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Introduction

NATIONAL NARRATIVES, MINOR CHARACTERS

The Magnitude of the Quotidian

The transformation of China is an epic story of an illustrious civilization reborn through a revolutionary party into a prosperous and populous nation. This book, however, offers no grand narrative about contemporary China. Rather, it is an account of minor, inconsequential characters seeking to thrive in a tumultuous society where opportunities seem abundant but failure is commonplace. The acclaimed writer Yu Hua, one of the most significant writers in China since Lu Xun, is a keen observer of daily struggles in contemporary Chinese society. In *China in Ten Words*, he distills the complexities of Chinese society into the following ten themes: people, leader, reading, writing, Lu Xun, revolution, disparity, grassroots, copycat, and bamboozle. Under bamboozle (*huyou* in Chinese), Yu Hua recounts how he feigned stomach aches whenever he was about to receive some punishment from his father. This finally led to his appendix being removed by his father, a surgeon, who believed him to be suffering from appendicitis. According to Yu Hua, contemporary social relations in China are characterized by *huyou*, widely acknowledged as the condition of the times. Deception for personal gain is pervasive, and *huyou* is part of the vernacular, popularized and satirized by young and old, in both daily interactions and official media. Yu Hua notes, “The rapid rise in popularity of the word ‘bamboozle,’ like that of ‘copycat,’ demonstrates to me a breakdown of social morality and a confusion in the value system in China today; it is an aftereffect of our uneven development these past thirty years. If anything, bamboozling is even more widespread in social terms than the copycat phenomenon, and when

bamboozling gains such wide acceptance, it goes to show that we live in a frivolous society, one that doesn't set much store by matters of principle" (2011, 221).

This book engages with Yu Hua's ten themes and proposes another set of significant interlinked keywords: *affliction*, *injury*, *anticipation*, *compositional labor*, and *post-socialist moral economy*. These concepts help make sense of the narratives that appear in daily life on China's urban streets and in the Chinese mediascape. More specifically, *affliction*, *injury*, and *anticipation* capture a dark corner of what is otherwise a magnificent portrait of a resplendent China. A nation of undisputed importance, China is also a place of disorienting frenzy. People with stories of illness, disability, injustice, and poverty circulate on the streets in every major Chinese city soliciting public assistance for their private afflictions. The cases examined here represent conditions ordinary Chinese citizens face and the means they use to communicate their pain, trauma, and loss in the public sphere. Scorned in Chinese public culture as "selling cruel circumstances" (*mai can*), these stories reflect the magnitude of the quotidian and how ordinary dilemmas take on an exceptional quality when ordinary situations drive people to extreme measures in search of resolution. The relentless banality of the cases is equally confronting and confounding, and thus, noteworthy of sustained attention. Drawing on ethnographic research primarily in Beijing and Guangzhou, *Scenes of Affliction* explores how individuals and families in need have turned to publicizing their medical plights on the streets to gain aid and attention. In an environment of precariousness and resilience, these collective testimonies of medical misfortune amid the lack of family resources offer a counternarrative to the state-sanctioned ideological script of economic prosperity and social progress. People's migration to the city to seek medical care and public assistance lacking in impoverished rural areas is an assertion of their right to life and a livelihood in the new China. At the same time, as private affliction is transformed into public pain, the continual solicitation and portrayal of need becomes its own injurious practice of daily labor.

There is a long history of street peddlers, hawkers, beggars, and charlatans making their living on city streets. Opportunistic and observant of the activity around them, they have long been a cornerstone of the liveliness of the street. Regarded as vagrants, and in some instances as criminals, they constitute a working community engaged in what I call *compositional labor*. Perceived as unskilled in the conventional economy, they are savvy observers of human behavior and have a streetwise comprehension of the urban infrastructure. They use their body, appearance, voice, presence, and story as resources to earn a livelihood in spaces hostile to their existence. Thus, the people whose stories

I tell in this book follow centuries-old behavioral patterns characterizing the street community, but with a key difference. Disenfranchised and disabled people communicate their distress and need for assistance in the public spaces of urban streets, parks, government office compounds, hospitals, and in the mass media to secure not only financial assistance but also social recognition of their moral worth and human dignity. Staking such a claim involves *making private pain public*. In doing so, it turns sufferers into *entrepreneurs of their own misery*. And it turns the people who witness the performances of suffering into dispensers not only of money but of human virtue. My choice to characterize these public scenes as performances does not invalidate the truth of their circumstances. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that performance is the means through which we validate our identity and express our connection to others.

Scenes of Affliction tries to make the *post-socialist moral economy* visible through the prism of minor characters telling local stories with national significance. It describes encounters meant to help us understand how Chinese citizens struggle to accommodate the prevailing economic order, adopt “enterprising” logics in their aspirations for a better life, and resist unjust bureaucratic practices. The uneasy balance between Chinese socialism and global neoliberalism has reterritorialized the terrain of everyday life in China, making possible new ways of living while making others increasingly unimaginable. The scenes of suffering on the streets serve as unsettling reminders of pre-socialist and socialist morality eroded by the waves of economic reform since the 1980s. Not only are they matter of place, they are *matter out of time*. Their tragedies represent remnants of history that disrupt the illusion of a China that is glorious in the present and will endure into the future. Each *mise-en-scène* of affliction reveals an episode, an event, a semblance, a spectacle, a story within the contours of the post-socialist moral economy in contemporary China. *Scenes of Affliction* is about the magnitude of the quotidian, showing how ordinary stories filled with mundane dilemmas take on an exceptional quality because they are told in a manner and in a space so typically ordinary as to be exceptionally representative of pervasive sentiments in Chinese society. The narratives are driven by the appeal to the compassion of a stranger and the recognition of self in another’s suffering. Their disruptive and haunting presence in public life serves to illustrate the formidable forces that grip the everyday.

Supplicants soliciting public assistance populate the streets in every major Chinese city. Some of their stories are “professionally” presented, with elaborate printed text and images (see figs. I.1, I.2, and I.3). Others are handwritten on whatever paper or cardboard is readily available to the supplicant (see



FIGURE I.1. Loudspeakers and flashing lights grab the attention of onlookers on a busy street in the evening. A man without legs sings his appeal to passersby in Xian. His prosthetic legs hold down a banner with printed portraits of his family. Photo by author.

fig. I.4). Despite public suspicion that these presentations of one's woes are ploys to solicit unwarranted donations, the scenes and narratives on display in the streets index a social reality marked by widening disparity and lack of adequate and affordable medical care, which most people can recognize and relate to ever since the initiation of economic liberalization in the 1980s. The individuals in



FIGURE I.2. A couple makes an appeal for their young daughter in Tianjin. They provide medical records and a birth certificate, along with photographs of the family. Photo by author.

need in each of the cases examined here seek some form of intervention to change their tragic trajectories, and their anxious anticipation is directed at an anonymous public possessing the economic and social means to help.

Begging is a ubiquitous activity on the streets of Chinese cities and global metropolises in general (J. Y. Chen 2012; H. Lu 2005; Schak 1988). The



FIGURE 1.3. A father urgently seeks money for a transplant operation for his son in Tianjin. The sign next to him asks passersby to do an online search on Baidu (a popular Chinese search engine) to verify his story. Photo by author.

presence of beggars is so commonplace that they have been captured in literary works, drawings, paintings, and artistic production of all sorts, whether in the West or elsewhere. For example, Sean Shesgreen (2002) has written of English visual culture from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries depicting this community of marginal urban dwellers and working poor. Artists of the times captured this population's manner of dress, paraphernalia, and ways of earning a living (either legally or illegally). Similarly, Susan Schweik (2009) offers a compelling social history of American cities that passed laws in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries banning unsightly beggars from using their disabled bodies to solicit charity. These laws further limited the ability of individuals unable to find conventional work due to disability from establishing a livelihood on the streets. Regarded as beggars, vagrants, and in some instances as criminals by the general public, if they are even regarded at all, the supplicants examined in this book are part of a larger community of the urban laboring poor. Their performance of affliction is a form of compositional labor



FIGURE I.4. Handwritten appeals are accompanied by medical records to verify the medical ailments and cost of treatment in Beijing and Guangzhou. Photos by author.

intended to communicate their circumstances and relate their need for community and, in some few instances, government support.

Global China

Beijing's staging of the "One World, One Dream" 2008 Summer Olympics was the culmination of years of bidding for the games, extensive planning, and propaganda campaigns. In the lead-up to the Olympics, national and local television stations aired human interest stories showing Chinese citizens learning English, redecorating their homes with Olympics memorabilia, and making their neighborhoods tidy and welcoming for international visitors. I was living in Beijing during the period of the most intense preparation, when whole swaths of the city were under construction to widen roads and build the now-iconic bird's nest stadium and the water cube aquatics center. The grand spectacle was engineered to inspire awe among domestic and international audiences alike. The subsequent 2010 World Expo in Shanghai continued to elevate the image of China as a global economic and cultural force for the new millennium. In contrast, due to the COVID-19 pandemic the fanfare accompanying the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics was restrained and subdued. Tight restrictions on athletes and strict limitations on the number of spectators, combined with continued speculations that the virus originated in Wuhan, made the games both controversial and lackluster. Still, Beijing is the first modern city in the world to host both summer and winter Olympics. This distinction feeds into the national narrative of an increasingly prosperous country led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that delivers on its promise to serve the people and bring honor to China once again. The engineering feats that continue to shape the Chinese landscape include massive infrastructure projects such as the high-speed rail network linking all major domestic cities and the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013 with the aim of building a "New Silk Road" stretching around the globe and connecting China with every region of the world.

Since the reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping, China's economic development has been accompanied by fear of Chinese-made products flooding the global marketplace, fueled by reports of contaminated pet foods, toothpaste, pharmaceuticals, milk powder, and lead-covered toys, to name just a fraction of the commodities that have raised concerns over anything "made in China." (One particularly hysterical book even documented the plight of one American family trying to live "made in China" free for a year [Bongiorni 2007]).

I recall an incident from this period of intense scrutiny of Chinese goods that illustrates poignantly one perception of China in the American public imaginary. I had brought back green tea powder as a gift for friends in the United States. This was a product that I often consumed while living in China (for its health benefits), and I thought it an appropriate gift, purchased from a highly reputable tea shop and nicely gift wrapped. One of the recipients of the gift later recounted that she took the green tea powder to a local café to ask the owner, a friend of hers, to make her a green tea latte. She had brought several of the individually wrapped, serving-size packets with her to the café so that he could try the product himself, imagining that he might be inspired to create a new drink for the menu. Unfortunately, she did not get a chance to enjoy the green tea latte because he immediately took the packets from her and threw them into the garbage can behind the counter. With a great look of concern, he asked if she had already consumed any of the powder. When she said that she had more at home and had already tried it, he asked her to promise him that she would not consume anymore and would throw the rest away when she got home, “because you do not know what they put into products from China.” He then warned her that consuming such products was a threat to her health and asked her to pass along this friendly caution to me, the unwitting anthropologist who allegedly brought back contaminated goods.

This minor incident is revealing, because global consumers encounter China at this level of banality, especially in a global economy where everything appears to be made in China.¹ As an emergent superpower, thriving market (though slowing growth in the aftermath of COVID-19), military giant, authoritarian government, and an alleged source of harmful goods for humans and their pets, China globally inspires curious fascination and uneasy suspicion. The international sensation of the TikTok social media app and the exponential growth of e-commerce sites Shein and Temu only add to the belief that China is a security and environmental threat to the world. Even as the country is increasingly recognized for its achievements in producing high-end, value-added products such as mobile phones and electric vehicles, unfavorable representations of a government that blatantly violates intellectual property rights, oppresses Tibetan religious freedom, forcefully reeducates Uyghurs, engages in military exercises that threaten Taiwan, and interferes in Hong Kong’s legislative and legal systems continue to haunt its successes. This tension also affects scholarly analysis of China, as scholars struggle with how to define the Chinese political and economic system. The Chinese leadership calls the regime, which is ostensibly socialist and ruled by a communist party,

“socialism with Chinese characteristics” (*ju you zhongguo tese de shehui zhuyi*), or alternatively, “market socialism with Chinese characteristics.” And yet the proliferation of academic labels applied to China, including late socialist, post-socialist, and postcommunist, indicate that the country in many ways defies easy characterization. China is indeed a vast country and dynamic society uniquely positioned in the world due to a whole litany of widely cited factors that include its immense population, its role in global manufacturing, the amount of foreign reserves held by the Chinese government, its military expansion through the enterprises of the People’s Liberation Army, and its brokering influence in nuclear disarmament negotiations with North Korea. However, those attributes are waning as birth rates decline, more manufacturing has moved to Southeast Asia in search of cheaper labor, high local government debt is saddling the banking sector, and criticism of China’s antagonistic posturing in international relations increases suspicions of its ambitions. Scholars and students of China are faced with the challenge of understanding its complexity, and while labels may sometimes help illuminate the overarching political economic system, they fail to capture the texture of everyday life in a country undergoing cycles of dramatic change. In the new so-called Asian Century, there is global recognition that China is a significant presence and superpower (and might one day usurp the position of the United States). And yet, beyond its geopolitical importance and economic power, to understand China, we need to understand another storyline that runs parallel to the grand national and global narratives.

Through sustained ethnographic research, anthropologists work to combat stories of either simple vilification or triumphalism that circulate in the popular media, instead offering an understanding of a human condition that is unique to a specific place but at some level also universally shared. In this book, I trace the shifting sentiments of a post-socialist moral economy in the realm of the public street and in the media. From the urban sidewalk to the screen, Chinese individuals narrate their hardships as a strategy to sustain a livelihood, secure assistance, seek redress for injustice, receive recognition of human worth, and retain their dignity in the face of devastation, loss, and suffering. They do so in an environment where common understandings of the economy and specifically “the market” increasingly pervade the populace’s self-understanding and behavior, in ways both intended and unexpected.

Indeed, the CCP is actively crafting a representation of China and its path to development not only for the international community but more importantly for the Chinese populace. The party’s reliance on market growth has

given primacy to economic reform as the engine to drive China out of poverty and underdevelopment. In part, they have done so due to the perceived success of Western nations relying on the same means to achieve their own prosperity. However, the market is an unpredictable mechanism that eludes prediction and defies rational explanation. “Millennial capitalism” is a world of twilight and occult economies where the regulating forces take on a spectral quality (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). China’s participation in this market mysticism has led to emergent forms of what political economist Susan Strange (1986) refers to as “casino capitalism,” where speculation and risk-taking thrive. At the “frontiers of capital,” which China had been from the period of Deng Xiaoping until relatively recently, individuals embrace the hype of the “new economy” with its promises of transformative wealth (Fisher and Downey 2006), without necessarily understanding the risks and perils of doing so.

In China, economic liberalization resulted in new challenges to the efforts of the CCP to set the moral agenda. The CCP recognizes that Chinese socialism must be responsive to the needs of the people beyond the urban classes. Initiatives such as “common prosperity” and “new socialist countryside” represent a correction to policies of the Deng Xiaoping era that overlooked rural development in favor of the coastal cities and allowed the emergence of gaping income disparities. Private life has been promoted as the domain of personal liberty in a state-directed consumer society seemingly divested of political content. However, these campaigns have not alleviated ongoing political and social angst across the country. Some overt protests and political violence of the nature seen in Tibet prior to the Beijing Olympics in the spring of 2008 and the incidents in Xinjiang in 2009 were disruptive enough to draw international media attention. The most recent public display of dissatisfaction was in response to the government’s draconian handling of COVID-19 measures to control the spread of the virus. The resulting “white paper” protests across the country in 2022 and any dissenting voices tended to be represented by state media as practices of ignorant, malicious, and unpatriotic splinter groups.² However, we do not need to turn to sensational accounts of protests and violence entangled in the already sensitive issue of Tibetan independence and the Xinjiang “separatist movement” to find evidence of disharmony in Chinese society. The disjunctions of the everyday are evident in the precarious existence of Chinese youth facing high unemployment in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the loss of faith in a promising future illustrated by the “lying flat” (*tangping*) and “let it rot” (*bailan*) movements found on Chinese social media. The feelings of despair and angst expressed in daily life

by China's citizens comingle with the nation's ambition to be recognized for its historic achievements.

The Enterprising Socialist State

The CCP, as representative of the Chinese state, is itself riven with ideological battles over policy directions. Competing factions have always existed within the party, even during the period of Mao's leadership (suffice to say that Deng Xiaoping was expelled multiple times before rising to power after Mao's death). The consolidation of power by President Xi Jinping since 2013 has ushered in a new era of authoritarianism and cult of personality unseen since Mao Zedong. While the party's legitimacy was initially rooted in the revolution, the events of 1989 gave the Chinese state an opportunity to shift further in the direction of market reform as a means of shoring up the regime. As political theorist Wang Hui argues, "after 1989 mechanisms of interaction between state and market came to substitute for those between state and society. As part of this historical process, the concept of society was gradually replaced by the concept of the market and the basic motive power behind promotion of the transformation of the mechanisms of the state and the reform of the legal system was no longer 'society,' but internal and external markets" (2003, 119). Thus, the Chinese state post-1989 shifted its attention to protecting markets and abandoned its responsibilities for providing social welfare. Neoliberalism is not incompatible with authoritarianism; in fact, the latter can flourish because of the state's deliberate interventions in the economy for the purpose of creating conditions for the aggressive function of markets.³ The CCP is adapting Chinese socialism with its Maoist and Leninist lineages to the demands of globalization and the movement of capital into untapped frontiers to extract surplus value (Cooper 2008). China is currently enmeshed in further solidifying its presence in Africa and Southeast Asia and striving to become a technology leader in artificial intelligence and electric vehicles in order to expand on its own capital accumulation efforts.

Cultural theorist Louis Althusser (1972) offers an important analysis of the function of ideology considering the distinction between the repressive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus. His distinction between the two is useful in understanding how the state apparatus has shifted from its primary use of violence to secure its legitimacy to relying on ideological indoctrination through the various institutions of school, family, church, communications, trade unions, cultural facilities, and political parties. In Althusserian terms, the

Chinese ideological state apparatus is actively cultivating an urban population of enterprising, self-regulating individuals able to maneuver in the realm of the transnational marketplace. The “calculative procedures of economic actors” (Miller and Rose 1993, 89) have become the norm as Chinese citizens engage in ever-more efficient self-regulation, requiring less coercion by the state. However, the state is ready to employ force—in a visible manner—when it comes under threat by any collective group, which is why it restricts the rights to public assembly. The suppression of Falun Gong is a clear example of how the CCP forcibly addresses popular challenges to its legitimacy and moral authority. According to political scientist Vivienne Shue (2004), Falun Gong was targeted by the Chinese government because it offered a moral discourse that directly challenged the one promulgated by the CCP. As a spiritual movement it threatened the secular basis of the Chinese state’s legitimacy, offering a separate cosmology of ethics and goodness that departed from the material provisions of market reform and the truth of scientific rationalism. The movement’s slogan, “Truth, Goodness, and Forbearance,” challenged the CCP’s interpretation of the traditional ideals of “Truth, Benevolence, and Glory” grounding Chinese statecraft. Unlike other protest groups demanding economic reparations that the Chinese government could manage through negotiation, Falun Gong challenged the very basis of the CCP’s domination and authority. The suppression of Falun Gong in China has paradoxically allowed the movement to become international, with adherents disseminating information about continued abuses of members held as political prisoners through publications such as the *Epoch Times*.

While particularly spectacular, the Falun Gong’s defiance of the CCP is by no means the only source of contestation in China. Challenges to the CCP’s legitimacy are posed every day by citizens using the organs established by the party itself. For example, petitioners who arrive in Beijing to file a formal complaint to government ministries against unjust actions by local officials challenge the redistributive logic of the CCP by holding the regime accountable to its founding principle of representing and serving the people. The reinvention of Chinese socialism (Chun 2006; Yanzhong Huang 2009) has been characterized by a series of reforms such as the promotion of rule of law and embrace of technological development. However, political scientist Lin Chun, in writing about the institution of legal reforms, warns, “legality alone is no solution to the problem of the powerlessness of citizens” (2006, 185). The construction of a functional judicial system is still hampered by lack of public trust, because the system is not independent from party functionaries. Media

and cultural studies scholar Jing Wang's (2001a; 2001b) discussion of the Chinese state promotion of leisure culture in the mid-1990s offers a series of productive deliberations about the state, entitlement, access, structure, agency, hegemony, and pleasure. She argues that the changing technology of state governance successfully cloaked the ruling ideology in the rhetoric of common sense (Wang 2001b, 38–39). This involved the deployment of the cultural and communications aspects of the ISA to construct a new vocabulary to describe the reinvented social imaginary. The double leisure day campaign, which encouraged urban citizens to engage in leisure activity, was made possible by the nationwide institutionalization of a forty-hour workweek, reduced from the previous forty-eight-hour week. As Wang noted, leisure culture constituted an official discourse that issued from state policy serving dually to encourage appropriate leisure activities and fuel the growth of the market:

More specifically, discourses about the “double leisure day” reveal to us the changing political technologies of a modernizing state policy: it reorganizes recreational spaces, constructs the meaning of the new citizen-consumer, disciplines production and consumption simultaneously, and reinvents the notion of “the public (sphere)” by defining it in terms of the people's entitlement to leisure cultural goods and services. The emphasis on the centrality of leisure culture as an egalitarian discourse is strategically vital to a regime caught in the dilemma of having to carry out its agenda of globalization while finding the means to mediate the contradictions resulting from uneven capital accumulation. (Wang 2001b, 40–41)

Ironically, the success of market expansion has ushered in an even more brutal working culture in the technology sectors that are leading the Chinese economy and stock market. The notorious “996” celebrated by one of China's tech titans, Jack Ma of Alibaba, refers to working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, which is the *de facto* norm despite being a flagrant violation of labor laws. But the most extreme of all is “007,” which emerged during the transition to working from home as part of the COVID-19 shutdowns. The ubiquity of social media apps in use, such as the WeChat platform, means workers are available 24/7, with no clear demarcation of working hours and personal time. The ideological construction here is simple: Once the market is valorized as a democratic space for a new citizen subjectivity, the Chinese state can then redefine its primary duty as protecting each citizen's right to freely participate in the market. This coincides with Shue's argument that “the maintenance of the conditions in which the economy does develop and the people do enjoy

more prosperity—this, I believe, comes much closer to capturing the actual core of the contemporary Chinese state’s claims to rule legitimately” (2004, 29). Unsurprisingly, then, during the National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference held in Beijing in March 2025, the economic agenda prioritized boosting domestic consumption and technological innovation as drivers of economic recovery.

The focus on domestic consumption draws on the anticipation of and satisfaction of Chinese citizens’ “natural” desires to be “free” to enjoy the pleasures newly offered by economic liberalization. Moreover, the market is coded as a site that embraces the autonomous individual because “the ‘autonomous’ subjectivity of the productive individual has become a central economic resource” (Miller and Rose 1993, 100). The Chinese citizen then becomes a “subject that works harder and moonlights more in order to spend more for leisure, a subject that partakes in rational recreation to maximise his (renewed) capacity for labour, a subject committed to bailing herself out of the ‘unemployment’ rut through the cultivation of the enterprising self, a subject learning to become a law abiding consumer with a burgeoning ‘finance consciousness’ and a will to save less and invest more . . . and ultimately a subject that is subjugated to market reasoning at the state’s command” (Wang 2001b, 42–43). The unleashing of this “finance consciousness” is evident among the growing Chinese middle class and the established elites possessing the disposable income to purchase real estate, travel abroad, shop for imported goods, and send their children overseas for a Western education. This, of course, is accompanied by its own contradictions, as increased Chinese investment abroad has resulted in concern that Chinese investors are buying up property in the most desirable cities in the world and inflating already overheated local real estate markets. Similarly, Chinese students make up a substantial proportion of overseas international students at universities in the West and are being courted because they pay high international tuition fees, leading to complaints about discrimination against local students with fewer financial means (this is true particularly of public universities in the United States). In the same vein, while the throngs of Chinese tourists traveling abroad in tour buses have been criticized in media reports and on social media as a nuisance at popular tourist destinations, they serve as a needed boost to local economies that survive on tourism. It is no surprise, in this context, that luxury brands have grown reliant on the Chinese consumer to boost sales not only in China but in Europe and elsewhere as more Chinese travel abroad.

The development of market sensibilities is part of an arsenal of government strategies to create a class of consumers distracted by what sociologist

Zygmunt Bauman refers to as “life-politics” in order to deflect attention from the failure of the Chinese state to deliver political rights, transparency, and egalitarianism. In Bauman’s theorization of “liquid modernity” as the distinguishing characteristic of post-Panoptical societies, individuals are no longer interested in engaging in what he calls “Politics with a capital P.” Instead, interest has shifted to another type of politics, a life-politics concerned with the care of the individual body. Bauman argues that this pursuit of individuality interferes with the maintenance of a good and just society, and I would add, obstructs the perpetuation of a global class-consciousness. Geographer Noel Castree (1996/97) suggests that the obscuring of the *vision* of the economy poses a serious obstacle to any effort to transcend capitalist value relations. Drawing from political theorist and cultural historian Susan Buck-Morss’s argument that the vision of the economy put forth by political economists since the eighteenth century hides from view the social relations that constitute global capital, Castree argues that “by passing off the monadic activities of apparently asocial individuals and spatially separate communities as the ‘truth’ of economic life, market theory encourages a selfish individualism and reactionary localism to reenchant the ‘empty’ space of society” (1996/97, 57). In this he echoes French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1998b) assessment that “a Darwinian world emerges” in “the new order of the lone, but free individual.” Castree argues for a *rehabilitation of vision* as a viable instrument of critique to reclaim the “reality” of social relations, even as he acknowledges that “it can never offer a final, decided vision of that ‘reality.’” In a very modest way, I try to take up Castree’s insistence that we work to make the economy *seen* through the minor characters of the post-socialist moral economy. And these minor characters, exhibiting their economic savvy, make an appearance in all manner of daily life.

The art of the local entrepreneur in China is encountered in some of the most unlikely scenarios. For example, during one of my early residencies in Beijing I went to the Beijing Chinese Medicine University to seek treatment after seeing a program featuring a practitioner from the institution. I decided to sit in the lobby and observe the scene before stepping to the large display of practitioner portraits and biographies hanging to one side of the seating area. As I sat alone, a woman dressed like a nurse came over to ask if I needed any help selecting a doctor and proceeded to ask me why I had come into the clinic. Initially, I thought it was genuinely kind of her to take some time to assist me, considering that most overwhelmed hospital staff are not known to be especially welcoming. However, after a few minutes it became clear that she was scouting for potential patients for another clinic. She mentioned the name

of another doctor that she and her family used and gave me directions to his medical office. I thanked her for her concern but told her that I would seek treatment at this clinic. She persisted in saying that her doctor was not as costly and would be more effective, but I insisted on remaining at this particular clinic and she eventually backed off. Over the course of my research, incidents of this nature occurred in the lobbies of many different clinics and public hospitals, and I became suspicious of anyone who approached me in these settings. My initial appreciation of a stranger's kindness grew into doubt and apprehension. This was, in fact, the tip of the iceberg, as my research revealed that many underground transactions transpire in such public spaces. For example, scalpers buy up the daily allocation of appointment numbers for doctor appointments and sell them to desperate patients at inflated prices in the lobby or on the walkways leading up to the hospital. Larger public hospitals have already instituted policies of registering identification and limiting the quantity of appointment numbers each person can purchase to combat this underground economy. In these cases, the line between immoral opportunist and entrepreneur can sometimes be fuzzy.

Opportunity and Precarity in the City

Beijing and Guangzhou are emblematic of major cities in contemporary China, as they have grown exponentially with a continual influx of migrants from other provinces seeking work opportunities and a better life in these capital cities. The urban streetscape reflects the outgrowth of economic liberalization, with a profusion of startling architectural spectacles and cosmopolitan shopping plazas overshadowing the disappearing alleys and courtyards that once defined local life in the historic hutongs of old Beijing and crowded alleyways of old Guangzhou. As the nation's capital, Beijing has a high concentration of the best universities, think tanks, research centers, government offices, and distinctive monuments. The city remains the seat of the CCP, with Mao Zedong's portrait still hanging over the gates of Tiananmen Square and a mausoleum showcasing his preserved body. By contrast, Guangzhou, formerly known as Canton, is the capital of Guangdong Province and has served as a historic trading port for many centuries. Its strategic location in the Pearl River Delta has made it a launching point for outward migration to other regions in Asia and for trading with foreign merchants. The concentration of factories in Guangdong Province during the early period of economic liberalization and the establishment of special economic zones made it a magnet destination for migrant workers from

rural China seeking employment. To this day it remains one of the most significant and populous Chinese cities on the eastern seaboard and is part of the Greater Bay Area, which includes the special administrative zones of Hong Kong and Macao and eight other cities in Guangdong province (Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Huizhou, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen, and Zhaoqing). The Greater Bay Area is the wealthiest zone in Southern China and is filled with high-tech start-ups, incubators, and capital venture firms, much like Silicon Valley and the San Francisco Bay area in California. Both cities attract migrants, domestic and foreign, with the promise of new opportunities.

Like every Chinese city, Beijing and Guangzhou now sprout what one friend's father called "bamboo forests," referring to the ubiquitous clusters of high-rise apartment buildings. As more complexes for indulgent, conspicuous consumption catering to the middle and upper-middle class occupy available urban space, local residents inhabit these newly developed spaces for their own enjoyment in ways that do not involve patronizing the shops. In fact, the well-lit and smooth pavements of shopping squares with accessible public transportation links and amenities are attractive spaces in the evenings for congregating locals practicing dancing, singing, aerobics, water calligraphy, people-watching, and all manner of social activities to pass the time. The social phenomenon of *dama tiao guangchangwu* refers to the middle-aged matrons who come out in droves each night to dance in public parks, shopping plazas, playgrounds, and any available open space in the city. The cacophony of blaring boom boxes playing ballroom, disco, jazz, pop, house, and techno intermingled with live singing, drumming, and clamoring of cymbals to accompany the practicing Chinese dance troupes enriches the urban soundscape.

Street vendors have been increasingly displaced from the sanitized and gentrified urban core now dominated by gleaming emporiums designed to attract consumers and tourists with an appreciation for global luxury brands. But informal street economies continue to operate along the edges of the city in migrant enclaves distributed around Beijing's outer districts. Figure I.5 depicts a couple selling freshly puffed corn and rice made over a coal-fired makeshift burner to supplement their meager income from farming. This form of everyday entrepreneurship reflects how migrants create a livelihood and community for themselves on the outskirts of the city not yet enfolded into the image of Beijing as global metropolis. The intermingling of visibly marked rural migrants and young aspirational urbanites adapting to the changing urban surroundings illuminates how daily life in Chinese society is permeated with dynamism and revealing contrasts.



FIGURE 1.5. Migrants are engaged in street commerce on an unpaved road next to a construction site on the outskirts of Beijing. Street vendors have set up businesses to serve the residents living behind the unfinished building. Photo by author.

The cases presented in the following chapters illustrate how images of suffering bodies are entangled in moral, symbolic, and street economies. The book is a blend of ethnographic and media cases focusing on the forms of spectacle, registers of moral value, and moments of despair that index the states of being and feeling in contemporary China. People perform misfortune, tragedy, and injustice in the Chinese public sphere as a means of obtaining financial assistance and claiming social recognition. But perhaps unsurprisingly this form of soliciting aid is fraught with suspicion and accusation. Chinese citizens express anxiety over the general *luan* (disorder, chaos) that they see as a sign of deteriorating social relations and trust. A Chinese schoolteacher told me that when the phenomenon of narrating hardships on the streets gained more visibility in the early 1990s, one popular story was that of young people describing how they tested into university but did not have the money to attend. Since education is so highly valued in China, people would greatly empathize with the student's difficult situation, lamenting the lost potential and interpreting it as a tragedy greater than someone losing an arm or a leg. Subsequently, once it was exposed that these stories were scams, people stopped giving money—to anyone. Today, public narrations of need are

quickly dismissed as ploys to manipulate sentiment, no matter how tragic the accompanying figure. Chinese citizens are wary of the rampant opportunism practiced by government officials and petty thieves alike.

We do not know how the scenes register in the mind of the observer; what matters is the existence and circulation of such stories in the public sphere. In other words, what is important is the recognition of *scene*, *story*, and *sentiment* coming together. These tableaux offer a reflection on how *anticipation* (a state of feeling that includes both apprehension and hope) is manifested in the everyday lives of people who are dispossessed and dismissed. This book explores the emotional and economic terrain on which public representations and enactments of affliction work to generate sympathy. These narratives are intended to emotionally move (*gandong*) an audience. However, the narrative elements and accompanying paraphernalia generate a form of feeling that is paradoxically both empathetic and othering. Witnessing suffering does not mean wanting to draw near. In fact, we may feel an impulse to distance ourselves from the scene and evade the potential for it to move us to action. We may resist by moving away because the feeling of empathy can be rather discomforting. We may also move away because we don't feel the scene is worthy of our attention. The philosopher Elizabeth V. Spelman (1998) has warned that our responses to suffering run the risk of objectifying, exoticizing, and appropriating the suffering of "others." Each of these reactions belongs to an "economy of attention," wherein we make distinctions about the form and weight of the suffering to discern if it is worthy of our limited attention. In other words, we compare the kinds and qualities of suffering, and in doing so, we also decide how to react. The anticipation of some transformative act of generosity rarely manifests into a satisfactory resolution, yet enacting hardship in public has emerged as a hopeful strategy to sustain a livelihood. In the end, these stories are compelling because they communicate life dilemmas to which a Chinese and global audience can relate.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the philosopher Adam Smith writes about humans' imaginative capacity to feel the connection to others as the source of sympathy. The ability to imagine the neglect, the pain, the injustice, and the resentment felt by the afflicted is key. Smith articulates this ability to conjure up feeling in the following passage:

It is quite otherwise with those passions which take their origin from the imagination. The frame of my body can be but little affected by the alterations which are brought about upon that of my companion: but my

imagination is more ductile, and more readily assumes, if I may say so, the shape and configuration of the imaginations of those with whom I am familiar. A disappointment in love, or ambition, will, upon this account, call forth more sympathy than the greatest bodily evil. Those passions arise altogether from the imagination. The person who has lost his whole fortune, if he is in health, feels nothing in his body. What he suffers is from the imagination only, which represents to him the loss of his dignity, neglect from his friends, contempt from his enemies, dependence, want, and misery, coming fast upon him; and we sympathize with him more strongly upon this account, because our imaginations can more readily mould themselves upon his imagination, than our bodies can mould themselves upon his body. (Smith 2002 [1759], Pt. 1, sec. 2, chap. 1)

Thus, seeing a body in pain does not elicit a similar pain in the body of the viewer; rather, it *incites the imagination of the viewer*, who shares a sentiment of loss without mimicking the physical sensation. Each story in this book is an exercise in evoking the reader's imagination. The narratives told in the streets or on the screen sustain a public imaginary in which it is possible to sympathize not through a shared bodily experience (though unlike Smith, I do not deny that this may be possible too) but to recognize the hurt and pain a stranger has endured. I also acknowledge that being able to identify with a situation based on past experiences is not sufficient motivation to act. Moreover, our reaction to suffering runs the risk of only serving to cast the sufferers as objects of pity. This negates their agency, as it neutralizes the potential for transformations toward justice, equity, and inclusion.

Self and Society in “Neoliberal” China

The people on the street, with their narratives of illness and disability and their trajectory toward imminent death, are an affront to the modern sensibility of neoliberal order, discipline, and control. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998b) incisively defines neoliberalism as “a programme for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic.” The objective of the discourse and set of practices labeled neoliberalism is a “utopia of endless exploitation.” The suicides by workers at Foxconn (who made popular consumer electronics such as the Apple iPhone) and the subsequent protests in 2010 suggest that China has derailed from its socialist trajectory in a decidedly more neoliberal direction (see Chan and Pun 2010; Pun and Lu 2010). In *Privatizing*

China, anthropologists Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong (2008) have mapped out the terrain of a new “social” in a neoliberalizing China that has unleashed “powers of the self,” but this “social” represents an urban citizenry that is positioned differently in the economy than the rural population. In *The Human Condition*, philosopher Hannah Arendt offers a provocative thesis about “the social” through a genealogy of the public and private realms since Greek and Roman classical times.⁴ She argues that the modern world has seen a conflation of the social with the political, whereas in the classical age, the political existed in the public realm—the polis—as an environment of words and persuasion. For its part, the private resided in the household, where force and violence were normative means of engagement. The modern age, concurrent with the rise of nation-states, ushered in the de-compartmentalization of household and political concerns. The rise of the social has meant a collapse of these demarcations and the deterioration of the political. Economics, once relegated to the private sphere because it dealt with life-sustaining activities, now dominates the public realm and has come to define “the political.” This resonates with political philosopher Carl Schmitt’s (1996) critique that the centrality of economics cloaked in humanitarian language enables countless assaults on human life. For Schmitt the political was a matter of life and death based on existential threat, in contrast to the polis, where the political was a realm of heterogeneous meaning-making unfettered from the concerns of the necessities of life.

The guiding principle of neoliberalism is the active encouragement of the individual to be more involved in self-governing, through “the generalization of an ‘enterprise form’ to *all* forms of conduct” [original italics] (Burchell 1996, 28–29). This in turn redefines the role of government as securing the grounds for the rational, free individual to conduct the business of life. In the Chinese context, the realm of the economic has liberalized to the extent that we see practices very much aligned with social historian Michel Foucault’s definitions of liberal governance, despite the firm grip of the CCP over the political realm. Foucault defines governmentality as “the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security” (in Burchell et al. 1991, 102). The biopolitical state is primarily concerned with the maintenance of life and its productive capacities; thus, government must permeate the depth and detail of the individual (Foucault 1995). The “technologies of the self” are critical to modern governmentality because “a government informed by the

precepts of political economy . . . economizes on its own costs: a greater effort of technique aimed at accomplishing more through a lesser exertion of force and authority” (Gordon 1991, 24).

Drawing from Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose’s (1993) description of “government from a distance,” Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong (2008) propose the concept of “socialism from afar” to describe how the Chinese state is integrating technologies of the self into its governance strategies. Foucault (1988, 18) defines “technology of the self” as that “which permit[s] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” This suggests that the individual is continually employed with managing his or her human capital. Foucault’s focus on technologies of governance offers a useful way to understand the protean processes of subjectification under modern regimes. Similar to Foucault’s articulation of power as relational, the state is not a concrete set of institutions or a visible and tangible thing in and of itself, but an abstraction of the social constituted through practices (Mitchell 1991). Accordingly, Foucault notes, “the state is no more than a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction, whose importance is a lot more limited than many of us think . . . thus the state can only be understood in its survival and its limits on the basis of the general tactics of governmentality” (in Burchell et al. 1991, 103). In other words, the state is an imaginary, ideological technology of governance that resides in no particular set of institutions but is continually constituted through changing forms of practice.

Anthropologist Yan Yunxiang (2013) sees surface similarities between the Western liberal model of an enterprising self and what he calls a “striving individual.” He prefers this term because it is not embedded in the values of Western liberalism such as freedom, rights, and autonomy; rather, it is rooted in a Chinese understanding of a hard-working person who strives to do right by their family and community, seeking to uphold the principles of *ren* and *li*. These Confucian precepts of benevolence and propriety, respectively, provide the structure and moral guidance for one to become properly human, or *zuo-ren*. Historically, being a good and dutiful person meant to be engaged in continual self-cultivation, performance of familial responsibility, and respect of ancestors. The CCP channeled that striving into self-sacrifice for the glory of the party and the nation. The communist regime heralded the collectivist mentality represented in the people, or *renmin*, which broke down in the

post-Mao era with the introduction of market liberalization. As Yan writes, “In the post-Mao reform era, there is no effective restraint—Confucian or Communist—to curb the newly awakened self-interested individual, and successful people, once realizing the goal of being a person above persons, are not shy about flaunting their power and privilege through conspicuous consumption, the abuse of power, and unfair competition” (2013, 271). In this increasingly competitive economic, political, and social sphere, individual success was the primary goal. Many scholars have written about the moral vacuum concomitant with the expansion of market mentality and the harm inflicted on the personal psyche and collective consciousness (e.g., Hsu and Madsen 2019; Kleinman et al. 2011; Lora-Wainwright 2013a; Osburg 2013; Osnos 2014; Oxfeld 2010; Zhang et al. 2011).

Riches and success have been accompanied with certain privileges. On a mundane level, we see this in cars seizing right of way over bicyclists and pedestrians on Chinese urban streets. It is not the most vulnerable who enjoys the right of way but the most powerful. As the number of cars has increased alongside the number of the wealthy, the cars have taken over the sidewalks, parked haphazardly in front of storefronts and forcing pedestrians to walk in the street. This is indicative not only of a lack of urban infrastructure to accommodate the growing number of cars in China but also of the brazenness of car drivers demanding space for their cars even at the cost of displacing pedestrians from the sidewalk. At the same time, this newly striving individual is not completely untethered from familial demands. Each person must now negotiate a morass of corruption, greed, hard work, and worthiness, balancing the demands of this new arena of individual striving with the social demands to be a dutiful son or daughter and a good citizen of the Chinese nation. These expectations are enfolded into the imperative to be successful and to embody the ethos of “patriotic professionalism,” in a fusion of Maoist-era values and neoliberal ambition (Hoffman 2006).

Increasingly, we can see the adoption of market logics and their application in daily life. The active promotion of the entrepreneurial self in all matters is a technology of governance that perpetuates the hegemonic ideology of the ruling elite. Yet, though the market is productive, it cannot fully compensate for the rollback of government social welfare programs. Even in an authoritarian state such as China, citizens’ internalization of the ruling logic is never complete. As technologies of the self expand in China, so does the potential for “unruly” subjectivities to emerge. Agency appears in subtle negotiations with power, in line with French sociologist Michel de Certeau’s (1984)

argument that everyday tactics evolve along with the state apparatus. For example, anthropologist Nancy Chen (2001) and cultural studies scholar Jing Wang note that the revival of *yangge*, “a proletarian art form resuscitated into a metropolitan spectacle” (Wang 2001a, 81; see also Brownell 1995), performed by middle-aged and retired enthusiasts on the streets of Beijing, offers an alternative to the individualistic consumption of health. More significantly, it allows participants to claim city streets as their dance floor. The ruling technologies do not always produce docile bodies and can produce subjectivities that challenge both the ideology of the ruling elite and the ordering of public space. The example of *yangge* shows that alternative bodily practices and the reappropriation of public space can emerge despite the refined technologies of statecraft. However, it is important to note that the hegemony of market logic does not translate into the retreat of the state. Rather, the state actively promotes this logic through interventionist policies that construct the market as the most efficient and responsive means for governing individual citizen-subjects. As sociologists Miller and Rose write, “No longer is citizenship construed in terms of solidarity, contentment, welfare and a sense of security established through the bonds of organizational and social life. Citizenship is to be active and individualistic rather than passive and dependent. The political subject is henceforth to be an individual whose citizenship is manifested through the free exercise of personal choice amongst a variety of options” (1993, 98). In the case of China, the options remain limited to economic activities that do not challenge political stability.

Chinese urban citizens—unmoored from a *danwei* (work unit) system that provided a *tie fanwan* (iron rice bowl)—have gone from celebrated vanguards of the party to dispossessed mendicants (Solinger 2004). Rural citizens have suffered a worse fate because they never benefited from the *danwei* system in the first place, were not the beneficiaries of the skyrocketing Chinese real estate market, and continue to suffer as a result of the post-COVID-19 economic downturn. In the haze of the furious construction of China’s new economy and cities, a concern with the material conditions of life and the management of the body and its productive capacity permeates individual ruminations and government strategies. Crucially, the adoption of neoliberal principles does not mean that China is moving toward Western liberalism and abandoning socialism outright. As Zhang and Ong (2008) suggest, the embrace of neoliberal logic might actually serve to strengthen Chinese authoritarian rule as the CCP seeks to reimagine socialism for the people. This outcome, however, is not foreordained. For example, geographer David Harvey (2005) argues that

the “wholesale process of proletarianization” in China has resulted in such fierce antagonism between the CCP and the “masses” that the preservation of a system identifiable as socialism remains in doubt. This book seeks to shed light on these contradictions through an analysis of ethnographic cases representative of Chinese citizens employing various strategies to maneuver between the market “opportunities” and state mechanisms that continue to bind everyday life.

Post-Socialist Moral Economy and Moral Capital

The concept of “moral economy” has a long etymology (see Arnold [2001]; Booth [1994]; Götz [2015]; Powelson [2000]) but was solidified in the anthropological canon through political scientist James C. Scott’s seminal ethnographies on peasant societies in Southeast Asia. As noted by the historian Norbert Götz, “the notion of economy was embedded in a pre-determined framework of social norms and not understood as an autonomous sphere of human agency. In ancient thought the term moral economy would, therefore, have been redundant. . . . Only eighteenth century camera-lists and physiocrats construed commerce and national accounting as significant dimensions of economy, pushing Aristotelian morals and the order of the household to the margins of the discourse” (2015, 148). In Aristotle’s practical philosophy, the economy was a domain interlinked with ethics. From the eighteenth century onward, the modern understanding of the term shed this ethical dimension, reemerging in recent times with the conceptualization of the “moral economy” to resignify the centrality of ethics and values (Götz 2015, 149). Scott’s (1976) reinterpretation of British Marxist historian E. P. Thompson’s (1963; 1971) use of the concept stretched its applicability beyond Thompson’s particular historical context of the formation of class consciousness in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Despite the disparate configuration of geographic, historical, and cultural contexts, Scott and Thompson offered an approach to understanding moral economies through the everyday struggles of subaltern figures with elites and state entities. Subsequently, scholars have continued to apply this concept in much wider contexts, going beyond class consciousness and civil unrest to highlight the enduring versatility of “moral economy” as a concept for capturing the intricacies of political and social life in different societies.⁵

Anthropologist Didier Fassin, revisiting the concept through Thompson and Scott, offers a succinct and productive working definition of moral

economy that emphasizes the moral component: “the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space” (2009, 1250). This definition affords some boundedness but also retains its adaptability to different state, systemic, and social formations. Its openness allows for different constituencies to make claims to a moral economy based on evolving relations of reciprocity, obligation, and authority. In comparison, anthropologists Jaime Palomera and Theodora Vetta “contend that the structural inequalities generated by particular forms of capital accumulation—mediated by particular kinds of state regulation—are always metabolized through particular fields constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meanings, and practices. It is these fields that we call moral economies. They can reproduce or strengthen patterns of capital accumulation that regulate social structure, but they can also alter and even short-circuit them” (2016, 414). Their definition is more focused on the interactions of class and capital as seen through the registers of everyday livelihoods. They also see moral economy as an anthropological method: “The moral economic approach has a double ‘mission’: on the one hand, it advocates a grounded understanding of the more abstract and global political-economy processes; on the other, it historicizes the everyday realm of observation by accounting for class-informed dispositions in a particular time and space. Moral economy is particularly well suited to analyze the political culture, norms, and expectations of the various groups of people involved in social reproduction, broadly speaking; the power relations between the governed and the elites; and the articulation of such dispositions and relations with capitalist processes of continuity and change” (2016, 415). For Palomera and Vetta, this approach highlights “the ambiguous logics and values that guide and sustain livelihood practices, by looking at the dynamic fields of struggle around the boundaries of what is good and acceptable, their power hierarchies, and the political projects they might inform” (2016, 415). This method also retains the concept’s timeliness *and* timelessness, because it can account for historical ruptures and continuities in cultural practices. My own account of moral economy draws on both intellectual engagements (and earlier formative interlocutors) with a focus on affliction to illuminate what I regard as a *post-socialist affective economy*. This particular form of moral economy is enmeshed in historical legacies of Confucian and Maoist values that are differently invoked within the social transformation of global and state capital accumulation strategies by government and citizens alike. The blurred boundaries of contestation and accommodation in everyday practices of the vulnerable help

us understand how this affective economy is generative of and capitalizes on the force of feeling, sensation, and emotion. Resistance and reproduction of the dominant values are intertwined in this moral economy.

Scott (1976) was concerned with the “subsistence ethics of peasants,” and in a similar vein, this book pays attention to the “subsistence ethics of supplicants” and their labor of appeal in a post-socialist affective economy, in an effort to capture how daily acts of survival are riddled with moral meaning and consequence. The cases examined here represent hardships of “survivance” (cf. Vizenor 1999; 2008), “everyday forms of resistance” (see Scott [1987]; [1992]), and public protest that are also grudging accommodations to the prevailing regime. The demands for recognition and assistance are not expressed through overt contestation; rather, they negotiate the idioms of the Chinese moral economy. These strategies of the weak are manifestations of what anthropologist David Graeber (2012), in his effort to understand the logic of domination has called “interpretative labor,” wherein the weak must employ interpretative labor to appeal to the sensibilities of the powerful and navigate the structures of violence that curtail their own agency. As Fassin insightfully argues in the cases of rebellion noted by Scott, “waiting for justice is thus both essential and marginal. It is essential because on it depends the survival of farmers and their families, and it is marginal because basic relations of production are not questioned. In other words, the moral economy helps us understand how an exploitative system can hold even when local principles of justice prevail” (2009, 1244). The concern for security in the face of insurmountable uncertainty mitigates in favor of leaving intact structures of exploitation rather than attempting a complete overhaul of the system. For example, Chinese petitioners appeal to bureaucrats because they are the only figures with the power to intervene and deliver justice in an arbitrary institutional system. The CCP’s stranglehold on political power has created a hegemonic ideological position. Yet, importantly, the measure of the party’s legitimacy lies in a prosperous society marked by economic growth. As long as the economy is growing and households are prospering, there is no need to question the political status quo. However, the downturn in the global economy and the sluggish recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed lingering ruptures in the social fabric.

The moral economy in contemporary China is infused with Confucian and Maoist notions of social belonging, duty, and service entangled with the forces of commodification of intimacies, relationships, and life itself. The emphasis on moral economy is not to be conflated with morality, but it is inclusive of it.

Morality and ethics are central considerations within the moral calculus (see Mattingly and Throop [2018] for a review of “the ethical turn” in anthropology). The focus on moral economy foregrounds the interlinking of moral sentiment and market logics in daily considerations. The proliferation of on-line scams, the continuation of adulterated and unsafe food production, and the spate of public violence in 2024 termed “revenge against society (*baofu shehui*)” (attacks by lone, disgruntled Chinese perpetrators against children, strangers, and even foreign tourists in parks, schools, workplaces, and urban sidewalks) are symptomatic of personal discontent and frustration spilling over into the public. Predatory profiteering behavior in the marketplace is unsurprising in a competitive economic environment where “entrepreneurs” turn to deceptive practices that harm anonymous consumers with impunity. Existing ethnographies on morality in contemporary China testify to the substantial and tangible negative shifts in the quality of daily interactions among citizens in all manner of social life. These ethnographies include, but are not limited to: Richard Madsen’s early study of competing moral discourses in Chen Village ([1984]; see also Chan, Madsen, and Unger [2009]); Hok Bun Ku’s study of a Hakka village and its defensive measures against unfair government policies (2003); Ellen Oxfeld’s village ethnography of moral obligation and debt within the family in Guangdong Province (2010); Bryan Tilt’s analysis of the ethical contestations over hydropower development in Yunnan Province (2014); Anna Lora-Wainwright’s portrayal of families struggling with care and diagnosis in a “cancer village” in Southwest China (2013a); Hans Steinmuller’s study of struggles with moral uncertainty among villagers in Hubei province (2013); Arthur Kleinman et al.’s collection of moral quandaries in Chinese personal lives (2011); and Xin Liu’s account of daily practice and performance of modernization in a post-reform village in Shaanxi Province (2000). These evocative ethnographies contribute to our understanding of the wide scope of profound changes that continue to mark the distinctive transformation of contemporary China; *Scenes of Affliction* contributes to this line of scholarship by offering an account of marginalized figures experiencing representative *private struggles that manifest in very public ways*.

Appealing to public charity is a means to manage misfortune and precarity. Misery operates as a form of moral capital in this moral economy, transforming the experience of affliction (as resource) into a moving narrative generative of money (as capital). Moral virtue and money are thus entwined elements of the moral economy. My objective is not to claim that supplicants are either

worthy or unworthy, nor provide “evidence” that the described experiences of individuals and families are “genuine.” Instead, I examine the field of possibility for individuals to compose and curate an emotive, symbolic narrative that sufficiently resonates with the public in order to secure resources of value for their livelihood, be that money or other forms of assistance. Within this specific Chinese moral economy, the invocation of Confucian values—or claims of “paternalistic citizenship” (Ma 2021)—should be seen as attempts to weave into the moral fabric an insistence on reciprocity, interdependency, and responsibility between the state and its citizen-subjects. Anthropologist Zhiying Ma (2021) has examined how the network of neighborhood committees, the *danwei* system, and other communal care structures have eroded with market reform, leaving working families solely responsible for the care of family members suffering from mental health conditions. The lack of sufficient social welfare and the need to earn an income make it difficult to balance familial responsibility with livelihood demands. These family members turned care workers for their kin have a lingering attachment to a state paternalism that promised to care for the needs of the people and are frustrated by government inattention to their plight, in a context where the state continues to shift ever more responsibility for care to the community, and thus, the family. Ma notes a great irony here: “In their struggles for paternalistic citizenship, caregivers seek dependency on the very state that they identify as the source of their suffering” (2021, 967). Thus, the post-socialist environment is suffused within an ethical morass of market rationality, party paternalism, and familial longing.

The concept of moral economy brings to the fore the material considerations of everyday existence and how human agency is shaped by confounding market logics, especially for the marginalized who readily recognize their lack of “market value” by this measure. But if they are entrepreneurial, they can draw on their “moral capital” as a livelihood resource. In doing so, they are generating their own form of “emotional labor” (cf. Hochschild 2012 [1983]) that is distinctively different from the demands of a feminized service economy. The term “moral capital” highlights the moral calculus at work in the assessment of worthiness of assistance, and thus existence. This is predicated on distinguishing truth from fiction (genuine need vs. a scam) and determining the worthiness of the supplication. The quality of the narrative in terms of moral weight and the ability to communicate with emotive force does not always ensure success in securing money. Thus, the post-socialist affective economy recounted through these cases is permeated with additional injury

(continued...)

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