

MAPPING “ZHENG NENGLIANG”: THE AFFECTIVE CIRCULATION OF POSITIVE EN-  
ERGY ON THE CHINESE INTERNET

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

by

Yingchuan Qu

May 2023

© 2023 Yingchuan Qu

## ABSTRACT

Underscoring the historical formation of the phrase *zheng nengliang* and the convergence of multiple genealogies of cultural influences in the process, this thesis delves into the discursive formation and circulation of *positive energy* discourse within contemporary Chinese cultural politics. Chapter One recasts the *positive energy* discourse as a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than reducing it to an oversimplified political initiative by tracing three interwoven cultural forces shaping the dissemination of “positivity” in the late 2000s and the early 2010s. Attending to the role media technologies and media industries played in the process, I also highlight the contentious collaboration between the public, market, and state in constructing the phrase. Following the framework, Chapter Two probes the dynamic processes of re-adaptation and co-production of positivity and the “happy subject” ideals, emphasizing the continuities and discontinuities in the following decade. Scrutinizing six media spectacles and treating each as techno-social assemblages, I seek to sketch a comprehensive web of relationships, interactions, and negotiations in constructing post-socialist happy (and therefore, good) subjects, with the hope of contributing to the scholarly literature at the intersection of China studies, affect studies, and media studies.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born and raised in Suzhou, China, Yingchuan Qu earned her B.S. in Media, Culture and Communication from New York University in 2021 and subsequently enrolled in the M.A. program in Asian Studies at Cornell University. Following her graduation from Cornell in May, Yingchuan is set to embark on her doctoral journey at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 2023.

*For Tutu*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my special committee members, Professor Andrew Campana and Professor Nick Admussen. I am deeply appreciative of Professor Campana's unwavering encouragement, support and critical feedback, which have been instrumental in my growth as a scholar. My sincere thanks also go to Professor Admussen, who challenged me to think critically and provided valuable insights on this thesis. The profound influence both of you have had on me, through taking classes and just by talking with you, has deeply resonated with me more than I initially realized. I would also like to extend my appreciation to my TA Supervisor, Professor Peidong Sun, whose solidarity and empathy have been a constant source of support for me, to which I remain indebted. I am also thankful for the exceptional scholars and individuals I have had the privilege to encounter at Cornell. They have, each in their own way, shaped who I am now as a scholar and as a person, and will continue to be my source of inspiration. Words cannot fully express the gratitude and joy I felt every day for some of the most precious friendships I have forged during my time in Ithaca. Finally, I wish to express my utmost gratitude to my family, especially my parents, who have always supported me, believed in me, and been my biggest cheerleaders no matter what.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
Methodology.....	5
Chapter 1 Constructing <i>Positive Energy</i> .....	9
1.1 Approaching <i>zheng nengliang</i> .....	9
1.2.1 Crisis in Happiness and the Rise of Popular Psychology.....	11
1.2.2 Harvard Happiness Class and the Neoliberal Self-Cultivation.....	13
1.3 Confucianism as a Roadmap for Finding Inner Peace .....	20
1.4 The Narrative of Sacrifice and the London Olympics as a Catalyst.....	27
Conclusion.....	34
Chapter 2 Embodying <i>Positive Energy</i> .....	35
2.1 From Making to Becoming.....	35
2.2 The Cute-fication of Sacrifice.....	38
2.3 Living the Life that Our Souls Need.....	44
2.4 Eileen Gu: Coming Home.....	51
Conclusion.....	59
References.....	62

## INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a surge in discussions on a series of soft propaganda in China. The phrase “正能量 zhèng néngliàng,” with a literal translation of “positive energy,” has garnered significant attention in both scholarly and public discussions. As a grassroots-stemmed catchphrase later appropriated and promoted by the state, *positive energy* in China studies scholarship has been mostly discussed in terms of a political intervention into public discourse exercised by the Chinese state, helping to construct happy, productive, safe, and therefore, good Chinese subjects. (Yang & Tang, 2018; Chen & Wang, 2020; Hird, 2017). In this thesis, I aim to dissect the rhizomatic nature of the affective discourse of *positive energy* that permeates Chinese cultural politics, highlighting the necessity to unpack its diverse origins and interconnections to fully grasp its implications on contemporary Chinese society. Rather than perceiving the *positive energy* discourse as a political campaign imposed by the central government at a specific set date, I argue that the key to understanding the discourse that dominates Chinese cultural politics now requires a nuanced understanding of how the concept is historically situated, formed by the entanglement of multiple genealogies of politics, and re-formulated in always-ongoing, dynamic interactions between both human and non-human actors.

Chapter One historicizes the formation of the *positive energy* discourse and repositions the discourse as a socio-cultural discourse co-produced and co-reinforced by the public, the market, and the state, aided by media technologies and media industries including online education programs, national television programs, and the rise of Weibo. In this chapter, by tracing three interrelated cultural forces, namely, Western self help industry and positive psychology, the revival of national studies, and the narrative of sacrifice reminiscent of Mao times – each exempli-

fied in a media spectacle – I contend that positivity and the idea of happiness as an affective sign was circulated through cultural objects across time as individuals, the market, and the state attached different signs and meanings to it with the aid of media technologies. By examining a parallel set of media events, Chapter Two provides in-depth accounts of the dynamic processes of re-adaptation and co-production of positivity and the definition of a happy life in the following decade, further tracing the ways in which formerly loosely connected signs become affectively intertwined in the age of participatory culture, with an emphasis on identifying some of the continuities and discontinuities throughout. By treating the cases discussed as techno-social assemblages formed in the circulation of affective signs, I ask: What kind of Chinese subjectivities have been cultivated in the ongoing construction of the “positive energy” discourse? How (un)stable have these constructions been? Ultimately, my goal is to sketch a comprehensive web of relationships, interactions, and negotiations (both explicit and implicit) that contribute to the ongoing construction of post-socialist happy (and therefore, good) subjects. Hoping to not only offer new perspectives on the promulgation of happiness and the formation of content subjects in China in the age of new media, but also to complicate the dichotomies of entertainment/politics, propaganda/resistance, and coercion/consent, I aim to contribute to the literature at the crossroads of affect studies, media studies, and China studies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Zheng nengliang*, or positive energy, as a mode of governing, recently starts to garner scholarly interest in the field of China studies, albeit it has historically long been a significant cultural theme in the everyday life of Chinese citizens. In these scholarly accounts, *zheng*

*nengliang* is primarily identified as a political discourse strategically implemented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to govern its citizens. Scholarly discussion of *zheng nengliang*, or positive energy, most often appears in research that focuses on state-sponsored propaganda and political persuasion. In Chen and Wang’s analysis, positive energy discourse is framed in Foucauldian term as a form of Chinese governmentality and it “borrows and evolves from previous ideological works, but features a more dispersive power structure” (Chen & Wang, 2019). Penetrating popular culture and everyday lives, the discourse can subconsciously discipline people’s subjectivities as they conform to certain norms and values promoted by the state (Chen & Wang, 2019). Underscoring the versatility of the phrase, Yang and Tang contend that the discourse of positive energy “is not only a discourse but also an affective state that can be induced by various means, such as media content, interpersonal communication, and social events” and hence “operates on three levels in Chinese discourses: as a moral principle, as a political slogan, and as a cultural trend” (Yang & Tang, 2018). In tandem with the “harmonious society (和谐社会)” discourse propagated under Hu’s China, “positive energy” works to encourage citizens to be more supportive of the government’s policies.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have also looked at specific scenarios in which the discourse of positive energy penetrates popular culture, catering to the lifestyle and taste of the youth. TikTok’s Chinese counterpart, Douyin, for example, endorses the Chinese State’s political agenda by promoting a novel form of “playful patriotism” online through establishing a section called “Positive Energy” on the platform’s homepage (Xu et al, 2020). In a comparable account, Wong et al have observed

---

<sup>1</sup> First raised in 2004 by China’s then President Hu Jintao, “Harmonious Society” (和谐社会) denotes a political ideology and policy agenda aimed at fostering social stability, tackling social inequalities, and achieving a balance between economic growth and social welfare. Moreover, this concept promotes the nurturing of ethical values and moral behavior within society, in accordance with traditional Chinese cultural values.

that the Chinese state has employed “fandom governance” by leveraging cuteness during the COVID-19 pandemic to develop affective bonds between the citizenry and the state, promote positive energy discourse, and rally support for government policies (Wong et al, 2021).

An alternative point of departure in analyzing the discourse of positive energy involves examining the subjectivities that emerge in the process, with an emphasis on the affective dimension of the discourse. Hird’s book chapter on *zheng nengliang*, for instance, explores the embodied manifestations of positive energy discourse in popular discourses and argues that multiple imagined subjects are constructed in contemporary happiness initiatives in China, which include but are not confined to the “neoliberal” self-governing subject (Hird, 2017).

My research speaks to this rich body of literature from a media/cultural studies standpoint while also attending to the dynamic interplay among ideological control, market interests, and public consent. Although scholarly works have broadly recognized the ways in which the phrase “positive energy” – as a floating signifier – “renders previously unrelated elements, such as optimism/confidence (at personal level), charity/philanthropy (at societal level), and patriotism/nationalism (at political level), equivalent to each other in the sense that they are all ‘positive’” (Yang & Tang, 2018), the mechanisms through which this “vagueness” is initially constructed remain under-explored, nor has the attribution of “positivity” to these interconnected levels been well-scrutinized. In a similar vein, while scholars have examined the types of embodied subjectivities fostered by the positive energy discourse, how these subjectivities are continuously affected and subsequently affect other concepts, objects, and signs has yet to be systematically assessed. Focusing on movement and circulation, then, this thesis aims to bridge these gaps by reconceptualizing propaganda not solely as a top-down imposition but as *culture* being diffused

in society through discourse, subsequently crafting an immersive experience for citizens and continuously shaping their subjectivities.

## METHODOLOGY

### Methodological Considerations I: Critical Media Industry Studies

In this thesis, I adopt a critical media industries approach to examine the intricate relationships between culture, media, technology, political power, and policy. Drawing from Douglas Kellner's critical cultural studies agenda, I employ a three-fold analysis, focusing on the production and political economy of culture, cultural texts, and the audiences and reception of these texts and their effects (Kellner, 2003). This approach ensures a comprehensive examination without narrowly concentrating on a single dimension of the project. Drawing on works of scholars like Horace Newcomb, who see traditional political economy studies tending to overlook the production mechanism of entertainment content while traditional cultural studies can easily fall into the trap of "textual games" of deconstruction (Newcomb, 2009), I try to give equal attention to media production, industry, political power, text, and audience, seeking to bring the concerns and focus of political economy and cultural studies closer together.

Previous critical research on the Chinese Internet predominantly adopts a political-economic perspective that emphasizes macro-level structural issues such as regulatory regimes, concentration of media ownership, historical change, and their larger connection to capital interests. Recent years witnessed a burgeoning literature on the digital culture within the Chinese Internet, highlighting the dynamic interactions among multiple parties in the making of Internet culture. My work, like many other studies on either soft propaganda or media industry in China, concerns

power and power relations. Instead of conceptualizing power as a form of economic and political control over media organizations and laborers that is exercised through coercive practices, I adopt an understanding of power derived from Foucault and Gramsci of seeing power as diffuse and relational.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the complex and interconnected nature in cultural and ideological hegemonization, I see power as a form of leadership constructed through discourses that privileges specific ways of understanding the media and their place in people's lives, which not only highlights ideological dominance asserted by institutions, the state, and intellectuals but also emphasized the importance of consent in implementing ideological projects.

#### Methodological Considerations II: The Affective Circulation of Signs

Working in tandem with the frameworks of Foucault and Gramsci, to outline not only the complicity of power relations but also wish to map out the dynamics – the flow of intensities – between objects and actors, across space and time, my research necessarily draws from scholarly works that touch upon affect in general, including Sara Ahmed, Raymond Williams, Lauren Berlant, and Wendy Chun. *Zheng nengliang* is a compound of the characters *zheng* (正) and *nengliang* (能量). The term *zheng* refers to positivity as opposed to negativity, or “负”, correctness as in “正确”, orientation as in “正面,” uprightness as in “正直,” and impartiality as in “公正.” Emphasizing direction and (mis)position, it points to a moral compass and a moving dynamic. Meanwhile, *nengliang* (能量) is comprised of the words *neng* (能) and *liang* (量). *Neng* denotes capability, potentiality, and possibility, while *liang* means quantity, amount, and capacity.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish : the birth of the prison*. New York :Pantheon Books, Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York :International Publishers,

Combined, *nengliang* is often translated to “energy” in English, at once alluding to the Daoist idea of *qi* (氣) and the scientific concept of energy in physics, endowing it with both a nature of cosmological transcendence and a sense of affordance as a bounded whole. Inherently untraceable and inarticulable, the notion of affect is particularly useful here in thinking about direction and potential for it denotes a constant process of becoming: instead of referring to a static structure, it suggests an intricate web of relations that is forever moving and in the making. Indeed, affect is *networked*. Reflecting on what Lauren Berlant criticized on “trauma,” rather than being satisfied with the idea that there was a traumatic moment that caused historical change, instead it would be much more comprehensive to look at the situation affectively as having all these different moments occurring at various times all acting upon the subject at every moment (Berlant, 2011). In a parallel manner, I intend to look at the discourse of positive energy affectively, recognizing the array of moments transpiring at diverse instances all acting upon the phrase. To elucidate how *positive energy* attains its current meaning and how the concept it embodies has evolved historically and circulated through various cultural objects across time and space, it relies on a crucial premise of, as Sara Ahmed proposes, seeing emotions work as a form of capital. In her words, “affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation” (Ahmed, 2004). Some signs “increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to ‘contain’ affect” (Ahmed, 2004). The concept of affective economies suggest that emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field. Informed by these definitions, I ask how the circulation of signs of affect shapes the materialization and the reception of cultural objects and how these signs of affect, in turn, move in and out between

these objects.

It is in this context that I examine the multifaceted construct of “positivity” and “positive energy,” encompassing an array of dimensions from personal emotional well-being, workplace productivity, societal harmony, and national prosperity. To do so, I treat the flow of positivity as a signifier and track how the myriad of meanings, feelings, and concepts, including happiness, health, harmony, patriotism, cuteness, modernity, sorrow, Confucianism, among many others, got produced in the rhizomatic process of interactions and subsequently become productive in their own right. The history of *positive energy*, then, can be thought of a history of associations. The six cases I traced in this thesis, namely, Harvard Happiness Class, Yu Dan’s *The Analects*, the 2012 virtual Olympics torch relay, Hongxing Erke, Li Ziqi, and Eileen Gu are all studies of cultural object, or, in the age of new media can be better designated as media spectacles, that are constructed and imbued with specific affective signifiers. Their proximity to “positivity energy” aside, the rationale behind the selection of these media spectacles as sites of analyses is bluntly simple: they are, or were at one time, highly popular. Being popular indicates several implications: that they harbored enormous affective energies capable of galvanizing the emotions of a collective body, that they might have markedly altered the prior structures of feeling, and that they consequently played a pivotal role in shaping the current one. To study these media spectacles, then, requires not only pertinent attention to the text itself but also the responses it elicited and the evolving meanings produced in the discursive interplay between the audience, the platforms, the market, and in many cases, the state. Embracing such intrinsic messiness, I adopt a multi-method approach, incorporating textual analysis, reception studies, semiotic analysis, and discourse analysis in my research. In my analysis, I conduct a close reading of the media specta-

cles to discern specific elements, techniques and language that contribute to their affective impact. Attending to reviews, comments, and social media reactions, I aim to delineate the audience responses and public sentiment evoked through the media events. Adopting semiotic analysis, I hope to probe the signs and symbols employed within the media text and their interpretations by diverse audiences. Critically assessing the public discourses enveloping the media spectacles, my primary sources encompass news articles, interviews, and public debates on blog sites and social media. By implementing these methodological approaches, I eventually ask simple yet often-times overlooked questions: How does the media spectacle make people feel? Why does it make them feel this way? Through what means has it achieved the affective effect? In the end, my goal is to trace which signs have become attached to which meanings, which affect becomes stuck to what cultural objects, scenes, and concepts, and by what means in the affective circulation of the concept “positive energy.” By approaching positive energy discourse affectively, my project is two-fold: firstly to explore the potential of affect as an analytic tool in examining contemporary Chinese cultural politics; and secondly to complicate the nature of contemporary governance in China in a way that moves beyond, as Jie Yang describes, “common Western assumptions about Asian governmentality” (Yang, 2014).

## CHAPTER ONE

### CONSTRUCTING POSITIVE ENERGY

#### **1.1 Approaching *zheng nengliang***

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of *zheng nengliang* as a state-promoted expression with overtly political undertones, rarely have scholarly accounts examined the larger histori-

cal context of the term, nor has sufficient focus been given to the multiple strands of cultural forces that contribute to the broader discourses of social happiness and therapeutic governance, collaboratively fashioned by the state paradigm, private sectors, and media industries. While it may be tempting to claim that *zheng nengliang* serves as an overarching force that exercises mass-scale ideological engineering, recent cultural phenomena witnessed in China call this assertion into question. In particular, the rise of “*sang* (丧)” culture, “lying flat (躺平)” culture, and the “anti-involution (反内卷)” trend appears to contest the notion that *zheng nengliang* is an all-encompassing force in shaping contemporary Chinese society.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, to maintain that the prevalence of “anti-positive” movement in China indicates a vanishing interest in positive energy would be yet another oversimplification. Therefore, rather than merely considering “positive energy” as the state-endorsed narrative, the positive energy discourse I probe into here is necessarily more expansive, embracing notions including happiness, fulfillment, positivity and the good life – indeed, what positive energy fundamentally advocates for is the empowerment of individuals’ desire to live a content life by oneself, accentuating the personal autonomy in achieving happiness. In that sense, I contend that the neoliberal concept of positivity is perpetually evolving, manifesting in various forms, expressed through distinct languages, and utilized differently by different parties.

In this chapter, to understand how *zheng nengliang* – a catchphrase reframed by the state as a political campaign – seamlessly entered the public discourse in 2012, we need to rewind back in time and look at how the idea of positivity rose to popularity prior to that year. Specifi-

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Tan, K. C., & Cheng, S. (2020). “*sang*” subculture in post-reform China. *Global Media and China*, 5(1), 86–99.; Liu, Y.-L. (2021, May 14). *China’s “involved” generation*. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved April 12, 2023, from <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/chinas-involved-generation>.

cally, I argue that as some have noted but continued being overlooked, *zheng nengliang* is a term that draws from cultural resources resembling both Western self-help movement and Chinese traditional thoughts/indigenous roots and is promoted by multiple agents, including Chinese netizens, market forces, and the state, rather than being a top-down ideology solely propagated by and originated from “above.” It is in the interactive process of constant attachment, detachment, and reattachment that *zheng nengliang* acquires its cultural significance and itself becomes productive in constructing modern Chinese subjects. In weaving through these vantage points, I also wish to illustrate how these cultural sources have been repackaged into consumable products for ordinary people through media, the affective intensities that diverse media forms afford, and the kind of happy, therefore good, subjects constructed by charting an affective mapping of the sets of relationships that emerged during the interactions – both visible and invisible – between media texts, audiences, creators, the market and the state.

### **1.2.1 Crisis in happiness and the rise of popular psychology**

Growing at an average annual rate of 10.5% between 2000 and 2010, China’s economy in the first decade of the 21st century experienced rapid growth and transformation since economic reform, cementing the country’s position as a global economic powerhouse. While China underwent rapid economic growth and saw the rise of a middle class, this growth was not evenly distributed, leading to a significant income gap between urban and rural residents, with urban households earning more than three times as much as rural households on average (Sicular et al., 2007). The Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, increased from 0.293 in 1978, to 0.372 in 2000, and to 0.474 in 2012 (Kanbur and Zhang, 2005; National Bureau of Statistics of

China, 2013). During this same time, happiness became a global keyword, with the first World Happiness Report published in 2012. The report, supported by the United Nations, ranked China 93rd out of 155 countries and directly linked to the sudden surge in China's attention to happiness (Wielander, 2018). In her critical study on the feel-good emotions, *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed describes happiness "as a form of world making," and further indicates that it not only measures individual development but also national development (Ahmed, 2010). The unexpected economic growth and sharp contrast in income equality, accompanied by several major national events happened over the years and the increasing global prominence of the happiness industry, sparked Chinese people's quest for happiness, with 2005-2012 being the peak of popularity for the word "幸福 (happiness)" (Hird et al., 2018).

Concurrently, the catastrophic Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 triggered an expansion in psychological communities, with a huge number of disaster victims in need of long-term psychotherapeutic care. Following the Wenchuan Earthquake, the state implemented large-scale psychological assistance for the first time to aid survivors in coping with trauma. The academic field of psychology also gained increasing prominence. In 2008, Dr. Kaiping Peng, a psychology professor at Berkeley founded the Psychology Department at Tsinghua and served as its chair since.<sup>4</sup> In 2010 and 2012 respectively, the International Positive Psychology Conference was held at Tsinghua University, China.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> See Peng, K. Dr. Kaiping Peng - Bio and main page - University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://culcog.berkeley.edu/peng.html>, Anwar, Y. (2010, July 15). *UC Berkeley Psychologists Bring Science of Happiness to China*. Berkeley News. Retrieved April 29, 2023, from <https://news.berkeley.edu/2010/07/15/happiness/>

<sup>5</sup> For details on the Conferences on Positive Psychology held at Tsinghua, see Tsinghua University. *China International Conference on Positive Psychology held at Tsinghua*. Tsinghua News, Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/en/info/1253/2334.htm>

### 1.2.2 Harvard Happiness Class and the neoliberal self-cultivation

Not only psychology in general started to be emphasized on a state level after the deadly earthquake, but one specific branch of psychology, namely, positive psychology, garnered much attention in public discourse in China around the same time, along with the growing popularity of “Success Studies”(成功学). This surge in public interest can be represented by the popularity of the Harvard Happiness Class, an online lecture series taught by Dr. Tal Ben Shahar, which was introduced to the Chinese audience through NetEase Online Open Courses. In this section, I contend that the renaming and repackaging of the course from “PSY 1504: Positive Psychology” to “Harvard Happiness Class” not only made it more accessible to a wider audience but also allowed the course to shape a specific Chinese subjectivity aspiring happiness. Drawing on viewers’ comments and reviews, I explore how the affective sign of happiness is gradually attached to keywords such as positivity, liberal education, self-cultivation and neoliberal concepts of personal growth and emotional well-being in contemporary Chinese society.

During the early 2000s and mid-2010s, the Harvard Happiness Class played a significant role in popularizing positive psychology as a widely recognized concept in China among various cultural products. It was originally a lecture taught by Dr. Tal Ben Shahar at Harvard University with a core message of “one can learn to be happy” and got streamed through NetEase Online Open Courses – the biggest and most popular online open courses platform in China – in 2010. As one of the first groups of online courses introduced to the NetEase platform, the course *PSY 1504: Positive Psychology* Shahar taught at Harvard in 2006 was renamed into *Harvard Happi-*

*ness Class* (哈佛幸福课) on NetEase and became an instant hit in China.<sup>6</sup> Since its launch in 2010, the Harvard Happiness series has consistently ranked as the most popular course on the platform, with a total of over 20 million views, several times larger than the second most popular series.

The widespread appeal of the series can be ascribed to the global ascent of positive psychology not only as a scholarly domain but also in the realm of popular self-help literature.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the considerable attention it receives is also due in part to what the online open class can afford as an emerging educational media form and the strategic rebranding of the series. At Harvard, the course taught by Tal Ben-Shahar was titled PSY 1504: Positive Psychology, which aligned it with psychology as a social science discipline. However, in its Chinese online streaming edition, the title is reconfigured into “Harvard Happiness Class.” Eschewing any direct reference to psychology, this new course title is curiously ambiguous: solely based on the title, it would be challenging for anyone to discern that it belongs to the realm of positive psychology. Yet, given Harvard’s prestigious standing and its captivating connection to happiness as suggested, it is not unexpected that individuals might be enticed to click the link just to see what this is about. Repackaging the class from PSY 1504: Positive Psychology to the Harvard Happiness Class, then, denotes a shift from the academic realm to everyday life, from the elite to the masses. While the term “positive psychology” might not be widely understood, “happiness” is a term that resonates with or piques the curiosity of most people. Although positive psychology may appeal to specific groups, the inclusion of “happiness” in the title has effectively broadened the

---

<sup>6</sup> See 哈佛大学公开课：幸福课. 网易公开课. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://open.163.com/newview/movie/courseintro?newurl=%2Fspecial%2Fopencourse%2Fpositivepsychology.html>

<sup>7</sup> See Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press.

potential audience base, rendering the class more approachable and attractive to a larger demographic. As one viewer commented in 2013 on Douban:

After watching it, I realized that it's about positive psychology. It was well-taught and I learned a lot. Thanks to the person who named the course. If it had been called positive psychology, I probably wouldn't have watched it. (@beren, 2013)<sup>8</sup>

This modification, however, extends beyond merely attracting a larger audience; it also contributes to engineering a specific affective imagination and molding a unique Chinese subjectivity. The term “Harvard,” in this context, connotes academic excellence, scientific credibility, and prestigious appeal. While the proportion of Chinese students pursuing education abroad expanded rapidly around 2010, they still constituted a small fraction of the overall Chinese population.<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of Chinese students have not had the opportunity to study abroad, let alone attend Harvard. At the same time, a considerable number of Chinese students were gearing up for their first study-abroad experience. It is not unusual for viewers of the lecture series to state that they were “here to learn English.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, until today, many still regard this lecture series as a valuable resource for refining their IELTS listening skills, owing to the lecturer's clear articulation and moderate speaking pace, as evidenced in the series' *danmaku* comments on the video-

---

<sup>8</sup> The comment from Douban user @beren is collected from the comment section of the Douban entry titled “积极心理学 *positive psychology*,” which represents the Harvard Happiness Class on NetEase Online Open Courses . Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://movie.douban.com/subject/11538023/>

<sup>9</sup> See (2022, July 27). *Number of Chinese students in the U.S. 2021*. Statista. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/372900/number-of-chinese-students-that-study-in-the-us/>

<sup>10</sup> See the comment section under the series. 哈佛大学公开课：幸福课. 网易公开课. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://open.163.com/newview/movie/courseintro?newurl=%2Fspecial%2Fopencourse%2Fpositivepsychology.html>

sharing platform Bilibili.<sup>11</sup> In line with Dr. Tal Ben Shahar's advice on achieving happiness through journaling, many viewers even developed a habit of writing English dairies, as posted by some users on Douban.<sup>12</sup>

The year 2010 also marked the initial introduction of online courses from foreign universities in China. Before this, students could only envision American college life through movies and television shows. Watching online courses offered by prestigious global institutions provided a glimpse into the experience of attending these universities. For the first time, students gained access not only to educational content developed and delivered by Harvard professors but also to a specific mode of imagining: what the professors are actually like, how they look, what their teaching style is, and what the general atmosphere in class is like. Tal Ben-Shahar, the series' lecturer, often sits at the lecture table while sharing personal anecdotes about his childhood, family, and love life. He speaks slowly but articulates well. In the recollections of many Chinese viewers, he has a gentle and soothing voice; he is caring while also good at using humor to lighten the mood. Overall, he appears easy-going, empathetic, approachable, and funny. The Harvard Happiness Class thus also served as a virtual portal into "the outside world," fueling the Chinese imagination regarding the Western education system – liberal, free, and enjoyable – a sharp contrast to the often-scolded Chinese higher education system, typically described as rigid, disci-

---

<sup>11</sup> *Danmaku* (弹幕), derived from Japanese, can be literally translated to "bullet curtain." In the context of online video platforms, it refers to a real-time commenting system where viewers' comments are overlaid directly onto the video, typically scrolling horizontally from right to left. *Danmaku* is popular on Chinese and Japanese video-sharing websites like Bilibili and Niconico. ; For the video series on Bilibili and the comments, See 农夫Cc. (2020, November 23). 【哈佛大学】积极心理学 *talben shahar* (全23讲) \_哔哩哔哩\_bilibili. \_哔哩哔哩\_bilibili. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ka411w7qd/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd\\_source=e9561fade988a700f09ff3a502faf55a](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ka411w7qd/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=e9561fade988a700f09ff3a502faf55a)

<sup>12</sup> On Douban Group, a feature on the Douban platforms that allows users to create and join various interest-based online communities, there is a group dedicated to the Harvard Happiness Class series. Some users have kept the habit of writing English journals and posting them in the group. See 哈佛幸福课. 哈佛幸福课小组. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.douban.com/group/279978/>

plined, and competitive. Engaging with these lectures became not only a means of learning how to be happy but also an immersive online learning journey, an opportunity to practice English, and an experience of imagining oneself in a different country leading a different life – one that is modern, liberal, fulfilling, and ultimately, happy. As articulated by a netizen who is reportedly “addicted to” taking online open courses from top foreign universities on NetEase Open Courses, taking these open courses is a fashion: “...It’s like sitting in the slightly old-fashioned lecture halls of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, listening to Nobel laureates chatting and laughing in class – it’s truly a wonderful experience.”<sup>13</sup>

Highlighting a virtual transnational experience, the pursuit of English proficiency and emotional preparedness extends beyond linguistic mastery and mental health, but further taps into strategies of neoliberal self-cultivation in an effort to bolster one’s emotional and intellectual competitiveness on the global stage. Such presence of neoliberal self-cultivation is not unproblematic for the state on the one hand but also does not necessarily lead to the trade-off of Chinese traditional values on the other. In her recent work on Li Yang Crazy English (李阳疯狂英语), in treating English as a neoliberal technology of the self, Iskra examined the “frictions that are generated in the encounter of English conceived as a neoliberal technology of the self with the Chinese nation-state,” concluding that English study in early 2000s China “embodied the tensions between two values that characterized the state’s project of desirable citizenship: entrepreneurialism and patriotism.” (Iskra, 2023). In collaboration with state officials, the lecturer of the Harvard Happiness series, Dr. Tal Ben Shahar, has repeatedly emphasized the link between positive

---

<sup>13</sup> See 北京晚报. (2011, June 7). 国外网络公开课网上风行 国内高校难复制? . 新浪教育. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <http://edu.sina.com.cn/1/2011-06-07/1657203274.shtml>

psychology and Chinese traditional values. During his 2012 speech at the Fifth China EAP (Employee Assistance Program) and Occupational Mental Health Annual Forum, he referenced Laozi and Confucius, contending that “in numerous aspects, the underpinnings of positive psychology have their origins in China” (Ben-Shahar, 2012, as cited in Sina.com., 2012).<sup>14</sup>

Positing happiness as a science that can be learned also implies the existence of correct protocols to attain it. If an individual is unhappy, they must have failed to abide by these prescribed guidelines and principles. Ahmed draws attention to the paradoxical nature of this concept: “if the science of happiness presumes happiness as being ‘out there,’ then how does it define happiness?” (Ahmed, 2010) Within the scientific framing of happiness, it is not hard for us to envision happiness as a disciplinary technique when happiness can be explained, dissected and learned. In 2010 and 2012, Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania, who is widely recognized as the father of positive psychology, was invited to the International Positive Psychology Conference held in Tsinghua University. In the 2010 conference, he eloquently pointed out the relationship between positive psychology and the Chinese dream:

Positive psychology can provide powerful instruments for the realization of the Chinese dream...For example, engagement and accomplishments contribute to prosperity directly and to positive emotion indirectly. Meaning and relationships facilitate national revival.

All five fields of positive psychology enhance people’s well-being. (Seligman, 2010) <sup>15</sup>

Individual happiness and positivity, then, becomes detrimental to both national stability and corporate profit. While “happiness” needs to be achieved by self-cultivation and personal growth,

---

<sup>14</sup> See 新浪财经. (2012, April 9). 泰勒-本-沙哈尔：成功并不能导致幸福. 新浪财经. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <http://finance.sina.com.cn/hy/20120409/104411775699.shtml>

<sup>15</sup> See Kuhn, R. L. (2013, July 19). *Understanding the Chinese Dream*. chinadaily.com.cn. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from [http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/weekly/2013-07/19/content\\_16799253.htm](http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/weekly/2013-07/19/content_16799253.htm)

the notion of happiness become nonetheless nationalized. Not only responsible for their own emotional well-being, a Chinese happy subject is now also responsible for the overall happiness of the society. Taken together, transplanting *PSY 1504: Positive Psychology* to online setting under the title Harvard Happiness Class is transforming a university curriculum into a consumable cultural – or even an entertainment – product that calls for transformation. This reconfiguration effectively fused a diverse array of signs and concepts, while simultaneously causing some to become less connected. The concept of “happiness” became increasingly intertwined with key terms such as liberal education, Western modernity, positivity, self-help, emotional strength and personal growth, cultivating a unique neoliberal Chinese subjectivity characterized by modernity, proactivity, mindfulness of mental and physical health, personal development, eagerness to learn, and a desire for positive transformation — to feel better is to get better. In this light, happiness is intricately linked to improvement, a key term inevitably recalls the *suzhi* discourse within Chinese cultural politics.<sup>16</sup> While *suzhi* discourse in China studies scholarship is often examined in terms of rural/urban dynamics grounded in the remnants of eugenics and *suzhi* education (素质教育), which underscores intellectual and moral advancements with explicit elitist undertones (illustrated in the immense success of the best-selling parenting manual *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting: A Character Training Manual* 《哈佛女孩刘亦婷：素质培养纪实》),<sup>17</sup> there is also increasing public attention to mental *suzhi* (心理素质) and bodily *suzhi* (身体素质), which both connotes

---

<sup>16</sup> *Suzhi* (素质) is often roughly translated as quality of people. For details on the *suzhi* discourse, see, for example, Anagnost, A. (2004). The corporeal politics of quality (*suzhi*). *Public Culture*, 16(2), 189–208.; Kipnis, A. (2006). *Suzhi: A keyword approach*. *The China Quarterly*, 186, 295–313.

<sup>17</sup> *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting* is a manual-style parenting book written by Liu’s parents about how their daughter got accepted to Harvard University in 1999. The book details the methods and upbringing they believe contributed to their daughter’s achievements and became a bestseller in China in 2000. See Zhang, X., & Liu, W. (2000). 哈佛女孩刘亦婷：素质培养纪实. 作家出版社.

strength — better mental and bodily *suzhi* leads to a stronger mentality and a stronger body. According to the rationale, if one enhances *suzhi* in all these aspects, one must be happy.

### 1.3 Confucianism as a roadmap for finding inner peace

At the same time, ancient Chinese cosmological notions such as dao 道 and qi 氣 that have associations with *nengliang* and the Confucianist connotations embedded within the word *zheng* (正) have also shaped the interpretation of the later formation of the phrase “positive energy.” Inasmuch as how popular psychology in China adheres to traditional Chinese cultural values, Yu Dan—intentionally or not—has also adeptly repositioned within the lexicon of Western self-help literature and success studies. By delving into the case of Yu Dan phenomenon in 2006, which illustrates the transformation of Confucius’ *The Analects* from an academic classic to a best-selling self-help manual, I will investigate how Yu Dan’s affect-based presentation and reinterpretation of the text redirects the focus from classics and politics to personal happiness and well-being, aligning traditional Chinese culture with the national “harmonious society” program promoted by the Chinese state while also crafting a unique Chinese subjectivity that is encouraged to constantly “look inward” in the quest for happiness.

During the National Day celebration week (Oct 1st to Oct 7th) in 2006, China Central Television (CCTV) broadcast a series of lectures on Confucius’ *The Analects* under the program “Lecture Room”, or *Baijia Jiangtan* (百家讲坛) through Channel 10, which is widely known as the science and education channel. According to CCTV, “Lecture Room” is a show that is “committed to building a bridge between experts, scholars, and the general public to promote

excellent Chinese traditional culture.”<sup>18</sup> Lasting for seven days straight, *The Analects* series was lectured by Yu Dan, a literature and media studies professor from Beijing Normal University. The series was a huge success, marking the peak of *Lecture Room*’s popularity. Following her appearance in “Lecture Room,” Yu Dan’s book, *Confucius from the Heart* (《于丹论语心得》), became a bestseller in China, selling over 10 million copies by 2009. Yu’s instant popularity is referred to as the Yu Dan phenomenon, a highlight of the “national studies fever,” or *guoxuere* (国学热) in China around the 2010s.<sup>19</sup> Yu Dan also became a household name, with some press calling her the “academic super girl.”<sup>20</sup>

Serving as a bridge between Confucius and the general public, Yu Dan presented to the public with a highly mediated version of *The Analects*. Curiously, the name of the series was not called Yu Dan on *The Analects* 于丹说论语 but was named “Yu Dan’s insights on *The Analects* from the heart (Yu Dan Lunyu Xinde于丹论语心得)”, emphasizing Yu Dan’s personal insights on the text and her sincerity. As Zhang argues in her book chapter on the Yu Dan phenomenon,

---

<sup>18</sup> Featuring scholars from various disciplines providing lectures, *Lecture Room* is a Chinese television program hosted by China Central Television (CCTV), the primary state-owned television network in China. The show was first broadcast on 9 July 2001 on CCTV-10 and became most popular during 2005-2009 after a series of lectures featuring scholars like Yi Zhongtian, Yu Dan and Qian Wenzhong. See 百家讲坛\_CCTV节目官网. CCTV节目官网. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://tv.cctv.com/lm/bjtt/>; 中国青年报. (2008, December 9). 制片人: “《百家讲坛》不是一言堂也非百家论坛.” Chinanews. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/news/2008/12-09/1478781.shtml>. For a list of lectures streamed from 2001 to 2016, see 小段大帅. (2018, February 8). 百家讲坛2001-2016年节目播出表- 总目录. CSDN博客. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://blog.csdn.net/u011652364/article/details/79286827>.

<sup>19</sup> *Guoxuere* (国学热), or “national studies fever,” refers to the revival of interest in the traditional Chinese cultural, historical, philosophical, and value systems within modern China. This renewed zeal for national studies incorporates various elements of classical Chinese scholarship, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and other indigenous Chinese philosophies, in addition to conventional literature, poetry, and artistic works. For scholarly works on *Guoxue*, see, for example, Dirlik, A. (2011). *Guoxue/National Learning in the age of global modernity. China Perspectives, 2011(1)*, 4–13.

<sup>20</sup> A reference to “Super Girl,” or “Super Voice Girl (超级女声),” a Chinese singing competition television series, which first aired in 2004 and became extremely popular.

the strategic use of *xinde* (knowing from embodied learning of the heart) repackaged *The Analects* from a traditional cultural text that is normally studied by the well-educated elites into a personal, intimate memo that can be accessed by the general public and is more relative to contemporary times. As a narrative strategy and rhetoric technique, the writing of *xinde*, Zhang reminds us, is “highly personal and rooted in an individual’s particular experience of engaging texts, emotions and practices, which is not amenable to the criteria of right or wrong” (Zhang, 2016). This turn of Confucianism from the professional realm to the everyday, personal realm, as argued by Zhang, was further aided by Yu Dan’s feminine, even maternal image televised through mass media. Antithetical to the elitist academic Confucian discourse embodied by straight-faced male scholars, who expound Confucianism in terms of philosophic theories and moral principles in an academic context, the Confucius embodied by Yu Dan is not detached and intimidating but rather kind and personal, showing an “affinity” (亲和力) with ordinary folks. Noted by Zhang, *People’s Daily* ascribes Yu Dan’s popularity to her “feminine sensitivity of feelings” (女性特有的细腻情感) and “her voice of poetic charm” (吟咏般的语调), which facilitated the delivery of engaging Confucian texts and wisdom from the ivory tower to the living rooms of ordinary people (People’s Daily, 2007; Zhang, 2016).<sup>21</sup> Consider that many of the typical traits of books in the US-oriented self-help tradition – namely accessible language, catchy slogans, a personalized focus on the author’s own life, and upbeat life lessons, Yu Dan’s Confucius tellingly resembles a motivation coach in the American self-help tradition, catering to the everyday needs of the modern individual. While Yu Dan does not explicitly cite the American self-help tradition,

---

<sup>21</sup> People’s Daily. (2007, February 7). 于丹为什么这样红 (于丹现象启示录) . Sohu.com. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <http://news.sohu.com/20070207/n248087134.shtml>

Hendriks's recount of Confucian philosopher Daniel A. Bell's review proposes that her book does appear to emulate elements from some of these "American" self-help books (Hendriks, 2016).

Centering on its affect-based wisdom for happiness, Yu Dan unconventionally interpreted *The Analects* in terms of Confucian wisdom to "happiness of the heart." According to Yu, "the essence of *The Analects* is to teach everyone how to live the kind of happy life that our souls need." (Yu, 2006). In her lectures, Confucian guiding no longer aims for producing "gentlemen (君子)" and *The Analects* is no longer mainly about politics. Rather, Confucian thinking becomes simple and relevant to us all in our everyday life: that the purpose of Confucian thought is to tell us how to live a happy life in the modern world. Yu Dan begins her book by saying that "nobody should think that the Confucian 'Analects' are so high we can only gaze up to them. Really, 'The Analects' are meant to teach us how to attain spiritual happiness, adjust our daily routines, and find our place in modern life" (Yu, 2006). In one episode, Yu Dan told the story of *Zi Gong Wenzheng* (Zi Gong asked about politics). The original story starts with Zi Gong asking about the government. Confucius said: "The requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the confidence of the people in their ruler (子曰：「足食，足兵，民信之矣。」)." Zi Gong asked: "If it cannot be helped, and one of these must be dispensed with, which of the three should be foregone first? (子貢曰：「必不得已而去，於斯三者何先？」)." Confucius answered: "The military equipment (曰：「去兵。」)." Zi Gong went on asking: "If it cannot be helped, and one of the remaining two must be dispensed with, which of them should be foregone? (子貢曰：「必不得已而去，於斯二者何先？」)." "

Confucius answered: “Part with the food. From old, death has been the lot of men; but if the people have no confidence in their rulers, there is no standing for the state. (曰：「去食；自古皆有死；民無信不立。」)。” In scholarly discussions on *The Analects*, the word 信 is widely interpreted as 信任, meaning *confidence/trust*. 民信, then, means people’s confidence/trust in the government. The underlying meaning of “民無信不立” is to demand that rulers win the trust of the people. In Yu Dan’s reinterpretation, however, 信 was understood as 信念/信仰, which leans towards faith/belief in English. From interpreting 信 as in 信任 to 信 as in 信念, the slight change in wording shifts the responsibility of building a nation-state from its leaders to its people. While the former is often used in a more practical or pragmatic sense, the latter, on the other hand, is often used in a more spiritual or religious context. In a political relationship mediated with “trust,” people can either have confidence in the government or lack thereof. Faith, however, refers to the absolute belief and worship of the people in the government. After telling the story of *Zi Gong Wenzheng*, Yu Dan went on to connect this passage to our modern life by discussing the recent shift from using GDP to GNH (Gross National Happiness) as a measure of a country’s quality of life. Drawing on Yan Hui’s story from *The Analects*, which illustrates his approach to dealing with poverty, Yu Dan offered insights about the discontentment that arises from continually comparing oneself to others: “This is because our eyes see too much of the external world and too little of the soul... Confucius was able to teach us the secret of happiness, which is to find the inner peace within ourselves.” (Yu, 2006)<sup>22</sup>

Aided by the incorporation of dramatic background music, PowerPoint-style posters, and

---

<sup>22</sup> See 于丹. (2006). 于丹《论语》心得. 中华书局.

humorous – cute, even – animated clips, the show’s format enabled Yu to render *the Analects*, an abstruse classic, into vivid anecdotes. Broadcast at midday during the national holiday week for seven consecutive days in October 2006, the show was later nostalgically recalled by many viewers as a family lunchtime viewing event – indeed, being both entertaining and educational, the series could be a perfect family show.<sup>23</sup> Despite the original text’s predominant focus on political issues, by reconstructing *The Analects* as a entertaining/educational self-help manual that steers readers toward the pursuit of happiness, Yu Dan ultimately presents a highly depoliticized version of Confucius. Affective signs got to circulate across cultural objects in the repackaging of the text. The cultural sign “*The Analects*” got increasingly detached from politics but increasingly attached to personal well-being, detached from academia but attached to everyday life. The affective sign, “happiness,” is detached from state responsibilities but further attached to individual soul-searching, and ancient wisdom is detached from archival knowledge but has become sources of contemporary motivation. In the process of strategic recontextualization and reconstruction, keywords and concepts including Chinese traditional culture, Confucianism, ancient wisdom, happiness of the heart, well-being of nation-state and soul, inner peace become stuck together, generating a new affective mapping of the structures of feeling constructed in the formation of the media spectacle. Through the series of skillful repackaging and reinterpretation, *The Analects* from thousands of years ago now speaks the truth about the contemporary life of Chinese people. More importantly, Chinese traditional culture, which has been mostly seen as history and regarded as ancient wisdom, is now connoted with importance relevant to achieving

---

<sup>23</sup> See the comment sections under Douban entries “于丹《论语》心得 (the book)” 于丹《论语》心得. 豆瓣. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://book.douban.com/subject/1931318/>, and “百家讲坛：于丹《论语》心得 (the show)” 百家讲坛：于丹《论语》心得. 豆瓣. (2006, October 1). Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://movie.douban.com/subject/26707511/>

contemporary happiness, positivity, and harmony, both on an individual level and a national level.

This transformation of Confucius is not only a state-sponsored program technologically supported through CCTV but is also promoted ideologically by the state paradigm with a political aim. Calling for a “search from inside” rather than “from outside” when encountering difficulties, Yu Dan’s interpretation of Confucius plays in tune with the goal of the Chinese state to build a “harmonious society.” Yu Dan was not only officially endorsed as a lecturer under contract with CCTV, the state-sponsored television station, but her popularity was also so significant that the state’s official media mouthpiece, *People’s Daily*, even contributed a special column called “Why is Yu Dan So Popular: Insights on the Yu Dan Phenomenon” for seven days.<sup>24</sup> Her book with the same title was almost a must-read for government employees – many were even required to write reading reflections on it.<sup>25</sup>

Influenced by the trend of positive psychology and the American self-help industry, Yu Dan strategically repackaged *The Analects* into a culturally consumable self-help product that can be easily accessed by ordinary people. By doing so, Yu Dan’s affective reading of Confucianism achieves several objectives on an economic, political, and cultural level: 1) It achieved tremendous success in business. 2) It re-imagines the role of governance, advocating for “a felt relationship between citizens and the nation-state that is maternal and emotive, rather than paternalistic and moralistic” (Zhang, 2016). 3) It sparks a phenomenal interest among the general public in Chinese traditional culture, which is closely tied to life wisdom and finding inner peace.

---

<sup>24</sup> People’s Daily. (2007, February 7). 于丹为什么这样红（于丹现象启示录）. Sohu.com. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <http://news.sohu.com/20070207/n248087134.shtml>

<sup>25</sup> 尚海. (2009, May 22). 让我们向快乐出发——读于丹《论语心得》有感. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from [http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn/l/jgbdhg/200905/t20090522\\_2196596.html](http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn/l/jgbdhg/200905/t20090522_2196596.html)

Most significantly, Yu Dan's reading on *The Analects* fosters a unique Chinese subjectivity, positing that happiness originates from the heart – from “inward” rather than “outward.” To find inner peace and lead a fulfilling life, then, necessitates “self-cultivation” – the ongoing refinement of one's character, morality, and behavior to become a better person.

#### **1. 4 The narrative of sacrifice and the London Olympics as a catalyst**

Even though the idea of happiness, or *xing fu* (幸福) in Chinese, has been trending over the past few years prior to 2012, it is in this year that *zheng nengliang* as a social and cultural catchphrase went viral and entered the public discourse of everyday life after a series of events during the 2012 London Olympics. During the Olympics, the organizing committee invited ten previously unknown Chinese citizens who had contributed to the public good in their ordinary life to the torch relay, including Alimjiang Halik, a Uyghur who has donated over 200,000 RMB to support impoverished students relying on his meager income of selling lamb skewers, Tao Chongwen, who was twice issued a death notice due to heart disease at the age of two but ultimately defeated the illness with incredible perseverance, and Mao Chenbing, an art student from Wenzhou, who traveled three days to Guizhou, thousands of miles away after receiving an urgent call for help in a QQ group to donate 240 milliliters of rare RH negative type AB blood to save the life of the critically ill pregnant woman.

These stories featuring ordinary people who did good deeds and showcased perseverance is reminiscent of the narrative of *Touching China* or “good people good deeds,” a traditional narrative of sacrifice in Chinese cultural history especially with Maoist resemblance. *Touching China* (感动中国) is an annual television program in China, which honors individuals who have

made significant contributions to society through their selflessness, bravery, and dedication to helping others.<sup>26</sup> In the same light, “good people good deeds (好人好事)” is a phrase often used to describe the same individuals who exhibit selflessness, altruism, and dedication to helping others, as well as the actions they perform to make a positive impact on society. This concept can be traced back to Lei Feng (雷锋), a soldier in the People’s Liberation Army and a cultural icon in Revolutionary China. His story became widely known after Mao called on the nation to “learn from Comrade Lei Feng (向雷锋同志学习)” in 1963 and Lei Feng was celebrated by Mao as a symbol of selflessness, loyalty to the Communist Party, and service to others. Later into post-reform socialist China, Lei Feng was dissociated from radical Maoism and revolutionary class politics but re-branded as a civic-minded citizen emblematic of the *suzhi* discourse. Lei Feng’s revival “as the celebrity face of a government campaign to promote volunteering in 2012-2013,” argues Jeffreys, “aimed to draw large groups of young people into planning for the PRC’s future, while commemorating its history” (Jeffreys, 2016). Chinese people are encouraged to become “living Lei Feng (活雷锋)” by helping others, showing selflessness and making sacrifice for the society (Jeffreys, 2016).

The “good people good deeds” narrative is often coupled with the superstitious belief of “good people good karma (好人好报).” The selection of these ordinary individuals as torch relay runners for the 2012 London Olympics not only emotionally touched the Chinese populace by reinforcing their belief in human goodness, but also affirmed the idea that performing benevolent

---

<sup>26</sup> Launched in 2002 by China Central Television (CCTV), *Touching China* (感动中国) recognizes the extraordinary achievements of ordinary people and shares their inspirational stories with the public. These stories often involve acts of selflessness, courage, and perseverance in the face of adversity, reflecting the values of altruism and social responsibility. By showcasing these exemplary individuals, *Touching China* seeks to inspire the viewers to emulate their actions and contribute to social harmony and progress.

acts can indeed lead to positive outcomes.

With this dual mindset, following the news, many Weibo users started to repost the event with the hashtags #Igniting positive energy and explode your microcosm/ #点燃正能量, 引爆小宇宙 as a virtual means of participating in the Olympic torch relay. Symbolizing fortune, the torch itself also became the embodiment of good luck. Although it may initially appear that the entire *zheng nengliang* hashtag movement was spontaneously initiated by the public, with both official and popular accounts echoing the same narrative regarding the phrase's viral emergence, closer scrutiny of online sources reveals that the Weibo hashtag campaign was, in fact, a marketing strategy orchestrated on behalf of Yihe Gold Products Co., Ltd (颐和黄金制品有限公司), the exclusive national franchise dealer for London Olympics torch models.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, in news articles published by both media outlets such as *Tencent Sports* and state-sponsored traditional paper press like *Phoenix Press*, discussions of the hashtag movement are frequently followed by a mention of the sales of the torch models at the end of the piece.<sup>28</sup>

A 2013 web article by Brandcn, a branding and marketing consulting firm based in Beijing, details the intricate process through which the campaign was initiated, developed, and executed, involving the general public, Weibo "Big-V"s (micro-celebrities), government officials, and the Olympics committee by leveraging Weibo as the main arena but also aided by traditional paper press and television.<sup>29</sup> According to the article, the "several Weibo bloggers who started to

---

<sup>27</sup> See 穆峰. (2013, August 30). 点燃正能量: 伦敦奥运火炬模型社交媒体营销案例解析. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from [https://expert.brandcn.com/hangyepinglun/130830\\_355598.html](https://expert.brandcn.com/hangyepinglun/130830_355598.html).

<sup>28</sup> For example, see Tencent Sports. (2012, July 25). 伦敦奥运火炬成励志吉祥物 引各地抢购热. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://sports.qq.com/a/20120725/000508.htm> and 凤凰网. (2012, July 30). 网友催热伦敦奥运火炬模型收藏. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://news.ifeng.com/c/7fcnbP3ru3R>

<sup>29</sup> 穆峰.

post the hashtags,” as commonly reported in the media, were actually part of the marketing campaign, organized to post those hashtags intentionally. These Weibo bloggers selected were mostly grassroots “Big V”s,<sup>30</sup> which means they are both influential with a large follower base and representative of grassroots tastes/interests. Some of the accounts mobilized in the first round of the campaign included @全球热门精选榜 (translates to “Global Hot Picks List” and @当时我就震惊了 (translates to “I was shocked at that time”), which are prominent accounts on Weibo that share funny and trending content. On July 4th, 2012, @全球热门精选榜 first posted a microblog linking *zheng nengliang* to the torchbearers and urged people to repost the message:

@全球热门精选榜: 31-year-old Chinese torchbearer Xiong Yu is a member of the Queen’s University Belfast Council and a PhD supervisor, which is an unattainable dream for many in China. 23-year-old Chinese torchbearer Zhang Jinglong ran for European Parliament at the age of 19, which is also an incredible achievement. Let’s ignite positive energy and encourage more outstanding individuals to emerge around us, not only for them, but also for each and every one of us! If you support this, please share! (July, 2012)

The post ended up being reposted more than 17,000 times. Following the trend, another “Big V” account posted a microblog comparing the torchbearers in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, who were mostly celebrities, with the ordinary people in the 2012 Olympics. The post was further reposted by influential accounts like @当时我就震惊了 and @我Hold不住了. The chain of reposting by influential accounts and their followers made the topic of *zheng nengliang*, the two Olympics

---

<sup>30</sup> a “Big V (大V)” refers to a verified user on social media platforms like Weibo, which is similar to Twitter. The term “V” comes from the verification badge, which is a small “V” icon displayed next to the user’s name. These verified users are often influential figures, including celebrities, politicians, business leaders, and well-known bloggers or commentators. They typically have a large number of followers and significant social influence, making their opinions and posts highly visible and impactful.

and social issues hot topics of the day. By July 6th, with the retweets of thousands of netizens, an assembly of 20 grassroots Weibo accounts, and the participation of dozens of Weibo opinion leaders, the #ignitepositiveenergy# (#点燃正能量#) topic has grown from 53 search results on Sina Weibo initially to 580,000.

During the 20-or-so-day spread on Weibo, there were a total of 350,000 reposts and over 40,000 comments. Other than the verified grassroots accounts who participated the event, over 100 verified users and 40 official Weibo accounts also participated, including Deputy Director Chen Li of the Shaanxi Public Security Department, Chief Reporter Zhang Xilei of the Zhengzhou Evening News, Huizhou Tourism Bureau, and Dongcheng District Government of Beijing.<sup>31</sup>

Catalyzed by the series of online events during the London Olympics centered on the torchbearers, “*zheng nengliang* (正能量)” gained traction as a buzzword frequently employed by Chinese people in everyday life, and had itself be productive and developed into a marketing tool for various products in the process of intertwining with other pre-existing cultural trends, including in the aforementioned field of positive psychology. In July 2012 – coinciding with the London Olympics –, British psychologist Richard Wiseman published *Rip It Up: The Radically New Approach to Changing Your Life*, a self-help book rooted in positive psychology. Just one month later, its Chinese edition came out. Although the book did not as much attention in the English-speaking world as Wiseman’s other works, it nonetheless became a bestseller in China that year, not only due to its alignment with the popular psychology industry but also because of the skill-

---

<sup>31</sup> 穆峰.

ful repackaging of its marketing to fit the prevailing trend of positive energy.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the absence of the phrase “positive energy” in Wiseman's book, the Chinese edition's title was nonetheless rebranded as *Zheng Nengliang* (《正能量》), with an accompanying subtitle that reads: “Stay positive and fear not in life (坚持正能量, 人生不畏惧).” Along with the change in title, the contents page of the Chinese edition experienced considerable revisions, departing significantly from the original. The titles of several chapters were amended to accentuate the idea of positive energy. For instance, Chapter One, “How to Be Happy,” was translated in the Chinese edition as “The Energy of Happiness.” Similarly, Chapter Five, originally titled “Persuasion,” was (mis)translated as “Control your thoughts and stimulate your inner positive energy.” Chapter Six, “Creating A New You,” was rendered as “Use Positive Energy to Create a New You.” Not only the titles, but many parts of the text in the book are also “decorated” with the popular term “positive energy”. Suffice it to say, “positive energy” is actually a term creatively added by the translator or publisher’s editor. As Chen & Wang briefly alluded to, by strategically weaving the trendy phrase into every aspect of the book, it not only secured the book’s position as the year’s bestseller but also pushes the discourse a step further in its meanings (Chen & Wang, 2019). At the core of the book lies the notion that make-beliefs can evolve into self-fulfilling prophecies. In other words: happiness arises when one behaves as though they are happy. By finding happiness in places of *zheng nengliang*, it generates these places as being good, as being what should be promoted as goods. The phrase *zheng nengliang* has now become inextricably linked with notions of the “good life” and “happiness”; correlations are now read as

---

<sup>32</sup> According to the 2012 bestseller list on Dangdang.com, a major online bookstore, *Positive Energy* ranked eleventh despite published late in the year. Dangdangwang, 2012.

causalities.<sup>33</sup>

The popularization of *zheng nengliang* during the 2012 London Olympics torch relay provides an example of the complex and multi-faceted process by which cultural trends and public discourse evolve, with the public, the market, and the state each contributing to the phenomenon in distinct yet interconnected ways. The public, with their innate desire for inspiring stories and a shared sense of national pride, found the torchbearers' tales of selflessness and perseverance both compelling and relatable. These stories resonated with the public and created a sense of unity, amplifying the concept of *zheng nengliang* as a cultural value. The market, recognizing the potential to capitalize on this sentiment, strategically intervened by orchestrating a marketing campaign that utilized social media platforms like Weibo. By creating a seemingly spontaneous hashtag movement, the campaign not only promoted the sale of Olympic torch models but also contributed to the widespread adoption of the phrase *zheng nengliang* in Chinese society, demonstrating the power of the market to shape cultural trends, as well as its ability to tap into and exploit existing public sentiment for commercial gain. The state, with its ideological agenda of promoting core socialist values, played a more subtle yet significant role in the popularization of the phrase. By endorsing and celebrating the torchbearers' stories, the state reinforced its message of unity, perseverance, and selflessness, aligning these values with the broader ideological framework of a happy society that fosters good, positive, and content citizens. The popularization of the phrase, then, is not the result of a single, isolated factor. Instead, it is the product of a dynamic interplay between the public, the market, and the state, each influencing and shaping the discourse in their unique ways. If “positivity” in relation to “happiness” in pre-

---

<sup>33</sup> Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press.

vious contexts mainly discusses happy life in a personal level, such as Harvard Happiness class and Yu Dan's Confucius lecture, the popularization of the term *zheng nengliang* based on the emotionally motivated stories of the torchbearers, along with the shared ethos embedded in the *Touching China* narrative, then, further gained meaning in a societal level in the Olympics in constructing the idea of "a happy society" by instilling people faith in humanity's innate goodness and the benevolent nature of society.

## 1.5 Conclusion

In historicizing *zheng nengliang*, or "positive energy," a term that has captivated the Chinese public and been repurposed by various entities, I investigate the term's cultural origins in Western self-help movement, traditional Chinese thought, resemblances to the narrative of sacrifice, and its eventual coinage and rise to prominence during the London Olympics, with a goal of unveiling the intricate web of cultural, social, and political influences that have shaped the term's meaning and role in contemporary Chinese society. Rather than operating as separate, independent wholes with well-defined boundaries, the cultural forces examined above exhibit a much greater degree of fluidity than we may assume—they mutate, dissolve, interpolate, and mingle. The global ascent of the self-help industry and the "psycho-boom" in the early 2000s played a substantial role in the emergence of positive psychology in China. Within the endorsement of popular psychology and self-help literature, connecting Western self help writings to traditional Chinese values plays a part in easing the apprehension associated with the adoption of neoliberal principles of self-improvement. Potentially influenced by the trend, Yu Dan picked up aspects of the language and speech style prevalent in Western self-help industry, repackaging Confucius

into a spiritual guru tailored for contemporary Chinese people. In the London Olympics, the narrative of sacrifice and the trajectory of positive psychology unexpectedly collided in the official formation and popularization of the term “zheng nengliang (正能量).” It is in these discursive interactions and mutual appropriations that Western self help industry and positive psychology, symbolizing scientific rigor and emotional modernity, the arc of traditional culture embodying Chinese cultural legacy’s potential in achieving “inner peace,” and the indigenous trajectory of “good people good deeds,” characterized by distinct Maoist attributes, ultimately coalesced intimately in the construction of a system of positive energy discourse. As an assemblage of social aesthetics constitute of not a single affect but a myriad of feelings, symbols, concepts and narratives, positive energy, then, emerges as a floating signifier that bridges the personal, the societal, and the national on the one hand and guides both the political and the everyday on the other.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EMBODYING POSITIVE ENERGY

#### **2.1 From Making to Becoming**

In 2012, the term “正能量 (positive energy)” experienced a sudden surge in popularity, to the extent that it was rated as the top catchphrase of the year by the leading Chinese linguistics magazine, *Yaowen Juezi* (《咬文嚼字》). According to Chen & Wang, in June 2013, the phrase first became related to propaganda works, when Liu Yunshan, Politburo Standing Committee member and head of the propaganda system, stated that propaganda needed to “disseminate the positive energy of morality” with the “most beautiful people” and “most beautiful phenomena,”

with the latter usually referred to ordinary people who sacrifice themselves for the greater good (Chen & Wang, 2019). As the state embraced the phrase, *zheng nengliang* also started to appear frequently in various forms of official Party-state communication and publication. For instance, optimistic and non-critical journalism that focuses on the positive and hopeful aspects of Chinese society and politics is considered “positive energy.” According to Yang, as of May 2016, “positive energy” – tagged posts garnered some 2.1 billion views and more than two million discussion threads on Sina Weibo (Yang, 2018). Although *Zheng Nengliang* ranked No. 1 among the “top ten catchphrases of the year” in 2012 with the London Olympics as a catalyst, like many catchphrases, it has since decreased significantly in popularity. A quick search on Baidu Index, a data analysis tool provided by Baidu that measures the popularity of keywords used on the platform, reveals that after June 2013, the popularity of the term decreased rapidly by over 50%. In the years after and until now, the usage of the term remained relatively stable, neither becoming too popular nor obsolete.<sup>34</sup> As the term *zheng nengliang* was increasingly deemed old-fashioned or even cliché and corny by the younger generation, other once-popular trends such as positive psychology, national studies, and the *Touching China* narrative of suffering marked with historical traits of the 2010s have also fallen out of favor. Although the lecturer of Harvard Happiness Class has opened an Bilibili channel in November 2021 and received over one million views on his first video, he is nonetheless far less popular than he was ten years ago. Yu Dan and her peers who were once deemed as the “Master of National Studies (国学大师)”, were criticized by the public for being unprofessional and were accused of “only aiming for money.” *Touching China*,

---

<sup>34</sup> 百度指数Baidu Index. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://index.baidu.com/v2/index.html#/?login=1&fromu=https%3A%2F%2Findex.baidu.com%2Fv2%2Fmain%2Findex.html%23%2Ftrend%2F%25E6%25AD%25A3%25E8%2583%25BD%25E9%2587%258F%3Fwords%3D%25E6%25AD%25A3%25E8%2583%25BD%25E9%2587%258F>

the national television show once moved millions of Chinese, who admired and looked up to these ordinary role models, now received dismal viewership. However, even though there has been a decline in the popularity of these positive energy programs, it does not mean what these discourses embody – the quest for happiness on a personal, societal, and national level – has vanished. In the routine practice of consuming, desiring, and producing positive energy, the concept encapsulated in the phrase has been repackaged into new media formats tailored to a younger generation that may perceive the original expression as antiquated. In Wendy Chun’s words, the notion of positive energy and the moral system surround the phrase have matured into a “habit” – an infrastructure, even, – one that is not static but perpetually being modified and updated in everyday crisis. In other words, the affective resonances embodied in these cultural objects has once again – or rather, has always been – circulating among different cultural objects. In a decade later of the phrase’s initial terming, the narrative of Western pop psychology, the narrative of traditional national studies, and the narrative of suffering over the past decade are also updated into newer, trendier cultural formats facilitated and afforded by new media technologies. In this chapter, I will scrutinize three cases – Li Ziqi, Hongxing Erke, and Eileen Gu – that experienced rapid vitality between 2019 and 2022, epitomizing the narratives of Chinese traditional culture, the narrative of suffering, and the narrative of Western psycho-well-being respectively. In doing so, I aim to explore the continuities and discontinuities of the affective cultural-political economy with that of the 2010s, positing that if “positive energy” discourse is emerging in the mid-2000s to the late 2010s, primarily as a noun, then the following decade bear witness to the embodiment of positive energy, with the expression increasingly enacted as an adjective. Delineating the ways in which each media spectacle makes its audiences feel and by what means, I

contend that while the construction and marketing of positivity in the 2010s relies heavily on de-elitizing what would otherwise be considered professional, traditional, elite and emphasizing grassroots, the 2020s have witnessed the transformation of the de-elitization of positivity's cultural resources into more accessible, playful, and "authentic" programs, facilitated by innovative media forms such as live-streaming, video-sharing platforms, and social media. Furthermore, the market exerts a considerably more substantial role in the process of affective mobilization, as state actors maneuvers the digital space as a virtual playground, seeking to be part of the game and seize collaboration opportunities when the time is right.

## **2.2 The Cute-fication of Sacrifice**

From July 20th to July 21st, 2021, a catastrophic rainstorm hit central and northern Henan province and surrounding areas in China. During this difficult time, a Chinese sports brand, Hongxing Erke (Erke), quickly donated 50-million-yuan worth of supplies to aid the disaster area in Henan. Despite receiving limited attention initially, the story later gained significant traction online after it was revealed that Erke had negative net profit of 220 million yuan in 2020 and still managed to donate 50 million yuan to charity. Moved by the act, numerous netizens flocked to Erke's official Weibo account and actively eagerly circulated posts about donation. This successfully raised the profile of the event, making it a hot topic on Weibo and in Chinese media scene. Within just two days until July 23rd, Erke's sales increased by 52 times year-on-year, triggering a consumer frenzy of "wild shopping (野性消费)". This section aims to explore the emotional journey of the Hongxing Erke phenomenon, as it evolved from a heartwarming and heart-wrenching narrative that aligns with the conventional positive energy discourse exem-

plified in *Touching China* and the “good people, good deeds” narratives, to a playful or even “cute” event facilitated by the advent of social media and live-streaming platforms. By examining the role of new media technologies, user-generated content, and the shift in public sentiment, I seek to understand how the affective intensities, including collective emotions like grief, sorrow, and compassion, as well as affective signs like poverty, sacrifice, ordinary people, and consumerism have been circulating in and out of the traditional narrative of sacrifice. In doing so, I trace the ways in which unconventional affective energies and signs like joy, humor, cuteness, and entrepreneurship enter the affective system and re-embody the positive energy discourse in the context of contemporary China.

Going back to the case itself, despite facing financial difficulties, Hongxing Erke still donated a significant sum to fulfill its social responsibilities, earning labels such as “patriotic,” “conscientious entrepreneur (良心企业家),” and “the light of domestic brand (国货之光).” As a result, this action boosted its previously unpopular live broadcast room, with the views of its official flagship store’s Taobao live room soaring from a daily average of roughly 11,000 to over 2 million overnight. In the user-created accounts relayed on Weibo, Hongxing Erke is lauded for being a “low-key” and “conscientious” domestic brand providing good quality merchandise at affordable prices. Lacking marketing funds, the brand nearly vanished from public discourses in recent years and appeared on the verge of bankruptcy. Nonetheless, it is this company, which was “even reluctant to buy a Weibo membership,” that contributed 50-million-yuan worth of materials during the Henan floods – not only did they donate so much, but they also did it without any fanfare. Under one of Erke’s official Weibo posts, a Chinese netizen shared a nostalgic sentiment that resonated with many, resulting in one of the most upvoted comments: “It’s just like the older

generation who have worked hard and saved money all their lives, keeping even the smallest amount in a metal box, but smashing it open immediately and offering everything to the country when it is needed.” Analogizing Hongxing Erke to an elderly, this metaphor further humanizes the brand, causing an outpouring of emotion from netizens who feel heartbroken and exclaiming “it broke my defenses (破防).”<sup>35</sup>

“Heartbroken” is the prevailing sentiment found under Hongxing Erke’s Weibo posts and shared by netizens. On the day the donation event went viral, the trending topic on Hongxing Erke was hashtagged #Comments on Hongxing Erke’s Weibo are heart-wrenching (鸿星尔克的微博评论好心酸). The Chinese term “心酸” (xin suan) can be translated into English as “heartache” or “sorrow.” It is used to describe a feeling of sadness, distress, or emotional pain, often resulting from witnessing or experiencing unfortunate or difficult situations. Not surprisingly, this feeling echoes people’s reactions to torchbearer stories, where people are affectively moved by the self-sacrifice and altruism of ordinary people. Resonated with the *Touching China* narrative and the Maoist “good people good deeds” discourse, the emotional response to Hongxing Erke’s story, however, got further imbued with an extra layer of playfulness.

Despite the initial sentiments of heartening and heartache towards Hongxing Erke’s donation, as inferred earlier, there was a noticeable shift in tone as netizens began to inject humor and playfulness into their comments. In the comment section of Erke’s first microblog about their donation posted on July 21st, I selected ten most voted comments for a close reading of public

---

<sup>35</sup> 破防 (pò fáng) is a Chinese internet slang term derived from the gaming world, where it originally referred to breaking through an opponent’s defense. In a more general context, 破防 is used to describe a situation where someone’s emotional defenses are broken, and they are left feeling vulnerable or deeply touched. In English, 破防 can be defined as “breaking one’s defenses” or “overcoming emotional barriers.”

sentiments. Upon analyzing the comments, several themes emerged: 1) The frustration stemming from the lack of attention Erke received for their donation (8 comments); 2) Demonstrations of support for the brand, as evidenced by purchasing Weibo membership for the official account (2 comments); 3) The admiration expressed for Erke's donation despite their challenging financial situation (8 comments); 4) The sharing of the story of Hongxing Erke's founder, Wu Rongzhao, who experienced a factory flood during the early days of his business, and suggests his experience motivates his desire to help others affected by floods (1 comment). Notably, among the comments, the narrative that Hongxing Erke donated 50 million but did not even have a Weibo VIP membership further spread on Weibo, becoming a meme that widely participated by Weibo users.<sup>36</sup> Many Chinese netizens voluntarily started to buy Weibo membership for Erke. Following this trend, on the second day of the event, the official Weibo account of Erke posted a microblog saying: "After being busy for a while, I found out I have become a Weibo VIP member #Netizens Gift Hongxing Erke With Weibo Membership #Thank You Netizens For Gifting Ten Year Membership" (Erke, 2021).<sup>37</sup> In the comment section of Erke's microblog posted on July 23rd, two days after the initial outbreak, out of the twenty most upvoted comments, nine comments made fun of or mentioned Weibo membership. This is a significant increase compared to the two comments on the joke in the previous Weibo's comment section. Some Weibo users have jokingly commented under Erke's post on how Chinese netizen have bought 119 years of membership for Erke's official Weibo account: "I won't live to 2140, but if you work harder you

---

<sup>36</sup> See @鸿星尔克官方微博. (2021, July 21). 守望相助，风“豫”同“州”，我们在一起！[威武] 鸿星尔克心系灾区，通过郑州慈善总会、壹基金紧急捐赠5000万元物资，驰援河南灾区，河南加油！#河南挺住我们来了# . Sina Weibo. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://weibo.com/2171593110/KpMHuBDdo#comment>

<sup>37</sup> See @鸿星尔克官方微博. (2021, July 22). 忙了半天，发现自己已经是微博会员了~[抱抱] #网友给鸿星尔克冲微博会员##感谢网友赠送十年会员#[泪] . Sina Weibo. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://weibo.com/2171593110/KpVjfoG1m#comment>

probably will. I will watch you grow stronger and achieve more success from heaven.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, Wu Rongzhao, the CEO of the Hongxing Erke, rose to celebrity fame overnight as humorous anecdotes and memes about him get widely circulated on the Internet. Some of the memes include him “riding a shared bike to the live broadcast room at night, but after ten minutes the bike was stolen” and “the CEO advises everyone to consume rationally, netizens tell him it’s none of his business.” Among the most popular stories is one that also unfolded in Hongxing Erke’s live-broadcasting room, where netizens asked Wu to showcase their most expensive sportswear for them to support the brand, yet Wu presented a pair of shoes valued at a mere 300 Yuan. Finding that Wu represents “ordinary people,” is “down-to-earth” and “genuine,” and occasionally demonstrates unfamiliarity with live-streaming technologies, users couldn’t resist exclaiming “that’s too adorable” – oftentimes accompanied by a sobbing emoji.<sup>39</sup>

The state’s expeditious endorsement of the Hongxing Erke phenomenon also came in a timely manner. However, unlike in the past, where traditional print media would report a “good deed” like this extensively employing official language, state official news outlets adopt a language borrowed from Internet popular culture and fandom culture. On July 24th, the official Weibo account of CCTV News announced a live stream of #National Fitness# sales hosted by famous CCTV presenters, with a particular emphasis on featuring clothing from Hongxing Erke. The Weibo post also incorporated the trending expression of “wild consumption” in its title.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> See @快乐追星十级学渣. (2021, July 22). 鸿星尔克的老板吴荣照，有23年的党龄，公司创业初期，车间仓库生产的鞋一夕之间都被水淹了，因为自己曾经淋过雨，所以也想给别人撑伞。2020年财报显示，亏空2.2亿，自己捐了5000万，直播间让消费者量力而行。网友说：我不要理性消费，上最贵的！结果老板拿出了一双300块的鞋，真诚又可爱[泪] . Sina Weibo. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://weibo.com/6871390978/Kq32myKYh#comment>

<sup>40</sup> See @央视新闻. (2021, July 24). #央young之夏# 【全民健身好货来了！网友：理（野）性消费】 . Sina Weibo. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://weibo.com/2656274875/Kqfhr6bQd#comment>

After a few days, on August 15th, the official Weibo account of *People's Daily* released a video Weibo regarding Erke. However, contrary to what we might expect when praising Erke's charitable donation during a national disaster, the content of this video is actually more aligned with consumerism and thus can be seen as entertainment news rather than overtly conveying a political message. This video reports an incident that occurred at an Erke store in Zhejiang, where a woman sought to support domestic products, found a pair of shoes she liked, but deemed them too costly. She then changed into the new shoes and walked out of the store without paying. Titled "Women caught at Erke for changing shoes with slippers, claiming to support domestic products but deeming them too expensive" with an emoji representing being "speechless", the video is also accompanied by a relaxed and cheerful background music one would normally hear in a funny video. Although posted by the official account of *People's Daily*, the Weibo is nonetheless more like trying to make the audience laugh a little or slightly feel "speechless" than a serious propaganda news piece.<sup>41</sup> In another video Weibo posted by China Daily on the 26th, the state-affiliated media outlet shares a story about a customer who was getting haircut while participating in a livestream to buy clothes from Hongxing Erke. The hairdresser joked about giving the customer a haircut with the brand's logo, and the customer happily agreed. Hashtaged "#adorable Chinese people (可爱的中国人)", the Weibo post distributes cuteness to not only patriotic entrepreneurs like Wu Rongzhao and netizens in the live-streaming room but also offline enthusiastic consumers.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> See @人民日报. (2021, August 15). 【#女子在鸿星尔克用拖鞋换新鞋被抓#, 称想支持国货但嫌贵/费解/】. Sina Weibo. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://weibo.com/2803301701/KtGSixLqi#comment>

<sup>42</sup> See @中国日报. (2021, July 25). #可爱的中国人# 【#顾客边剪鸿星尔克发型边抢服装#理发师: 佩服这样的企业, 支持国货】. Sina Weibo. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://weibo.com/1663072851/KqvVksrIR>

Initially driven by feelings like sorrow and heartbreak and subsequently given away to joy and playfulness, the surge in attention towards Erke can be aptly described as an online social event mobilized by the emotional responses of its audience. While the core of the event still resembles the narratives of *Touching China*, the idea of “helping others even in difficulty” has nonetheless been more directly associated with the nation, broadening the bearer of responsibilities to include corporations. Ten years ago, people shed tears for the touching stories of Olympics torchbearers who were as ordinary as them; ten years later, they cannot help but be moved by bankrupt entrepreneurs donating huge sums of money for national disasters. In contrast to the narratives of “good people good deeds” from a decade ago, while the acts of kindness performed by Olympic torchbearer were primarily personal in nature, Erke’s “bankruptcy-style donation” not only exemplified individual good heart but also signifies an enterprise’s commitment to societal and national philanthropy. Facilitated by new media technologies and novel forms of interactions, the *Touching China* narrative in the positive energy discourse system, which was previously associated with heartwarming stories of personal sacrifice, is now associated with events similar to Hongxing Erke phenomenon, placing a greater emphasis on patriotic sentiments, consumerism, and the playful nature of participatory culture. The Chinese happy subject embodied in this narrative is no longer simply miserable yet positive but is constructed into a more nuanced representation that is miserable, yet positive, hence adorable.

### **2.3 Living the life that our souls need**

Li Ziqi, a content creator who has garnered immense popularity for promoting traditional Chinese culture through her food and handicraft videos, mirrors the positive reception of the re-

vival of traditional culture in the past as in the case of Yu Dan. With millions of followers on various social media platforms, including YouTube, Weibo, and Instagram, her work has been viewed and shared by audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds across the globe. Although Li Ziqi's popularity has grown exponentially since she began creating content in 2015, she nonetheless really reached her peak fame and known by the general public between December 9th and December 17th, 2019, according to Baidu Index. This period will also be the main focus of my analysis.

Before December 4th, Li Ziqi was only a prolific video creator with a large following – many vloggers has that. She was mostly recognized as a talented video blogger and an inspiring role model, given her background of experiencing her parents' divorce in childhood and relying on her grandmother for support. In her early years, despite only earning limited income, Li Ziqi still sponsored an orphan who couldn't afford to study for 8 years. In that sense, if Li Ziqi were to embody the discourse of “positive energy,” she would arguably be more closely aligned with the “*Touching China*” narrative.<sup>43</sup> A browse on trending posts about Li Ziqi on Weibo would confer that before December, Li Ziqi was most often associated with affect like “wholesomeness,” “admiration” and concepts like “rural vlogger” or “tasty food.” By tracing how Li Ziqi was transformed from a successful individual to a national treasure, I will illustrate that it is the series of online events occurred in early to mid December, 2019 that ultimately transformed her into a hero representative of traditional Chinese culture, subsequently imbuing her with newfound affective signs associated with poetry, a genuinely happy way of living, and a revival of pride in

---

<sup>43</sup> For example, see 新京报. (2019, December 10). 评论：李子柒是一个生活镜像而非“文化英雄”. 新浪网. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://tech.sina.com.cn/roll/2019-12-11/doc-iihnzhfz5006765.shtml> on commenting it is Li Ziqi's overseas success that granted the phenomenon with “greater interpretive value” and prior to that, domestic netizens regarded her more as an inspirational figure.”

Chinese traditional culture.

On December 6th, one hashtag topic “Is Li Ziqi a kind of cultural export (李子柒是一种文化输出吗)” ranked high on Weibo’s trending hashtag topic lists, with over 800 million views. To gain an overview of the content related to Li Ziqi that generates the most interest among users, I applied the filter function featured on the Weibo webpage. The time period was limited to December 1st to December 20th, and only trending Weibo with large amounts of comments (>1000) were selected for analysis. By arranging the Weibo posts in chronological order, I identified the first viral post regarding the topic #Li Ziqi Cultural Export# being posted on December 4th by a verified Weibo user, @雷斯林Raist, who is a travel blogger, writer and similar to a public intellectual. Got over 4,800 comments and around 19,000 reposts, @雷斯林Raist wrote in the post:

Li Ziqi’s already had 7.34 million followers on YouTube and earns millions of dollars annually. I thought her videos would have English subtitles, but they don’t – the videos are exactly the same as those posted on Weibo. Foreign viewers watch her videos daily, even though they don’t understand them, and comment on how her content is like a fairy tale world or the Garden of Eden, praising the beauty of China. Besides, Li Ziqi’s fans are really some of the sweetest I’ve seen. For example, one commented, “I never skip the ads when watching Li Ziqi’s videos because I want her to earn the money.” Another said, “I think her grandmother could live to be 150 years old.” Someone else commented, “This is like watching National Geographic + Disney + a cooking show.” Damn, this is real cul-

tural export. (@雷斯林Raist, 2019) <sup>44</sup>

In addition to the text, he also included screenshots of the YouTube comments mentioned in the post. With only a few sentences, the brief post conveyed a multi-layered message: First, it underscored the immense popularity of Li Ziqi on YouTube, with a substantial overseas following. Second, the absence of English subtitles implies that her content and her channel is not tailored to an English-speaking audience while also emphasizing the “cultural confidence” embedded. Thirdly, the microblogger emphasized the pleasure foreign viewers derive from watching Li Ziqi’s videos, their admiration for her and her peaceful countryside life, and linked this appreciation to praise for China. Finally, he proclaimed Li Ziqi to be a genuine cultural export, implicitly drawing a comparison to the official propaganda disseminated by the Chinese state. Highlighting Li Ziqi’s positive reception overseas, @雷斯林Raist connects Li Ziqi, a food vlogger on an individual level and a cultural product on a societal level, to a national resource representative of genuine Chinese soft power, elevating her status from a video blogger to a figure of national pride. Except for feelings like pride and admiration that can be easily detected in and transmitted through the post, this post is also written in a casual and conversational tone, with use of humor exemplified in the comment such as “this is like watching National Geographic + Disney + a cooking show” he chose to include, making it more shareable and relatable.

On December 5th, @雷斯林Raist published a follow-up blog article titled *How is Li Ziqi Not Cultural Export?* (李子柒怎么就不是文化输出了?), which coincided with the viral spread of his initial Weibo post, resulting in heated discussion on Chinese social media and the article

---

<sup>44</sup> See @雷斯林Raist. (2019, December 4). 李子柒youtube上都734万粉了，每年赚几百万美元.....妈的这才是文化输出啊。 . Sina Weibo. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://weibo.com/2216334181/IjcJI9K1v#comment>

itself has garnered more than 10 million views. This article further delves into the affective relationship between Li Ziqi and her international audience, emphasizing the “authenticity” and the “healing effect” of her videos. He wrote: “...Every time I watch her videos, I feel a sense of healing...” and cites popular YouTube comments such as “I just feel fully and completely satisfied. Like all is completely right in the world” and “Does anyone else on YouTube find this relaxing?” Moreover, the blogger invokes prominent Chinese poets throughout history, establishing a connection between Li Ziqi’s life and poetry – a literary form embedded profoundly in the nation’s cultural history and collective psyche:

In Tao Yuanming’s writing, this is the “Peach Blossom Spring,” where “the old and the young live together in harmony and happiness.” ...The reclusive-loving Meng Haoran chose this kind of life, the expert in writing about rural life Fan Chengda loved this kind of life, and the poet Haizi, who wrote “facing the sea, with spring blossoms,” yearned for this kind of life. (@雷斯林Raist, 2019)<sup>45</sup>

Establishing a connection between Li Ziqi and affective cultural signs like poetry imbues her work with a layer of cultural, literary, and aesthetic relevance, fundamentally setting her apart from other successful Chinese YouTubers like Huanong Brothers or Wang Gang, who also create food videos rooted in rural life but adhere to a more unpolished filming aesthetic.<sup>46</sup> In discussing

---

<sup>45</sup> Original text in Chinese reads: “在陶渊明笔下，这是‘黄发垂髫，并怡然自乐’的桃花源……热爱隐居的孟浩然选择了这种生活，擅长写农村生活的范成大热爱这种生活，写‘面朝大海，春暖花开’的海子向往这种生活。” Translations are my own. See @雷斯林Raist. (2019, December 5). 李子柒怎么就不是文化输出了? . Sina Weibo. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404446136898289811>.

<sup>46</sup> Huanong Brothers (华农兄弟) and Wang Gang (Chef Wang美食作家王刚) are successful rural Chinese YouTubers who also make food videos. See YouTube. (n.d.). 华农兄弟. YouTube. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/@huanongxiongdi37>, and YouTube. (n.d.). Chef Wang 美食作家王刚. YouTube. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/@chefwang>.

why Li Ziqi stands out, the article comments that:

Unlike other food bloggers, the time scope of her filming is stretched out much longer, which more closely aligns with the essence [of food production]... Many of the agricultural activities shown clearly demonstrate that she truly knows how to do farm work. Her hands may look beautiful, but upon closer examination, they appear quite rough. (@雷斯林Raist, 2019)<sup>47</sup>

Although rural YouTubers like Huanong Brothers or Wang Gang may be perceived as more real in terms of their video production quality, Li Ziqi's content is now labeled as "authentic," "genuine" and "more reflective of life's true nature." Together with the emphasis on how prominent poets in Chinese cultural history have "chosen this kind of life, loved this kind of life, and yearned for this kind of life" respectively, @雷斯林Raist imparts cultural legitimacy upon the lifeworld depicted in Li Ziqi's videos, endorsing it as the epitome of an authentic life, a desirable life, and therefore, a good life.

The affective resonance attained in keywords such as desire, good life, essence of life, peaceful, and healing inevitably reminds us of Yu Dan and her interpretation of *The Analects* as the ultimate guidebook for Chinese people to find their inner peace. Representing a call to return to Chinese traditional culture, while both Li Ziqi and Yu Dan's media spectacles tap into a collective yearning for a simpler and more authentic way of life, in the process of affective circulation, a diverse range of affective registers got attached, detached, and re-attached to these cultural objects. Even though Yu Dan repackaged *The Analects* into consumable, depoliticized popular culture, it is still strongly associated with Confucius and Chinese ancient philosophy and classics.

---

<sup>47</sup> See @雷斯林Raist.

Meanwhile, although Li Ziqi's videos never explicitly propagate Chinese traditional culture, the Chinese audiences nonetheless find her life "serene," "fulfilling," and full of life wisdom. If a decade ago, Yu Dan pointed out the potential of Confucianism and the ancient wisdom embedded in Chinese traditional culture in guiding Chinese people towards "inner peace" and "living the kind of life their souls desire," then the lifeworld depicted in Li Ziqi's videos represents the ultimate materialization of that kind of fulfilling life, with Li Ziqi herself emerging as the contemporary role model who embodies and promotes the pursuit of true happiness in harmony with traditional values.

In the article, @雷斯林Raist keeps in mind to provide additional screenshots of the "sweet" YouTube comments from abroad, who express their love for Li Ziqi and her videos in various ways, ranging from Nietzsche quotes to playful memes such as "Gordon Ramsay: I am the best chef ever! Liziqi: hold my tomatoes." By highlighting Li Ziqi's international appeal, it becomes apparent that the subjectivities she fosters extend beyond the pursuit of inner peace but contribute to the development of a modern Chinese subjectivity that takes pride in its cultural heritage and actively engages with the global community.

As noted by Liang, by "turning both food production and preparation into a media spectacle, authentic labor becomes a media commodity capable of generating profits in terms of both social media subscriptions and advertisements by platform sponsors" (Liang, 2022). Upon launching her e-store on T-Mall, China's leading e-commerce platform, in 2018, Li's sales of food and handicrafts surpassed 10 million RMB yuan within a mere three-day period. Capitalizing on her success in promoting traditional Chinese culture, Li Ziqi has also entered into collaborations that showcase her alignment with the values and interests of the Chinese state. In May

2020, *People's Daily's* official Weibo account announced a limited-edition collaboration with Li Ziqi, featuring co-branded snail rice noodles (柳州螺蛳粉) – a popular dish showcased in one of Li's most-viewed videos and recognized as a Liuzhou intangible cultural heritage cuisine. The packaging, designed to resemble vintage newspapers with blue and purple ink on a piece of beige paper, evokes nostalgic feelings, forging an emotional link between the product and consumers while enhancing its commercial allure. At the end of post, it also invites users to follow @People's Daily and repost the Weibo for a chance to win one of 500 bags of co-branded rice noodles. Mutually beneficial, *People's Daily* leverages Li Ziqi's popularity to propagate state-sanctioned cultural values, while Li Ziqi gains legitimacy and exposure through her association with a state-affiliated institution. Distinct from the subjectivity fostered by Yu Dan's Confucius, then, Li Ziqi cultivates a more nuanced Chinese happy subject who is not only self-cultivating and genuinely loves life, but also takes pride in Chinese culture with global awareness and stands as a modern consumer with refined taste. The untroubled coexistence of Li Ziqi as both a simple rural woman and a transnational conglomerate can be read as the antithesis of the friction between Western neoliberal self-cultivation and the emphasis on Chinese traditional cultural values exemplified in the Harvard Happiness Class. Should the self-help industry nurture individuals based on the neoliberal logic of self improvement and competitiveness while upholding connection with Chinese culture, then Li Ziqi's impact encourages a subject that romanticizes, monetizes, and commodifies Chinese traditional culture within the global arena.

## **2.4 Eileen Gu: Coming Home**

Acclaimed by Chinese netizens as the “Heaven-sent Purple Star (天降紫微星)”<sup>48</sup> and “Empowered Female Lead in a Feel-Good Novel 爽文大女主,”<sup>49</sup> an eighteen-year-old girl captured the hearts of many during the winter of 2022. Born and raised in California with a mixed heritage of American and Chinese descent, Eileen Gu unexpectedly chose to compete on behalf of China at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, securing two golds and one silver, which contributed to achieving China’s best Winter Olympics performance to date. In the following section, by examining one popular fan-made-style video produced by a party-affiliated media account on Bilibili, I investigate how Eileen Gu – the very embodiment of a happy subject enacted by the Western principles of positive psychology and happy education – comes to be heralded as a national hero, subsequently fostering a new, unique Chinese subjectivity that is increasingly related to patriotic ideals.

If one searches “谷爱凌” on Bilibili, the prominent video-sharing platform in China, one of the most viewed videos is a short compilation of Eileen Gu’s interviews, featuring three con-

---

<sup>48</sup> The term “Heaven-sent Purple Star (天降紫微星)” in popular culture refers to a superstar who has achieved exceptional success in their work, often used in fandoms and the sports world. In sports, it denotes an athlete with outstanding achievements who has transformed the current state of their field. Ancient astrologers regarded the “Purple Star” as the “Emperor’s Star 帝星,” believing that those with the “Purple Star 紫微星” as the main star in their “life palace 命宫” possessed the so-called “Emperor’s appearance 帝王之相.” Nowadays, “Heaven-sent Purple Star” is used as fandom terminology to describe celebrities who were once relatively unknown but suddenly gained immense popularity overnight through a particular work. The term “Heaven-sent Purple Star” is synonymous with “Heaven-sent Superstar,” implying that the artist has performed their job remarkably well, produced excellent work, and attained a level of success that is difficult for other artists to reach.

<sup>49</sup> In Chinese popular culture, especially in the world of Internet literature, “爽文大女主” can be defined as the “empowered female lead in a feel-good novel.” “爽文” generally refers to a type of commercial novel that provides readers with a “cathartic” and pleasurable reading experience. These novels are supported by “satisfying elements 爽点” that trigger the audience’s pleasure. “大女主,” then, refers to a female protagonist with self-awareness, whose achievements and glory come from her own hard work and talent. Different from the typical female lead who relies on the honor bestowed upon her by a male character in Chinese Internet literature, a “大女主” should be full of personality, have her own opinions, and not be a mere accessory to a male character.

versations with journalists from United States, UK, and China.<sup>50</sup> The first two interviews from foreign press and the one at the end with Chinese CCTV are presented with a sharp contrast. In the former, Gu displays confidence and composure. For instance, in the first clip, when a female journalist asked Eileen Gu if China now feels like home, she assuredly replied,

I've grown up spending about 25% to 30% of every year in China, growing up so you know I'm fluent in Mandarin, my family's Chinese...so yeah absolutely...being able to hear the Beijing accent again and be able to eat Chinese food and be surrounded by culture, yeah it definitely feels like coming home for sure. (Gu, 2022)

As she made the statement, the video adeptly incorporated sassy background music of F.O.O.L's "Criminals," a track known for its energetic and dynamic electronic sound, which serves to emphasize her fierce demeanor. The clip concludes with the text "Is that all? Next question (就这? 下一个问题。)," suggesting that she is unfazed by the challenging questions and is ready for more. This arouses sentiments of admiration, respect, and empowerment within viewers, as they empathize with her strong and unyielding attitude. In the next clip, Gu responds to an interview question from *The Guardian* following her gold medal win, which has also become the most popular clip of all her interviews. The male journalist inquires:

You spoke very eloquently about tryna keep everyone from the US and China happy. I was wondering how hard it is for you to balance those two things, particularly you get criticism on social media, particularly in America. (Journalist from *The Guardian*, 2022)

To which Gu famously responds:

---

<sup>50</sup> See @广东共青团. (2022, February 9). 谷爱凌: 好的, 下一个问题... 哔哩哔哩\_bilibili. \_哔哩哔哩\_bilibili. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1pZ4y1R7qG/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd\\_source=e9561fade988a700f09ff3a502faf55a](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1pZ4y1R7qG/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=e9561fade988a700f09ff3a502faf55a).

Here's the thing. I'm not trying to keep everyone happy. I'm an 18-year-old girl out here living my best life...I know I have a good heart, and I know that my reasons for making the decisions I do are based on a greater common interest and something that I feel like is for a greater good. ...So yeah, if people don't believe me or don't like me, then that's their loss. They are never gonna win an Olympics. (Gu, 2022)

This clip features a background music of Guan Dazhou's most representative Chinese-style music tracks "Xiang Wang Xing 象王行," a piece tailor-made as the opening music for the national television show "National Treasures (国家宝藏)" on CCTV when Guan served as the music director for it.<sup>51</sup> Featuring traditional Chinese instruments like Chinese drums, *zheng*, *pipa*, *flute* and *erhu*, the music piece is a grand celebration of Chinese traditional culture (with a reference to Buddhism, specifically). Often described as grandiose and majestic, the music piece conjures up historical imaginings, imperial royal fantasies, and *wuxia* imagery. For instance, listener feedback includes sentiments like "It is a piece that reveals the profound cultural heritage of China's 5,000-year history," "Listening to this song makes me feel like I'm about to ascend to the throne," and "While listening, my mind is filled with scenes of dancing with swords in a bamboo forest."<sup>52</sup> Using *Xiang Wang Xing* (象王行) here as a musical backdrop for Eileen Gu's interview clip, then, not only elicits a sense of national pride and highlights her ties to Chinese cultural ancestry, but also generates a metaphorical representation of rivalry and triumph over Western media. In connection with this, a number of viewers dropped *danmaku* like "《舌战群儒》" while

---

<sup>51</sup> To listen to the full track, refer to Guan, D. (2022, January 15). 象王行 (特别版). YouTube. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6zlOzqAnLc>.

<sup>52</sup> Comments are collected from the comment section of Xiang Wang Xing's Douban entry. See 关大洲. 象王行 (特别版). 豆瓣. Retrieved April 29, 2023, from <https://music.douban.com/subject/35270985/>

watching Eileen Gu confidently answers challenging questions from the journalists in the video. Translated as “Debating with a Group of Scholars,” the Chinese phrase has a literal meaning of “embarking on a tongue war with a group of scholars,” subtly hinting at an adversarial dynamic between Eileen Gu and the Western journalists.<sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, in the following interview clip with CCTV, the Chinese journalist posed a more casual and personal question: “I know you just took a nap this afternoon, how long have you slept?” Gu responded in fluent Mandarin, with a down-to-earth Beijing accent, “I ate some dumplings...with pork and chives filling, I ate a piece of cake...then I went take a nap, not long, for about 45 minutes.” In stark contrast to the intense and grandiose background music employed in previous clips involving foreign media, the video clip from CCTV is accompanied by a playful, light-hearted tune reminiscent of the soundtrack one might hear in adorable animal videos or funny clips.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the previous interviews both occurred in relatively professional settings (in the first one, Gu just finished her competition and was still wearing her skiing attire; in the second, Gu was in a post-performance press conference), whereas the CCTV interview seems to occur through a casual video call. In the close-up shot featuring Eileen Gu and the female interviewer, their direct gazes into the camera create the impression of speaking directly to the audience. One would also notice a “Bing Dwen Dwen” – the cute panda-inspired mascot of the 2022 Beijing Olympics – sitting in the background of the female interviewer. Unlike the

---

<sup>53</sup> “舌战群儒” is an idiom originated from the 43rd chapter of the episodic novel “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” (三国演义), one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. The title of the chapter reads: “Zhuge Liang debated with a group of scholars, and Lu Zijing forcefully pushed through the opposition.” The story describes how Zhuge Liang, who is widely regarded as one of the most accomplished strategists in Chinese history and known for his exceptional intelligence, foresight, and resourcefulness, faced criticism from the strategists of the Eastern Wu while trying to form an alliance with Sun Quan to resist Cao Cao. In the end, Zhuge Liang refuted each of them one by one, leaving them speechless.

<sup>54</sup> See @广东共青团.

approachable, unmasked, and warm portrayal of the CCTV interviewer, we never see the face of the first female interviewer or the male interviewer from *The Guardian*, who has been masked throughout the interview. This juxtaposition fosters a sense of remoteness and obscurity for the audience, ultimately rendering the Western journalists as an enigmatic and potentially threatening “other”.

The video was a hit on Bilibili, accumulating more than 2,000 *danmaku* and over 1,700 comments, making it one of the most popular videos related to Eileen Gu other than her Olympic clips. The viewers’ reactions to the interview compilation unveil a diverse array of affective responses. Scrutinizing the top comments and most prevalent *danmaku*, it is evident that people generally admire her remarkable language proficiency, self-confidence, and tenacity particularly when confronted with challenging questions posed by Western journalists. The discussion on Eileen Gu’s English constitutes a huge part of the comments. Many viewers exclaim how good her English is in *danmaku* comments, jokingly expressing their jealousy of her. Some engage in debates about whether Eileen Gu’s thought processes are in English or Chinese. They also find Eileen displaying different personalities when conversing in English and Mandarin. The top-liked comment under the video asserts: “When speaking English, she’s so cool and confident; when speaking Chinese, she suddenly becomes adorably innocent and sweet, haha (36,327 likes).” A huge number of commentators commend her strong aura, often ascribing it to the education and upbringing she received in the West: “She is so resolute! Despite her young age, she has truly a strong presence (17,435 likes).” Keywords like “confident,” “aura (气场),” “inner strength (内心强大),” “mental resilience (心理素质),” “queen (女王),” “determined (坚定)” and “emotional intelligence (情商)” frequently show up in the *danmaku* comments. Additionally,

many comments delve into the apparent difference between foreign journalists' aggressive and sometimes politically sensitive questions and Chinese journalist's focus on Eileen Gu's personal well-being: "She knows that outsiders will ask all sorts of irrelevant questions, while family members will only care about how well you eat and sleep (6,233 likes)." <sup>55</sup> The intense nationalistic sentiments conveyed in the comments are expectedly in line with the desired outcome of the uploader – the official account of Guangdong Communist Youth League. That said, this video is state-sanctioned with a soft propaganda mission, yet no one has thus far pointed out, let alone critiqued it – indeed, the playful, “燃 (lit)” and dramatic presentation of the video imitates one of those fan-made productions, complementing seamlessly with the ACG-focused video-sharing platform, Bilibili.<sup>56</sup>

Such strong emphasis on English skills and inner strength rightfully reminds us of the popularity of Harvard Happiness Class in China and the kind of neoliberal personhood it encourages. In the press, Eileen Gu's success is often attributed to the “happy education” she received. Akin to the principles and values promoted in positive psychology, “happy education” aims to promote individuals' well-being, personal growth, and intrinsic motivation for learning by focusing on their interests, passions, and strengths. In that sense, Eileen Gu embodies everything Western positive psychology extolls and manifests a contemporary version of the Harvard Girl Liu Yiting: she demonstrates resilience, excels under pressure, and embraces the possibility of failure, yet always rebounds. She prioritizes sleep, nutrition, and holistic self-care, both emotion-

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> With a literal meaning of “burn” or “lit,” the term “燃” is commonly employed in popular culture when discussing movies, TV shows, music, or performances that evoke strong emotions, inspire, or make one feel pumped up. In this sense, “燃” captures the essence of the energy and enthusiasm that the subject in question generates.

ally and physically. Meanwhile, she cultivates interests and passion in multiple fields: fashion, writing, sports, and physics – just to name a few. She personifies the ideal graduate of Harvard Happiness Class: a modern, self-loving, energetic, and confident individual with exceptional inner strength, flawless English, unwavering self-discipline, and a genuine love for learning. But taking the subtle friction between Western neoliberal self-enhancement and patriotism, as embodied in the self-help industry, one degree further, at the peril of facing criticism for appearing “overly Western,” the kind of happy subject that Eileen Gu represents needs to be visibly patriotic: she is expected to beat the West at their own game by defending China in perfect English; she is expected to stand on the peak of Western modernity and come back “home.” Drawing on Iskra’s analysis on Li Yang Crazy English, the intertwining of entrepreneurialism and patriotism in Eileen Gu’s immense popularity likewise “resonates with historical narratives that imagined ‘Western learning’[...] as *yong* 用 (utility), subservient to Chinese *ti* 体(essence)” (Iskra, 2023). Applauded for her “fighting fire with fire” rebuttals, Gu evolves from an “18-year-old girl living the best of her life” into a national hero, proving that despite being immersed in Western education and upbringing, China still retains a “superior” position and serves as the ultimate destination to which one should return. Through the strategic selection of background music, interview clips, shooting techniques, and other visual and auditory manipulations exemplified in the case demonstrated above, Eileen Gu’s public image has been meticulously sculpted to epitomize the perfect “good returnee,” simultaneously showcasing and cautioning those drawn to elite education and the Western world for study abroad experiences years ago about what they should do and say so that they would not be seen as unpatriotic traitors by their homeland.

## CONCLUSION

Taken collectively, the sections that comprise this thesis demonstrate the complex construction of the the positive energy discourse as a mode of governance in contemporary China by tracing the term's cultural genealogy and its contemporary reformulations. The new moral orientation that directs Chinese people's everyday subject-making simultaneously draws on Western neoliberal frameworks as well as traditional Chinese cultural sources. Neoliberalism, however, as cautioned against by China studies scholars, has often been theorized and used as an overarching trope that "risk a reification that occludes more than it reveals" (Kipnis, 2007). Avoiding using neoliberalism as an umbrella term to describe and define these media events and the *positive energy* discourse in general, I use neoliberalism in its particularities. While neoliberalism is useful in understanding contemporary Chinese cultural politics, it is crucial to examine how specific instances, policies, and practices frequently associated with neoliberalism have been adapted and modified in unique ways within China. The examples included in this thesis, for instance, each illustrate the tension between the market and the state in a manner that contradicts the neoliberal assertion that marketization is often accompanied by a decline in state power. Such neoliberal subject-formation is not unproblematic, either. The persistent tension between neoliberal self-development and patriotism is evident in the approaches adopted by the public, the market, and the state in their attempts to strike a balance between contemporary, competitive subject formation and patriotism amid the emergence of transnational entrepreneurialism.

Another valuable term to consider when analyzing the affective circulation of positive energy discourse is the notion of habit, as Wendy Chun highlights in her influential work, *Updating to remain the same* (Chun, 2008). Chun observes new media, noting, "our media matter most

when they seem not to matter at all, that is, when they have moved from the new to the habitual” (Chun, 2008). I suspect the same may be applicable to the discourse of *positive energy*. Without the need of using the phrase, the archives of *positive energy* language have inhabited our bodies and become our second skin, entrenched and alive. Citing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze and Clare Carlisle, Chun contends that “this creative accrual of habit is central to personality, to subjectivity (or the lack thereof), and to ideology” (Chun, 2008). Indeed, collective habit, or *habitus*, “is ideology in action” (Chun, 2008). The different traditions of self-cultivation, including narratives of Western self-help tradition, Confucianist tradition and the Maoist tradition of sacrifice have become part of the archive of feel-good feelings residing within us, subtly yet profoundly shaping specific bodies, subjectivities and ideologies. The habit of desiring *positive energy* is the very embodiment of the positive energy discourse; and the *positive energy* discourse, in turn, reinforces the habit of desiring. Amidst ordinary, mundane everyday crisis, habits mutate and update accordingly. Yet such updates are hardly noticeable or disruptive; rather, in iterative updates, habits enable and strengthen stability.

While it is crucial to recognize the stickiness of the concept, I also wish to delineate how the language of *positive energy* can be potentially productive, disruptive even, as it evolves into an affective, bodily, and unconscious habit that is likely to endure. Drawing on Bourdieu again, Chun reminds us that *habitus* reveal “the limit of rationality and regulations, for *habitus* cannot be explained through ‘rules’” (Chun, 2008). If it is the irrational, invisible and ineffable nature of habit that makes it unconsciously sticky, in the case of the *positive energy* discourse, then, it is precisely in the very process of naming, appropriating, and promoting the term that the habit and the desire of *positive energy* eventually becomes visible, hyper-visible even, thereby equipping

us with a set of linguistic/conceptual tools to locate, identify, and ultimately articulate these otherwise under-the-surface affects. In the unrelenting search for places where *zheng nengliang* resides, where desires for feel-good emotions and a content life reside, tracing the history of the term involves a historicist and materialist study of the relationship between language and social change. Such a reflection also draws upon Raymond Williams's important work *Keywords*.<sup>57</sup> In Williams's terms, keywords function "as a way of recording, investigating and presenting problems of meaning in the area in which the meanings of *culture* and *society* have formed" (Williams, 1976). Scholars like Marie Moran have advocated for a "keywords-as-methods" approach.<sup>58</sup> In discussing digital media, Marc Steinberg likewise underscores the significance of platform as a keyword in the book *The Platform Economy (2019)*.<sup>59</sup> To build upon what these scholars have established, keyword as an approach not only elucidates the relation between words and worlds but it also makes the invisible visible. It is both a process of connecting the dots and one of unveiling, seeing, and articulating, thus offering a possibility for alternatives. Ultimately, keywords operate in clusters, and it is my hope that the term *positive energy* will serve as a linguistic site, working in conjunction with other terms to sketch a comprehensive map of contemporary Chinese cultural politics.

---

<sup>57</sup> Williams, R (1983 [1976]) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2nd edn). Fontana Paperbacks.

<sup>58</sup> Moran, M. (2021). Keywords as method. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(4), 1021–1029.

<sup>59</sup> Steinberg, M. (2019). *The Platform Economy: How Japan transformed the consumer internet*. University of Minnesota Press.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective economies. *Social Text*, 22(2), 117–139.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Bell, D. (2010). *China's new confucianism: Politics and everyday life in a changing society*. Princeton University Press.
- Berlant, L. G. (2012). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Bray, D., & Jeffreys, E. (2016). New Mentalities of Government in China: An Introduction. In D. Bray & E. Jeffreys (Eds.), *New mentalities of government in China* (1st ed., pp. 1–15). introduction, Routledge.
- Bray, D., Jeffreys, E., & Jeffreys, E. (2016). Governing through Lei Feng: A Mao-era role model in reform-era China. In *New mentalities of government in China*. essay, Routledge.
- Chen, X., Valdovinos Kaye, D. B., & Zeng, J. (2020). #positiveenergydouyin: Constructing “playful patriotism” in a Chinese short-video application. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 14(1), 97–117.
- Chen, Z., & Wang, C. Y. (2019). The discipline of happiness: The Foucauldian use of the “Positive Energy” Discourse in China’s ideological works. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 48(2), 201–225.
- Chun, W. (2017). *Updating to remain the same: Habitual new media*. The MIT Press.

- Craig, D., Lin, J., & Cunningham, S. (2022). *Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Du, S. (2014). Social Media and the transformation of 'Chinese nationalism': 'igniting positive energy' in China since the 2012 London olympics (respond to this article at <http://www.therai.org.uk/at/debate>). *Anthropology Today*, 30(1), 5–8.
- Fang, K., & Repnikova, M. (2017). Demystifying “little pink”: The creation and evolution of a gendered label for nationalistic activists in China. *New Media & Society*, 20(6), 2162–2185.
- Han, R. (2015). Defending the authoritarian regime online: China's “Voluntary Fifty-Cent Army.” *The China Quarterly*, 224, 1006–1025.
- Hendriks, E. C. (2016). China's self-help industry: American(ized) life advice in China. *Handbook of Cultural and Creative Industries in China*, 311–328.
- Hizi, G. (2021). Zheng Nengliang and pedagogies of affect in contemporary China. *Social Analysis*, 65(1), 23–43.
- Hird, D. (2018). Simile yourself happy: zheng nengliang and the discursive construction of happy subjects. In D. Hird & G. Wielander (Eds.), *Chinese Discourses on Happiness* (pp. 106–128). essay, Hong Kong University Press.
- Hird, D., Wielander, G., & Wielander, G. (2018). Chinese Happiness, a Shared Discursive Terrain. In *Chinese discourses on happiness*. Hong Kong University Press.

- Iskra, A. (2023). Crazy english: Nation strengthening and the changing politics of neoliberal selfhood in Reform-era China. *Positions: Asia Critique*, 31(1), 143–169.
- Jeffreys, E., & Xuezhong, S. (2016). Governing through Lei Feng: A Mao-era role model in reform-era China. In D. Bray & E. Jeffreys (Eds.), *New mentalities of government in China* (1st ed., pp. 30–55). Routledge.
- Kanbur, R., & Zhang, X. (2005). Fifty years of regional inequality in China: A journey through central planning, reform, and openness. *Review of Development Economics*, 9(1), 87–106.
- Kellner, D. (2003). *Media Culture Cultural Studies, identity and politics between the modern and the post-modern*. Taylor and Francis.
- Kipnis, A. (2007). Neoliberalism reified: Suzhi discourse and tropes of neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13(2), 383–400. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00432.x>
- Liang, L. (2022). Consuming the pastoral desire: Li Ziqi, food vlogging and the structure of feeling in the era of microcelebrity. *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.3998/gi.1020>
- Lukács, G. (2020). *Invisibility by design: Women and labor in Japan's digital economy*. Duke University Press.
- National Bureau of Statistics of China (2013). Press conference on national economy of 2012. [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgz/tjdt/201301/t20130118\\_17719.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgz/tjdt/201301/t20130118_17719.html).

- Newcomb, H. (2009). Toward Synthetic Media Industry Research. In J. Holt & A. Perren (Eds.), *Media Industries. History, Theory, and Method* (pp. 264–270).
- Sicular, T., Ximing, Y., Gustafsson, B., & Li, S. (2008). The urban-rural income gap and income inequality in China. *Understanding Inequality and Poverty in China*, 30–71.
- Tan, K. C., & Cheng, S. (2020). “sang” subculture in post-reform China. *Global Media and China*, 5(1), 86–99.
- Wong, J., Lee, C., Long, V. K., Wu, D., & Jones, G. M. (2021). “let’s go, Baby Forklift!”: Fandom governance and the political power of cuteness in China. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2), 205630512110249.
- Yang, G. (2014). Political contestation in Chinese digital spaces: Deepening the Critical Inquiry. *China Information*, 28(2), 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203x14539910>
- Yang, J. (2013). “fake happiness”: Counseling, potentiality, and psycho-politics in China. *Ethos*, 41(3), 292–312.
- Yang, J. (2015). *Unknotting the heart: Unemployment and therapeutic governance in China*. Cornell University Press.
- Yang, P., & Tang, L. (2018). “Positive energy”: Hegemonic intervention and online media discourse in China's Xi Jinping Era. *China: An International Journal*, 16(1), 1–22.

Yang, X. (2023). Incommensurability between “filial daughter” and “all-capable princess”: Discursive legitimation in Chinese media coverage of Quan Hongchan and Gu Eileen.

*Communication & Sport*, 216747952211493.

Yang, Y. (2021). When positive energy meets satirical feminist backfire: Hashtag activism during the covid-19 outbreak in China. *Global Media and China*, 7(1), 99–119.

Zhang, Y. (2016). Crafting Confucian remedies for happiness in contemporary China: Unraveling the Yu Dan phenomenon. In J. Yang (Ed.), *The political economy of affect and emotion in East Asia* (pp. 31–44). essay, Routledge.

Zou, S. (2021). Restyling propaganda: Popularized party press and the making of soft propaganda in China. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(1), 201–217.