



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

Introduction: The politics of negative affects in post-Reform China

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If there is such a thing as a dominant public sphere in post-reform China, its emotional tonality has often been described as overwhelmingly positive, as evidenced by the recent focus on “happiness” campaigns or state-promoted “positive energy.” This special section takes the prevalence of positivity as an invitation to investigate its opposites: what, in an authoritarian context, is the political work of negative affects such as bitterness, fear, shame, indifference, deflation, or trouble? Locating the articles within a broader literature on affect and emotion in anthropology and beyond, this introduction provides an overall framing for the collection. Based on the articles, it depicts the potential of negativity as both disruptive and generative, as affects work through their evaluative and propositional force which induces transformation while often evading repression.

Keywords: affect and emotion, post-Mao China, “positive energy,” negativity, dysphoria

“You must convey positive energy (正能量!)” Incribed in red ink, this injunction was that of a primary school teacher in Jiangsu Province, China, as she reacted to the writing of one of her pupils. Asked to comment on a passage of the classic novel *Journey to the West*, the pupil had depicted mistrust as a necessary orientation in a morally corrupted society of “dark” souls. The teacher’s response made its way into international media reports (*Le Monde* 2020) when the student later took her own life.

The story condenses significant affective dynamics that anthropologists have shown to be at work in the People’s Republic over the last decades. Attending to predicaments shared among various groups of people, scholars have described the impact of fast-paced transformations since the end of the Mao era in affective terms: the pressures felt by young people as they face the education system and the attendant worries of parents over child-rearing (Kuan 2015); the anxiety of middle-class urbanites over issues such as housing (Ho 2017) or marriage (Pettier 2016); new forms of psychological distress (Yang 2017; Zhang 2020); the “heartache” of officials (Yang 2018); the anger and depression among laid-off workers (Yang 2015, 2016) or rural migrants employed in facto-

ries (Pun and Lu 2010); the distrust that plagues stranger interactions (Lee 2014; Pettier 2016), to name but a few. In the Chinese context, where the Communist Party has a long tradition of presenting itself as the provider of the people’s happiness (Larson 2019), such negative affects are no light matter. They bring into question the success of the political regime while serving as a drive to “repeat petitions” (Hou 2020) or social mobilization (Ying 2011). Anger, in its extreme manifestations, has sometimes led to retaliatory violence (Yang 2016). In a rather different vein, the recent celebration of indolence through the idiom of “lying flat” (躺平), as popularized through social media, indexes a will to disrupt productivity-oriented routines. The party-state has become increasingly wary of these potential causes of social unrest, deploying various strategies of regulation (Yang 2015, 2016; see also Sorace 2019: 150–51). Attempts at “emotional reshaping” (Hou 2020) have been paired with the pervasive promotion of positivity and happiness (Chen and Wang 2019: 213; Wielander and Hird 2018; Yang 2013). Epitomizing shifting modes of governmentality in China (Yang 2015), public culture in the last two decades have been filled with discourses from positive psychology and self-help genres, circulating through television, social media, or



among the shelves of “success studies” (成功学) books in mainstream bookstores.

Borrowed from positive psychology, the phrase “positive energy,” as used by the teacher in the story above, refers to “the healthy, optimistic, and positive upward forces and feelings” (Baidu Baike, cited in Hird 2018: 111) celebrated in popular discourses and later integrated into official language. In China’s urban landscape (Hird 2018), or on social media, deployments of this rhetoric have become pervasive. As education has become a key arena for the transmission of positivity (Pun and Qiu 2020), the teacher’s comment comes as no surprise. That particular speech act, however, remains equivocal in its intention: is “positive energy” used as a restrictive imperative, a condemnation of negative expression, an encouragement to self-censorship? Or is it invoked as a solution to the social ills described in the schoolgirl’s piece of writing? In contemporary China, after all, the tale of a moral crisis has been commonly told in state media, and popular expression of social mistrust does not exactly count as subversive. Official discourses explicitly portray “positive energy” as a solution to counter “the ills of marketization” and ideological change (Triggs 2019: 97–98).¹

Either way, there is more to those red-ink characters than restriction of the sayable or ideological promotion. Beyond control or persuasion, the work of “positive energy” has been read in terms of production of new subjects, in part through “manipulating emotions” (Chen and Wang 2019). What I want to foreground here is the kind of social aesthetics—“norms and assumptions about what human life and collectivity should look and feel like” (Zoanni 2019: 449)—that is being (re)produced as the expression of mistrust and disaffection encounters aggressive prescription. Reiterating norms of public affects, the teacher’s injunction reads like an attempt to restore the façade of ordinary social life, where the negative emerges as a felt disturbance that requires an intervention of some kind.

Years spent conducting ethnographic fieldwork in China have offered many occasions to sense this social aesthetics as it is (re)produced through everyday life. In the realm of mundane talk and banter, between the anthropologist and her interlocutors, or between friends or kin, positive energy’s opposite, “negative energy” (负能量), is a term that one’s interlocutor may use, however playfully, to mark certain speech acts as useless, if not unde-

1. Chun-Yi Sum’s contribution to this special section provides a more detailed discussion of this “moral crisis” tale.

sirable, and to redirect conversations. These echoes of positivity should by no means be seen as the sole result of state-led promotion. If the expression of negative affects may be viewed as “culturally inappropriate and personally unavailing, along with being politically unwise” (Kleinman et al. 2011: 7), ordinary iterations of positivity may be meaningful to our interlocutors in their own lifeworld (Richaud and Amin 2020). Other scholars (Yang 2014: 3; Ying 2011: 25) have rightly warned against a totalizing view of the everyday in China as immune to public eruptions of the negative, due to a traditional inclination for social harmony. And yet, there is evidence of ordinary reappropriations of “positive energy,” through the inspirational quotes exchanged on social media, or the ways in which playfulness, cheerfulness, fun, hope, optimism, and joy prevail in grassroots and popular practices, such as LGBT+ activism (Deklerck 2019) or migrant workers’ public performances (Florence 2019), whose initial *raison d’être* has to do with troubled or painful experiences.²

What initially inspired this collective inquiry into the politics of negative affects, thus, is the impression that if there is such a thing as a dominant public sphere in China, its emotional tonality seemed overwhelmingly positive. Once instrumentalized by the Maoist state through the ritualized form of “speaking bitterness” (Anagnost 1997), narratives of suffering had remained significant in the propaganda of the reform period but tend to recede from public view in the context of recent “happiness” campaigns (Chen and Wang 2019), despite occasional re-activation (Xie, this issue). The idea behind this collaborative project thus originated in what I took to be an apparent dissociation between a cheerful public culture and the everyday situations of “restricted agency” (Ngai 2005: 2) of those who nonetheless joined in performances of fun, happiness, and optimism.³ This

2. A few counterexamples are worth citing here, such as the NGO-staged tears and pain of female domestic workers (Wallis 2018) or the ways in which public discussions of gender-related matters rely on the expression of suffering as a depoliticizing frame, thus remaining outside of state purview (Bellot 2021). Note, however, how in both cases the gender dimension seems to legitimate public emotional performance.

3. See my concluding chapter (Richaud 2019) in Vanessa Frangville and Gwennaël Gaffric’s edited volume, *China’s youth cultures and collective spaces*. I should thank the volume’s editors for the occasion to comment on the contributions, with which the present reflection began.



seemed to leave little room for public expressions of negative affects (Richaud 2019; Sum 2017),⁴ even though an emerging “dispirited” (丧) subculture among the youths reveals an ironic stance toward “positive energy” discourses (Tan and Cheng 2020).

If the very categorization of “positive” and “negative affects” may be rightly criticized as a kind of reductive binarism (Cvetkovich 2012: 6), it nonetheless serves as a starting point to this special section, one that has roots in the meaningfulness and affective resonance of these categories in China. Could we track further the moments in which misattunement (Ahmed 2014) becomes overtly performed? Could we attend to moments when the emotional labor of positivity is disrupted, if only to give space and form to its other? Did negative affects ever bring subjects in copresence, and if so, what forms of sociality unfold between “affect aliens” (Ahmed 2014)—those bodies who fail to attune to dominant moods of optimism, hope, or happiness? And does this have any political implications, in a context where the state claims “affective sovereignty” over its subjects (Sorace 2019)? Is it that “not being in the mood for happiness becomes a political action,” as Sara Ahmed (2014: 28) writes in relation to the British context? These were some of the questions I had in mind while embarking on this project, inspired by a growing body of work across the humanities and social sciences which has sought to reassert the political work of negative affects (e.g., Cvetkovich 2012; Ngai 2005; Nouvet 2014). Simultaneously, however, we ask to what extent these modes of conceptualization, which have emerged from cultural and literary studies of Euro-American contexts, can be transposed to different fieldsites. One aim of this special section is to demonstrate the insights of ethnographic theory in debates over whether and how “feeling bad” (Cvetkovich 2012) is connected with (political) agency.

The studies gathered here draw their significance from the Chinese party-state’s long history of producing

affective regimes (Perry 2002). Yet, while seemingly exacerbated in the case of China’s “emotional authoritarianism” (Pun and Qiu 2020), the normalization of positivity obviously resonates with dynamics unfolding in various geographical contexts. Beyond China, the visceral impact of social, political, and economic processes often coincides with the construction of happiness and optimism as sociocultural imperatives in ways that have often been associated with neoliberal discourses and ideologies (Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011; Cabanas and Illouz 2019; Pettit 2019). Displays of unhappiness or *resentiment* become delegitimized, especially when involving subjects whose negative affects ensue from situations of subalternity (Ahmed 2010, 2014; Fassin 2013). Among many examples, the “happy” public gatherings of queer subjects in Western streetscapes, albeit irreducible to their festive dimension, have been analyzed in this light—as mirroring the encouragement to “party and play but not protest” (Oswin, cited in Johnston and Waitt 2021: 1432; see also Lambe 2021). If, in China, state-led promotion of happiness rather explicitly links positive attitudes with political responsibility (Yang 2013), recent developments in other parts of the world seem to indicate a similar alignment of positivity with exemplary citizenship (Cabanas and Illouz 2019). In the context of the yellow vests protests, the words of President Emmanuel Macron blaming the French for being “too negative” reiterates a “politics of accusation” that works through assigning “ugly emotions” to certain subjects or groups to maintain the status quo (Hughes et al. 2019).

This special section therefore echoes Ann Cvetkovich’s (2012: 3) ambition “to tarry with the negative as part of daily practice, cultural production, and political activism.” To do so, however, is not to regard negative affect as superior (Cvetkovich 2012: 6; see also Ahmed 2010: 215). In China and beyond, people often have their own “horizons of purpose”⁵ as they cultivate “positive” orientations to existence, despite hardships (Richaud and Amin 2020; see also McCarthy 2021 and Hizi 2021 on “positive energy” in China). Well-being is not reducible to neoliberal governmentality (Walker and Kavedžija 2015: 4; Ortnor 2016: 60). To recognize the potential of the negative does not mean that we should no longer acknowledge that positive affects might retain “an openness to development whose ‘direction is neither inevitable nor foreseeable’” (McCarthy 2021: 112). Neither do we seek

4. Note a coincidental parallel between my approach and Michael Vine’s (2020: 281) work on performances of cynicism in city council meetings in the Florida. Perhaps attesting to the comparative potential of our project, Vine writes: “If there is such a thing as an orthodox public sphere within the municipal United States, its normative ‘feeling-tone’ (Leavitt 1996) is that of enthusiastic but level-headed participation. In turn, there is little space given over by agents of the state for the public performance of ‘ugly feelings’ (Ngai 2005) . . . feelings that are perceived to be ‘uniquely corrosive’ of social and political bonds.”

5. I am here borrowing the subtitle of an earlier special issue of this journal on happiness (HAU 2015).



to overlook the wounds of dysphoric experiences for those living through them, however heuristic for cultural critiques and ethnographers. Treading a fine line between romanticization and analytic dismissal, the contributors remain attuned to the affective burden of those they engage with.

But the negative, in this collection, does not always take dramatic forms or expansive bodily expression, even in times and places where injunctions to positivity combine with political repression. Our “bestiary of affects”⁶ include indifference, trouble, shame, bitterness, confusion, or aphasia, as well as rather diffuse forms of fear and *ressentiment*. From participant observation and auto-ethnography to small talk and analyses of public culture, the contributors deploy various ethnographic methods to capture the productivity of the negative beyond common dualisms of acceptance and resistance.

Turning back: Working with affect after the anthropology of emotion

Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009: 8) once cautioned anthropologists against how new theoretical “turns” in the social sciences often bring risks of what she metaphorically referred to as “ruination”—that is, a tendency to “negat[e] other conceptual approaches and apparatuses.” The turn to affect, which has been taking place across the social sciences, serves as the main example in Navaro-Yashin’s discussion. For it now seems common to say that if the 1980s saw a discursive turn in the anthropology of emotions (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990: 10), the last two decades have seen the introduction of “affect” in the discipline as a rejection of discourse and meaning.⁷ The turn to affect has often been associated with the work of Deleuzian-inspired cultural theorists such as Brian Massumi (1995) or Nigel Thrift (2008), with their emphasis on the corporeal as autonomous from cultural constructions and semiotic mediations: “a terrain that is presubjective without being presocial” (Mazzarella 2009: 291). From this perspective, emotion can be understood, by contrast, as “qualified intensity”: “a subjec-

tive content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” (Massumi 1995: 88).

Echoes of this trend in anthropology can be found in titles such as Kathleen Stewart’s (2007) *Ordinary affects*. Through a style of writing that strives to escape its own fixity, the ethnographer’s task, here, is not to map out emotional discourses. Subtle descriptions of everyday moments and impressions as they unfold, instead, seek to achieve what John Leavitt once saw as the capacity of ethnographic writing “to set off evocations and resonances to produce a total effect that goes beyond the semantic” (Leavitt 1996: 530; see also Stewart 2017).⁸ As such, as “affect” became increasingly invoked during the last two decades alongside terms such as emotion, feeling, or sentiment (e.g., Gray 2013; Malmström 2019; Nouvet 2014; Stewart 2007, 2017), these conceptual shifts have been perceived as an attack, albeit often implicit, on earlier conceptions of anthropological research on emotions as the study of “discourses on emotion and emotional discourses as social practices” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990: 1).

Let it be clear that the very framing of this special section—as focusing on the politics of negative *affects*—is not to be read as a rallying cry against earlier modes of theorization. Be it what William Reddy (1997) referred to as the “strong constructionism” of Catherine Lutz and others, or more recent approaches to affect, each theoretical shift should be understood as legitimate response to dominant situated knowledge. As Catherine Lutz rightly reminded us in her comment on William Reddy’s (1997: 345) *Current Anthropology* piece “Against constructionism,” the early emphases on the “creation” of emotions through cultural constructions reflected the need to attend to the sociality of emotions, thus going beyond what were hegemonic “psycho-physical frameworks” (Lutz 2017: 181) that located emotions in the individual body (see Leavitt 1996: 533n11; see also Despret 1999; Leys 2017 on the constitution of these universalist frameworks). In like manner, in her discussion of Ruth Leys’s (2011, 2017) critique of the affective turn, Carolyn Pedwell (2020) argues that the rehabilitation of the visceral and “non-representational” dimensions

6. I borrow Sianne Ngai’s (2005: 7) playful characterization of her own intellectual enterprise.

7. For critical reviews, see Lutz (2017), Mazzarella (2009), Martin (2013) or Rutherford (2016). See Lutz (2017) for a more specific discussion of its relations to earlier anthropological theorizations of emotions.

8. Andrew Beatty (2019) aptly describes Stewart’s book as “an effort to capture the inchoate” (2019: 210) in his otherwise largely skeptical discussion of this ethnographic and analytic style.



of experience came at a time when poststructuralism had placed discourse and meanings at the center of social science research (see also Rutherford 2016: 287–88 for a kindred argument).⁹ In line with early attempts to move beyond either/or views that have characterized much of the history of anthropological writing on emotions (Leavitt 1996; Reddy 1997), this special section attends to both “meaning and feeling,” recognizing the need for ethnography to be transparadigmatic (Navaro-Yashin 2009).

Our use of the term “affects,” then, can be traced to several sources—all of which reflect the multiple and sometimes contested genealogies of the recent turn. Indeed, its recent resonance in anthropology over the last few years more broadly reflects the “different varieties of affect theory” (Barnett 2020: 116; see also Lutz 2017), not all of which derive from Massumi-inspired lines of thought (see, for example, Berlant 2011: 14–15).¹⁰ Some of us, as early-career scholars trained during the last two decades, have been drawn to recent works associated with the “affective turn” within the discipline and beyond—from Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary affects* to Lauren Berlant’s (2011) *Cruel optimism*. Encounters with these texts have led us to think of affect(s)¹¹ as “the register of historical experience” (Cvetkovich 2012: 11). Giving

new life to Raymond William’s writings on “structures of feeling,” what these works provide is a mode of attention to experiences of struggles for the “good life” in contexts of generalizing precarity (Berlant 2011; Lutz 2017; Navaro 2017; Nouvet 2014; Stewart 2007) or political repression (Malmström 2019). We were drawn to Stewart’s (2007: 2) and others’ emphasis on scenes of affective circulation that condense the various intensities of everyday injuries without foreclosing future directions. Attentive to action and atmospheres as they unfold, this body of work importantly reminds us that our interpretative frameworks often fail to render human life in all its messiness (Lutz 2017: 188). In the opening to her book *Ordinary affects*, Stewart (2007: 1) writes that concepts such as “neoliberalism,” “advanced capitalism,” or “globalization,” commonly used to render the experiential singularity of our present time, “do not in themselves begin to describe the situation we find ourselves in.” The affective turn explicitly reaffirms the *emergent* nature of sociopolitical processes as one key premise of field-driven theorization (Rutherford 2016: 286).

These propositions remain relevant to China scholarship, where the details and incoherence of subjective felt experiences can sometimes be concealed by “neoliberal post-socialism,” “authoritarianism,” and other categories. Joseph Cho-kiu Li’s article in this special section illustrates how we can benefit from these insights, attending as he does to “political fearing” as an ordinary affect in today’s Hong Kong. Having first approached the topic from a distance-based intellectual stance (Li 2019), Li chose, as a citizen of Hong Kong, to take a step away from the practice of historical scholarship he had been most familiar with. What his contribution offers instead is a moment-to-moment, albeit historically informed, account of what the recent political events felt like in his own life, entangled as it was with that of members of this “community of fear.” We get a sense of both intense and more fleeting, less dramatic feelings amidst the rhythms and patterns of the ongoing everyday. However, unlike Stewart, Li’s practice of (affective) reflexivity *involves others*: we get to hear how some of the people he shares his life with feel. Like other contributors, Li’s approach differs from what has sometimes been criticized as affect theorists’ self-awarded privileged position which tends to reduce reflexivity to “a capacity appropriated for themselves by scientific experts or those select analysts attuned to the play of affective resonances in the world” (Barnett 2020: 124; see also Martin 2013).

9. As Lutz (2017: 183) sums up, the “worry that this work treated the force of emotions as if it were lodged in impassioned words more than in animated bodies.” Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990: 12) did anticipate the critique. Building on the Bourdieusian concept of *hexis*, they nonetheless seemed to subscribe to a view of emotions as socialized bodily processes displayed through learned grammars, whereas some quarters of the affective scholarship conceive of “bodies as processes (rather than fixed or unchanging objects or entities)” (Blackman and Venn 2010: 9) which retain unpredictability.
10. For condensed descriptions of the different ways in which the concept of affect has been taken up in anthropology, see Lutz (2017: 181–82) or Rutherford (2016: 286–87).
11. While “affect” is generally used in its singular form in everyday language, shifts between singular and plural forms can be found throughout the literature (e.g., Massumi 1995: 96)—and the contributions here are no exception. My use of the plural form in the title of this special section reflects our method to explore the work of negative affectivity by tracking differentiated, often named feelings.



On the whole, we remain alert to recent words of caution against a separation between recent writing on affect and the early anthropological literature on emotion. If the rehabilitation of the visceral is now commonly attributed to theorists associated with the affective turn, we should also note that the “strong constructionist” stance that characterized much work in the early days of the anthropology of emotions was not, however, unanimously embraced.¹² William Reddy (1997), for example, has long criticized constructionism in the ethnography of emotions for ignoring the bodily matter of emotions, as if they were entirely “*created in*, rather than shaped by, speech in the sense that it is postulated as an entity in language where its meaning to social actors is also elaborated” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990: 12). In like manner, if Brian Massumi went so far as to theorize the “autonomy of affect,” it is worth reminding that his position is not unanimously recognized within affect-centered scholarship. Feminist thinkers like Sara Ahmed (2004) and Sianne Ngai (2005: 27) have regarded the distinction between emotion and affect as only one of degree (see also Lutz 2017: 183), suggesting that the two terms might be used interchangeably. Recent work in the anthropology of China and East Asia has followed in their footsteps (Pettier 2016; Yang 2014, 2015; Ying 2011), while adding insights from local conceptions of affect/emotion which blur the distinctions between cognition and feeling.

Inspired by Ahmed, Ngai, and Yang, this middle-ground way is echoed by most of the contributors to this issue, who agree on the necessity to move beyond overstated dichotomies between the semiotic and discursive on the one hand, and the visceral on the other. For some contributors, it is words and narratives that draw their attention to the variegated affective states under scrutiny. Exemplary here is Barclay Bram’s interest in the work of “psychological trouble” as an appealing category to young urbanites dealing with various forms of distress while avoiding the sense of stigmatization associated with mental illness. As discourses around emotions proliferate in contemporary China, “psychological trouble” can

be seen as an “emotive” in Reddy’s (1997) sense—an utterance that alters the very experience it refers to. But how cultural constructions impress upon sensuous experience does not make up the whole picture. Circulated via social media-based counseling services, inner troubles bring strangers together. Bram tracks the forms of sociality arising out of these encounters where emotions are not only shared but also produced. If “psychological trouble” is a “capture” in Massumi’s (1995: 96) terms—the “closure” of affect through semiotic characterization—the copresence of bodies constitutes new affective spaces, “inducing bodies to respond to each other and orient toward new potential for action and expression” (Anderson, cited in Hizi 2021: 26). The relationships between affect and sociolinguistic processes may include what Massumi (1995) describes as “blockage,” but semiotic capture does not suggest an end point.

Whether they choose to retain a distinction between affect and emotion (see Hizi) or use the terms interchangeably, the authors in this collection show that the (dis)continuous relationships between visceral processes and cultural qualifications are often at stake. That one might exceed the other should not remain a theoretical claim; it is mostly a matter of ethnographic concern (Kaufmann 2020: 220; see also Hizi, this issue). If there still can be a point of encounter between the different bodies of work described above, this collection suggests that it should make the further exploration of these relations one of its aims. For our interlocutors in the field might find themselves concerned with the ways in which their affective experiences are rendered into words—be it, for example, when operations of qualification are experienced as a deprivation of first-person authority (Kaufmann 2020: 220). Ma Zhiying’s (this issue) description of interactions between a psychiatrist and caregivers of family members living with mental illness provides an interesting example in this respect. Unfolding in distinct interactional settings, the work of qualification is thus a dynamic, sometimes contested, and in itself affective process, to echo existing writings on the affectiveness of semiosis (Ahmed 2004; Hutta 2015; Newell 2018).

Defining negative affects

The use of the term “negative affects” in this special section can be traced to both existing scholarship and qualification processes unfolding in empirical realities, in China and beyond. In the social sciences and humanities,

12. Interestingly, John Leavitt (1996: 526) had suggested the value of the philosophy of Spinoza—a key reference for proponents of the affective turn (see Massumi 1995)—for offering a middle ground between cultural meanings-centered and biological models (ibid.: 517), toward a view of emotion as involving both meaning and feeling.



the phrase “negative affects” has been associated with feelings such as distress, anxiety, depression, exhaustion, shame, cynicism, disappointment, irritation, and envy, which an expanding body of work has deemed worthy of exploration in their own right (e.g., Hughes et al. 2019; Love 2007; Probyn 2004; Vine 2020; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2019). This special section echoes this trend, moving beyond a largely anger- and pain-centered literature in China scholarship (Pun 2005; Pun and Lu 2010; Tong 2015; Yang 2016; Zheng 2012). While the contributions explore fear, shame, bitterness, or trauma, they also call attention to a variety of “weak” (Ngai 2005) affective registers, such as aphasia, indifference, trouble, perplexity and confusion, or cynicism.

While I return to the reasons behind this interest in negative affects at greater length below, let us note for the moment that systematic definitional attempts have nonetheless remained scarce. In various empirical studies, the term tends to be used either as a synonym for dysphoric experiential qualities (Chow 2019) or to signify the moral judgment commonly assigned to specific affects—their “ugliness,” or anti-social character (Hughes et al. 2019; Vine 2020). Most recently, geographers Thomas Dekeyser and Thomas Jellis proposed a definition of negativity as “that which disunifies or undermines” (2021: 319). Again, this conception foregrounds dysphoria and its assumed social consequences—a mode of being at odds with what the authors refer to as an “affirmationalist ethos,” “the inclination to embrace—ontologically, politically, and/or ethically—the productive forces of inciting, sustaining, and cultivating existence” (Dekeyser and Jellis 2021: 318).

Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly feelings* constitutes, to date, the most valuable attempt to unpack the “multiple levels of negativity” (2005: 12) of the feelings she sets out to analyze. Besides dysphoria, the “experientially negative” (2005: 11), Ngai evokes their “socially stigmatizing meanings and values,” which she terms the “‘semantically’ negative.” Finally, the “‘syntactically’ negative” refers to the “trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction, phobic strivings ‘away from’ rather than phobic strivings ‘toward’” (Ngai 2005: 11). Though analytically distinct, these dimensions are by no means discrete in the subject’s experience. As Ngai (2005: 10) notes, “the morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status of these feelings tends to produce an unpleasurable feeling *about* the feeling.” Greater dysphoria, then, might result from one’s awareness of feeling a certain way. In this issue, Chun-Yi Sum’s article offers one illustration of such amplified dysphoria

in her ethnography of self-organized student gatherings in the aftermath of one particular event—the killing of Wang Yue—which exposed the “indifference” (冷漠) of passers-by in front of a dying child. Publicly recognizing indifference as a shared, albeit morally degraded, affective mode, the students experienced further dismay through ethical concern.

While Ngai’s definitional efforts provide us with a sensitizing framework, they also shed light on the uneasiness with which some of the examples in this issue fit these propositions. The case of “bitterness” (苦) examined by He Xiao is one. The sensations described by the migrant workers alongside whom He worked undeniably convey dysphoria, as brought about by the tastelessness of meager food and labor-induced fatigue. Yet, expressing these affective experiences through the idiom of “bitterness” erodes their negativity. In China, “bitterness” is associated with a long history of politicizing narratives of suffering. Experiences of “bitterness” as induced by one’s position in the pre-Revolution class system was highly valued in the Mao era (Anagnost 1997). Although contested among the youths, state-promoted versions of socialist happiness foregrounded sacrifice as one of its key component (Larson 2019). While narratives of suffering tend to recede from public view (Chen and Wang 2019), they nonetheless remained a significant part of the regime’s propaganda in the Reform period (see also Xie’s contribution to this issue). As such, to qualify the dysphoric sensations caused by the experience of subalternity—here, as migrant workers—as “bitterness” prevents further associations with (politically) negative affects and endows them with positive moral valence. Xie Kailing’s article on the party-led reanimation of the trauma inherited from the Nanjing massacres prompts similar comments.

In this special section, we also conceive of negative affects as modes of engagement characterized by detachment. Examples include the “aphasia” of bureaucrats (Yang, this issue), as well as the lack of concern for the suffering of strangers as examined by Sum’s (this issue) discussion of Wang Yue’s death. Other contributions highlight a mere inability to generate attachment or sustain commitment, one that may signal negativity in moral terms, as when youths engaged in self-development programs experience moments of “confusion” (迷茫) and “deflation” (Hizi, this issue). Negativity as a deficit of drive toward anything is also exemplified in the “learned indifference” of young Beijingers in newly built and yet fast-transforming areas of the capital city (Nolan, this issue). Describing an absence of attachment to dwelling

places, Nolan argues that this “learned indifference” might be better conceived in neutral rather than negative terms.

Attention to these modes of being inevitably drives us away from a conception of affect centered on intensity (Massumi 1995), and more toward diffuse, flatter tonalities and textures of everyday routines (Berlant 2015; see also Highmore 2017); the “feeling states” that do not “find their true expression in expansive bodily performance” (Berlant 2015: 194). In China, this lack of vivacity matters in its contrast with normative ideals of the over-involved, emphatic subject able to embrace (self-)entrepreneurial projects as part of a national “dream.” As Hizi (this issue) shows, in a context where forward-looking orientations should guide individuals through the life course, low affect becomes endowed with “negative valence,” both ascribed by the self and others. By portraying the ambivalence of educated youths, Hizi’s depiction complicates previous scholarship which tends to depict coherent “yearning” (Rofel 2007, 2016) and “striving” (Yan 2013) subjects in pursuit of success (see also Anagnost 2013). Following Dekeyser’s and Jellis’s (2021: 318) recent critique of an “affirmationist ethos” in the social sciences, our aim is to reanimate negativity as more than what needs “to be overcome, set aside, or even forgotten” (Nouvet 2014: 89). Reworked through qualifying operations, modes of communication, and sociality, negativity remains open to unforeseeable developments, which we seek to explore.

The work of the negative in post-reform China

Attuned to affective disturbances within a largely positive-looking public culture, this collection enriches existing imaginaries of the negative in post-reform China beyond virtual spaces and overt resistance through expression of agonistic political emotions.¹³ Affects in the context of state-induced politics are explored in some of the contributions, especially in relation to experiences of repression (Li, Yang), corruption (He), and disregard for precarious, yet dutiful citizens (Ma). In these articles, the contributors’ interlocutors do engage viscerally with state politics, albeit often in nonoppositional ways. Other articles, by contrast, depict the affective vicissitudes of subjects living lives from which “politics” (政治) appears distant, “big things” that cannot be changed, as Bram’s informants call it. These are, for the most part, ethnog-

raphies of millennials struggling with norms of self-making (Bram, Hampel, Hizi) and who at times convey their disenchantment toward modern urban life (Nolan, Sum). Expression of negative affects unfold in gathering spaces—public speaking clubs, therapeutic sessions—whose very formation cannot be dissociated from state projects of governing subjectivity, but which are irreducible to the latter from the perspective of participants (Hizi 2021). This is a constitutive ambivalence of ordinary life in China, where the party-state is known to be omnipresent while leaving some spaces free of interference, as long as popular practices are not perceived as threats.¹⁴

The decoupling of negative affects from opposition to state politics brings us into dialogue with a productivity-centered approach to negative affects developed outside of China scholarship, one which highlights their political potential beyond conceptual repertoires of resistance. Over the last two decades, scholars have sought to rethink the connections between everyday aesthetic experience and politics, increasingly regarding negative affects not only as mediating sociopolitical forces, but as a potential ground for embodied agency. Although ambivalent “ugly feelings” can function as an index of structurally induced predicaments (Ngai 2005), they may give rise to a sense of the (im)possible and imagination of the otherwise (Nouvet 2014). These might materialize through the making-public of affects, in spaces of sociality where negativity can be inhabited and expressed in one’s own terms, enabling viable forms of living rather than outright resistance (Cvetkovich 2012). To conceive of the politics of negative affects in such terms seems especially valuable in an authoritarian context where straightforward articulation of political claims often remains unthinkable. It allows us to shed light on subtle, albeit limited, transformational maneuvers, in a context where the party-state regulates and restricts popular political practice through linguistic and emotional engineering—of which the articles by Xie and Yang offer vivid examples. If this special section locates the political potential of negativity in its capacity to interrupt (however momentarily) state-shaped affective regimes, the articles also allow us to move beyond this disruptive conception of the political, to foreground more generative dimensions, through the diagnostic and propositional power of negative affects.

13. For a study of online expression of politically induced negative emotions in China, see Tong (2015).

14. A perception that is sometimes difficult to anticipate, however, as Hampel’s (this issue) example of banned self-help books reminds us.



Affective evaluation: From reflexivity to social critique?

Negative affects, Sianne Ngai argues, disclose situations of “restricted” or “obstructed agency” (2005: 2–3). Feeling, here, implies interpretive processes, even when it is “far less intentional and object directed” (Ngai 2005: 20) than political passions such as anger or *ressentiment*. More “diagnostic” than “strategic” (Ngai 2005: 22), it sheds light on how “the environment can affect people,” to borrow a comment by Hizi’s close informant Wenya. If examples recur in this issue, Nolan’s contribution specifically echoes Ngai’s interest in feelings that are “diagnostically concerned with states of *inaction*” (2005: 22, emphasis original). Attending to the unsustainability of place attachment in contexts of urban redevelopment, Nolan shows how this constant “thinning out” of one’s dwelling environment comes to be registered as normalized indifference among young and relatively privileged city dwellers. Their withdrawal into private and virtual spaces to “forget about ‘real-life society,’” as one of Nolan’s interlocutors describes, is no mere symptom of individualism. Rather, such detached modes of dwelling enable one to inhabit transience. Contrasting with official promotion of positive communal bonds, they nonetheless perpetuate the situation of passivity in which the youths find themselves.

Affective evaluation may, however, trigger imagination and enactment of the otherwise. In He’s ethnography of rural migrants enduring “bitterness” in Shanghai, the story of factory boss Yin echoes Nouvet’s (2014) theorization of exhaustion as a corporeal ground for imagining better forms of existence. A former worker himself, Yin’s narrative romanticizes shifts in his life trajectory as having roots in a kind of “embodied knowing” (Blackman and Venn 2010: 8) arising out of fatigue. Here, efforts to interrupt hardship in pursuit of a different future are deployed on an individual scale, but these self-oriented “micro-agencies” (Nouvet 2014: 93) may imply commitment to others, as when He’s interlocutor Zhi Guo evokes how, as an entrepreneur, he should share profits with his workers.

If the previous example suggests that dysphoria-induced transformation can occur without explicit social critique, this issue nonetheless illustrates how the latter can arise from moments of feeling together and public articulation of negativity. Sharing their suffering, marginalized caregivers use socialist genres of “speaking bitterness” against dominant narratives that locate the sources of unhappiness within the individual (Ma). In like manner, students enrolled in civic associations

discard individual-based explanations of a perceived moral crisis as they make sense of indifference (Sum). Indifference acquires diagnostic power when this shared affective state is exposed through a critical event—the death of “Little Yueyue.” Unlike many commentators, the students refuse the “politics of accusation” (Hughes et al. 2019) that consists in pointing at the immorality of others—the passers-by who failed to provide help—while reasserting one’s virtuousness. But as Sum’s interlocutors admit their own indifference publicly, critical self-awareness does not individualize the problem. Feeling together rather leads to recognizing a collective situation of restricted agency, one that has roots in broader sociopolitical dynamics—“I am made indifferent,” one student comments sarcastically. Affective evaluation, here, draws on various resources, from Christianity to Confucian understandings of the human heart as compassionate by nature. Through reassertions of reciprocity as an ideal for engagement among strangers, the students dismiss the state’s role as a moral guide and deem socialist-inspired models of self-sacrifice artificial. Calling for alternative affective alignments, the students nurture spaces of ethical engagement outside of the state’s “intrusion into the civic.” Sum’s study shows how negativity-based sociality drives diagnoses of inaction toward attempts at reclaiming agency.

Unsurprisingly, the spaces through which affective expression unfolds can inflect their evaluative work. Three contributors focus on self-help culture, which in previous scholarship has been viewed simply as sites through which emotional regimes centering on positivity take shape. Working alongside educated young people engaged in self-development programs, Hizi highlights how deflation and perplexity result from exposure to a competitive job market whose fierceness is hardly concealed by injunctions to positivity. But in public speaking clubs, where such affects are seldom acknowledged, signs of confusion and lack of purpose encounter moral judgment and invalidation, in ways that often lead to more efforts to improve one’s position in a largely disappointing environment. Even the biggest cynic in the public speaking club shows that if dysphoria might be “conducive to producing ironic distance” (Ngai 2005: 10), it targets overperformed positivity, not the “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) of self-development.

In public speaking clubs, however, negative affects are not only dismissed; they can also become resources for self-transformation in accordance to dominant social norms. As Hampel shows, participants recount

experiences of shame in moments of failure to be recognized as a modern, cosmopolitan subject. Developing one's reflexivity, a quality that some see lacking in China, enables disregarded "outsiders" (外地人) to claim entitlement to urban citizenship and upward mobility. This affective evaluation acknowledges the validity of social hierarchies. But Hampel also points to the ambivalence of shame. In public discussions, multiple perspectives are expressed; norms can be questioned. And, as Hampel describes, one book that framed lack of reflexivity as a shameful characteristic of Chinese culture was banned. The book, Hampel assumes, might have been regarded as too great an attack on national pride, especially in a context where, I would add, "loving the nation" (爱国) and "loving the party" (爱党) are often conflated.

The public circulation of affects may be critical to their very condemnation (Hizi) or redirection (Hampel), yet, Bram's contribution shows that self-help cultures also offer spaces where distressed young educated urbanites can reclaim first-person authority. Group meetings become "liminal" spaces of recognition and "free-flowing" affective expression, much in contrast to grammars of interactions with peers and kin. "Trouble" and misattunement to social imperatives can be expressed without risking invalidation. Therapeutic governmentality, albeit oriented toward positivity, thus entails the creation of spaces where negative affects can be legitimately released as well (see also Yang 2015; Iskra 2021). While reiterating narratives that obfuscate the role of structural forces, the shared nature of feelings—about the workplace, or gender norms—is exposed, and new affective evaluations arise. What would happen, then, if deflation, cynicism, or trouble were to become objects of countervalorizing cultural repertoires? This remains to be seen. Powerholders as well as market-based promoters of positive psychology perhaps too simply assume the malleability of affects, overlooking the diagnostic power of dysphoric alignments between bodies.

Dysphoric modes of address

While Bram reminds us of the difficulty of sharing negative affects with one's intimates, other contributors explore the ways in which dysphoria can function as a mode of address when ethical and political grammars restrict enunciation of sacrifice and pain within the family (He) or of demands and critiques vis-à-vis government officials (Ma, Yang). Often, in these cases, it is the (silent) language of the affected body, rather than words, that calls for attention, recognition, and response, as

when demands for welfare support are made through sitting for hours in front of the local government (Ma), or when bureaucrats stage suicide attempts (Yang).

Recalling the opening story in this introduction, one might expect such manifestations of negativity to be curtailed through aggressive requests to perform "positive energy." The articles, however, tell a different story, showing how dysphoric address manages to linger, receive attention, and yield effects. If dramatic, violent manifestations of one's predicaments are regarded by Ma's interlocutors as efficacious, addressing the state through affects may also unfold through less intense, "underperformed" modes. This is the case in Yang's examination of bureaucrats withdrawing into silence in the aftermath of a 2014 party directive that bans "inappropriate" discussions of the central government's policies. In this context of renewed linguistic engineering, the politics of voice analyzed by Yang rests on the ambiguous propositional force of silent suffering, one that circumvents political norms of the (un)sayable without foreclosing public interpretation. As silence calls for attention, flat affects call for cultural qualifications. In Yang's account, the silence of bureaucrats is biomedicalized, leaving the damaging impact of authoritarian politics unnamed.

In the context of Chinese "emotional authoritarianism," the generative potential of negative affects remains conditioned by the state. Although positive affectivity tends to be conflated with "love" for the party, the regime does not go as far as to frame all failure to enact "positive energy" as expressions of political animosity. Room for expression that retains a dissonant propositional force without being oppositional remains. It is within this space of indeterminacy that public performances of dysphoria might become generative.

For example, Ma's interlocutors attempt to trigger compassion toward themselves and those suffering mental illness, getting state agents to award its "citizens-children" material support and/or symbolic recognition. Claims to "paternalistic citizenship" open up a space for mutual recognition, involving demonstrations of the everyday labor of care as much as expectations toward a caring state which can be traced back to a Confucian imagination and socialist ethics.

Although those who came of age during the Mao era do not entirely reject neoliberal imperatives of self-responsibilization (He, Ma), the collection reveals the persistence of a generational gap in emotional investment and expectations toward the state. The students enrolled




in civic associations (Sum) are critical of state-promoted sacrificial models of moral action where acting is dissociated from *feeling*. Unlike former socialist workers re-asserting their dependency on the state in Ma's article, the students seek to carve out ethical and civic spaces on their own terms, outside of state interference. By contrast, the modes of address depicted by Yang and Ma re-actualize the figure of "humanistic" government as performed through state propaganda. Xie's article reminds us that state-led re-activation of narratives of suffering also serves this purpose. The role of such narratives in maintaining legitimacy is said to have declined: forty years after Maoism, more than past trauma, it is the success of an ongoing "Chinese Dream" on which political legitimacy relies. But the example of the Nanjing massacre examined by Xie brings nuance to this view, as the party-state performs itself as a "caring" figure.

This special section, we hope, will provide a space through which the resonance of our interlocutors' irreverent disaffection (see Li, this issue) and vocal silences can linger.

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