Suzhi: A Keyword Approach*

Andrew Kipnis

ABSTRACT The word *suzhi* has become central to contemporary China governance and society. Reference to *suzhi* justifies social and political hierarchies of all sorts, with those of "high" *suzhi* being seen as deserving more income, power and status than those of "low" *suzhi*. This article examines the rise of the word's popularity during the reform era, the ways in which its meaning has been transformed, and the relationships of the word to earlier discourses. It proceeds through three sections: a linguistic history, a genealogy of related discourses and an analysis of the contemporary sociopolitical context. The historical section focuses on the spread of the word across various political and social contexts during the reform era. It examines the ways in which the word operates semantically and the challenges to translation these semantic structures pose. The genealogical section explores the historical antecedents of the meanings of the word in earlier political and social discourses both in and out of China. Finally, the sociopolitical section examines the uses to which the word is put and asks what the rise of *suzhi* discourse tells us about contemporary China's governance, culture and society.

In his classic work, *Keywords*, Raymond Williams describes how particular words become central to contention over ideas and values in a given era. Such words develop a multiplicity of meanings that both reflect and influence the processes of contention. That keywords are related to developments in other languages and involve complex interactions between spoken and written forms increases both the difficulty and the value of describing the evolution of these words' meanings and their social contexts.[1]

This article demonstrates the usefulness of Williams's approach in relation to the word *suzhi* (素质). Usually glossed as "quality," this word has become central to PRC dynamics of governance. Reference to *suzhi* justifies social and political hierarchies of all sorts, with those of "high" quality gaining more income, power and status than the "low." In rural contexts, cadres justify their right to rule in terms of having a higher quality than the "peasants" around them.[2] All manner of human resource decisions can be justified in terms of

* An Australian Research Council Discovery Grant provided financial support for the research undertaken in preparation for writing this article. Catherine Zhang and Jean Hung of the University Service Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong provided essential research assistance. Thanks also to Benjamin Penny for help with etymology and to Luigi Tomba and Jonathan Unger for suggesting revisions on early drafts.

1. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), pp. 14–20.

2. Stig Thøgersen, "Parasites or civilizers: the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party in rural areas," *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2003).

© The China Quarterly, 2006 doi: 10.1017/S0305741006000026

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

quality, and development projects may be bolstered by claims that they will raise the quality of the targeted poor.[3] In popular usage, the notion of "lacking quality" is used to discriminate against rural migrants, litterbugs, the short, the nearsighted and the poorly dressed. Education reform is justified in terms of quality,[4] and individuals of many backgrounds consume a dizzying variety of books, nutritional supplements, clothes, exercise equipment, medicine and educational programmes in the pursuit of quality for themselves and their children. Finally, the CCP increasingly claims its own legitimacy in terms of producing a strong nation by individually and collectively raising the quality of its citizens.

Though often translated as "quality," no single English term fully catches the nuances of *suzhi*. By one count, it has been translated into 32 different English terms.[5] This difficulty of translation has elicited numerous explanations of the concept's meaning in Western writings related to *suzhi*.[6] No one, however, has undertaken a detailed examination of the word's rise during the reform era, the ways in which its meaning has been transformed, and the relationships of the word to earlier discourses.

This article provides such an analysis through three lenses: a linguistic history, a genealogy of related discourses and an analysis of the contemporary sociopolitical context. The historical section describes the rise of the word during the reform era. It further examines how the word operates semantically and the challenges to translation its semantic structures pose. The genealogical section explores the antecedents of the word in earlier discourses. Finally, the sociopolitical section examines the uses to which the word is put and asks what the rise of *suzhi* discourse reveals about contemporary China's governance, culture and society.

Linguistic History

Suzhi is a compound of the characters *su* (素) and *zhi* (质). *Zhi* means "nature, character or matter," while *su* has many meanings

3. Yan Hairong, "Neoliberal governmentality and neohumanism: organizing suzhi/value flow through labor recruitment networks," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2003).

4. Andrew Kipnis, "The disturbing educational discipline of 'peasants'," *The China Journal*, No. 46 (2001).

5. Jiang Tong, "'Suzhi jiaoyu' yingyi bianxi" ("An analysis of the English translations of *suzhi jiaoyu*"), *Changjiang zhigong daxue xuebao* (*Journal of the Changjiang Vocational University*), Vol. 16, No. 4 (1999).

6. Ellen Judd, *The Chinese Women's Movement between State and Market* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Kipnis, "The disturbing discipline"; Børge Bakken, *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Terry Woronov, "Transforming the future: 'quality' children for the Chinese nation" (PhD, University of Chicago, 2002); Rachel Murphy, "Turning peasants into modern Chinese citizens: 'population quality' discourse, demographic transition and primary education," *The China Quarterly*, No. 177 (2004); Ann Anagnost, "The corporeal politics of quality (suzhi)," *Public Culture*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

including unadorned, plain, white and essence. Before the late 1970s, *suzhi* most often meant the "unadorned nature or character of something." Such meanings go back as far as Guanzi (管子) (over 2,000 years before the present).[7] As modern nature/nurture dichotomies influenced Chinese thought during the 20th century, *suzhi* became more closely associated with inborn characteristics. As such, it could be contrasted to *suyang* (素养), which refers to embodied characteristics that derive from one's upbringing and cultivation. While alternative usages of the term *suzhi* have long existed, the 1979 version of the authoritative Chinese dictionary *Sea of Words* defines it as the inborn characteristics of a person, and, in Maoist fashion, notes that these elements are less decisive than social environment in determining a person's overall development.[8]

The meanings and uses of *suzhi* have undergone a remarkable transformation and growth since the late 1970s. Three changes in the connotations of the word are particularly striking. First, *suzhi* no longer connotes the natural in a nature/nurture dichotomy. While contemporary usage still implies qualities that are deeply internalized, these qualities are very much affected by one's upbringing. The term thus glosses over the nature/nurture distinction rather than implying the natural.[9] Secondly, contemporary usage is limited to individually embodied, human qualities. To discuss the quality of non-human entities, or of human institutions like the military, education or industry, the term *zhiliang* (质量) is used. Thirdly, *suzhi* has taken on sacred overtones. It now marks the hierarchical and moral distinction between the high and the low and its improvement is a mission of national importance.

These transformations took place over two major and ongoing propaganda campaigns. Birth control propaganda has used the term "(human) population quality" (*renkou suzhi* 人口素质) since the early 1980s. This phrase blurred the nature/nurture dichotomy in *suzhi* and began the sacralization of the term. Then education policy makers coined the slogan "education for quality" (*suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育) in the late 1980s. This usage furthered the sacralization of the term, separated *zhiliang* from *suzhi* along the lines of the embodied human versus the institutional or nonhuman, and further increased the term's popularity.

Writings on birth control during the late 1970s and early 1980s almost exclusively use the term *renkou zhiliang* instead of *renkou suzhi*.

7. Hanyu da cidian bianji weiyuanhui (ed.), *Hanyu da cidian* (*An Extensive Dictionary of Chinese*), Vol. 9 (Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe, 1992), p. 743. Thanks to Benjamin Penny here. Note that while the fourth meaning given in this dictionary suggests some extension of meaning during the early 20th century, these usages remain closely related to the earlier ones.

8. Cihai bianji weiyuanhui (ed.), *Cihai*, *suoyin ben* (*Sea of Words, Fine Print Edition*) (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1979), p. 1222.

9. Others, especially Bakken, *The Exemplary Society*, discuss how *suzhi* bridges the nature/nurture divide, but not how recent this bridging is.

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These writings advocate raising the population quality through both education and genetic counselling. Since, in the late 1970s, the term *suzhi* referred to inborn qualities, it was not appropriate for such an overarching notion of quality. Despite *suzhi*'s connotations of innateness, in 1982 the *People's Daily* began using the terms *renkou suzhi* and *renkou zhiliang* in synonymous fashion. Once this usage appeared in such an authoritative source, books and articles by population specialists began using the terms in a relatively interchangeable fashion until around 1986, when *renkou suzhi* begins to predominate.[10] Figure 1 displays the rate at which *renkou zhiliang* and *renkou suzhi* appeared in the *People's Daily* from 1979 to 2003.

The term *suzhi jiaoyu* emerged during the late 1980s. In 1985 the CCP Central Committee declared that "raising the *suzhi* of the people of the nation was the basic goal of education system reform."[11] In 1986, the new compulsory education law stated that education must improve education quality (*jiaoyu zhiliang* 教育质量) in order to improve the *suzhi* of the nation's people.[12] Note that these phrases, while focused on raising the *suzhi* of the people, do not yet use the phrase *suzhi jiaoyu*, which first appears in print in 1988.[13] By then, Chinese education reformers were frustrated by the obsession of most schools with testing into university rather than education in a broader sense. Teachers ignored students with little potential to excel in exams, directed their curriculum towards exam success, and emphasized memorizing in their teaching methods.[14] Chinese education reformers used the phrases *shengxue jiaoyu* (升学教育) (education for the purpose of testing on to the next level) and later *yingshi jiaoyu* (应试教育) (education for the purpose of passing exams) to criticize this type of education and coined the term *suzhi jiaoyu* – education for the purpose of improving the quality of the people – to describe the type

10. Most of the books on population studies from the early 1980s use the phrase *renkou zhiliang* either exclusively or predominately: Jiaoyu xueyuan (ed.), *Renkouxue jichu* (*Basics of Population Studies*) (Beijing: Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1982), Liu Jing (ed.), *Renkou lilun jiaocheng* (*A Course of Study for Population Theory*) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1985), Liu Jing, *Renkou lilun wenti* (*Problems in Population Theory*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1984), Anhui jihua shengyu bangongshi (ed.), *Renkou yu sihua* (Hefei: Anhui renmin chubanshe, 1982). The earliest mention of the term *renkou suzhi* in an academic book occurs in 1982: Jiaoyu xueyuan, *Basics of Population Studies*, p. 227. The first academic book in which the term *renkou suzhi* clearly predominates was published in 1985: Liang Zhongtang, Liu Yongji, Li Xiangde and Wang Yufen, *Renkou suzhi lun* (*On Population Quality*) (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1985). A 1986 *Population Studies Dictionary* (written in 1983, according to the preface) defines the two terms as synonymous, but uses the term *renkou suzhi* primarily in relation to inborn characteristics: Liu Jing (ed.), *Renkouxue cidian* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1986), pp. 24–25, 399.

11. Guojia jiaoyu weiyuanhui (ed.), *Shiyi jie san zhong quanhui yilai zhongyao jiaoyu wenxian* (*Important Documents on Education since the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress*) (Beijing: Jiaoyu kexue chubanshe, 1992), p. 182.

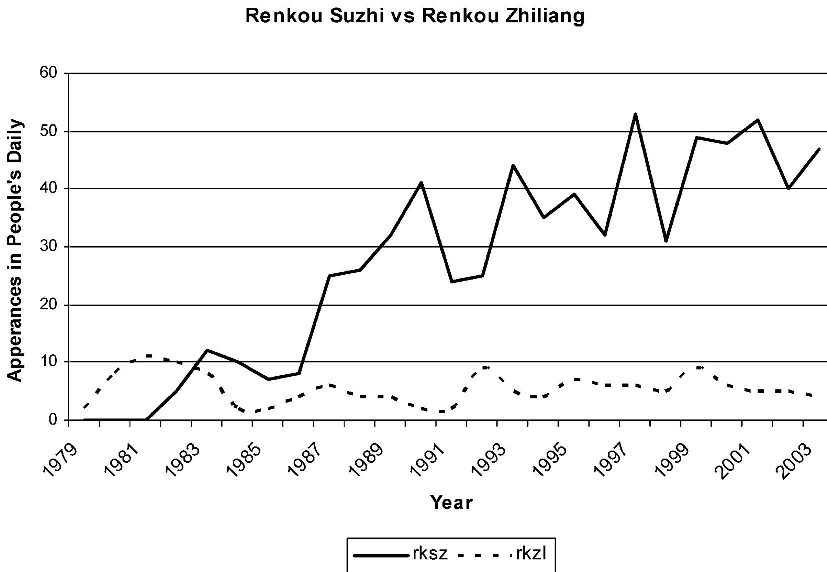
12. *Ibid.* p. 236.

13. Jiang Tong, "An analysis of the English translations of *suzhi jiaoyu*," p. 36.

14. Kipnis, "The disturbing discipline."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1: **Appearances of *Renkou Suzhi* and *Renkou Zhiliang*, 1979–2003**



of education they advocated.[15] In so doing, they equated their reforms with the wording of the 1986 education law.

Many of these reformers were widely read in Western education theory. The North American notion of "competence education" was particularly popular, as it emphasized training students in specific competencies rather than exam success.[16] Though the term competence education itself was not usually translated in Chinese as *suzhi jiaoyu*, when Chinese education reformers translate the term *suzhi jiaoyu* into English, they often translate it as "competence education."[17] Ideas from other Western education theories are now also

15. Some of the earlier articles include Xu Zhongan, "Jiaoyu jiushi tigao ren de suzhi: luelun 'suzhi jiaoyu' de mubiao yu renwu" ("Education means improving human quality: on the goals and mission of *suzhi jiaoyu*"). *Zhongxue jiaoyu* (*Middle School Education*), No. 9 (1989), Yan Guocai, "Guanyu suzhi jiaoyu de ji ge wenti" ("Regarding several issues about *suzhi jiaoyu*"), *Jiaoyu kexue yanjiu* (*Scientific Education Research*), No. 2 (1990), Wang Julong, "Yiju suzhi tedian shishi suzhi jiaoyu" ("Implement *suzhi jiaoyu* according to the special qualities of students"), *Pujiao yanjiu* (*Compulsory Education Research*), No. 4 (1990). For a later book length overview see Cui Xianglu (ed.), *Suzhi jiaoyu: zhongxiaoxue jiaoyu gaige de xuanlu* (*Suzhi Jiaoyu: The Melody of Reform in Primary and Secondary Education*) (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999).

16. See Yuan Yunkai (ed.), *Jianming zhongxiaoxue jiaoyu cidian* (*A Concise Dictionary of Primary and Secondary Education*) (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000), p. 559 for a Chinese overview of competency based education. Peng Tao, "Xuexi yingyong CBE tixi shenhua zhiye jishu jiaoyu gaige," *Jiaoxue yu yanjiu*, No. 2 (1994) is an early formal article.

17. See Jiaoyu zhuti cibiao bianji weiyuanhui (ed.), *Jiaoyu zhuti cibiao* (*Thematically Organized Education Dictionary*) (Beijing: Jiaoyu kexue chubanshe, 1993) p. 145 for

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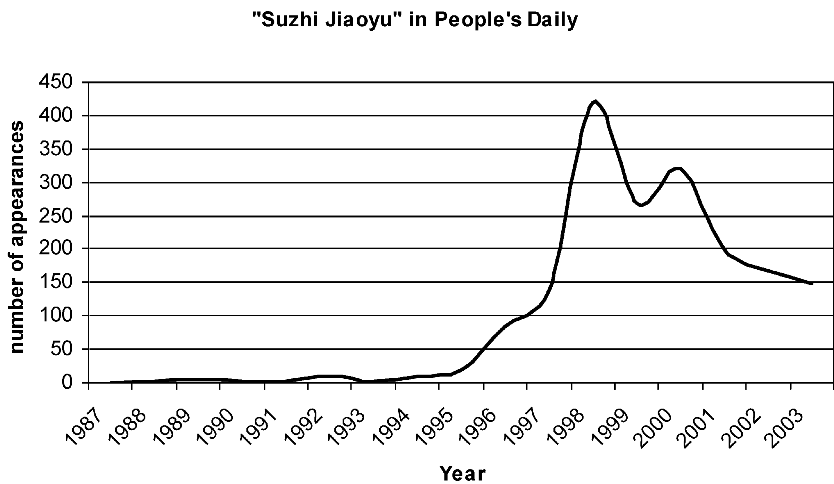
Figure 2: **Appearances of *Suzhi Jiaoyu*, 1987–2003**



classified in Chinese under the general rubric of *suzhi jiaoyu*.[18] During the late 1990s, *suzhi jiaoyu* was increasingly emphasized and in 1999, the phrase formally entered the nation's education policy. Since then, all proposals for education reform, no matter how contradictory, are described as *suzhi jiaoyu*. Figure 2 shows the rate at which the term *suzhi jiaoyu* appeared in the *People's Daily* between 1987 and 2003, while Figure 3 shows the number of articles catalogued in the Chinese Academic Journals database with the phrase *suzhi jiaoyu* in the title between 1994 and 2003. Because the term officially enters education policy in 1999, usages peaked then.

The changes in *suzhi*'s connotations relate directly to the phrases *renkou suzhi* and *suzhi jiaoyu*. The use of *suzhi* in birth control slogans transformed the connotations of the word away from the inborn. The focus on raising population quality elided the nature/nurture distinction by involving both, as captured in the slogan *yousheng youyu* (优生优育) (superior birth and superior education). In practice, especially in urban areas, birth control policies have been linked with efforts to improve healthcare and educational opportunities, giving the notion of "improving human quality" some concrete referents. The use of *suzhi* in education circles has completely negated the term's earlier connotations of innateness.

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footnote continued

the official translation of the education department. Jiang Tong, "An analysis of the English translations of suzhi jiaoyu," and Zhang Yue, "Cong 'suzhi jiaoyu' yi ci de shisan zhong yingyifa tanqi" ("A discussion starting from 13 different tranlsations of *suzhi jiaoyu*"), *Xinyang shifan xueyuan xuebao* (*Journal of Xinyang Teachers College*), Vol. 21, No. 5 (2001) provide Chinese language discussions of the manifold ways that *suzhi jiaoyu* gets translated into English.

18. Yuan Yunkai, *A Concise Dictionary of Primary and Secondary Education*, p. 14.

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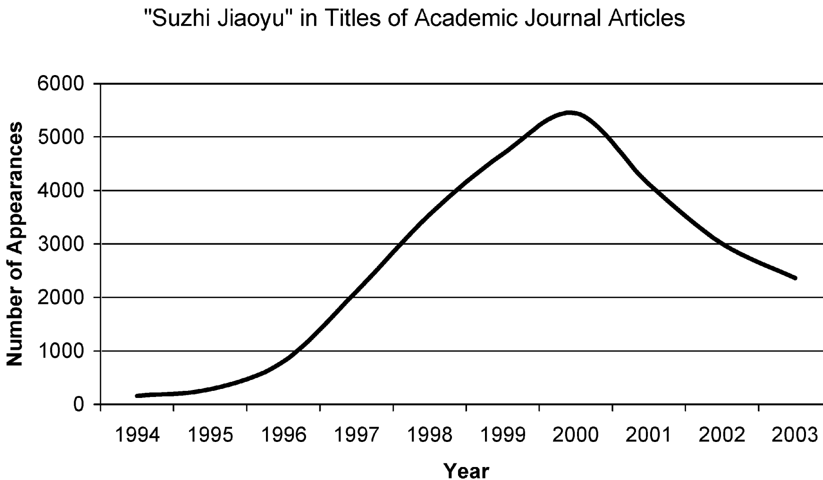
Figure 3: **Appearances of *Suzhi jiaoyu* in Academic Journal Articles, 1994–2003**



Since birth control policy regulates the intimate processes of bearing and nurturing children, it also shifted the meaning of the term towards qualities that were embodied by individual human beings. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the term *suzhi* was often associated with complex institutions, as in the phrase *gongye suzhi* (工业素质) (industrial quality).[19] Just as the population specialists spoke of the need to raise the population quality to defend the nation, so did political economists speak of saving the nation by raising industrial quality. As with population quality, industrial quality referred to a multi-faceted, overarching quality rather than any specific quality per se. By the mid-1980s, however, the term *suzhi* is increasingly reserved for qualities that are embodied by individual humans as opposed to those which are embedded in complex institutions.

The phrase *suzhi jiaoyu* cemented the association of *suzhi* with embodied human qualities. As Woronov points out, *suzhi jiaoyu* should not be translated as quality education because it is not the quality of the education system that is at stake.[20] Rather *suzhi jiaoyu* is education that makes raising the quality of the population its goal. The phrase is thus better translated as "education for quality." When education specialists want to speak of the quality of the education system, they use the phrase *jiaoyu zhiliang*. For example, one article argues that implementing *suzhi jiaoyu* requires raising the "quality of the education system" (*jiaoyu zhiliang*) and that raising the *suzhi* of rural teachers is the key to this process.[21] Such usages clearly align the

19. Niu Genying, *Gongye qiye suzhi* (*Industrial Enterprise Quality*) (Beijing: Jingji kexue chubanshe, 1985).
20. Woronov, "Transforming the future."
21. Zhang Dexiang, "Yi 'san ge daibiao' sixiang wei zhidao, quanli tigao nongcun jiaoyu zhiliang" ("With the 'three represents' as a guide, heartily improve the quality of rural education"), *Jiaoyu yanjiu* (*Education Research*), No. 283 (2003), pp. 3–4.

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term *suzhi* with individual humans (in this case the teachers) and reserve the term *zhiliang* for complex organizational systems like "education" or "industry."

In 2004 the popular intellectual Jie Sizhong (解思忠) brought out the deep historical resonances of the distinction between embodied human characteristics and human institutions. He invoked a long line of Confucian and social Darwinist writers to argue that improving the people's *suzhi* rather than institutional reform is the key to victory in the international competition among nations.[22] He approvingly quotes Liang Qichao (梁启超) as arguing that if we can recreate the people, then there is no need to worry about creating new institutions, a new government or a new nation. He then quotes Yan Fu (严复) as arguing that the quality of the people is the basis of saving the nation while the visibility of new institutions is merely an external sign of the nation's health.[23] Jie's argument thus explicitly presents the historically deep dichotomy between embodied human characteristics and human institutions implicit in the contemporary *zhiliang/suzhi* distinction.

Birth control in rural areas has now persisted for more than two decades. Slogans about raising the quality of the population can be seen in the remotest of villages. As any rural cadre will tell you, birth control is a "hard" policy. Rural cadres who do little else are forced to enforce the birth control policy under threat of immediate dismissal. In urban areas, the policy is even more strictly enforced. All of the effort the Party has put into enforcing the birth control policy has closely associated the language "raising quality" with the power of the Party itself. This power demands respect as blasphemy has a political cost. The originally mundane connotations of *suzhi* have thus become sacred.

Suzhi spread from official and academic publications into more popular genres during the 1990s.[24] Advertising campaigns for numerous products promise to raise the *suzhi* of those who consume them. Popular magazines for parents give suggestions on how to cultivate the *suzhi* of their children.[25] Popular nationalist books speak

22. Jie Sizhong, *Zhongguo guomin suzhi weiji* (*The Quality Crisis of Our Nation*) (Beijing: Zhongguo chang'an chubanshe, 2004). By translating *Zhongguo* as "Our Nation" in the English title on the book's cover, Jie simultaneously flaunts his academic credentials (he claims knowledge of English and the ability to attract an English language audience) and demonstrates his nationalist sentiments. This combination is a performance of Jie's own high *suzhi*.

23. *Ibid.* p. 3, see also pp. 7–11.

24. Anagnost "The corporeal politics" argues that *suzhi* replaces class as the predominate term in public discourse. For further discussion see Andrew Kipnis, "Dissecting homo neo-liberalis: suzhi discourse and (non-)neoliberalism in the PRC" (nd).

25. Chen Huichang, "Suzhi peiyang: cong cheng qiche he paidui zuoqi" ("The cultivation of *suzhi*: take riding buses and queuing up as a starting point"), *Fumu bi du* (*Must Reading for Parents*), No. 4 (1998), Xu Fan, "Xinli xuejia tan suzhi jiaoyu" ("Psychologists discuss *suzhi jiaoyu*"), *Fumu bi du*, No. 1 (2000), Yuan Datong, "Suzhi shi techang haishi xiguan" ("Is *suzhi* a matter of habits or special abilities?") *Fumu bi du*, No. 2 (1999).

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of defeating the Japanese by raising the *suzhi* of the nation.[26] Some publications in the popular *suzhi* genre even set records. The 2000 book, *Harvard Girl, Liu Yiting* (刘亦婷)*: A True Chronicle of Suzhi Cultivation*, has gone through 63 printings (at the last count) and sold over 1.75 million copies. Needless to say, it has led to numerous spin offs.[27]

The slippage between quality and qualities. The ability of the term *suzhi* (like all Chinese nouns) to elide the English language distinction between singular and plural has important philosophical, social and political implications. Consider an example from *Harvard Girl, Liu Yiting*. Most of the book is written by Liu's mother, who describes every step taken to cultivate her daughter's *suzhi*. One chapter, however, is by Liu herself. In it she describes her experience on a month-long exchange at a wealthy, private high school in Washington DC. She includes a section entitled "A comparison of the *suzhi* of American and Chinese high school students."[28] In it she scrutinizes eight points of comparison, some of which use the word *suzhi*, like "bodily *suzhi*," and others that do not, like "social interaction ability." For one of the eight points of comparison Chinese students are better, for most the Americans are better and for some they are equal. At the end of this section she concludes: "With regards to *suzhi*, Chinese primary and secondary students are still behind American students," though she consoles her audience that Chinese students are catching up.[29] Here, then, we can see how the word *suzhi* is used both to point to specific qualities and to an overarching judgement of something that can be translated in the singular as capital Q "Quality."

This slippage between singular and plural forms enables *suzhi* to work in both liberal and authoritarian discourses. In her more liberal moments, Liu can emphasize the essential equality and individuality of humanity by asserting that "some of the qualities of American students are better than mine and some of my qualities are better than the American students." In her conclusion, though, she reverts to a more hierarchical discourse that implies an overall ranking of human (capital Q) Quality.

Countless Chinese publications on *suzhi* include lists of the specific qualities that should be cultivated. They can be found in tracts on the qualities needed to enable liberal democracy[30] and in articles on curriculum design for almost any educational institution. What is notable is not just that these publications often use *suzhi* to refer to

26. Jie Sizhong, *The Quality Crisis of Our Nation*.

27. Mike Meyer, "The world's biggest book market," *The New York Times, Sunday Book Review*, 13 March 2005.

28. Liu Weihua and Zhang Xinwu, *Hefuo nühai, Liu Yiting: suzhi peiyang jishi* (*Harvard Girl, Liu Yiting: A True Chronicle of Suzhi Cultivation*) (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 2000), p. 324.

29. *Ibid.* p. 328.

30. Jie Sizhong, *The Quality Crisis of Our Nation*, pp. 137–180.

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both more specific qualities and an overarching capital Q form of Quality, but that many of them also contain explicit discussions of how the various specific qualities will integrate to form a Quality whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. Party theorists of population *suzhi*, for example, argue that overall *suzhi* has three main components: bodily *suzhi*, thought and moral *suzhi*, and educational *suzhi*. They further assert that these three types mutually restrict, promote and permeate one another to form a unified body (*tongyi ti* 统一体). They conclude that population *suzhi* is a totalized historical product that is summed up by the ability of a people to understand and remake nature.[31]

The slippage between singular and plural forms of *suzhi* facilitates the types of hierarchical discourse that require moving from one of the many specific qualities of an individual, such as the way she is dressed, her accent, her table manners or her score on a particular test, to an overall judgement of her capital Q Quality. When, for example, an urbanite points at an unfashionably dressed migrant and says to his friend "such low quality," he links the specificity of the quality of the migrant's dress with her overall physical/mental/moral Quality. Jacka describes how migrant workers in Beijing avoid using the word *suzhi* because it is used to disparage them so often.[32] If they wish to discuss their own lack of education, for example, they use words like *wenhua* (文化) (educational level), which, in contemporary Beijing anyway, refers to more specific and limited qualities.

English really lacks a term like *suzhi*. In English, while one may speak of human "qualities," it is de-humanizing to use the singular form to discuss "the quality" of an individual or group of human beings. Even if such a construction is grammatically acceptable, at least since the demise of eugenics it has become politically unacceptable. Though one may refer to the moral qualities of a person with the term "character," the mental qualities with the term "intelligence" and the physical qualities with the term "strength," there is no term like *suzhi* that can refer to all of these things at once.

Genealogy

Though *suzhi* discourse emerges in the post-Mao period, its roots in earlier discourses are revealing. As Jie's invocation of Liang Qichao and Yan Fu indicate, many of the philosophical issues have links to late 19th century concerns. The following examines discourses of eugenics and self-cultivation to illuminate the relationships between *suzhi* discourse and earlier traditions.

31. Jinyi Wu (ed.), *Zhongguo renkou suzhi* (*The Population Quality of China*) (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1991), pp. 5–15. See Bakken, *The Exemplary Society*, pp. 70–72 for a similar example.

32. Tamara Jacka, *Sisters and Outsiders: Rural Women in Urban China* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), ch. 6.

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Eugenics. The conceptual continuities between *suzhi* discourse and early 20th century eugenics are numerous. These continuities involve both the ideas expressed and the types of debates that emerge in relation to these ideas. The term *renkou suzhi*, however, does not appear in either the materials I have read or Dikötter's studies of Republican era eugenics.[33]

As Dikötter describes, eugenics in China derives primarily from English sources. As elsewhere, it takes racial improvement as its end; for the survival of the nation, the superior must breed and the inferior must not. Though contemporary *suzhi* discourse places much more emphasis on education than breeding, many of the same concerns appear. Foremost is the link between nationalism and social Darwinism. China is imagined as struggling for survival and supremacy with other nations.[34] Linked to this concern with supremacy is a clear and holistic distinction between the superior and the inferior. The word for eugenics in Chinese (*youshengxue* 优生学) can literally be translated as the study of superior birth, and superior birth remains a central slogan of the birth control policy. As in contemporary *suzhi* discourse, Republican era eugenicists often imagined lower class, uneducated, rural people as inferior to urban intellectuals.[35] In addition, the notion of racial improvement (*renzhong gailiang* 人种改良) closely relates to that of raising the population's *suzhi*. There is simply a shift from imagining the nation as a population instead of a race and from the language of "improvement" to that of "raising quality."

Much of this shift can be traced to Republican era demographers. These intellectuals used the word "population" from the start, though just as with the eugenicists' use of the word "race," the word often indexed the people of the nation. These intellectuals further engaged in vigorous debates with the eugenicists. In the 1920s, Sun Benwen contested the genetic determinism of the eugenicists in the following way. First he noted that the quality (*pinzhi* 品质) of a population or an individual had both its bodily characteristics (*shenti tezhi* 身体特质) and its spiritual characteristics (*jingshen tezhi* 精神特质). Next, he pointed out that all human characteristics were shaped by both genetic and environmental factors. Then he argued that while genetic factors may be more important to certain types of bodily characteristics, it was probable that environmental factors are more important for spiritual characteristics. He concluded that since spiritual characteristics are mostly matters of culture, population quality fell into the realm of sociology rather than eugenics.[36]

33. Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), Frank Dikötter, "Eugenics in Republican China," *Republican China*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1989).

34. For example, see Jie Sizhong, *The Quality Crisis of Our Nation*.

35. Dikötter, "Eugenics in Republican China."

36. Sun Benwen, *Renkoulun ABC* (*The ABC of Population Studies*) (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1928), pp. 107–113.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sun's language is remarkably close to that of contemporary *suzhi* discourse. His word for population quality (*renkou pinzhi* 人口品质) differs from *renkou suzhi* by just one character. His division of population quality into bodily and spiritual aspects prefigures the contemporary divisions into physical, educational and moral aspects. His linking of the survival of the nation to improving quality likewise prefigures contemporary discourse. The following sentence could fit as easily in post-Mao propaganda as it does in Sun's 1928 work: "The nation's strength and the prosperity of the people requires making population quality the focal point of transformation."[37]

The PRC's birth control advocates' adaptation of language from Republican era population specialists in part reflected their need to declare themselves proper Marxists. As Greenhalgh argues, they needed to define birth planning as a Marxist activity.[38] They adapted several strategies in this regard, including noting the importance of "planning" to socialism,[39] labelling the desire for many or male children as feudal, and actively disavowing Malthus (whom Marx had criticized) as a "capitalist." Under socialism, they argued, too many people does not lead to Malthusian misery as the productive forces of society develop and the proceeds are fairly distributed. Rather the problem of too many people is the link between population quantity and population quality. Population quality is a key factor in the productive forces of society, so improving the quality of the population is a key goal of good socialists. In China, to improve the quality of the population, its quantity must be controlled, the argument concludes.[40]

Placing population quality at the ideological centre of birth control advocacy enabled birth control advocates to draw on the language of both the Republican eugenicists and the Republican population specialists. Improving the quality of the population required a dual focus on both nurture and nature. The eugenicists' focus on genetic improvement was thus considered valuable, needing only to be purged of its links to racism and its exclusive reliance on nature.[41] Socialist population policy would involve superior genetic counselling, advances in the education system and proper moral education. The language of the eugenicists (superior birth) and the population specialists (population quality) both had their place.

Cultivation. The terms *Renzhong gailiang*, *renkou pinzhi*, *renkou zhiliang* and *renkou suzhi* resemble each other in many ways. The later three all seem to be translations of the English term "population

37. *Ibid.* p. 112.
38. Susan Greenhalgh, "Planned births, unplanned persons: 'population' in the making of Chinese modernity," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2003).
39. See Bakken, *The Exemplary Society*, pp. 50–75.
40. This argument is reproduced in a number of sources: Jiaoyu xueyuan, *Basics of Population Studies*; Liu Jing, *A Course of Study for Population Theory*; Liu Jing, *Problems in Population Theory*; Anhui jihua shengyu bangongshi, *Renkou yu sihua*.
41. Liu Jing, *Renkouxue cidian*, p. 399.

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quality." Appreciating the subtle differences among them and especially the importance of the 1980s shift from *renkou zhiliang* to *renkou suzhi* requires noting the role of popular Chinese notions of cultivation.

As Judd argues, Confucian and Marxist traditions of cultivation inform contemporary *suzhi* discourse.[42] The holistic form of development implied in the word *suzhi* – simultaneously physical, intellectual and moral – finds its intellectual roots in these two traditions. Confucian modes of cultivation included physical, musical, ritual, intellectual and moral training. Throughout the imperial period the study of Confucian classics was imagined as ensuring the intellectual, moral and social development of the individual. The examination system further linked Confucian cultivation to worldly power. The Marxian tradition, especially in China, likewise emphasized the all-around development of individuals. The early 1980s birth control advocates repeatedly quote Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao as arguing that only socialism brings about the development of well-rounded individuals and that it was the duty of a socialist government to produce well-rounded individuals. Mao is often quoted as declaring that socialism should "make those who receive an education develop morally, intellectually and physically and become cultured workers with a high degree of socialist consciousness."[43]

The official Confucian/Marxist paradigms, however, form only part of the genealogy of cultivation in China. Just as important are various popular traditions. These traditions could be linked to official forms of cultivation, as in the case of lineage schools teaching Confucian classics to young boys, or relatively independent from state power, as with various traditions of martial arts, *qigong*, medical training and craft apprenticeships. Like the official traditions, they often involved holistic forms of development that could result in the attainment of some form of worldly power, but the power thus attained could be independent of the state and the methods of cultivation were often shrouded in secrecy. In contemporary China, such forms of cultivation are often commercialized. The secrets are open to anyone willing to pay the price of the training that is desired. But as the *falun gong* (法轮功) followers' pursuit of cultivation shows, they can still take an underground secretive form.[44]

Here I explore the contemporary culture of cultivation by comparing two forms of popular literature: the *gongfu* (功夫) novels of Jin Yong (金庸) and books on parenting techniques represented by the aforementioned bestseller *Harvard Girl*. Jin Yong's writings were

42. Judd, *The Chinese Women's Movement*, pp. 19–32.
43. Jiaoyu xueyuan, *Renkouxue jichu*, p. 231.
44. Nancy Chen, "Healing sects and anti-cult campaigns," in Daniel Overmyer (ed.), *Religion in China Today*, *The China Quarterly Special Issues: New Series, No. 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Nancy Chen, *Breathing Spaces: Qigong, Psychiatry, and Healing in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

immensely popular in 1970s Hong Kong, and both written and film versions now attract large PRC audiences. They provide numerous examples of non-official cultures of cultivation.

Two of Jin's novels depict the adventures of the knight-errant Hu Fei.[45] The second PRC edition of the first novel was printed in 1999 after the first edition had already sold 180,000 copies, while the second novel is being made into a film.[46] Though much of the novels are devoted to action scenes and fighting, portraits of the cultivation practices of Hu Fei and the other characters emerge. The first book opens with a scene of a young man and woman spying on a hidden martial arts training session in which a young man throws darts at wooden targets as his mother speaks the names of her late husband's enemies. The intense and serious manner in which the training takes places as well as its secretive nature set the tone for the rest of the book. Though Hu Fei is an orphan, he trains according to the martial arts methods depicted in a secret family training manual, passed on from his father. As a young boy, Hu Fei undertakes his training arduously and secretly, often in the middle of the night after a full day's work. Though this training sets the basis for his later abilities, some of the secrets of his father's techniques only become apparent to him as the result of encounters with other martial experts in young adulthood. As with young children memorizing Confucian classics, deeper meanings emerge with later life experiences. Though primarily a martial hero, in later life Hu Fei also masters various literary arts. Finally, his intense chivalric morality is on display throughout the novel. He selflessly rights wrongs and demonstrates just the proper degree of sexual restraint for a morally correct martial hero of both 1970s era Hong Kong and the contemporary PRC.[47]

The themes of cultivation in this work echo many aspects of *suzhi* discourse. The embodiment of an overall physical/mental/moral superiority and the links between proper cultivation, power and morality are clearly evident. Just as the production of a high *suzhi* population involves both nature and nurture, so is Hu Fei's superiority attributable to both a superior birth (he is the son of a martial master) and his superior training (by the secret family training manual). Finally, the constant stress on identifying the best forms of

45. Jin Yong, *Hu Fei wai zhuan* (*Legends of Hu Fei*) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1999) and Jin Yong, *Xueshan fei hu* (*The Flying Fox of Snowy Mountain*) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1999).

46. Zhong He, "Xueshan feihu Xinjiang quying Wang Jing zhidao" ("Wang Jing directs the filming of The Flying Fox of Snowy Mountain in Xinjiang") *Shenzhen wanbao* (*Shenzhen Evening News*), 4 April 2005.

47. Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 89–90 notes that no matter how controlled the sexuality of Bruce Lee might seem in comparison to, say, James Bond, 1970s martial heroes still smoulder in comparison to those of premodern Chinese classics. In premodern literature, scholars are often promiscuous while martial heroes disdain all women. In contrast, 1970s martial heroes are both attractive to and attracted by women, but display a strict morality in which they attend to all other social obligations before pursuing potential marriage partners.

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cultivation, as well as the fact that superiority emerges only after half a lifetime of training, can also be found in contemporary *suzhi* discourse. These are especially apparent in that explicit classic of contemporary *suzhi* cultivation, *Harvard Girl*.

In that book Liu Yiting's mother describes all the steps taken to cultivate Liu's *suzhi*, from the womb to her admission by scholarship to Harvard. Liu's mother begins by forcing herself to eat the proper foods when she is pregnant, even when they make her sick. When Liu is first born, her mother is careful to feed her at precise intervals and regularly to stimulate of each of her sensory organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin. During her first year, her mother gives her calcium supplements and trains her memory of people and objects with constant questioning. At 18 months Liu demonstrates the memory of a three year old and her mother sets her to memorizing Tang dynasty poems. In her early primary years, Liu's mother begins her moral education by emphasizing the value of doing chores at home and learning to be strict with herself but tolerant of others. While in primary school Liu's mother has her study in noisy settings to train her concentration. To ensure that both her physical and mental *suzhi* develop evenly, 20-minute study periods are alternated with five-minute stair running sessions. In her late primary years, Liu's stepfather has her jump rope twice a day and write 250 characters a day in her diary. During vacations, her parents take her on trips to rural areas to increase the diversity of her experience and to improve her knowledge of society. All playtime is devoted to either physical activity or experience-building activities that can serve as material for the essays Liu regularly writes. Her ability to endure pain is trained by having her pinch ice cubes for 15 minutes at a time. As she progresses through middle school, her parents leave more of her training to the schools, but continually help her pick the right activities and take the proper moral attitude. Liu is taught to ride the fine line between being unfriendly and too friendly towards men and boys. The end result is not just admission and a scholarship to Harvard, but a *suzhi* model for all to emulate.

The comparison of Hu Fei and Liu Yiting demonstrates the roots of contemporary *suzhi* discourse in an earlier era. While careful readings of contemporary martial arts literature reveal some breaks, the centrality of a disciplined practice of cultivation continues.[48] More importantly, the immense popularity of this genre today represents another side of contemporary *suzhi* discourse.

In a linguistic sense, the transition from *renkou zhiliang* to *renkou suzhi* facilitated the bridging of scientistic discussions of eugenics and popular cultures of cultivation. *Renkou pinzhi* and *renkou zhiliang* are the cold technical terms of social scientists. While *suzhi* did not become popular until the 1990s, it was long predated by the term

48. For more on the history of martial arts literature see John Christopher Hamm, *Paper Swordsmen* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suyang, which refers to physical/intellectual/moral qualities embodied over a long period of cultivation. The word *suzhi* was able to add resonances from the popular culture previously associated with the word *suyang* to the social scientism of the concept *renkou zhiliang*.

Sociopolitical Context

The importance of *suzhi* discourse in post-Mao China relates to several aspects of the contemporary socioeconomic context and the CCP's practices of governance. Here I highlight the continuation of authoritarian governance, the rising visibility of social inequality, the importance of nationalism as a legitimizing discourse, and the appearance of resistance to *suzhi* discourse itself.

The spread of *suzhi* discourse relates directly to the authoritarian structure of language use in the PRC. What I have called the sacredness of *suzhi* discourse does not restrict the use of the term to an elite few. Rather it is a sacredness that guarantees that the range of contexts in which the term is used continually expands. Here a comparison with Maoism is in order. During the Cultural Revolution, Maoist sayings constituted a sacred language used by almost everyone. No matter how self-serving, disingenuous or subversive one's intent, expressing one's thoughts through Maoist slogans implied that one was respecting the leadership of the Party and thus offered a modicum of political protection as well as an opportunity to be heard. The language of *suzhi* works similarly today. Since the early 1980s, notions of *suzhi* have been increasingly used to argue for all manner of policy and to justify any sort of hierarchy.

Elsewhere, I have argued against interpretations of *suzhi* discourse that frame it as a form of neoliberalism.[49] I must acknowledge, however, that the increasingly competitive nature of Chinese society is one of the driving forces behind the national concern with *suzhi*. As inequality becomes more visible, the anxiety generated by the possibility of falling behind increases competition to attain the trappings of *suzhi*. This anxiety is especially apparent in the manner in which parents push their children to succeed at school and to out-compete their classmates for university places.[50] Parental anxiety has been further exacerbated by the birth control policy, which has created a generation of only children in urban areas.[51] In rural areas, though only children are not as common, the birth control policy has drastically reduced the average number of children per household. More importantly, rural households display even greater anxiety about employment prospects for their children, as evidenced by the intense discipline at rural senior middle schools. In 2005 I found that

49. Kipnis, "Dissecting homo neoliberalis."

50. Yan, "Neoliberal governmentality" and Anagnost "Corporeal politics" both discuss the relation of *suzhi* discourse to inequality.

51. Vanessa Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

these schools held classes seven days a week, 15 hours a day, up from six-and-a-half days per week in 2000.[52] This increase in competitiveness occurred despite concerns that the rising tuition costs were making university education a poor economic investment.[53]

Nationalism is the third major basis of contemporary *suzhi* discourse. Moreover, the Party blends *suzhi* discourse with nationalism to legitimate itself. In official assessments of *suzhi*, evaluations of patriotism are central. These evaluations equate patriotism with respect for (higher levels of) CCP leadership. In the education system, love of country and love for the Party are taught together. In literature, history, politics and philosophy classes, Chinese students are repeatedly taught of the humiliations China faced before CCP rule and how the CCP has ended national humiliation.[54] Regardless of the effect of this education on students, official culture becomes permeated with a nationalist fervour that allows challenges to Party authority on nationalist grounds to proceed much further than any other sort. Official and popular nationalism thus tightly intertwine, and nationalism enters even into popular intellectual discussions of *suzhi*, as with Jie Sizhong.

Finally, all of this *suzhi*-related seriousness has generated some resistance, as can be seen in the small but perhaps growing market for books that counter *Harvard Girl* child-raising strategies with titles like *I Am Average but I Am Happy*.[55] Anti-*suzhi* literary works also attract large audiences. One example is Jin Yong's last major novel, *The Deer and the Cauldron*. Like his earlier efforts, this martial arts epic has been released to a large PRC audience.[56] But unlike his earlier novels, it takes as its hero a foul-mouthed, illiterate, womanizing, brothel-raised son of a prostitute who refuses to train himself seriously in anything. The contrast with Hu Fei could not be more drastic.

Wang Shuo's (王朔) *Please Don't Call Me Human* provides another case.[57] Written during the late 1980s, the novel describes the efforts of a group of overzealous patriots to avenge China's failed bid for the 2000 Olympics by training a boxer to defeat foreigners. They identify

52. Kipnis, "The disturbing discipline."

53. Li Quansheng, "Nongcun 'pazi chenglong' xianxiang fenxi: yi Dong Kuang cun weili" ("An analysis of the rural 'fear one's child becomes a dragon' phenomenon: taking Dong Kuang village as a case"), *Qingnian yanjiu* (*Youth Studies*), No. 6 (2003).

54. Ann Anagnost, "Children and national transcendence in China," in Ken Lieberthal, S.F. Lin and E.P. Young (eds.), *Constructing China: The Interaction of Culture and Economy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) notes the nationalism apparent in much of the anxiety about China's children.

55. Zhou Hong, *Wo pingyong, wo kuaile* (*I'm Average but I'm Happy*) (Taibei: Golden Rich International, 2002).

56. My reading is from the PRC edition Jin Yong, *Lu ding ji* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1999). The English-language title is from Louis Cha, translated by John Minford, *The Deer and the Cauldron* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997). This story appeared as a PRC television serial in 2002.

57. Chinese quotations come from Wang Shuo, *Qianwan bie ba wo dang ren* (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, [1989] 2003), while the English title and quotations come from the Howard Goldblatt translation, *Please Don't Call Me Human* (New York: Hyperion East, 2000).

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a recruit in Tan Yuanbao, but decide that they must train him to win in style, which requires raising his *suyang*.[58] A wide variety of training is imposed. A questionable *qigong* (气功) practitioner subjects Tan to electroshock therapy, a sadistic ballet teacher improves his posture by whipping whatever body parts are out of position, and one of the patriots drills him in imitating Westerners. After several months, the patriots (who call their group Mobcom) feel that they have created a model for "improving the *suzhi* of the entire nation."[59] They produce a voiceover about Tan that states:

> According to experts in the field, China has not seen another individual with the incredible restraint or skills of Tan Yuanbao. They consider him a national treasure, someone whose safeguarding is absolutely essential. They stress that Tang Yuanbao must be studied carefully to see what makes him so special, for that may well hold possibilities in enhancing the quality [*suzhi*] of the Chinese race.[60]

The patriots then decide that Tan's further refinement requires a sex-change. A group of female college students are recruited to train him in the arts of shopping, fashion and applying makeup. Then Tan is neutered. Unfortunately, his fighting ability diminishes. So instead of a boxing competition, Tan is entered in an international "endurance contest." There, the entrants compete in enduring various forms of physical torture and humiliation. Tan wins every event. In the free-form finale, he stuns the judges by taking out a razor, making an incision around his face and peeling back the skin. In short, he wins the gold and face for the nation by ripping off his own face.

In Wang's novel, the relationship between national glory and arduous training is taken to its extreme. This poses the final question this article can ask: just how much *suzhi* improvement can the Chinese nation stand?

Conclusion

The rise of *suzhi* discourse during the post-Mao era is tied in with a series of political, economic, social, cultural and linguistic events including the implementation of the birth control policy, the return of competition to the education system and job markets, and the centrality of nationalism to the Party's self-legitimization. While keyword analyses, like linguistic phenomena themselves, necessarily lead in multiple directions, three structuring circumstances stand out in the history of *suzhi*.

First is the authoritarian linguistic environment of the PRC. The Party still has regular campaigns for its members to memorize the key slogans of its central leaders. Party workers are expected to reproduce these words whenever circumstances allow. Television shows and

58. Wang Shuo, *Qianwan*, p. 29.
59. *Ibid.* p. 114.
60. Wang and Goldblatt, *Please Don't Call Me Human*, pp. 174–75.

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headlines from local, regional, provincial and national newspapers reiterate them again and again. Anyone who wishes to speak to the policy-making apparatus must use these slogans.

Second are the reform-era birth planning and education policies. Instead of just being inundated with *suzhi* discourse, these two policy arenas have shaped the discourse itself. Birth control propaganda transformed the term's meanings. Because birth planning requires such an intimate intervention in the lives of all PRC families, it has led to a wide-ranging outreach effort, involving both propaganda and the offering of inducements to comply. These inducements focus on raising the *suzhi* of the population and form a contract of sorts, with the state helping families raise the *suzhi* of their children in exchange for accepting limits on birth numbers. *Suzhi* education rhetoric furthered these trends. While education policies may not be as extensively enforced as birth control policies, they are just as central to the daily lives of almost all PRC families.

Thirdly, s*uzhi* discourse, though arising from the state, has touched a popular nerve. It has tapped into long-standing cultural traditions of cultivation and post-Mao concerns with being left behind in a competitive society. Though anti-*suzhi* discourse may point at a backlash of sorts, even this backlash demonstrates the necessity for all either to participate in or to resist desires to cultivate *suzhi* (and most likely both at different moments). Perhaps more than anything else, it is the ability of *suzhi* to speak to both the concerns of Party leaders and those of the society at large that has lead to the contemporary pervasiveness of the term.

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