

Seeking *suzhi* through Modernization and Development

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Abstract

The Chinese term *suzhi* is generally translated into English as “quality,” but in fact, the English language does not have a single word that adequately conveys the type of “quality” to which the term *suzhi* refers. *Suzhi* refers specifically to the quality of the human, as opposed to the quality of a material, system, or an idea. The evaluation of “human quality” takes into account seemingly countless individual qualities of a person, including one’s physical health and appearance, psychological health, intellect, mannerisms, socio-economic status, and so on. The nuanced criteria under the umbrella of *suzhi*-evaluation render the term difficult to explain even by the Chinese citizens themselves. This thesis explores the concept of *suzhi* as it has been presented in government discourse over the course of the last 40 years of reform. Providing a somewhat chronological history of major developmental policies, the thesis illustrates the manner in which top-down policy framing of *suzhi* imbues it with new meaning in the imaginations of average citizens as they navigate a rapidly modernizing and internationalizing China.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 *Suzhi*: some things just can't be translated

My first encounter with the Chinese term *suzhi* (素质) occurred in the fall of 2011, in a Chinese language course at the University of Kansas. I had spent a year in China during my undergraduate studies, though after only a few years of being home, I hadn't retained even the simplest of vocabulary. At KU, we used excellently chosen textbooks for studying the language—the vocabulary was (nearly) always up-to-date so we could learn to communicate with ordinary Chinese people without sounding like trained robots, calling new friends “comrade” and stumbling around trying to use outdated maxims rooted in “Red China.” The textbook we used to gain insight into Chinese language and society was appropriately titled “All Things Considered,” as its reading exercises (though perhaps simplified in content and presentation) were largely taken directly from recent Chinese newspapers and cultural publications, exposing the students to a culturally-informed variety of real-life topics. As we muddled through these authentic readings in a classroom situated in one of the United States' most culturally homogenous areas under the guidance of an excellent and thoroughly knowledgeable of all-things-China professor, the language class was transformed into what seemed like a virtual-reality tour of China- and made us feel as if, were we to be suddenly dropped in the middle of Nanjing, we would find nothing entirely foreign to grapple with.

One morning, as our small class worked through the new vocabulary in the text of Chapter 14, *Lonesome Child* (*jimo de haizi*/寂寞的孩子), a news article published in 1999 by the People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao*/人民日报), we came across the new vocabulary word *suzhi* and paused to discuss its meaning in English, as was customary when the text seemed ambiguous or

used a term in an uncommon way. In this reading, the meaning seemed ambiguous. Within the context of warning presumably unaware parents of the new problems faced by urban Chinese single-children in the competitive society of the new market economy, the word appeared in the sentence: “Parents need to improve their own quality, and learn a bit about aspects of mental health.” (*jiazhang xuyao tigao zishen suzhi, xuexi yixie guanyu xinli jiankang fangmian de zhishi* 家长需要提高自身素质，学习一些关于心理健康方面的知识).¹ The vocabulary lists in each chapter generally provided suitable English counterparts to the meanings expressed in Chinese. There were, of course, times when the definition required clarification, or a term in Chinese had already undergone some type of semantic change in native discourse and the English description no longer conveyed the meaning appropriately. *Suzhi* was translated in English simply as *human quality* in our vocabulary list, and the concept in English seemed just as foreign as the Chinese word in the text.

When we paused our reading to further discuss the term’s meaning, the discussion was significantly shorter than usual. We asked “What does it actually mean- *human quality*?” As usual, we expected to receive clarification of the meaning from our professor. As he was a native English speaker fluent in Chinese, he was *always* able to offer more clarification. Having toiled through the language learning process himself, he was very good at catching nuances in Chinese that English speakers would find difficult to grasp, and his expertise in so many areas of Chinese culture, history, and literature made him very adept at simplifying complex cultural concepts. This particular term, however, “human quality” elicited a quite different response. This time, he paused to think a moment, then laughed a bit and waved his hand in the air, as if to say

¹ Chih-p’ing Chou, Yan Xia, and Meow Hui Goh, *All Things Considered*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2001), p. 189.

“forget about it.” He replied that he didn’t have a better translation or explanation for *suzhi*’s broader meaning. Perhaps he did have a better description, but simply didn’t have the time in a single class period to hash it out enough for it to make sense. He said to us, as a final note to remember before we moved on with the reading, that “You know, some things just can’t be translated. Language is part of culture, and this concept doesn’t really exist in our culture.”

In learning a foreign language, especially when learning primarily from mass-produced materials like textbooks, it is common to come across words or idiomatic expressions that seem so out-of-touch and random that it is nearly impossible to imagine a situation when one might actually need to use it in real life. Many such words and phrases do end up slipping through the memory cracks into the abyss of forgotten terms, often without ever reappearing in real conversation and never being missed. Thinking about that morning’s class on my way home, and considering the daunting number of words I needed to memorize in the next 24 hours, it seemed rather likely that *suzhi* might be the one from that day’s lesson that would get forgotten. When would I ever actually engage in a conversation-outside of my classroom- that would require me to so very specifically refer to *human quality*? Partly because I could not envision a scenario for its use, partly because I could not find that term or alternative explanation of it in my older Chinese language learning textbooks from years before, and finally because my own professor either could not or simply did not attach additional meaning to it to give it any significant value, I preemptively agreed to forgive myself for not being able to use it correctly in a sentence if ever called to do so.

A bit over a year later, in the fall of 2012, I returned to my former host city of Nanjing for a second period of two years. In a very short time, I realized that of all the terms that I had learned and forgotten, or studied but never fully learned, that foreign-concept-foreign-word *suzhi*

was indeed an extremely relevant term to grasp. On my way to school one morning, just outside of my apartment building, I was greeted by a Chinese man as he attempted to sell his “high-quality” (*zhiliang hao/质量好*) imported personal care goods. He greeted me that day by saying “hello” in English, and I responded similarly and continued on my way. Over the course of the next few weeks, I repeatedly crossed paths with the same man, as he stood directly in the path from my building to the bus stop each morning. Each time I passed, he would smile and greet me with a “hello,” but rather than greet me in Chinese once he learned that I could communicate in his native language, he continued to use greeting phrases in English, Japanese, Russian, Korean, German, and Spanish. I was not under the impression that he was fluent in these languages, but it was clear that he had made efforts to learn the essential phrases to grab the attention of passersby.

One day, confused by his insistence on greeting me in languages other than Chinese, I asked him why he continued on this way. Before asking him, I had assumed that he was either trying to show off his international knowledge, or that he was unable to guess my nationality, and trying to make me feel comfortable by greeting me in my possible native language. His response was not what I had imagined it would be.

I spoke to him in Chinese, letting him know that I am an English speaker from the United States, but my Chinese was decent enough that he could just talk to me in his own language. He responded that, of course, he knew that already, but he chose to greet me in languages other than Chinese because “the Chinese people’s *suzhi* is too low. They can’t be trusted and one should not do business with them.” He proceeded to explain that his greetings in other languages were meant to reflect his own business ethic- that the “other countries’ people” have morals in business, they do not cheat each other, they sell high-quality goods at a fair price, and they treat

customers with respect. He believed that by greeting potential customers in languages of people with “higher quality” than the Chinese, both he and his product would be received with a greater level of respect.

In hindsight, the irony in the above encounter is striking: a native-Chinese man was consciously attempting to distance himself from (what he understood as) the meta-stereotype of Chinese as being greedy and of “low-quality,” yet blocking bike and foot traffic by standing directly in a busy city bike-path during morning rush-hour, while peddling mediocre, western drugstore-brand beauty products (at several times the average retail price).² However, the way the man used that nearly-forgotten term *suzhi* was not clear enough to provide me with a confident understanding of what is meant by “human quality” in everyday speech. Though at first quite unintentionally, the following two years became for me a rather intensive and constant lesson in *suzhi* discourse. From street-side peddlers (*getihu*/个体户) to taxi drivers, construction/migrant workers, teachers and professors, restaurant workers, business elite, university students, and Communist Party cadres, I heard countless explanations of *suzhi*. By way of personal anecdotes, thoughtful discussions of individual interpretations, dialogues in group conversations, and through casual, spontaneous encounters with the ordinary people of Nanjing, as well as people I met as I traveled to a variety of other locations as far away from Nanjing as Xinjiang and Sichuan, I gradually developed a much clearer picture of “human

² As will be seen below, this very behavior is what some point to as an indicator of what is meant by “low-quality.” Blocking traffic and disregarding the inconvenience to others by standing in the bike path, peddling goods on the street, grossly exaggerating the quality and price of foreign imports for personal profit, and having no storefront from which to sell such goods (which implies at least minimal compliance with “quality control” mechanisms of the state inspection agencies) - each of these represent, in part, what has been meant by “low *suzhi*” over the course of the last four decades.

quality,” as the Chinese see it, in the context of their current, average, every-day lives in the 21st century.

This thesis explores the concept of *suzhi* as it has been presented in official discourse over the course of the last 40 years of reform. By tracing its evolution from a vaguely defined policy goal of the early reform period of the 1970s to its ubiquitous usage in public discourse in a variety of social contexts, one may grasp a fuller understanding of what is meant by the modern Chinese conception of “human quality” as it is used today against the backdrop of top-down modernization and development policy propaganda.

1.2 Western Scholarship on *Suzhi*

Various attempts by western scholars have been made to identify the performative aspects of *suzhi* discourse in contemporary Chinese society. A large portion of western scholarship tends to highlight the negative social influence of *suzhi* in terms of a social and political discourse that promotes economic disparity and social stratification. In identifying the connection between *suzhi* discourse and social inequality, Ann Anagnost argues, through a combination of Foucauldian theoretical frameworks on human subjectivity and empirical analysis, that the emphasis on improving the “quality” of the population is little more than a clever guise behind which lies a neoliberal governmentality- creating self-regulating, consumer subjects to further national economic development.³ Pun Ngai and Yan Hairong contribute to the neoliberal interpretation of *suzhi* by highlighting the socio-economic challenges faced by rural populations and migrant workers within the urban/rural class dichotomy and within the

³ Ann Anagnost, “The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*),” *Public Culture* 16, no. 2, (2004): pp.189-208, DOI: 10.1215/08992363-16-2-189; “From ‘Class’ to ‘Social Strata’: grasping the social totality in reform-era China,” *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 3, (2008), p.497-519, DOI: 10.1080/01436590801931488.

emergent market economy of the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁴ Hai Ren develops the concept of China's neoliberal transformation in a discussion of the formation of a "middle-class norm" based on consumer practices and the social respectability and opportunities for upward mobility that come with attaining middle-class status.⁵ Sun Wanning expands the neoliberal reading of *suzhi* discourse to illustrate that the designation of high or low "quality" not only places rural migrants at a competitive disadvantage against the consumer practices of the urban middle-class, but also further ascribes lower "quality" to migrants from certain geographical locations, thus creating a hierarchical valuation scheme within an already 'derogated' segment of the population.⁶

Others take a less value-oriented approach by illustrating the nuanced meanings of *suzhi* that ordinary Chinese citizens interpret and act upon in their daily lives, mostly within the context of a specific region and demographic. Carolyn Hsu refutes the neoliberal readings of *suzhi* discourse in her research on Harbin, Heilongjiang residents' perceptions of businesspeople, Communist Party cadres, and the developing entrepreneur-mentality at the turn of the 21st century. Through the narratives of her study participants, she identifies levels of "quality" as being imagined in terms of educational attainment and social responsibility, as opposed to

⁴ Pun Ngai, "Subsumption or Consumption? The Phantom of Consumer Revolution in "Globalizing" China," *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no 4, (2003), p.469-492, DOI: 10.1525/can.2003.18.4.469; Yan Hairong, "What if Your Client/Employer Treats Her Dog Better Than She Treats You? Market Militarism and Market Humanism in Post-socialist Beijing," In *Global Futures in East Asia: Youth, Nation, and the New Economy*, edited by Ann Anagnost, Andrea Arai, and Hai Ren, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013) p. 150-75; "Neoliberal governmentality and neohumanism: organizing Suzhi/value flow through labor recruitment networks," *Cultural Anthropology* 184, no. 4, (2003), p.493-523, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3651611>.

⁵ Hai Ren, "The Middle-Class Norm and Responsible Consumption in China's Risk Society," In *Global Futures in East Asia: Youth, Nation, and the New Economy*, edited by Ann Anagnost, Andrea Arai, and Hai Ren, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013) p. 29-52; "The Neoliberal State and Risk Society: The Chinese State and the Middle Class," *TELOS* 151, (2010), p. 105-28, DOI: 10.3817/0610151105.

⁶ Sun Wanning, "Suzhi on the Move: Body, Place, and Power," *Positions* 17, no. 3, (2009) p. 617-642, DOI: 10.1215/10679847-2009-017.

neoliberal logics of consumerism.⁷ Andrew Kipnis provides a genealogy of the term *suzhi* in a social, political, and linguistic context, details its transformation within a nature vs. nurture connotation, and explicitly dismisses interpretations of *suzhi* discourse as neoliberal by pointing out the over-generalization inherent in neoliberal frameworks of analysis.⁸ By incorporating the theme of “exemplary modelling” discussed by Borge Bakken, who posits that Chinese statecraft and social ordering are products of China’s long-standing tradition of learning by imitation, Kipnis provides a picture of contradiction and struggle. He argues that official discourse in *suzhi*-raising campaigns promotes the cultivation of specific qualities, such as individuality, entrepreneurialism, creativity, and self-regulation, yet these very qualities, if successfully cultivated, undermine the notion that social stability can be maintained by imitating “exemplary” models.⁹ The preceding scholarship is useful in helping to identify the major themes that are represented by the term over the course of the reform-era, but does little to offer insight into how the average person internalizes such a nuanced concept in daily life after the first decade of the 21st century.

Within the following chapters, I will provide an understanding of the term *suzhi* by highlighting how it has been used as a framing device for policy implementation throughout the reform period. In doing so, I will first introduce the general concept of “human quality” in China

⁷ Carolyn Hsu, *Creating Market Socialism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); “Cadres, Getihu, And Good Businesspeople: Making Sense Of Entrepreneurs In Early Post-Socialist China,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 35, no. 1, p. 1-38 (2006), Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40553488>.

⁸ Andrew Kipnis, “Suzhi: A Keyword Approach,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 186 (2006), p.295-313, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20192614>; “Suzhi Reified: Neoliberalism Reified: Suzhi Discourse and Tropes of Neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 2 (2007), p.383-400, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4622955>.

⁹ Borge Bakken, *The Exemplary Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Andrew Kipnis, “Subjectification and education for quality in China,” *Economy and Society* 40, no. 2 (2011), p. 289-306, DOI: 10.1080/03085147.2011.548950.

and its relation to statecraft in a brief overview of its historical antecedents. Then I will provide a somewhat chronological history of the usage of the term *suzhi* in official discourse throughout the Reform Era, from 1979 to the present day, to illustrate the process by which the term has evolved from an obscure adjective describing unadorned silk to a comprehensive self-improvement project and social ideal. Finally, in hopes of supplementing the excellent research already available, I will provide an brief discussion of *suzhi* as it is used by average citizens today, nearly 40 years after its modern debut into the public consciousness, to illustrate the manner in which top-down policy framing enters the very private consciousness of average citizens in their navigation of a rapidly modernizing and internationalizing China.

Chapter Two: *Suzhi* and Social Engineering in early Post-Mao China

2.1 *Suzhi* in Pre-Modern Chinese

Suzhi is a nuanced term with virtually no English equivalent. While it is often translated simply as “quality” or “human quality,” the term carries many meanings that the English translation does not convey.¹⁰ Chinese has many terms that may be translated into English as “quality,” but in modern discourse, when referring to the aggregate qualities embodied by a human being, rather than the quality (and qualities) of an object or an institution, for example, only *suzhi* encapsulates the variegated criteria of the concept of “human quality.” The designation of high or low “quality” can refer to a number of individual *qualities* an individual or a group possesses, such as physical quality (strength), mental/psychological quality (intelligence and aptitude), moral quality (character), and cultural or civic quality (tastes and etiquette). However, the term has only recently gained such nuanced meaning. Prior to the late 20th century, *suzhi* was a rather obscure word and quite unrelated to notions of human development.

The graphs *su* (素) and *zhi* (质) can be found numerous times in all varieties of classical and pre-modern texts. However, the combined graphs only appear a handful of times. The majority of occurrences of *suzhi* appear in relation to inanimate objects, rather than being specific to man or society, and although neutral in its connotation, it was often used to describe an object or material deserving praise or respect.¹¹

¹⁰ In Kipnis, “Keyword,” he counts 32 different English translations of *suzhi*, referencing the 1999 work of Jiang Tong, “‘Suzhi jiaoyu’ yingyi bianxi” (“An analysis of the English translations of *suzhi jiaoyu*”), *Changjiang zhigong daxue xuebao* [Journal of the Changjiang Vocational University] 16, no. 4 (1999).

¹¹ When these two graphs are found together, the meaning becomes an unadorned substance or pure substance. Though it is only found together on few occasions in extant texts, the consistency of its meaning remains intact through the various texts. In describing architecture in the rhapsodies, the beauty of a goddess, the disposition of an army, or the visual and structural quality of a person or thing, the implication of being pure, unadorned, natural and of solid structure is clear and praiseworthy. For examples, see: Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan: or Selections of Refined*

Su (素), alone, as defined in the *Shuowen jiezi*, is plain, unadulterated and unadorned white silk.¹² As white has been, since ancient times in China, the appropriate color for mourning ritual observances, pure, white silk was the silk of choice for such ritual ceremonies. Several passages in pre-Qin texts describe the silk worn by ritual practitioners as being *su*, praising its simplicity and the reverence it shows. This simple and unadorned material can also be extended in meaning to refer to one's demeanor or countenance, implying one appears to be unaffected, calm, or composed and unfettered. White, unadulterated silk was the material of choice not only for mourning attire, but also for the writing medium. Its purity in color and structural integrity allowed for an excellent base on which to write. In modern Chinese, along with its ancient definition, *su* also carries an additional meaning of a trait or behavior that is “habitual” or “longstanding.”

Zhi (質), alone, is defined in the *shuowen jiezi* as “a thing of collateral exchange,” or offering, derived from the practice of offering sacrificial humans and animals in ritual ceremonies, but it eventually came to denote the substantiating effect of offering (sacrificing) a

Literature, volume two: Rhapsodies on Sacrifices, Hunting, Travel, Sightseeing, Palaces and Halls, Rivers and Seas, He Pingshu, “The Hall of Great Blessings,” trans. David R. Knechtges, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982) pp. 279-304. Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan: or Selections of Refined Literature, volume three: Rhapsodies on Natural Phenomena, Birds and Animals, Aspirations and Feelings, Sorrowful Laments, Literature, Music, and Passions*, Song Yu, “Rhapsody on the Goddess,” trans. David R. Knechtges, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982) pp. 339-345. Excerpt from the *Han Shu*, Historical Narrative section, number 16: “wan shi wei zhi zhou zhang bo di shi liu: Mr. Wan of Wei Faces Mr. Zhang of Zhou,” accessed via CHANT.org, on April 11, 2016. URL: <http://www.chant.org.www2.lib.ku.edu/PreHan/Search.aspx>; Excerpt from: *The Lost Book of Zhou*, “Conquering Jie of Yin,” accessed via CHANT.org, on April 11, 2016. URL: <http://www.chant.org.www2.lib.ku.edu/PreHan/Search.aspx>. Excerpt from: *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, trans. by W. Allyn Rickett, volume two, chapter 14, section 42, “On Paying Attention to Circumstances,” (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) pp. 129-135. *Huainanzi*, “Instructions on the Original Dao,” section 10, accessed via: the Chinese Text Project, at URL: <http://ctext.org/huainanzi/yuan-dao-xun?searchu=%E7%B4%A0%E8%B3%AA&searchmode=showall#result>, on April 12, 2016.

¹²From the *Shuowen jiezi*, entry no. 8729 Accessed via Ctext.org, URL <http://ctext.org/shuo-wen-jie-zi?searchu=素>, on April 10, 2016.

hostage (usually a prince of a kingdom) as collateral during state negotiations.¹³ The graph was eventually most often used to mean “substance” or “the natural constituent or quality of a thing.”¹⁴ The latter usage is more commonly found in texts dated from the Warring States period and later, and generally carries this meaning of “substance” when it is paired with another graph to form a compound word.

When the graphs *su* and *zhi* are found together, the meaning becomes an unadorned, pure, or innate substance. As the following discussion will show, the concept of man as a moldable, useful, and necessary object in the functioning of a stable and prosperous state, will help to clarify how the ancient concept of “innate substance” came to mean “human quality” in the modern context.

2.2 The Family Planning Policy and *suzhi* as “Human Quality”

The term *suzhi* in modern discourse, first appeared on a broad scale during the Dengist reforms of the late 1970s in a political slogan coinciding with his Reform and Opening (*gaige kaifang*/改革開放) campaign, and the implementation of the newly-conceived family planning policy.¹⁵ Banners and headlines promoting the need to control the growth of the Chinese population began with a simple, catchy slogan that the average citizen could easily understand. Through the recent years of devastating famine, social chaos, and political turmoil that resulted

¹³ *Shuowen jiezi*, entry number 3952, from the *Bei* section, accessed via <http://ctext.org/shuo-wen-jie-zi?searchu=質>, through Ctext.org on April 10, 2016.

¹⁴ This meaning is taken from: *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, edited by Paul W. Kroll, and offered through the Pleco Android platform. 2015.

¹⁵ Rachel Murphy, “Turning Peasants into Modern Chinese Citizens: “Population Quality” Discourse, Demographic Transition and Primary Education,” *The China Quarterly* 177 (2004): pp. 1-20. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20192302>.

from the catastrophic mass campaigns under Mao's leadership, the Chinese people were acutely aware of the industrial and natural resource scarcity facing the country.¹⁶ Although within the scientific studies preceding and leading to the official promulgation of the Family Planning Policy, the concept of "quality" was interchangeably discussed in terms of *suzhi* and *zhiliang*, the neutrality of *suzhi* provided a much more flexible application of the idea of overall-quality.¹⁷ Though they have subtle differences in application and connotation, in early population studies literature these two terms both conveyed the sense of general, comprehensive quality- though over time, *suzhi* came to represent the aggregate qualities embodied by humans, while *zhiliang* referred to the quality of industries and institutions. "Quality," the English word that both terms (along with several other common terms) are generally translated as, does not adequately convey the "aggregate qualities" embedded in the term *suzhi*- the physical substance, psychological capacity, technological aptitude, and social utility- of the individual bodies that made up China's population.

The drive to industrialize and modernize the country revealed the overpopulation crisis, which would inevitably affect individual families and their prospects for success in the new market. In early 1979, the central government officially announced the nationwide Family Planning Policy, which dictated that urban residents would be limited to one child, and rural residents and minority populations would be limited to two children (if the first born happened to be a female).¹⁸ The policy announcement, in customary fashion, was promptly promoted across newspaper headlines and public announcement board through a concise and enthusiastic slogan.

¹⁶ Ann Anagnost, "From 'Class' to 'Social Strata': grasping the social totality in reform-era China" *Third World Quarterly*, 29, no. 3 (2008): 497-519. Accessed on 11/7/2014. DOI: 10.1080/01436590801931488.

¹⁷ Andrew Kipnis, "Suzhi: A Keyword Approach," *The China Quarterly*, no. 186 (2006) pp. 298-99.

¹⁸ Ezra Vogel, p. 688. March 23, 1979, official announcement of the birth control policy (p.687).

The slogan that became the driving factor in gaining eventual wide-spread support of the One-Child Policy read: “control the population growth, raise the population quality” (*kongzhi renkou zengzhang, tigao renkou suzhi/控制人口增长, 提高人口素质*), or for short, “decrease in quantity, increase in quality.”¹⁹ The implication here was clear that with fewer people to compete for scarce resources, access to education, employment, nutritious foods, housing options, health care, and other necessities would be more readily available to facilitate the healthy development of the physical being.

Although already by the early 1950s Women’s League members were charged with counseling and educating women about methods of birth control, benefits of delayed marriage and planned pregnancies, and essential education regarding overall reproductive health, the 1970s policy demanded strict enforcement by authorities above the Women’s League cadres, giving it the force of law.²⁰ To facilitate the implementation of the Family Planning program, authorities were called to strictly enforce the birth rates within their respective communities. Personal hygiene and physical health were included in the educational training, helping to foster public awareness of the connection between the overall health of the physical body and the quality of the child.

Suzhi, on the eve of major economic and social transformations of the late 1970s, was generally regarded as an innate, and mostly physical quality that could be enhanced by proper

Reiteration of the need for increased enforcement of family-planning efforts by all levels of administration in 1981 (Vogel, p. 688)

¹⁹ Patricia M. Thornton, “From liberating production to unleashing consumption: mapping landscapes of power in Beijing” *Political Geography* 29 (2010) 302-310. Accessed on 10/12/2014. DOI: 10.1016/polgeo.2010.06.001

²⁰ Law and Policy are generally considered two distinctly different things, but in Communist-led China, the two are often interchanged and the distinctions muddled. Laws are codified though sometimes ignored or difficult to enforce due to structural and social aspects of the legal system. Policies are pronouncements by leading officials, and are given priority often much more dutifully than laws. Failure to comply with policies has legal ramifications and are often more strictly carried out because of their explicit connection to party/political priorities.

access to life's basic necessities. The prevailing collectivist mindset of the time provided the understanding that the health and stability of the nation depended upon the fostering of physically and psychologically healthy children- in carefully limited numbers. The notion of 'human quality' rested upon a simple comprehension of Darwinian concepts of evolution and Malthusian theory- if China was to survive, and the Chinese people were to flourish among the people of the world, they must strive to raise the quality of the 'innate substance' of the people of their nation through limiting population growth and enhancing the availability of "life-improving" resources.

2.3: "Human Quality" and Related Concepts prior to 1979's *Suzhi*

Well before the term *suzhi* entered modern public discourse, concerns about the deficient *qualities*, the general characteristics in need of guidance and improvement, of the Chinese people were popular topics of discussion among China's elite. While a handful of western *suzhi*-discourse analysts consider the hierarchical valuation of man based on a ranking of individual qualities to be "dehumanizing," China's practice of doing just that for the entirety of its recorded history is, in fact, exceptionally focused on the human- particularly, how to become *more perfectly* human.²¹

Dating back to the formative years of classical Chinese philosophy, particularly during the warring states period of China's history, members of the *shi* (士) class and prominent followers of the more highly developed philosophical schools attempted to organize the human

²¹ For a concise discussion on the concept of man's becoming "whole" (*cheng/诚*) in terms of realizing his full potential, see Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, pp. 133-37.

realm by explaining man's nature, identifying his inherent deficiencies, and assigning social rank based on preconceived standards of quality that were grounded in moral psychology and social utility. The aim, at this time in history, was to reduce the chaos and strife experienced by all levels of society resulting from constant warfare and hegemonic ambitions of various states. Though the impetus of the rise of philosophical writings on these subjects was to direct kingly rule over the people, the underlying messages applied to the individual at the lowest level and extended to the ruling elite. The overarching goal of the various philosophical schools of the time was to enhance the state by enhancing the condition of society through reformed thought and behavioral practices of all individuals. From ritual sacrifices, daily dress, musical preferences, and personal behavior, early thinkers sought to harmonize society and provide a replicable framework for social stability, urging individuals to improve themselves for the sake of "all under heaven" (*tianxia*/天下). The Confucians hoped to achieve order by promoting ethical behavior through constant learning, self-rectification and self-cultivation, restricting desires and regulating emotion, and by ritually adhering to propriety defined within hierarchically ranked social relationships.

In the modern era of the Chinese state, determining the most effective method of ordering and harmonizing the multitudinous peoples of the state into a cohesive and productive whole still remains a prevalent discussion, though expressed in terms more fitting to the modern ideological and political scheme. The question of how to enhance the prosperity of the state, the knowledge that harmony and stability among the people rests on the mundane behaviors of the individual, has been a consistently pressing concern for China's ruling elite- from the advent of agricultural communities in pre-classical times, to the overthrow of Imperial rule, to the present day.

As will be discussed in Chapter five, the contemporary interpretation of the term *suzhi* carries with it many of the fundamental concerns that were the foundation of the prominent pre-classical philosophical teachings; namely, self-cultivation, proper public and private behavior, appropriate adornment of one's physical person, enhancement of individual skills/abilities, social stability, and collective harmonious progress.²²

The concept of cultivation of the self- be it in terms of morality, ways of dressing and personal comportment, the development of skillsets and cognitive aptitude for the betterment of self and state- was a fundamental theme in early Chinese thought. Though these ideas are now inherent to and embedded in the term *suzhi*, in pre-classical times, these ideas were expressed through a variety of terms, each related to the betterment of the human, and seen as measures of one's value in society. The terms briefly discussed below, in this context, relate most often to the human, as opposed to the other living things. More specifically, the terms in this discussion each share two distinctive commonalities: first, each was believed to be innate to the human being; that is, each human was/is inherently endowed with some degree of each of these simply by virtue of being born human; and second, each of these things were considered to be things that people needed to, or at least *could*, improve upon, regulate, and/or cultivate to become better or more fully perfected humans in the social world. These two similarities are also key features of the modern concept of *suzhi*. The terms briefly discussed here are: *de* (德), *xing* (性), *qing* (情), and *cai* (才/材).

***De* (德) Man's Innate Moral Power**

²² The sources here are too numerous to list. However, for a few excellent overviews of early philosophical concerns, see: A.C. Graham's *Disputers of the Tao*; Sarah Allan's *The way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*, Phillip J. Ivanhoe's *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*; P.J. Ivanhoe's *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation*, and Wing-Tsit Chan's *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*.

De (德), like *suzhi* today, is a rather problematic word in terms of English translation and concrete meaning. Evidence of its usage, or some closely related form of it, dates back to the Oracle Bone inscriptions of the late Shang dynasty.²³ Its usage and meaning varied depending on time and context, but has been taken to mean “virtue” in its simplest translation, as in the “inherent characteristic of something,” or as a moral-laden term meaning “inherent virtuousness” which, in either case, gave an individual a certain amount of sway or power over others depending on the amount of *de* he had.²⁴ *De* was believed to be an inherited trait, passed down through one’s lineage, built or depleted over time, and could be enhanced by certain ethical behaviors.

The Confucians, primarily, took *de* to be the manifest power of one’s inborn moral virtue. This version of *de* needed to be cultivated and built upon in order for a man to become a *junzi* (君子), a gentleman, or a man of noble character, eligible to hold an official position in the state apparatus and have a chance of upward social mobility. *De* was said to have a certain power over others, generating a genuine yet imperceptible influence on others.

Furthermore, as an important component in creating harmony among men, *de* contained a force generating reciprocity. When one acted with *de*, the reciprocated action would also be one of *de*. Cultivating *de* required the constant effort of self-rectification, perfecting both the ritual acts of sacrifice and the ritual acts of propriety in all mundane behaviors, being filial and sincere, and devoting oneself to learning the correct way of social conduct. Thus, *de* was a naturally endowed element of the human, but in the Confucian perspective, especially as the Ruist school

²³ Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*, “The Sprouts of Virtue,” (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) pp.101-106.

²⁴ Ibid.

developed through Mencius' and Xunzi's expansions, *de* came to carry an inextricable connotation of morality-as-virtue, and thereby became an integral and inseparable part of the Confucian ethical code.

Xing (性)

Along with *de*, man was thought to be born with both a mind/heart (*xin*/心) and a nature. *Xing* (性) is the combination of feeling and thinking and the natural inclinations of the human. In the early philosophies, it was not disputed that man had an inherent nature that differed from the nature of other living things, and this was due to his having the mind/heart (*xin*), which other species did not have. The *Analects* of Confucius state that men have similar natures, but as men grow, their practices differentiate them one from another.²⁵ Whether one's nature was inclined towards goodness or otherwise depended fully on the cultivation of one's character, and the surroundings in which one found himself. Thus, according to Confucian orthodoxy, man's nature could be improved upon through diligent practice. It must be guided and nourished in order to flourish to its full potential, and thus be of value within the social order.²⁶

Qing (情)

Related to man's nature, and very much embedded in it, is man's innate disposition, his *qing* (情). In early philosophical discourse, man's *qing* was considered to be inextricably related to his nature, but distinguished each individual by the *outward expression* of his innate disposition. Dispositions, sometimes translated as emotions, were also naturally endowed in the

²⁵ *Analects* 17.2, "The Master said: the natures of man are similar, it is practice/habit which differentiates them (*zi yue: xing xiangjin ye, xi xiang yuan ye*).

²⁶ The well-known debate between Mencius and Xunzi regarding the nature of man will not be discussed here, as it is beyond the scope of this paper. For a brief discussion of *xing*, see Sarah Allan's *The Way of Water*, pp. 107-111

human, were considered part of the natural order, and thus, neutrally viewed. Anger, joy, jealousy, frustration, sadness, and desire were all inherent in *qing*, natural to man's being human, but were, according to the Confucians, necessarily in want of cultivation and rectification or regulation.²⁷ To clarify the difference between *xing* and *qing*, man's *xing* automatically endows him with his individual parameters of *qing*, and his expression of *qing* determines his character as discerned by others. Because man's nature (his *xing*) was thought to be generally predisposed toward excess, without careful regulation of his *qing*, the excess of any of the forms of *qing* could destabilize both his internal and external environment, disrupting the social harmony and inviting similar reciprocation.

Cai (才/材)

Finally, though these concepts are not at all exhaustive of pre-classical terminology used to describe inherent endowments of the human category, the last term discussed here is *cai* (才/材). This term referred to the natural abilities endowed in man, the skills and *potential* capabilities of the human not yet taken shape or cultivated. *Cai*, originally a term for timber or the shoots of plants ready to grow, was used metaphorically to refer to man's abilities that could be put to use in the social realm.²⁸ In the Confucian tradition, an individual's *cai* was to be carefully cultivated and trained in order to make him both useful and refined in society. As with *de*, *xing*, and *qing*, *cai* was also inborn and inherent in humans, but, like *de*, was not equally distributed among men- some were endowed with very little potential, while others were born with extraordinary aptitude, though all would need to cultivate what he had in order to realize its

²⁷ Michael Puett, "The Ethics of Responding Properly: The Notion of *qing* in early Chinese Thought," in *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature*, edited by Halvor Eifring, (Leiden: Brill, 2004) Pages 37-68.

²⁸ Allan, *The Way of Water*, "The Sprouts of Virtue," pp. 111-113.

measure. In order for an individual's *cai*, or potential to be useful, it needed to be nourished, just as a seedling growing in a field must be watered and tended. This nourishment came in the form of self-cultivation, rigorous attention to ritual and duty, and from the process of education from a proper model or teacher. Left unattended, one's *cai* could perish, or grow into an unwieldy and socially useless form. In short, one's usefulness within the state necessarily required the attentive cultivation of one's individual potential. Inadequate cultivation of individual skill rendered one unfit to participate in the social order of men.

Although each of the terms discussed above originally denoted concepts now contained within the modern use of the term *suzhi*, each of them was relatively value-neutral at some point in the early Chinese lexicon. Although rooted in naturalistic or organic phenomena, their evolution and adoption/co-optation into Confucian philosophical rhetoric rendered them unsuitable for Communist leadership usage, as the new government attempted to build a new society while distancing themselves from the old social order.

None of the terms remained value-neutral past the Han codification of Confucian learning (202 to 220 CE), and each term and its numerous viable applications were tainted by the association with the "feudal Confucian past"- the very historical memory that the Communist regime sought to eradicate from the minds of the Chinese people after 1949. The terms *de*, *xing*, *qing*, and *cai* were not purged from the Chinese language, and are very much in use today to describe similar concepts as they had in the past. However, as state-building rhetoric of the Communist regime required disassociation from the historical ideology of imperial China, these terms were not to be used as official terminology.

Chapter Three: Modernizing the Nation and Raising the Quality of the People

3.1 Early Twentieth Century Concerns

In the final years of the Qing dynasty, reform-minded intellectuals united through a belief that the people of Qing China lacked the fundamental characteristics/qualities needed for a modern society. Influential literati insisted that the people had become “physically and mentally weak” and needed more than machinery and infrastructure to modernize- they needed more people “dedicated to perform” instead of shirking hard work, and they needed to reduce the pervasive “ignorance of the people” in terms of modern social ideas and scientific development.²⁹ Though most often grounded in hope, calls for the “moral renovation of the people” and the crisis of the “quality of the citizenry” (rendered as *renpin*/ 人品) being the main hindrance to the establishment of a constitutional government were growing louder beyond the confines of the Qing court.³⁰

After the fall of the Qing dynasty, the majority of the Chinese population was rural, accustomed to their small networks of local relationships and local customs. Over the course of the first few decades of the 20th century, various Chinese thinkers and activists sought to bring opportunity and education to China’s vast rural population. Among them was a western-trained scholar named James Yen, who returned to China from the United States in the 1920s to put his scientific education to work for the Republic. Seeking to raise the quality of the rural people, Yen and his team of researchers established the first of several “Rural Reconstruction” research sites, known as the “Ding Xian Experiments.” Through western methods of scientific research,

²⁹ Zeng Guofan, “Letter to his Younger Brothers,” (tr. Janice Wickieri), *Renditions*, nos. 41-42 (1994), pp. 135-36; *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection*, 3rd edition, edited by Janet Chen, et al., (New York: W.W. Norton & co., 2014), p. 128.

³⁰ Catherine Vance Yeh, *The Chinese Political Novel*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 166-175.

fieldwork, and data collection, Yen's team determined that rural life perpetuated "four fundamental weaknesses" in the largest segment of China's population at that time. The weaknesses plaguing the people were: "ignorance, poverty, disease, and civic disintegration."³¹ Reconstruction of the rural life was not purely an altruistic endeavor to help raise the rural people's standard of living, the weaknesses of the rural were not isolated to the rural areas. As a nation, the weaknesses of the rural people were seen as detriments to the progress and preservation of the entire nation.³²

Republican China grew deeply fascinated with the developed sciences of the western nations. Many of the intellectual and political elite of the Republican era had spent time abroad, learning and adapting western scientific information to benefit the new nation. By the 1930s, national development discourse revolved around the scientific, from infrastructure design and governmental procedure, to education and social engineering, each was done through careful consideration of the most up-to-date scientific research.

In the name of science and development, and couched in terms of racial improvement (*renzhong gailiang*/人种改良), elites of the Republican era sought to transform the Chinese from a backward people into a "strong and forward-looking nation-state."³³ Chiang Kai-Shek's Confucian-morality and modernity-driven "New Life Movement" of the mid-1930s sought to reinvigorate some of the Confucian ethical code in order to bring a modicum of stability and harmony to the disparate masses. Western and scientifically trained intellectuals realized that in

³¹ Y.C. James Yen, *The Ting Hsien Experiment*, pp. 7-39

³² Chen, et al., *The Search for Modern China: Documentary Collection*, p. 273

³³ Ibid, pp. 299-300. See also, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, *General Chiang Kai-Shek and the Communist Crisis*, (Shanghai: China Weekly Review Press, 1935), pp. 55-73.

order for the transformation of mores among the throngs of uncultured citizens to succeed, however, the fundamental qualities of China's enormous rural population needed to be improved.

Raising the comprehensive quality of the rural population coincided with other Republican-era population concerns. Western eugenic science, theories of genetic degradation and racial impurity, Social Darwinism, and similar race-science had found an eager pupil in the Republic of China. As the new government pressed its ideology of racial harmony as its legitimizing basis for political control of the nation, some within the intellectual circles of population studies and sociology fascinated themselves with methods to ensure that the Chinese race would progressively generate more scientifically superior specimen than was seen in the current sample.³⁴ The scientific approach to population studies during China's Republican years laid the groundwork for the population control policies and *suzhi*-raising campaigns of Communist China nearly half a century later.

3.2 Economic Reforms and Raising *Suzhi*

At the outset of the Reform and Opening policy, the logic put forth in propaganda and policy direction equated raising *suzhi* with liberating the economy and raising individual levels of income. Coinciding with the hard roll-out of the Family Planning policy, the economic reforms initiated in the early 1980s sought to bring the country out of backwardness by stimulating economic growth through liberated production mechanisms. However, exactly what *suzhi* meant- what it measured and how one might get it- had not yet been officially explained.

³⁴ Frank Dikkoter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, Second Edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 97-130.

The people were left to piece together a definition of “quality” that made sense in the current political and economic climate. The idea that the national population was somehow *suzhi*-deficient and needed improvement combined with the national drive to modernize through economic liberation to set in motion the evolving understanding of what “quality” meant. The logical connection between *suzhi* and economic success took root in the early years of Reform.

By autumn of 1980, the careful and gradual process of transitioning from a planned economy to a semi-market economy began to take visible shape informed, in part, by the successful results of the implementation of the Rural Agricultural Reform. Shortly after Mao’s death in 1976, intra-party criticism of many of Mao’s policies had already begun to circulate, and a consensus among the reform-minded faction of the Party/State leaders was that the gravest of Mao’s errors needed immediate rectification, lest the country slide even further backwards. The massive agricultural collectives, created during the 1950s Great Leap Forward, were widely held to be the direct cause of the crippling nationwide grain shortages, which ultimately led to widespread famine and the deaths by starvation of an estimated 30 million people. By 1977, two decades after the end of Mao’s Great Leap Forward, poverty and starvation in the countryside were still rampant. Deng Xiaoping, along with Wan Li and Zhao Ziyang, determined to discover a solution to this problem, much in the same way that James Yen had done in the 1930s.

Between 1977 and 1979, Wan Li took it upon himself to perform several weeks of ground-level research in the most impoverished areas of Anhui, while Zhao Ziyang simultaneously carried out his own research of a similar nature in the communes of Sichuan’s countryside. While Wan Li scientifically recorded his observations and developed a detailed 6-point proposal to alleviate the problem of starvation among Anhui peasants, Zhao covertly

implemented “decollectivization” experiments within the communes of Sichuan.³⁵ The results of their fieldwork proved to Deng and several other decision-makers that gradual decollectivization of the rural communes was imperative for the modernization and development of the countryside and the first step towards national economic restructuring.³⁶

The initial phase of official decollectivization came in the form of a program of “Contracting Down to the Household” within farming collectives. This program allowed the farmers themselves to determine their own preferred methods of crop cultivation, and was based on a mutually agreed upon contract of exchange. Housing and farming machinery were provided in exchange for a certain quota of the harvested crop. Whatever crop remained after remittance of the quota now belonged solely to the farmer, free to use it to feed his family, or sell it for personal profit in the local market. Not only did the program prove fully successful in revitalizing grain production and ending the widespread starvation deaths, but within only four years of implementation, the average annual income of the peasant-farmers had nearly doubled.³⁷ By 1982, the farming communes were officially abolished.

The success of decollectivization and the marked increase in living standards of farmers led to the next phase in economic restructuring and the beginning of the “Dual-track economy.” Former collective-run workshops and commune commercial stores, which had been created to support the local communes, were transferred to the newly-established township and village-level authorities as Township and Village Enterprises (TVE). These workshops were now

³⁵ Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 690-92.

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 691-700.

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp.700-704.

allowed to produce goods within their specializations to compete in the market alongside the centrally-controlled State-Owned Enterprises (SOE).

Throughout the 1980s, increasing outside investment in TVEs, mainly coming from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese, provided the TVEs with a significant edge in industrial production, gradually reducing the competitive strength of the SOEs with similar specializations. Although TVEs were not fully private enterprises, their autonomy in overall enterprise management provided a much-needed boost in output capability, material and supply procurement, and could adjust their level of production based on market demand, thus significantly cutting unnecessary expenditures.³⁸

By the second-half of the 1980s, the weakening of SOEs led to difficulties in fulfilling the welfare structure within SOE system, resulting in largescale layoffs and unemployment in the urban areas. To help alleviate the economic and social unrest following in the wake of this restructuring process, private small businesses (*getihu*), based on the precedent set by the contracted-household farmers' initial market success, were formally legalized to practice business outside the planned-economic structure. The legalization of private entrepreneurship was to allow citizens the chance to engage in the market "to provide a few goods and services to increase the quality of life."³⁹

That it was precisely the peasants, the "uneducated, backward, and uncultured" people of rural China who initially benefited from and were publically lauded for private entrepreneurship gave rise to the subsequent (and relatively short-lived) ill-regard for privately-run businesses in the following years. After all, it was primarily the rural Chinese whose low-*suzhi* was

³⁸ Vogel, pp. 704-705.

³⁹ Hsu, "Cadres, Getihu, and Good Businesspeople," p. 13.

purportedly holding the country back, and their “rural” consciousness could not simply be erased by having “gotten rich.”⁴⁰ The establishment of private business initially met with murmurs among the urbanites as something shameful and indicative of failure within the socialist system.⁴¹ The concept of lacking *suzhi*, as it was presented by the central government, indicated that it was primarily the rural population who needed their quality raised, so how did the term relate to the urban population? The division between rural and urban that was embedded in the early poverty reduction policies shaped the urban understanding of *suzhi* as something that tacitly elevated the urban individual’s status and separated the two groups into two distinct societies operating under entirely different conditions, norms, and expectations.

3.3 Privatization of “lesser” SOEs

In response to the crippling effects of the increasingly successful TVEs operating alongside the State sector, and to speed up the momentum of the Four Modernizations, the central government determined that a large portion of smaller SOEs should be either shut down or, in most cases, transferred to (quasi) private or joint-ownership. This process posed many benefits to the state, though the transition would upend certain stabilizing mechanisms on which the people had come to depend. In the transition from a socialist-planned to market economy, the justification for the transfer of state enterprises to private ownership would not only relieve the state of the significant financial burden of providing social welfare for the staggeringly high number of state employees, but would also allow for greater, much needed improvements in critical industries through competition in an open market.

⁴⁰ Yan, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism” p. 500.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 498. Also, Hsu, *Creating Market Socialism* (2007), pp. 31-53.

The transfer of authority of SOEs was gradual in scope and speed, and its effects were neither immediately nor equally felt throughout the regions. The restructuring policies, in terms of reducing state expenditures on public welfare, were successful and timely as the Asian Financial Crisis threatened China's primary goal of economic development in the second-half of the 1990s. However, still in the relatively early stages of Opening and Reform, very few among the masses, who would purportedly be the beneficiaries of structural reforms, had the capital or expertise necessary to successfully take on such large enterprises. As a result, the leadership/ownership of a large portion of State Enterprises transferred hands within and among the Party elite.

In the people's eyes, SOE privatization simply transferred the burden of the state onto the shoulders of the ordinary people. They no longer had the promise of stable employment, they lost significant benefits in health care, food supply and other subsidies, and many were forced out of their dependable housing in the work unit living quarters. In many respects, the people not only felt abandoned by the state, left to fend for themselves in a seemingly unpredictable new economic and political environment, but also developed a substantial distrust in the Party's loyalty to its own ideology.⁴²

Corruption and various abuses of power within the ranks of Party cadres were already major points of contention among the Chinese people in earlier years of the reform period. Such grievances were voiced loudly in the demonstrations throughout the late 1980s, culminating most intensely during the student-led demonstrations at Tiananmen Square, from mid-April through June 4th of 1989.⁴³ However, as more and more Party members "inherited" positions of power

⁴² Hsu, "Cadres, Getihu, and Good Businesspeople," pp. 25-25.

⁴³ Minzhu Han, *Cries for Democracy: Writing and Speeches From the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 275.

and consequently amassed enormous wealth in the newly-private sector, their blatant displays of wealth, power, extravagance, and wastefulness redoubled ordinary citizens' doubts regarding the Party's loyalty to socialist ideals and their determination (or ability) to perform their role as vanguard of the people.⁴⁴

During the process of privatization in the late 1990s, however, many common people were not well-informed of the nuances of the privatization reform policy, or what 'transfer of ownership' to the private sector entailed, and mistakenly believed that the large enterprises, some of which were now run by Party members, were still, in most respects, extensions of the State structure. With this assumption in mind, as people witnessed the large-scale layoffs of employees, which were in fact necessary to keep such enterprises afloat in the competitive market, they saw a betrayal of socialist ideals in exchange for private gain. According to the official guiding principles since the founding of the People's Republic, the Party was responsible for supporting the masses through selfless labor, providing necessities in exchange for building up the productive forces of society. Now acting as executives in accordance with the "laws of the market," though simultaneously maintaining active or nominal Communist Party membership, these cadre-turned-businessmen got rich, yet provided nothing to benefit society according to socialist ideology.⁴⁵

Beyond the perceived dereliction of duty to serve the masses as representatives of the socialist ideals, another factor existed to raise the ire of the public: it was well-known that prior to Deng Xiaoping's initiation of Reform and Opening, the vast majority of officials within the leadership lacked formal education. Under Mao Zedong's leadership, qualifications for positions

⁴⁴ Hsu, *Creating Market Socialism*, pp. 56-62.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 81-121.

and promotions within the Party/state apparatus were based on devotion to political ideology and military performance. Formal education, historical, international, technical, or cultural knowledge was not a criterion for rising in rank; in fact, education of these sorts, at times under the previous leadership, posed an insurmountable obstacle to joining the regime. Desire to expand the pool of better-educated party members was one of the driving forces behind policies such as the Four Modernizations and the 1986 Compulsory Education Law.⁴⁶

These factors worked to further shift the public's understanding of *suzhi*: wealth, and/or power did not unequivocally equate to high-*suzhi*. Some of the newly-rich were not current or former cadres or state bureaucrats, but they were (presumed to be) peasant-farmers profiting themselves through selling goods and food at high prices, and they provided nothing for the betterment of society beyond their own families. They simply “moved goods from here to there.”⁴⁷ They did not have education in a formal sense, and they did not have culture in the modern or traditional sense. What they possessed was a street-savvy ability to negotiate and maneuver in the new terrain- the same skills required for thieves and con-artists.

The cadre-businessmen did not possess any particularly admirable skillset either. Though they now had money, through which they held considerable sway within the world of Chinese private business, and they had advantageous personal connections to other high-level cadres, cadres-turned-businessmen, and government insiders, they lacked refinement of character, basic education, and even seemed to disregard the honorable virtue of loyalty to anyone but

⁴⁶ In 1986, the central government enacted the compulsory education law, providing 9 years of schooling as the minimum standard for all citizens, partly in response to the low education of cadres. According to the CCP Central Committee, “raising the *suzhi* [of the people] is the basic goal of education reform.” Beyond that, the need to raise the educational level of all current and future cadres required current cadres who did not have the equivalent of 9 years of schooling to attend training courses and pass exams in order to maintain their positions. Guojia jiaoyu weiyuanhui (ed.), *Shiyijie san zhong quanwei yilai zhongyao jiaoyu wenxian (Important Documents on Education since the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress)* (Beijing: Jiaoyu kexue chubanshe, 1992), p. 182.

⁴⁷ Hsu, “Cadres, Getihu, and Good Businesspeople,” p. 16.

themselves and their possible benefactors. These people, and those who managed to gain their good favor, had the kind of economic capital that was requisite for supporting the construction of a consumer society. They could afford the expensive name-brand clothes and foreign, higher-quality goods. They had the means to purchase cars and new homes as these also became commodified. But they only had the *material* markers of *quality* in the new socialist market economy. However persuasive the propaganda effort to equate material wealth with raising individual quality had been, the urban public found this simplistic equation to be lacking in the respect that so far, the economic benefits of *suzhi*-raising projects applied primarily to the “backward” rural peasant *or* the politically affiliated members of society. There was a logical disconnect for the urban, politically unaffiliated people which led many to search for more applicable and actionable definitions or markers of “quality” in the urban-commoner context.

The ability to earn money alone was not enough to earn respect. As urban citizens discussed the differences between “good businesspeople” and lowly “private businesspeople,” they clarified that *suzhi*, in their interpretation, contained qualities of cultivated humanity. Respect attributed to one’s “high-quality” was reserved for those who had a “refinement” of character, visible in manners of speech and dress, and were somehow using their business endeavors to facilitate national development through their knowledge of science and technology, foreign language skills, and cultural knowledge. Informed by the rhetoric behind the Four Modernizations goals which stated that “Without the rapid development of science and technology, there can be no rapid development of the economy,” the popular imagining of *suzhi* incorporated the lofty scientific goals found in government propaganda with the traditional

mores associated with the educated elite of Confucian literati.⁴⁸ This kind of behavioral refinement and scientific expertise was gained primarily through formal (and advanced) education.⁴⁹

For Chinese attempting to internalize the new national catch-phrase of *suzhi*, by the end of the 20th century, the term's meaning had expanded from a rather vague concept associated with top-down rural development projects, economic restructuring, and family planning goals to a self-cultivation project applicable to each individual. Relying on deeply-rooted traditions of respect for self-improvement through education, urbanites internalized the concept of raising quality as a means to meaningfully participate in the national development project and simultaneously enhance their own lives. At this time, however, education and the *suzhi* it could bring were still very much embedded in the market-based elements of the modernization project. The cultivation of "quality" through education and character refinement promised success and respect *in the market*, which would in turn provide the means for a comfortable, respectable, and stable position *in society* and the purchasing power to obtain quality goods commensurate with high- *suzhi* living standards.

3.4 Creating a "Quality" Consumer Society

Despite the general rise in domestic production and export capacity during the first decade of reforms, in order to raise the standard of living significantly enough to justify further reforms, China's leaders recognized the need to transform the traditionally frugal masses into a population of consumers. The decade-long influx of outside investment and the cheap labor

⁴⁸ Deng, Xiaoping. *Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Conference on Science*. IN Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Volume II, (1984). Beijing: Foreign Language Press, pp. 98-111.

⁴⁹ Hsu, *Creating Market Socialism*, pp.157-62.

provided by China's massive labor force, and the rise in successful and productive TVEs and small businesses competing in the market structure, left early 1990s China with a surplus of goods and too few international buyers. By the mid-1990s, the government initiated a propaganda campaign promoting consumer/leisure spending as a matter of pride and development. Employing the sense of national duty alongside the public's growing appreciation of individual wealth and its ability to satisfy material desires, the policies of the second half of the 1990s concretized the association of *suzhi* with educational attainment, cultural sophistication, accumulated wealth and personal leisure, thereby equating commodity expenditure with "quality" citizenship.

One of the ways in which the government "rewarded" the people's hard work and simultaneously promoted the reversal in traditional frugality, in accordance with the successful models of modernized western societies, was to mandate a reduction in working hours for the (primarily urban, white-collar) working class. In May, 1995, the central government officially introduced the 40-hour work-week (*da zhoumo*/大周末), in order to create a two-day weekend for employees of private and government enterprises. The initiative was promoted by state-run news outlets nationwide as a means for the people to enjoy their hard-earned money by having leisure time to "travel, shop, and enjoy a restaurant meal."⁵⁰ The reception among the masses was well-received: local markets, large department stores, restaurants, museums, and all varieties of entertainment venues were met with throngs of customers eagerly ready to physically and materially enjoy the fruits of their labor. Of course, not all enterprises/businesses readily complied with the new policy, but by the end of the 1990s, a large portion of the urban

⁵⁰ Pun Ngai, "Subsumption or Consumption? The Phantom of Consumer Revolution in "Globalizing" China," *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no 4, (2003), p.471.

population came to expect two days per week of personal time, during which they could pursue their own ideal of “the good life.”

A successful rise in consumerism resulting from the *da zhoumo* policy led the central government to further the potentiality of increased commodity and leisure expenditure by introducing a second round of reforms, to the delight of the public from all industries and social strata, as well as for the benefit of the national treasury. Prior to the 1997 revision⁵¹, two of the officially recognized national holidays, the May 1st International Labor Day, and the October 1st Founders’ Day (the holiday commemorating the founding of the People’s Republic of China by the Communist Party) were one-day, paid holidays. These two holidays were now extended to seven-day holidays, referred to by the party and official news outlets (during the first few years of implementation, at least) as “Golden Consumer Days” or “Golden Travel Holidays.”⁵² The extension of paid and unpaid holiday time from one day to seven, sometimes with an additional few days off due to the work-free weekends before and after the official holiday dates, was intended to facilitate even greater increases in consumer spending.⁵³ The biannual “Golden Weeks,” as the term was later shortened to in public discourse, were promoted as “national travel holidays” in which domestic tourism would play a crucial role in generating revenue for the nation.⁵⁴ Already by the year 2000, Pun Ngai cites official statistics indicating domestic travel

⁵¹ Some accounts put the official launching of this reform as taking place in 1999, though other sources indicate 1997 as the official declaration of the changes.

⁵² Ngai, pp. 471-72.

⁵³ The official policy mandates that workers be given 7 consecutive days off, but not that all 5 workdays be paid-time-off. Often, up to 3 days are paid holidays, while the remaining days taken for holiday are unpaid. Furthermore, in order to reclaim lost revenue caused by the extended hiatus of workers, it has become customary for some of the holiday days to be made up over the weekends before and/or after the “Golden Week” holidays.

⁵⁴ The May 1st Labor Day “Golden Week” was eventually reverted, in 2007, to one day or an extended weekend with one day paid-time-off, in order to curb the increasingly unmanageable burden on domestic transit systems, as well as to alleviate the financial and administrative mess incurred by businesses and institutions which deal primarily with international patrons who do not appreciate the extended delay in business dealings during Chinese holidays. To accommodate this, in addition to shortening the May holiday, the government extended the New Year holiday, and added three new traditional holidays to the list of national holidays.

had generated 18.1 billion yuan during the Labor Day holiday, with nearly 40 million citizens engaging in domestic holiday tourism and travel.⁵⁵ Weeks before the second “Golden Week” of that same year, the central government encouraged local government offices and party branches to enhance their efforts at stimulating consumption in their localities by promoting holiday travel.⁵⁶

In contrast with the annual Spring Festival mass-migration, when members of all social strata, some of whom must save significant portions of their income all year, take pains to journey to their hometowns to visit relatives and friends, welcoming the new year giving and receiving feasts and gifts in accordance with their various local customs, the “Golden Week” holidays were designed specifically to compel the financially-advantaged to spend. Or, to put it in terms of the 1990s public sentiment, the successful, aspiring “middle-class” members of society were expected to spread their money far and wide, and to enjoy the benefits of the expanse of commodities offered by the new, globally competitive market. From street-level *getihu*, small businesses, restaurants and convenience shops, to internationally-branded department stores of the urban arena, each saw first-hand the economic benefits of the extended holidays.

3.5 “Middle-Class Tastes” as Embodiment of *Suzhi*

⁵⁵ Pun Ngai, p. 472.

⁵⁶ As cited in Pun (2003), p. 473: “Vice-Premier Qian Qichen today asked all government departments and localities to increase cooperation in a bid to push holiday tourism to a new high. At the first ministerial coordination meeting for national holiday tourism, Qian said the coordination meeting system, authorized by the State Council, will announce tourism information and deal with major transportation, security and emergency rescue work during the tourism peak season. The vice-premier asked all departments and localities to take immediate steps to make tourism play a bigger role in boosting domestic demand, stimulating consumption, and restructuring the economy.” “Ministerial Cooperation Calls for Holiday Tourism,” *Xinhua News*, August 26, 2000, p. 473.

Beyond the increase in profit margins resulting from the holidays spending frenzies, further culturally significant phenomena began to solidify across the nation. The shift from production to consumption as national priority imbued the (urban) masses with a sense of both duty and pride in their ability to make money *and* showcase their ability to do so by accumulating goods and pursuing leisure for a price. In the more affluent urban areas, the showcasing of wealth manifested in wearing high-end, international brand-name clothing and accessories, purchasing private cars for personal use, enrolling in foreign language courses at increasingly high rates of tuition, paying for musical and artistic courses, and, as their incomes allowed, buying single-family apartments with modern conveniences such as private kitchens and bathrooms.

By the end of the extended Labor Day holiday of 2001, the Guangzhou Xinhua news outlet identified a new trend in the spending habits of urban consumers. In addition to taking advantage of the dizzying array of shopping opportunities and fine dining, urbanites were increasingly developing “more sophisticated cultural tastes (*wenhua wei*/文化味).” These “sophisticated cultural tastes” included “engaging in the leisure-time activities of going to the cinema, visiting exhibitions, and attending seminars.”⁵⁷ The “Golden Weeks” afforded the privileged citizens social permission to publicly satisfy their own desires by means of their private wealth, something which had been socially (and politically) unacceptable less than a few decades prior. The “middle-class” had, by the end of the end of the 20th century, become an identifiable social group, based on the material markers of common consumer tastes, though such tastes were attributed to the “human-quality” achieved through education and refined

⁵⁷ “Guangzhou Holidays Show an Increase in Cultural Taste,” *Guangzhou Xinhua News*, May 5, 2001.

character cultivation.⁵⁸ These “middle-class” consumer tastes, during the late 1990s period of reform-era China, had come to exemplify the meaning of “modernity” in the social consciousness. In the few years after the turn of the century, such consumer tastes and their seamless transition towards “sophisticated culture,” seeking leisure through cultural, historical, and intellectual curiosities, laid the groundwork for a gradual shift in what it meant to be, or be seen as, a person of “quality” in 21st century China.

The rural citizens, including the migrant workers residing in the urban areas but officially and inextricably tied to their rural roots, were not in the same financial position as many of their urban counterparts. However, they were nonetheless fully included in the social transformation to a consumer society. Inundated with slogans emphasizing the imperative of modernization, simultaneously ashamed and excited by the images, via advertisements in every medium available, portraying the luxuries enjoyed by the urbanites, each promoting and celebrating the success of economic modernization, and the social respect earned by those who spend their money (to build the nation and bring it out of “backwardness,”) rural Chinese became acutely aware of their own inadequacy. Striving to be seen as valuable members of New China, that is as consumers instead of lowly producers, once touted as the backbone of Chinese society during the Mao years, young rural men and women, by ever greater numbers, sought to escape their rural communities, and thus leave behind the socially-ascribed culturally-backward rural identities.⁵⁹ Equating urbanity with modernity and development, unprecedented numbers of rural men and

⁵⁸ Hai Ren, “The Neoliberal State and Risk Society,” pp. 115-120; also see Pun Ngai, “Subsumption or Consumption,” pp. 471-75; also see Hanlong Lu, “To Be Relatively Comfortable in an Egalitarian Society,” in Deborah S. Davis, ed., *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 120-125, for a brief discussion of the official designation of “middle-class” in 1990’s China.

⁵⁹ Yan Hairong, “Neoliberal Governmentality,” p.501-503. Yan estimates that in Anhui alone, the early 1990’s saw an uptick of 100 million migrant laborers pour in as a result of urban industrialization and privatization.

women abandoned their fields to find work in the industrialized zones.⁶⁰ Many did so with the explicit hope that the income gained, regardless of the exceedingly difficult labor conditions, would provide them with the financial means to consume in the way the urban “others” did, redecorate themselves with modern fashions, send home new commodities to their families left behind, and, especially, to attain for themselves the high level of “quality” so pervasively associated with urban life.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 501.

Chapter Four: Mainstreaming “suzhi” in Public Discourse

4.1 Education Reforms: *Suzhi Jiaoyu* (Education for Quality)

Within the larger context of modernization and development, the rise of consumerism and the concomitant establishment of a distinctly “middle-class” marked a quantifiable success of the reform period in establishing a sound base for the continued growth of economic capital. Liberating production from the confines of the command economy allowed for increases in production, revenue, and quality of products as a result of market competition. The next phase of reform and development, designed to enhance the quality and stability of the economic base, was to focus on the advancement of the human capital on which economic capital was generated. To enhance the quality of China’s productive forces, reformers turned to the education system and the term *suzhi* became a public sensation/buzzword at the turn of the 21st century.⁶¹

In mid-1999, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council issued "A Resolution to Deepen Education Reform and Push Forward *Suzhi* Education on All Fronts," stating:

*In today's world, science and technology are progressing by leaps and bounds; a knowledge economy [zhishi jingji] is emerging; global competition for national strength is increasingly fierce. Education is fundamental to the comprehensive formation of national strength, which is increasingly measured by the suzhi of workers and on the development of a talented human resources pool. This places a more urgent demand on educating and training the new generation for the 21st century.*⁶²

⁶¹ Kipnis, “Keyword,” pp. 300-301

⁶² “A Resolution to Deepen Education Reform and Push Forward *Suzhi* Education on All Fronts.” From the *Xinhua News*, June 17, 1999.

According to the resolution, both educational infrastructure and pedagogy needed urgent reform in order to "meet the need for improving the quality of the national population [*guomin suzhi*/国民素质]."63

Drawing on models from developed countries and western pedagogy, proponents of education reform sought to transform the Chinese educational system from one based on memorization and examination to one that fostered the development of a variety of *suzhi* competencies through a student-centered curriculum. It was believed that the success of developed countries was due, in part, to the comprehensive-education models practiced in those countries. Such comprehensive models were thought to foster creativity, independence, life-skills, and emotional/social intelligence in young students, traits that were deemed necessary for success in a competitive and increasingly global economy. Such skills were seen to be lacking in China's population. Education reformers blamed the heavy reliance on exam-oriented education (*yingshi jiaoyu*/应试教育) as the culprit responsible for producing "low-*suzhi*" workers.

Preparing the nation for greater capacity to generate innovators and responsible citizens, the academy of social sciences pushed the agenda of educational reforms and laid out a new pedagogy aimed at ameliorating the *suzhi* deficiency. Translated into English as education for quality, or quality-oriented education, *suzhi jiaoyu* (素质教育), as the new model was called, included in the curriculum courses and measurements for developing physical *suzhi* (*shenti suzhi*/身体素质), psychological *suzhi* (*xinli suzhi*/心理素质), ideological/political *suzhi* (*sixiang*

⁶³ Xinhua News Agency, "Zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan guanyu shenhua jiaoyu gaige, quanmian tuijin suzhi jiaoyu de jueding" (A resolution of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council regarding the deepening of educational reform and pushing forward suzhi education). Reprinted in *Beijing qingnian bao* (*Beijing Youth Daily*), June 17: 2.

suzhi/思想素质), as Education Minister Zhou Ji explained, in order to “make real improvements in the physical health, psychological *suzhi* and artistic accomplishment of students and foster a new generation of well-rounded people developed in morals, intellect, physical health and aesthetic appreciation.”⁶⁴

Drawing on western models of “comprehensive education,” *suzhi jiaoyu* sought to reform the educational curriculum to a “well-rounded education” system that would develop the specific categories of *suzhi* laid out in the scientific research of the population planners. These pedagogical reforms included the implementation of physical education, aesthetic appreciation (music and art), world history, geography, creative thinking and problem solving techniques, the re-introduction of “social models” as educational tools, and the inclusion of “self-ethical/moral evaluation” for children to incorporate into their educational regimen.⁶⁵ *Suzhi jiaoyu* became the official guiding pedagogical model in 1999, though only implemented at key experimental schools as pilot programs during its first few years.⁶⁶

Debates surrounding education reforms circulated in the national media, from scholars, government officials, talk radio hosts, and social psychologists prompted a resurgence of public discourse concerning the meaning and means of *suzhi*, the notion of “raising quality” became the hot topic as parents and educators grappled with the idea that student success would possibly no longer be defined by exam scores alone, but would be evaluated based on a mastery of their overall *suzhi*, instead. Despite the stated intentions of reducing reliance on exam scores as the

⁶⁴ Ji Zhou, “Zhou Ji xiangjie 2003-2007 nian jiaoyu zhenxing, Xingdong jihua” (Zhou Ji explains the 2003-2007 Action Plan for Invigorating Education), March, 2004, URL: <http://wwjydd.czedu.gov.cn/ywzn/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=39>.

⁶⁵ Rachel Murphy, “Turning Peasants into Modern Chinese Citizens,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 177, 2004, p.4.

⁶⁶ Belinda Bella-Iacovo, “Curriculum Reform and ‘Quality Education’ in China: An Overview,” *International Journal of Educational Development*, 29, pp. 243.

sole criterion for assessing student achievement, the education reformers had not yet devised a way to measure academic achievement as reliably as examination scores had. The result was a formally adopted curriculum geared towards the cultivation of *suzhi* yet still reliant on matriculation by examination. The concept of raising the “quality” of the country’s youth, though still only vaguely understood, entered the very private consciousness of individual households as a matter of urgent priority. Parents seeking desperately to provide their only child with the opportunity to develop high-*suzhi* and secure access to the academic credentials necessary to find gainful employment and respectable status later in life now felt an overwhelming pressure to supplement their child’s formal education with extra-curricular training.

4.2 Self-cultivation and National strength

The education reforms aimed at raising the quality of China’s children through a “comprehensive education” brought in their wake a renewed emphasis on the role of the family in cultivating “quality” in the home. How to raise a child’s *suzhi*, and thus effectively compete in both school *and* society, however, was vague and undefined, and was a question of great importance. In the early years of the 21st century, a new genre of *suzhi* raising guidebooks hit the market with immense popularity.⁶⁷ One of the first of its kind, the parenting guide/personal memoir titled *Harvard Girl, Liu Yiting: A True Chronicle of Suzhi Cultivation (Hafu nuhai, Liu*

⁶⁷ Chen Huichang, "Suzhi peiyang: cong cheng qiche he paidui zuoqi" ("The cultivation of suzhi: take riding buses and queuing up as a starting point"), *Fumu bi du (Must Reading for Parents)*, No. 4 (1998); Yuan Datong, "Suzhi shi techang haishi xiguan?" ("Is suzhi a matter of habits or special abilities?") *Fumu bi du*, No. 2 (1999); Xu Fan, "Xinli xuejia tan suzhi jiaoyu" ("Psychologists discuss suzhi jiaoyu"), *Fumu bi du*, No. 1 (2000); Liu Weihua and Zhang Xinwu, *Hefu nuhai, Liu Yiting: suzhi peiyang jishi (Harvard Girl, Liu Yiting: A True Chronicle of Suzhi Cultivation)* (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 2000); Jim Barret, Ken Russell, and Philip Carter, *Test Yourself/Test Your IQ* (translated from English into Chinese as *Suzhi ceshi shouce*, by Liu Xiangya (2001).

Yiting: suzhi peiyang jishi/哈佛女孩，留亦婷：素质培养纪实), sold over 1.75 million copies in its first printing, and detailed the painstaking efforts Yiting's parents made to cultivate the necessary qualities and habits in her that would ultimately win her a full-ride scholarship to the prestigious Harvard University. From excursions to the poverty-stricken countryside for cultural awareness development, to pinching ice-cubes to develop perseverance in the face of pain and hardship, the book chronicled Liu Yiting's life as a child of correct *suzhi* investment, and provided a model from which other parents could learn. Parenting guides, successful student memoirs, hand-books on child-psychology, detailed lists of "quality" markers and their corresponding habits, and translated biographies of international business and political elite all became sensational best-sellers, especially among the child-rearing, aspiring young professional, and university student demographics.⁶⁸

Raising the quality of individuals was not only a matter of private responsibility, but, as articulated in popular media by the public intellectual Jie Sizhong, it was an urgent task of the nation as an international player.⁶⁹ After China's entrance to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the notion of "market competition" gained a greater significance in the public mind. In his popular book *The Quality Crisis of our Nation*, he recalled the "century of humiliation" China had faced during the period from the demise of the last dynasty to the rise of Communist China. Jie invoked images of past humiliations by outside actors and national failure to compete with modernized nations and blamed these failings on the widespread lack of individual cultivation among the populace. His analysis of China's "*suzhi* crisis" was stated in terms of national

⁶⁸ Nearly all of the university students I have met have read or are especially familiar with the biographies of Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and a smattering of US presidents and officials. I found very few who mentioned biographies of native Chinese, but those who did named Zhou Enlai, Zeng Guofan, and Liang Qichao as exemplars of "high-quality."

⁶⁹ Jie Sizhong, *Zhongguo guomin suzhi weiji (The Quality Crisis of Our Nation)*, (Beijing: Zhongguo chang'an chubanshe, 2004).

strength and the ability to compete economically and intellectually in the international arena. In his interpretation, raising *suzhi* was not only a matter of moral development or domestic modernization, but the guarantee of national survival among nations. He emphasized that the “quality of individuals” equated to the quality of institutions, and the institutions served as the backbone of strength and a deterrent to hegemonic states seeking to subdue China’s rise.

What became clear for Jie’s readers was that “quality” was not inborn nor was it gained simply by exposure to advantageous environmental conditions. Parents of only-children needed to foster the growth of “quality” from day-one, inculcating them with habits and skills that would provide them with a competitive edge in society. The phenomenon known as “Tiger Mom,” and the positive and negative reactions to the stereotypical “Chinese-style” parenting described in the various success stories of high-achieving children was a direct social response to the “*suzhi*-raising” consciousness aroused by *suzhi jiaoyu* discourse.

How to raise high-achieving, high-“quality” children, the hot topic of the first decade of the 2000s, quickly transitioned into a discourse of social responsibility and the alleged behavioral degeneration of China’s “spoiled” single-children. Theories postulated that the over-emphasis on educational achievement at the expense of socializing experiences had created a generation of little Emperors and princesses who were selfish, driven primarily by material gain, and that this phenomenon had taken a detrimental toll on Chinese society. Reports by child psychologists claimed that Chinese single-children lacked emotional intelligence, regardless of how highly they scored on academic exams, and this emotional intelligence, officially termed psychological *suzhi*, was a key component not only of business success, but was also essential to the stability and progress of the entire society.

Incorporating *suzhi* development into the national educational curriculum effectively linked notions of nation building, modernization and development, together with parental responsibility and family governance. Within *suzhi jiaoyu* rhetoric, parents and teachers of primary school children were responsible for developing their own *suzhi* so as to become proper models for the nation's youth. The shift in *suzhi* discourse from economic development and technical training to moral cultivation and emotional intelligence contributed to a modified definition of "human quality" in the following decade. An educated person who was capable of participating in the modernization and development of Chinese society came to be imagined as a person who embodied physical health, psychological acuity, ideological soundness, civic duty, and social morality.

Chapter Five: *Suzhi* Today

5.1 Harmonizing Society and “Putting the People First”

In the 1930s, one of early modern China’s most renowned sociologists, Fei Xiaotong, discussed in a series of publications the conditions inherent in Chinese society that engendered selfish, “egocentric,” behavior.⁷⁰ Although the first decade of the 21st century brought with it several events worthy of national pride, from China’s entrance to the World Trade Organization in 2001, hosting the Olympic games in 2008, to becoming the World’s second-largest economy (surpassing Japan) in 2010, the celebratory mood was seriously dampened by several reminders of the very egocentric society Fei had spoken of so many years before.

The advancements in industry, education, and overall standards of living, as well as the vast improvements in infrastructure development, all of which were previously held to be essential to raising the “quality” of the nation’s people, proved to have little effect on the social behavior of individuals. Drastic changes in the management of the state and sustained economic growth had done very little to alter the fundamental nature of Chinese society.

Egocentric behavior and its detriments became the focal point of the “*suzhi*-conscious” discourse. Fei’s analysis, which was not intended to be a revolutionary treatise on the backwardness of traditional culture, rested on an empirical understanding of the historically embedded nature of the selfishness intrinsic to the Chinese mode of social relations. Consistent with Fei’s evaluation of Chinese society being a complex web of self-centered networks of relations, *suzhi* discourse turned its focus on the responsibility of the individual to behave in a manner that corrects the social group to which it is linked, which, in the case of “human quality”

⁷⁰ Xiaotong Fei, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, (trans.) Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng, (University of California Press: Berkeley), 1992.

discourse, refers to the entire nation of Chinese people. The emphasis of *suzhi* returned to an essentially classical Chinese conception of the ultimate importance of individual moral correctness in social relations. In the 21st century, relations were no longer defined in the Confucian terms of the Five Primary Relationships within the social hierarchy, but they were still understood in terms of the fundamental principle that the consequences of individual actions generate outward to affect the entire web of relations, constituting the entirety of the state.

The development of a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui/和谐社会*) became part of the official slogan under the Hu Jintao administration during 2002 to 2012. The slogan put forth the notion that social stability and social-moral accountability were inextricably linked, and stressed the need to improve the moral quality (*daode suzhi/道德素质*) of the nation’s people. Hu’s transition to moral “quality” and the development of a “harmonious society” marked an apparent departure from the previous decades’ reform policies by “putting the people first,” as opposed to focusing on the primacy of economic development.⁷¹ The concept of “harmony” referred not to an absence of conflict, but to the traditional Chinese understanding of harmony, a society ordered by morality (*daode/道德*) and propriety (*li/礼*) between and among individuals of differentiated, polarized, and stratified social networks.⁷² Moral education in primary and secondary schools was emphasized through the ongoing *suzhi jiaoyu* reforms, stressing the importance of charity, hard work, honesty, and good deeds as measures of “quality.” Harmony, in the Hu administration, was aimed at developing a set of social norms that could simultaneously unite the

⁷¹ “Communique from the 6th Plenary Meeting of the Chinese Communist Party 16th Central Committee” (*Zhongguo Gongchandang di Shiliu Jie Zhongyang Weiyuanhui di liu ci Quanti Huiyi Gongbao*), Xinhua News Service, October 11, 2006. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-10/11/content_5190605.htm. See also: Kin-min Chan, “Harmonious Society” entry in *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, Hong Kong, China, 2010, pp 821-825.

⁷² *Ibid*, “Harmonious Society,” pp 823.

economically and intellectually disparate urban and rural masses into a cohesive whole, and provide a public framework for orderly self-regulation in the chaotic environment of institutional change and unprecedented international integration.

In 2008, the country's leadership provided a clear and very public pronouncement to the Chinese nation, in fact, to the entire world, that the pride of Chinese culture and the foundation of harmony is rooted in Confucian ethics. For the majority of the CPC's tenure, Confucian ideology was derided as a harmful remnant of China's feudal past, and was a fundamental cause of the country's failure to modernize during the 20th century. Now, in the year 2008, in what commentators around the world called a most spectacular and stunning performance, the production of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games, purportedly watched by more simultaneous viewers than any Olympic games in history, entirely omitted any mention or display of Communist ideology or "Red" history, and instead celebrated the harmonizing principles and wisdom in Confucian teachings.⁷³ The awe-inspiring opening ceremony celebrated China's 5,000 years of history and contributions to global society, and included an elaborately choreographed tribute to Confucius, with thousands of perfectly ordered participants reciting in unison more than a dozen well-known, culturally significant proverbs attributed to the ancient philosopher. These proverbs highlighted the civilizing effects of education, discipline, self-cultivation, neighborliness, and propriety. The Party/State's inclusion of these proverbs in the extraordinarily public statement of the opening ceremony indicates the weight that they wished to place on them for both domestic and international audiences.

⁷³ "Beijing Olympics Draw Largest Ever Global TV Audience," *Nielson*, 09-05-2008. URL: <http://www.nielson.com/us/en/insights/news/2008/beijing-olympics-draw-largest-ever-global-tv-audience.html>; Jiandong Yi, "Beijing Olympics Scorecard," *Beijing Review* 36, (2008), p. 20.

5.2 The Moral Crisis of the Nation

Amid numerous scandals among the ranks of business, party, and government elite, now visible to the masses in greater frequency and detail (though sometimes only very briefly), thanks to the widespread availability of internet and smartphone use in the early 2000s, the public began to pay greater attention to the social ills plaguing the nation at all levels of society.

Despite the proud achievements of China occurring on the world's stage, domestic discussions of the Chinese people's *suzhi*, especially those that focused on the behavioral indicators of low-*suzhi*, increased dramatically in the aftermath of several disturbing events at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Although there were surely numerous localized events that produced internet debates over the low-*suzhi* of the protagonists, the few events mentioned below generated nationwide, even global, responses evaluating the apparent "moral depravity" of post-socialist China, and serve well to highlight the larger social ills that seem to have played an important role in the shift in *suzhi* interpretation to how it is understood and used in everyday speech today.

On a broad scale, public trust in the judicial system of the PRC has never been particularly high, mostly on account of weaknesses in the structural design that invite corruption and incompetence.⁷⁴ Reforms in the legal system in recent years have been geared toward generating a greater public faith in the impartiality and overall competence of judges, a stronger system of laws and consistency in enforcement, and a better appreciation for the rule of law.⁷⁵ However, one particular case in 2007 managed to highlight the basic flaws of the legal system

⁷⁴ For a detailed and comprehensive overview of China's legal system, systemic challenges, and public opinion, see Randall Perenboom's *China's Long March toward the Rule of Law*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (2002).

⁷⁵ Perenboom, *China's Long March* (2002), pp. 450-512.

while simultaneously showcasing one of the most pervasive moral issues of contemporary China. In late 2006, in Nanjing City of Jiangsu province, an elderly woman was knocked over, or fell over, while trying to board a public bus. Elbowing, shoving, and jostling are commonplace as crowds of people attempt to board and exit busses at the same time, but on that day, the elderly woman lost her balance, fell to the ground, and injured her hip. Unable to get up, a young man went to her aid. He helped her get up, call her family, and took her to the hospital. He even provided her a bit of money to help pay for the hospital costs. Later, however, the elderly woman sued the young man who helped her get up, claiming that it was he who had knocked her down and injured her.⁷⁶ She filed suit, and although there was no evidence that the young man was responsible for the woman's fall, the court ruled in her favor, requiring the man to pay several thousand yuan for damages and fees. The court's ruling stated that this man's helping a complete stranger was illogical and against common sense, thus he must be guilty.⁷⁷ According to the judgement, "common sense" was that only a guilty person would offer help to a stranger in this situation. If Peng was innocent and merely witnessed the woman lying on the ground, he would have no compelling reason to help her like he did.

The public response to the Peng-Yu case was one of disgust and outrage. Some pointed to the fact that the judge ruled against Peng without evidence, highlighting one of the many shortcomings of the legal system. Others pointed out that the precedent set by this case would scare people in the future from helping others for fear of being sued. Others, however, saw a bigger problem with the case and its outcome, one that seemed to be more indicative of deeper

⁷⁶ Shinan Liu, "Controversial Verdict Has Damaged Society," *China Daily*, Sept. 7, 2011, URL: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2011-09/07/content_13636204.htm.

⁷⁷ Melody W. Young, "The Aftermath of Peng Yu: Restoring Helping Behavior in China," *Pacific Rim Law and Policy* 22, no. 3, (2013), pp. 692-711.

social problems than the possible aftermath of the case itself. The judge presiding over the case followed basic protocol in adjudication, but lacking hard evidence on either side, he based his judgement on what he understood as the prevailing norm in society - the way most people would act in this situation. The judge's appeal to "common sense" was based on what he saw as common practice - people in this society do not help strangers unless there is an ulterior motive. Commentators picked up on the "common" element and lamented that although it was true that the case may be decisive in the future in deterring acts of kindness, the very "commonness" of ignoring others in need is the greater shame that needed remedy. The selfish mentality had become so pervasive that it had now become considered the social norm and was being legally sanctioned as rational behavior. These urban people, educated and "modern," seemed to have lost all sense of compassion for their fellow beings. To lack compassion is to lack one of the most fundamental qualities of being "human," at least as it had been understood in Chinese society until very recently.

Another major public incident, which shocked the nation and effectively linked China's perceived moral-crisis with "quality" discourse, is the case of Little YueYue.⁷⁸ In Foshan, Guangdong province in 2011, the two-year-old girl, Wang Yue (王悦) had wandered out of her mother's sight for a short time while her mother was quickly collecting hanging laundry before a storm. The toddler wandered into the nearby street and was struck by a van, first by the front tires, and a moment later, by the rear tires as the driver pulled forward. Shortly after being struck by the first driver, another van drove over her body, crushing her legs. The first driver knew he had struck the little girl before deciding to pull forward, but he also knew that the fines he would

⁷⁸ Josh Chin, "Toddler's Death Stirs Ire in China," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 2011. Accessed on 1/23/2016. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203752604576645033136435572>.

have to pay for her hospital bills would be much higher than the fines he would have to pay for her death. A financial calculation motivated the driver of the van to pull forward and crush the little girl's already broken body under the weight of his rear tires. Beyond the callousness of the driver's actions, an equally disturbing fact, shown in video footage of the entire incident online, was that no less than 18 people witnessed the girl wander into the street, watched her get struck by both vans and lie bleeding on the ground, and not a single one attempted to help her until it was far too late.

In response to the death of that young girl, thousands of online commentators made known their disgust with modern society and the undeniable selfishness and moral decay it has brought to the Chinese people. The incident spurred extensive debates about the lack of motivation to help others and the low moral quality of the unhelpful bystanders. Some expressed sorrow for the mother of the young girl, yet cited the 2007 Peng-Yu case and others like it, where those who take action to help strangers are punished, to justify the inaction of the onlookers.⁷⁹

5.3 Civilized Behavior and Social Etiquette

In 2012, the same year I returned to China, Xi Jinping succeeded Hu Jintao as the leader of China. Shortly after his accession to paramount leadership, he launched a multi-pronged campaign to clean out the “bad elements” that had grown out of the past decades of reform and development. The campaign sought to eradicate corruption within the ranks of the Communist party, strengthen the legal system and public faith in the rule of law, curb environmental damage

⁷⁹ Feng, Kan, “Death of Little Yue Yue Triggers National Moral Introspection,” *Sina China News Network*, October 27, 2011. Accessed on 1/23/2016. URL: <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-10-27/000423367798.shtml>.

caused by industrialization, and enhance social stability through intensified efforts in public moral education via the construction of “civilized cities.”⁸⁰ President Xi further promoted his predecessor’s agenda of building a “harmonious society” through reform policies by declaring the importance of traditional Confucian morality as the fundamental basis of Chinese civilization and social ideals.

In President Xi’s 2014 speech at the Opening Ceremony of the International Conference in Commemoration of the 2,565th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth, he stated

“Confucianism... emphasized giving play to culture’s educational and enlightening functions in cultivating fine personalities, and combined the cultivation of individuals’ and society’s moral qualities with management of state affairs, fulfilling the goal of mutually complementing and mutually facilitating interaction.... Meanwhile, contemporary human beings face such outstanding problems as widening wealth gaps, endless greed for materialistic satisfaction and luxury, unrestrained extreme individualism, continuous decline of social credit, ever-degrading ethics, and increasing tension between man and Nature.”

The solution, he explained, seemed to lie in the traditional culture of China and Confucian teachings that espoused

“persistent self-improvement and cultivation of profound moral characters worthy of rich material reward... governing with moral principles and uprightness, of perpetual reform, ...loving others and upholding moral principles, of treating people with sincerity,

⁸⁰ Carolyn Cartier’s “Chapter 5: Building Civilised Cities” in *The China Story Yearbook 2013*, (The Australian Centre on China in the World) online, <https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2013/chapter-5-building-civilised-cities/>

and fostering rapport by upholding good faith, ...being frugal and faithful to moral principles and adopting strict self-discipline against extravagance,... restraint and appropriateness....”

He concluded that the “educational values and moral instructions in the fine cultural heritages of the Chinese nation offer useful inspirations for understanding and transforming the world, handling state affairs, and improving society’s moral wellbeing.”⁸¹ Under the Xi administration, the behaviors that mark a city, town, village, district, school, or work-unit as civilized (*wenming*/文明) are synonymous with the “quality” of individuals who make up the collective, which thus marks the collective as one of high or low *suzhi*. Civilized behaviors include practicing good table manners, queuing in line, picking up trash from the road, speaking and eating quietly, being charitable and courteous, and showing respect and care for children, the elderly, and the less-privileged members of society.

5.4 Embodying *suzhi*

Over the course of two years, from 2012 to 2014, I engaged in multiple conversations with Chinese citizens from all walks of life, discussing their interpretations of *suzhi*.⁸² This view

⁸¹ Xi Jinping, “Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the International Conference in Commemoration of the 2,565th Anniversary of Confucius’ Birth and the fifth Congress of the International Confucian Association,” September 14, 2014, via: <http://library.chinausfocus.com/article-1534.html>

⁸² These responses (above and the ones which follow) are recollections from my own conversations with individuals from a large sample of Chinese natives, held over the course of two years in Nanjing, China (2012-2014). Several of the conversation partners belonged to an English club where I led English conversation classes in the evenings and on weekends. These students ranged from 12 years old to over 50 years of age, and came from varied socioeconomic standings *within* the Nanjing urban population. Some were business executives, low and mid-level salesmen, human resources workers, lawyers and legal assistants, housewives, college students, freelance writers, PLA performers, environmental scientists, café attendants and restaurant servers, hotel workers, travel agents, etc. Others, from outside the English club, represented a wider range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, as some were migrant workers, taxi drivers, school teachers, street peddlers, shop keepers, and

that behavior is the ultimate indicator of one's "quality" was echoed by my Chinese conversation partners on countless occasions. When I asked my acquaintances to explain *suzhi* in general terms, I often received generic responses that either tried to translate the word into English (as "quality" or "civilized") or simplify the concept's meaning along the lines of "it just means to be a good person." On other occasions, I heard that *suzhi* "is mostly about education and culture (*wenhua*/文化)." However, when I received generic definitions, a little prodding elicited a list of behaviors that were considered to be indicative of low-*suzhi*, and a description of behaviors and etiquette that were associated with higher levels of *suzhi*. Low-*suzhi* behaviors were described as manners and behaviors that make others feel uncomfortable, disgusted, frustrated, or otherwise upset.

Examples of low-"quality" behaviors, given by nearly all of my conversation partners, regardless of their individual background or current socio-economic position, included: crowding and jostling rather than standing in line; blocking the flow of traffic in public places; speaking loudly or shouting in public; jaywalking; smoking in non-smoking areas; not offering one's seat to pregnant, disabled, or elderly; spitting on the ground or floor; and eating loudly. Such examples may seem like trivial annoyances one encounters from time to time, but as nearly any Chinese person would attest, these behaviors are ubiquitous across China. Precisely because the above-mentioned behaviors are so common, the fact that *suzhi* discourse categorizes them as indicators of "low-quality" consequently suggests that raising one's own "quality" requires one

night-market hawkers, hotel maids, house cleaners, bike mechanics, bartenders, etc. The conversations were not part of an intended study, and were therefore not recorded or officially guided, but I did take detailed notes to record pertinent information because I had developed an interest in better understanding *suzhi* from multiple perspectives. Early instances of *suzhi* discussion came about naturally over the course of casual conversation, and eventually developed into an interest whereby I intentionally probed random, willing conversation partners to solicit their personal views.

to alter what is very much a social norm and standard practice. Furthermore, the justification for considering such behaviors as markers of “low-quality” was summarized in one conversation with a taxi driver who had migrated from rural Anhui province as: “those people [who do such things] have low-*suzhi* because they are not concerned about how their behavior affects other people. It is a kind of selfishness and not civilized.”

In discussing indicators of high-*suzhi*, the examples provided a clear connection between “quality” and social etiquette, and between “civilized behavior” (*wenming xingwei*/文明行为) and social benefit. In the contemporary logic of *suzhi*, “high quality” behaviors not only benefit the individual actor, but also benefit the surrounding community through the promotion of exemplary behavior. Examples of “high-quality” or “civilized” behaviors were not limited to simple the inverse of “low-quality” behaviors, instead, indicators of one’s high level of *suzhi* reflected a high level of emotional intelligence, empathy towards one’s fellow beings, concern for the environment and one’s own physical health, and altruistic kindness towards strangers. A common refrain was to quote a well-known proverb of Confucius, known to the world as the “golden rule,” that one should not do to others what one would not like done to oneself.

In one of my evening English Conversation courses, I led a discussion on the topic of *suzhi*, and asked my students to discuss their understanding of the term in English. One student in the class, who was also a graduate student at Nanjing University of Science and Technology, described the “high-*suzhi*” of a classmate by relating a story about the patience and kindness her classmate showed to various people on the way to class. She described an event that proved her classmate’s “quality.” Shortly after setting off to school, she and her classmate were approached by a young man handing out flyers with discount coupons for a nearby restaurant. “Typical behavior,” she said “would be to ignore him [the person handing out flyers] and keep walking.

No one wants to carry that trash [the flyer] all the way, and besides, those people are everywhere. If you stop and let them talk about the promotion, you'll never get to where you're going and you'll end up with a load of useless paper trash!" Her classmate, however, did stop for the young man and receive his flyer. "He even smiled at him and said 'thank you.' That alone was a good example [of high-*suzhi*!]" She then explained that her classmate was approached three more times by different advertisers during the same journey, and each time he accepted the flyer, smiled, and said 'thank you,' without ever commenting on the annoyance of being stopped. He carried the flyers with his book-bag until they reached the school building, then casually found a trash bin and discarded the flyers. She concluded that "at first, I didn't understand why he would be so nice to them, but I thought about it and realized that his kindness probably made them feel respected, and maybe even made them feel like their work was successful that day. That kind of feeling is important for everybody."

From this student's observation of her classmate's behavior, she began to analyze her own *suzhi* in terms of how her behavior might make others feel. "I started to notice small things that I do that might make people feel badly in their daily life- like when the cleaner (*ayi*/阿姨) is mopping the floor and I step my dirty shoes on the white tiles, or when I get in the taxi and I don't say hello to the driver- just tell him the location and sit quietly- these kinds of things can make people feel small." Her reasoning was that if her own actions caused others to feel badly, then her own *suzhi* was not high. In order to raise her personal "quality," she began keeping a journal of "uncivilized habits" (*bu wenming de xiguan*/不文明的习惯), and contemplating how to correct them.

The other participants in the English Conversation class listening to this story of "high quality" behavior agreed with this student's assessment of the importance of kindness as a

measure of *suzhi*. They added to the conversation by sharing their own experiences of the beneficial effects of kindness, politeness, and helpfulness. Another student added that “some people think *suzhi* is about how much money and education you have, but it isn’t about that. There are plenty of very rich people and some even have high [educational] degrees, but they still have very low *suzhi*.” The group discussed *suzhi* as a process of self-cultivation by which individuals learn to be conscientious members of society and conduct themselves with proper etiquette in different social environments.

For my students in the evening English courses, as well as many others with whom I spoke on the topic of *suzhi*, people considered to be “high-quality” not only abstain from the types of “low-quality” behaviors mentioned above, but also understand that their individual behaviors can affect the “quality” of society around them. Just as the student’s story above illustrated, the kindness shown to strangers by her classmate not only gave the advertisement distributors a momentary sense of job-satisfaction and respectability, but also played a decisive role in effecting a positive change in the narrator’s own behavior and social outlook. If more people practiced behaviors associated with “high quality,” more people would benefit from the outward civilizing effect, and the “low-quality” behaviors would become less and less common. This view echoes both the Confucian notion of the social benefit of self-cultivation and propriety and also reflects the degree to which the concept of *suzhi* in the minds of average citizens apparently has been shaped by official discourse.

Chapter Six: Concluding Remarks

Since the term *suzhi* first appeared in the Family Planning policy propaganda in 1979, its usage and meaning has been steered by top-down reform efforts. Though vaguely defined, the term has been used as both a justification for and an end goal of policies that have had profound effects on the whole of Chinese society. In the first two decades of the reform-era, the use and meaning of *suzhi* coincided with the primary political agenda of national development through economic growth. The Family Planning Policy expressed *suzhi* as a broad concept of physical well-being that would result from a smaller population and access to resources. The restructuring of the command economy through gradual decollectivization and marketization, designed to stimulate economic growth, promoted *suzhi* as something that could be gained by successful market competition and accumulation of private wealth. The heavy emphasis on scientific and technological development as a means to succeed in the emerging market endowed *suzhi* with connotations of prestige through intellectual accomplishment. The celebration of consumerism and the “sophisticated tastes” of the new “middle-class” in the 1990s and early 2000s conceptualized *suzhi* as something that could be sought through material markers and consumption habits. The education reforms at the turn of the century equated *suzhi* with academic merit, whereby one could gain “quality” by investing heavily in education and extra-curricular training. After the first decade of the 21st century, the political emphasis on “harmony” and the imperatives of “civilized” behavior of individuals established the framework through which *suzhi* is understood today, a social ideal based on the transformational power of morality (*daode*) and propriety (*li*).

Given the variety of contexts out of which *suzhi* discourse has grown over the last 40 years, it is unsurprising that western scholars have found it difficult to translate or define concretely in English. In my own quest to understand the meaning of “human quality” as it is expressed by the term *suzhi*, I found that average Chinese citizens of today’s society also found it difficult to define, yet they all seemed to accept the basic premise on which the political *suzhi* discourse is based, that the Chinese nation lacks adequate *suzhi*, and that cultivating *suzhi* is in the best interest of each individual as well as society as a whole. Beyond the acceptance of the basic premise as a kind of “common sense,” I found that many people with whom I spoke about the meaning of *suzhi* did not entirely reject the official framing of the term as being associated with wealth, education, and material comfort. However, the vast majority of my acquaintances believed that one’s *suzhi* is primarily determined by one’s behaviors and social etiquette. The logic that my Chinese counterparts imparted to me reflects the most recent official discourse on the imperative of improving the moral quality of the citizenry and the regulation of social behaviors in accordance with traditional Chinese thought. The congruity between grassroots interpretations of *suzhi* and the dominant political propaganda illustrates the efficacy of reform rhetoric through the use of *suzhi* as a method to guide public participation in the national development process.

Although top-down drives for *suzhi*-building are based on an economic/market foundation, ordinary individual interpretations of what *suzhi* means, how it is manifested, and how to get it can be more closely categorized as in line with traditional Confucian thought than with a neoliberal social order. While modern western scholars tend to tie together the aims of the state with the behaviors of individual actors in society, connecting the two without reference to longer-standing social/cultural traditions (traditionally accepted norm/beliefs) overlooks both the

importance of the individual in the overall shaping of the reality of society, as well as the influence of the past on the present, which is now being reflected in political discourse in terms of *suzhi*. This research finds that individuals have internalized the concept of *suzhi* as a cultural continuity, reflecting traditional philosophies of social ethics and interpersonal relations. Political discourse throughout the Reform era seems to have provided the people with a rubric for understanding *suzhi*, and the meanings associated with the term have been internalized and built upon as metrics of “quality” that coincide with the evolving needs of society within the process of national development.

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