind of performance and this kind of direct verbal expression of love towards parents. The student was then asked to make a solemn promise to the parent to always do his best in school, and to move beyond his own personal limits in order to pass the national exam with high marks. This performance was repeated with several other students, each time with a strong emphasis on the individual's ability to stand out and to promote him or herself in a show. At the same time, it was sending out a message recognizable within the cultural framework of *xiao* (孝, filial piety), although *xiao* in this instance was used as an emotional device to push the students to express their individual moral responsibility for failure or success, and lacked the kind of subtlety that was otherwise characteristic of the way *xiao* was talked about and acted out amongst students.

When the lecture was over, Zhang started to sell his self-help books, with VCD included, for 30 yuan each.³³ Most of the students lined up to shop and many, especially the girls, were quite emotional when waiting in the long queue to get closer to Zhang and buy the book: "teacher, I was so moved by this; did you also nearly cry?" one of the female students I knew quite well asked me with tears in her eyes. Several of her girlfriends started to discuss amongst themselves how they would now start studying harder, while some of the boys laughed and said they had never had so much fun during an afternoon at school. When asked what they had drawn from the meeting, most students said that it encouraged

³² Kipnis 2011, 145.

³³ The VCD versions of lectures are much less agitated than the show presented to the students in the autumn of 2008.

them to study harder, and that they learned that they should have self-confidence and believe in themselves in order to be successful in life.

Teachers' views on the meeting, on the other hand, varied from pragmatic to incredulous. They knew that students, especially in the third year, were exhausted from studying and they thought that they deserved to "have a bit of fun." However, they had no illusions that this one event would make a substantial difference to what they saw as an old-fashioned examination regime, combined with a cohort of not exceptionally qualified, talented, or motivated rural students. Some of them were concerned about both the general psychological impact of examination pressures on individual students, and about the fact that they themselves as teachers had no other means to encourage students to study harder than to pressure each student to try to move beyond what he or she thought were his or her own limits.³⁴ Many teachers in this school were themselves young (in their mid- and late twenties), and they recalled how they as students had experienced the same pressure: feeling a moral obligation towards parents and other family members who had supported their studies, and regarding it as a moral duty to succeed. They were the luckier ones because they had actually managed to at least become teachers in a mid-level rural school, and when discussing how they had achieved this, they also emphasized their own will, self-discipline, and "love of study." When discussing themselves and their own experiences, they expressed an acceptance of the message of individualism that centres upon the power of individual decision making and will, and they were less concerned with discussing the structural barriers that rural students may face.

At the same time, almost all teachers were highly critical of the examination system. They argued that in practice it forced them to push each student to study hard only for his or her own (or their family's) sake. The examination system's exclusive emphasis on individual performance prevented social activities that could be used to promote cooperative work among students, and to teach them to help each other to improve their work. Many of the teachers appreciated their jobs and had a good relationship with students and colleagues, but there was, at the same time, a general feeling of resignation when they discussed the students and their mindsets. Many felt that students in the high school were "egotistic," and failed to live up to the ideals of a rural student as being a morally sound and well-read "ordinary" person, originating in a rural area but who willingly contributes to its future and development towards "higher levels of civilization." Many teachers were frustrated that they could not make the students take part in common campaigns to help the elderly in the community, clean up the streets, or just keep the school grounds free of the piles of litter that grew during the weeks of no organized cleaning activities. The reaction of teachers and school authorities to this lack of engagement was to place even greater emphasis on the moral responsibility of each individual to study hard and develop self-confidence;

34 See also the prize-winning documentary about a third-year high school class in rural Fujian, *Senior Year (Gao san)* directed by Zhou Hao, 2006.

the result was that a strong ideology of individualism was promoted to students in connection with activities that were meant to develop a spirit of community and cooperation, as the following case of the student association suggests.

Making or Breaking the Individual

The experiments with student associations (*xueshenghui* 学生会) in rural high schools are part of a policy to modernize the education system and to train young people to become citizens who actively take part in community work sanctioned by the authorities.³⁵ Together with the Communist Youth League, the student association constitutes the only real possibility to participate in any organized collective activities with fellow students in the boarding school. Although all school authorities are obliged to set up a student association, the degree of activity varies between schools. One common feature of all the associations, however, is recruitment through student elections. There is an expectation that these elections will provide an opportunity for spotting leadership talent and those young people who are willing to put in extra work in the spirit of the common good; but most of all elections are a way to conduct top-down controlled training of students to make them more assertive yet subservient to regulations established by the authorities. This is reflected in the scholarly and educational discourse on the student association that is coloured by normative approaches emphasizing the association's capacity for building a communal spirit amongst youth.³⁶ Teacher Li, one of the administrators in charge of both the student association and the local youth league, explained that the association attempts to counter "widespread selfishness (*zisi* 自私) amongst youth today." It is supposed to build a communal moral spirit and create an atmosphere where students willingly work together with school authorities to make the school a cleaner place and to organize sports and cultural events, but it is also supposed to help to maintain discipline amongst fellow students.

Together with four young colleagues, Teacher Li was put in charge of revitalizing the school's student association in 2008. Up until then, the association had existed only in principle and the school had never even held elections. Now, Mr. Li and his colleagues explained, it was finally time to teach rural students how to run an association and for that purpose they needed to experiment with elections. They explained that their students were not as used to presenting themselves in front of others as urban students, and that they were less self-confident and generally of a lower *suzhi* owing to their rural backgrounds. By organizing elections largely based on the presentation of oneself, the teachers hoped to be able to identify and promote not only the students who were best at studying or who were most popular amongst their fellow students, but those who had the personal qualities needed to fill positions of trust in a formal association. They wanted to

³⁵ See Hansen 2012.

³⁶ Li 2007; Ma 2008; Zhang 2006.

make the association more “democratic,” to involve students more directly in its work, and to make sure that its members, and especially its leaders, would serve as role models for others. They emphasized the moral obligations of students in the association to demonstrate a collective spirit. At the same time, the election process presented itself as a vivid example of how an ideology of individualism in practice implicitly intermingles with, engenders, and influences many activities in the high school.

The teachers in charge of the student association were themselves unsure of how to instruct their students on how to present themselves in a new election process, and there was no carefully prepared “master plan” for how it should be done. In other words, while the work of school authorities is part of a more general political (and educational) neo-socialist, modernization process, teachers and administrators are often in doubt about what policies imply and how to implement them in the politically correct way. The young teachers experimented with educational and organizational practices in schools that did not only derive from professional training or political directives, but were also just as much a result of their own personal experiences, values and choices. Owing to the lack of experience, training and guidelines, a number of decisions and interventions were improvised during the process, and in many ways the election was an experiment as much for the organizing teachers as it was for the participating students. While the pep-rally discussed above was organized with the explicit purpose of making students study harder by catching their interest through a quick but intense cocktail of entertainment and mass suggestion, the association was regarded by teachers and authorities as a more long-term and academically sound method for building students’ communal spirit, promoting the right moral choices, and combating selfishness. However, both the association and the pep-rally implicitly emphasized a version of individualism that idealized a high degree of individual self-reliance, self-promotion and performance within a framework of clear limits set by the authorities.

When the election process started, those students judged by the school’s office for political education (*zhengjiaochu* 政教处) to be sufficiently qualified to run for election (based on their records of study, moral attitudes, and personal qualities as ascertained by their homeroom teachers) were asked to prepare a speech. There had been an overwhelming interest amongst students, with nearly all the 150 student cadres hoping to be permitted to stand. Pressure was therefore high on the 29 students who were finally given the green light to take part in the first rounds, and the atmosphere was tense and filled with excitement when the speeches were due to start. Between 16 and 20 students were to be elected by the incumbent members of the association, and there were student cadres representing each class. These were all in the audience, together with most of the members of the student association, and the five responsible teachers.³⁷ Students had prepared their

37 I was in the audience as well, but after some discussions I managed to avoid having to vote.

speeches themselves, and unsurprisingly many of them demonstrated that they were well versed in the politically correct discourse on the learning and morally responsible individual, and that they recognized the need for raising *suzhi* especially among “rural students” such as themselves. The students standing for election for the first time were emphatically told to “present themselves” and let the audience “get to know them” (*jian ge mian* 见个面), and this encouraged them to focus their presentations on *themselves*. For instance, rather than talking about how the *suzhi* of students in general should be raised (as they were used to hearing from teachers and during meetings), almost all of them underlined how the association would help *them personally* raise their *suzhi* (*tigao ziji de suzhi* 提高自己的素质); and they emphasized the qualities that they saw in themselves by using adjectives such as “responsible,” “hard-working,” “reliable,” “extrovert” (*xingge wai-xiang* 性格外向), and “humorous.” Speakers would also draw attention to other issues they thought important to develop in themselves through work in the association, such as “courage,” “self-improvement” (*tigao ziji* 提高自己), “self-training” (*duanlian ziji* 锻炼自己), “trust in myself” (*xiangxin ziji* 相信自己), “how to make fellow students trust me,” “learning how to be a good friend,” and so forth. Nearly all the speeches emphasized how the tasks they would undertake on behalf of others and the association (parents or the nation were hardly ever mentioned) would indeed be good for themselves and their own self-development. In this way, students formulated their own aspirations in accordance with the state’s modernization discourse stating how the improvement of the nation and its people also depends on each individual citizen’s *suzhi*.³⁸ However, it was striking to witness the extent to which self and self-evaluation were emphasized, while state and nation were virtually ignored by nearly all the speakers. Students were much less concerned with paraphrasing the modernization discourse on *suzhi* than with finding ways to express and evaluate personal qualities and potential for self-development. There were no obvious gender differences in the choices of expression, but female students were generally more interested in running for positions related to culture, and there were several instances when male students in the audience demanded that a given girl sang a song in addition to her prepared speech. Young men, on the other hand, did not receive such requests and in their speeches they were more likely than girls to point out that they were good at “managing” (*guanli* 管理) fellow students and that they were interested in the sporting activities of the association and/or the highest levels of leadership.

In combination, the content of the speeches, how they were delivered and perceived, and not least of all the teachers’ interventions in them, could all be interpreted as an expression of the tensions between the implicit call for a great emphasis on self-promotion and belief in the individual’s ability to be self-made on the one hand, and the educational authorities’ demand to keep these expressions under firm control and use the school to promote collective spirit

38 Anagnost 2004; Murphy 2004.

and responsibility on the other. Students were explicitly told to present themselves and their reasons for standing for election; nevertheless, whenever one of them began to suggest how the association might be improved or might change its work, he or she was immediately interrupted and encouraged to stay focused on him or herself. Students were asked to first of all demonstrate that they were self-confident and able to promote themselves. Again and again, teachers – and eventually also the student chairman (*zhuxi* 主席) of the association – interrupted speeches to explain that the speaker should not talk about the association as such, or about how to improve it, or why he or she wanted to be the chairman; but rather that students should simply make a “presentation of themselves” and stay focused on how to “improve themselves” and show that they “believed in themselves.” The message behind the interruptions was summed up in one of Teacher Li’s frustrated outbursts directed at all the students in the room:

Now, wait a minute. Listen, all of you: you shouldn’t recite a prepared text, but simply talk a bit about yourself. Don’t ask for other people to vote for you, and don’t be so nervous (*jinzhang* 紧张)! You should just express yourself (*biaoxian ziji* 表现自己). And don’t say that you want to be the leader of the association! We know that. Everybody wants that. Just let us see who you are (*jiangemian* 见个面), and don’t be so nervous!

The chairman also joined in and repeated the teachers’ earlier interjections: “Don’t be so nervous, just trust that you are the best!” (*xiangxin ni ziji zui bang de* 相信你自己最棒的).

In the rounds of elections that I followed between 2008 and 2010, and during the activities and meetings of the student association, teachers were constantly experimenting and struggling with how to give the association form. The teachers in charge were young and wanted to engage students actively in building a community spirit and morals (for instance through clean-up campaigns, charity work, and cultural events). At the same time, they wanted to use the student association to help improve discipline, for instance through a special student group with this responsibility, and through a system of surveillance. In these respects, they did everything they could to implement the required educational policies. But they also had their own views on what such a student association could and could not achieve among what they saw as a relatively disadvantaged cohort of rural students. They were themselves from a rural background and were brought up during a period of history when the individualization of Chinese society was intensified, while the social welfare of rural people was by no means secured. They saw their students, who were barely ten to 15 years younger than themselves, as children who were facing an increasing number of social and personal risks, such as a wasted education, disillusioned parents, and not least, a fiercely competitive education and labour market where their chances to live up to expectations were slim. Like the pep-rally they were so critical of, these young teachers had adopted, and implicitly tended to promote, an ideology of the self-made and self-reliant individual that is reflective of the intense individualization of Chinese society and Chinese institutions, including the Chinese state school.

Conclusion

In the Chinese state school, visions of the learning individual and ideologies of individualism are competing and negotiated. As Yunxiang Yan has argued, “the most important change in [Chinese] popular discourse and moral practice has been a shift from an authoritarian, collective ethics of responsibilities and self-sacrifice toward a new, optional, and individualistic ethics of rights and self-development.”³⁹ This shift, I argue, is reflected in the state school even though it is supposed to be one of the most prominent institutions for promoting the official discourse on socialist collective ethics and morals, and combating what many describe as selfish, hedonist and unfilial behaviour. Neither the contemporary Chinese high school nor its curriculum ask for complete submission of the individual to the party-state, nor do they promote a uni-dimensional political vision of the moral individual and his or her role in society. Rather, in practice, they experiment with how to build a neo-socialist individual who is submissive to Party rule and accepts dominant behavioural norms, but who is at the same time potentially capable of innovating and creating economic value through self-assertive behaviour.

The individualization processes in post-Mao Chinese society are transforming the Chinese education system from within, regardless of any political plans to use the school as an arena for transforming the social behaviour of young people according to the vision of a socialist, morally sound, healthy citizen, and collectively responsible learned individual. In her seminal book on city high school students in the 1960s and 1970s, Susan Shirk described a system of *virtuocracy* that rewarded students on the basis of political virtue, but which inadvertently created intense political and academic competition amongst many of them.⁴⁰ More than thirty years later, students are competing in fierce educational and employment markets, and teachers and school administrators are looking for ways to improve their students’ chances in these arenas. This increases the emphasis on final exams and textbook studies, while simultaneously inducing teachers and schools to experiment with new means of making students more successful, and thereby also improving their own performances as teachers. In my experience, younger teachers and school administrators are just as influenced by the intensified individualization processes as their students. In their attempts to teach their students about morality, collective responsibility, and the role of the individual in associations and society at large, teachers do not merely comply with official discourse and the content of textbooks. In their search for new methods to increase student motivation within a highly individualized examination regime, they resort to a version of individualism that emphasizes – and to a certain extent even idealizes – self-reliance, self-promotion, and the self-made individual. Therefore, an ideology of the self-made individual permeates the state school in ways that cannot be identified through

³⁹ Yan 2011, 2.

⁴⁰ Shirk 1982.

studies of textbooks and educational plans. This ideology is largely promoted by teachers who are themselves searching for ways to cultivate students capable of competing in a challenging employment market, and who largely base their experiments on their own intuition and experiences. In addition, teachers and school authorities are increasingly turning to private companies and entrepreneurs who are sensitive to these new market demands and ready to provide products and services accordingly. Taken together, the three cases discussed in this article show just how fragmented the perceptions and visions of the modern individual in China are today. This is the case not only in popular discourse on moral practices, but also within state-embedded institutions of learning whose explicit purpose is to socialize young people in the image of official discourse on the individual and on morality.

References

- Anagnost, Ann. 2004. "The corporeal politics of quality (suzhi)." *Public Culture* 16 (2), 189–208.
- Bakken, Børge. 2000. *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control and the Dangers of Modernity in China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- de Bary, William Theodore, Irene Bloom and Joseph Adler. 2000. *Sources of Chinese Tradition Vol. 1*. (2nd ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Beck, Ulrich, and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. 2002. *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Beck, Ulrich, and Edgar Grande. 2010. "Varieties of second modernity: the cosmopolitan turn in social and political theory and research." *The British Journal of Sociology* 61 (3), 409–443.
- Chang, Leslie T. 2010. *Factory Girls: Voices from the Heart of Modern China*. London: Picador.
- Dillon, Sam. 2010. "In PISA test, top scores from Shanghai stun experts," *The New York Times*, 12 July.
- Ding, Fan et al. (eds.). 2008. *Yuwen (Language and Literature) Vol. 1* (first semester high school). Hangzhou: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe.
- Han, Sang-Jin, and Young-Hee Shim. 2010. "Redefining second modernity for East Asia: a critical assessment." *The British Journal of Sociology* 61 (3), 465–488.
- Hansen, Mette Halskov. 2012. "Learning to organize and to be organized: student cadres in a Chinese rural boarding school." In Ane Bislev and Stig Thøgersen (eds.), *Organizing Rural China: Rural China Organizing*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 125–140.
- Hansen, Mette Halskov, and Rune Svarverud. 2010. *iChina: The Rise of the Individual in Modern Chinese Society*. Copenhagen: Nias Press.
- Hansen, Mette Halskov, and T.E. Woronov. 2013 (forthcoming). "Demanding and resisting vocational education: a comparative study of schools in rural and urban China." *Comparative Education*.
- Hanser, Amy. 2009. "The Chinese enterprising self: young, educated urbanites and the search for work." In Eugene Perry Link, Richard Madsen and Paul Pickowicz (eds.), *Popular China: Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 189–206.
- Hoffman, Lisa. 2010. *Patriotic Professionalism in Urban China: Fostering Talent*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kipnis, Andrew. 2006. "Suzhi: a keyword approach." *The China Quarterly* 186, 295–313.
- Kipnis, Andrew. 2011. *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kleinman, Arthur, Yunxiang Yan, Jun Jing, Sing Lee and Everett Zhang (eds.). 2011. *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.

- Lee, Wing On, and Chi Hang Ho. 2005. "Ideopolitical shifts and changes in moral education policy in China." *Journal of Moral Education* 34 (4), 413–431.
- Li, Rui. 2007. "Guanzhu xuesheng wenhua – jiaqiang xuesheng tuanjie jianshe" ('Pay attention to student culture: strengthen the building of student communities'). *Jiaoyu guanli* 1, 20–21.
- Ma, Xiangxiang. 2008. "Hangshi xuesheng zizhu guanli – youhua xuexiao deyu gongzuo" ('Improve the students' self-responsibility: optimize the ideology work in schools'). *Kaoshi zhouban* (week 7), 220–22.
- Michels, Volker. 2007. *Sämtliche Werke, Hermann Hesse*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Murphy, Rachel. 2004. "Turning peasants into modern Chinese citizens: 'population quality' discourse, demographic transition and primary education." *The China Quarterly* 177, 1–20.
- Nienhauser, William H. Jr. 1985. *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature Vol. 1*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Pang, Cuiming. 2011. "The Power of Cyber Communities: Building Collective Life in China." Phd thesis, University of Oslo.
- Pieke, Frank N. 2009. *The Good Communist: Elite Training and State Building in Today's China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shirk, Susan L. 1982. *Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.
- Vickers, Edward. 2009. "Selling 'socialism with Chinese characteristics,' 'thought and politics' and the legitimisation of China's developmental strategy." *International Journal of Educational Development* 29 (5), 523–531.
- Woronov, T.E. 2009. "Governing China's children: governmentality and 'education for quality'." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 17 (3), 567–589.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2003. *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2009a. *The Individualization of Chinese Society*. London: Athlone Press.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2009b. "The Good Samaritan's new trouble: a study of the changing moral landscape in contemporary China." *Social Anthropology* 17 (01), 9–24.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2010. "The Chinese path to individualization." *The British Journal of Sociology* 61 (3), 489–512.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2011. "The changing moral landscape." In Arthur Kleinman (ed.), *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 36–77.
- Yang, Guobin. 2009. *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Zhang, Everett, Arthur Kleinman and Weiming Tu (eds.). 2010. *Governance of Life in Chinese Moral Experience: The Quest for an Adequate Life*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Zhang, Xiaohua. 2006. "Xuesheng zuzhi yu zhongxue deyu de 'muxuosheng tong xiaoying'" ('The organizing of students and the 'bucket effect' of moral training in high schools'). *Party Building in Schools and Ideology Education* 7, 42–43.
- Zhu, Xiaoman. 2006. "Moral education and values education in curriculum reform in China." *Frontiers of Education in China* 1 (2), 191–200.