

THE LIMITS OF AGENCY: ASPIRATIONAL FRUSTRATIONS AMONGST WORKING-CLASS CHINESE YOUTHS

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This paper investigates the frustrated aspirations of three young Han working-class students in Inner Mongolia, Northern China. Drawing upon anthropological debates and philosophical developments in action theory, I argue that the subject qua actor ought not to be seen as an analytic construct that is given or presumed, but rather treated as an observable achievement that may be frustrated. Specifically, I argue that agency is exercised in cases when means and ends fit together, and this tenuous relationship between means and ends depend on an array of factors, which are often changeable in principle even if they do not change in real life. Along the way, I describe how amongst my Chinese interlocutors, the standards of agency – the normative assumptions of what counts as agentive – are tethered to aspirations to participate in the middle class.

Keywords: Action, China, the middle class, self, subjectivity

Introduction

A group of nearly fifty parents were crammed into a small classroom on the second floor of No.99, the senior high school where I conducted fieldwork during the 2020-2021 academic year. The parents were squeezed into the tiny desks and chairs usually occupied by their children. It was the early summer with about a month left in the school year. Teacher Peng, who oversaw this group of students – the top humanities class of the grade – addressed the crowd from the front podium. The parents looked up at her with the same deference that their children showed when being lectured at. The topic that day was the students' lacklustre academic performance on mock examinations earlier that term. These mocks prepared students for the *gaokao*, which students across China wrote at the end of their high school careers to gain admissions to universities. Although this class – Class 6 – was the best

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performing humanities homeroom in the grade, Peng warned parents that complacency was not an option. The *gaokao* was still two years away, and nobody knew what was going to happen in that time.

‘The point of the meeting is twofold’, Peng began. ‘First, I needed to connect with all of you.’ It was their first face-to-face meeting after the formation of classes according to student performance following the midterms of the previous winter, about seven months ago. Some of the parents had notebooks out, jotting down the key points. Others twiddled their thumbs. ‘Second, I wanted to discuss student performance of our class in detail.’ Though the public distribution of class results was forbidden by the Ministry of Education, Teacher Peng did it anyway. And while this information might have been new to the parents, students were already aware of their place in the hierarchy. The same list had been posted by the front door on the class bulletin board. Peng told me ahead of time that she would distribute the rankings. She said she knew it was forbidden, but she insisted it was necessary to be transparent with the parents about their children’s performance. She said she was taking ‘responsibility’ (*zeren*) for her pupils. She continued:

Let’s look at their progress towards university. You have already eliminated half of the people just by getting into high school, but don’t think you have achieved anything yet. If you want to get into a first-tier university, you will need to do the same thing, one more time. But this time, it will not be all that easy...

The point about eliminating half of the competition needs to be contextualised in the development of the Chinese public education system over the last decade.

During Andrew Kipnis’ fieldwork in a Shandong junior high school, from 2005-2006 with updates in 2007 and 2009, continuing into senior high school was relatively easy for most pupils. Kipnis (2011) paid attention to the stark contrast between the relative ease of attending senior high school and the intense study regime of the junior high school of Zouping, which prepared students for the entrance exam. In the first decade of this century, about 80 percent of students were able to attend senior high (*ibid.*: 40), but this is no longer the case today. In his text, Kipnis notes that the State Council in 2005 declared that by 2010, half of all senior high school students would attend vocational education (*ibid.*: 83-84). By my time in the field, this had already become the norm.

This reinvigorated focus on vocational education was a response to China’s structural transformations in the economy. China today faces demographic challenges, such as an aging population and declining birth rates, which has diminished the size of the young labour force. As Cui et al. suggest, there is a structural mismatch in labour supply and demand as the country experiences ‘a surplus of low-skilled workers and a shortage of high-skilled workers’, which the government is attempting to tackle with the promotion of vocational training (2018: 1231). Consequently, not many students get to attend a normal high school like No.99, as half are funnelled into such vocational programs.

In any case, after making each point, Teacher Peng would walk to the other side of the podium, as if to make sure that the parents were still listening. At the height of her diatribe, nobody in the room moved. Teacher Peng explicitly targeted the parents with her critique,

but from my third-person perspective, it looked as if it did not elicit much response from the parents.

...At this age, there is no need for parents to monitor their children. The biggest problem for the students is not that they lack discipline but that they lack drive (*bunuli*). They are being moved (*beidong*) and not moving themselves (*zhudong*)...

When it was time to go, most of the parents quickly cleared the room, each of them thanking Teacher Peng for her time before walking out the door. Nobody stayed behind to have further discussions concerning their children's academic performance. As Teacher Peng told me, they all had her WeChat account, and they all knew that she was available, if they ever needed to talk.

Teacher Peng's complaints evidently revolved around the so-called problem of passivity – the inability 'to be a self-mover' – amongst her students, who were supposed to be the top performers in the whole grade. In what capacity did students fail to be self-moving? Peng did not clarify. Maybe it was obvious to the parents, who did not ask questions about it either. Unfortunately, it was not all that obvious to me. The students' days were jam-packed with classes with little breaks in between, longer than most people's working days, even in China. They did not seem passive to me.

The aim of this paper is to understand such admonishments of passivity within the Chinese context, and in doing so, relate it to anthropological debates concerning agency, here understood through the distinction between activity versus passivity. I focus on three Chinese interlocutors who have all experienced some type of frustration in their life trajectories, and who were admonished by others for failing to be active, 'to self-move'. Using the ethnographic evidence, I suggest the subject qua actor should not be seen as an analytic construct but rather treated as an observable achievement – when the means and ends fit together to produce successful action – depending on contingent factors. I argue that while there has been wide anthropological rejection of 'agency', in the sense of *the individual subject who acts*, such a concept remains invaluable for ethnographic analysis so long as we do not forget that the standards for what counts as an agent is liable to shift cross-culturally and trans-historically. I shall also illustrate that for my interlocutors, the agent par excellence is fundamentally a middle-class 'striver', the product of economic reforms in post-Mao China.

The field

I was 'in the field' during the 2020-2021 school year, and my 'field site' was an urban high school, No.99 Senior High, in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, in the People's Republic of China. The city itself was described as comparatively 'backwards' (*luohou*), and the school was similarly categorised as being merely 'average' (*yiban*). Though No.99 graduates could gain admission into four-year bachelor's programmes, they failed to attend the best schools in the country. As the teachers put it, graduates at No.99 were only admitted to 'double-negatives' (*shuangfei*). These are the universities that were excluded from both the 985 and 211 projects, two now-

discontinued government programmes which sought to improve the academic standings of domestic institutions through top-down governmental investment (Choi 2010, Zhang et al. 2013).

As I have noted elsewhere (Jiang 2024: 75-78), my fieldwork was subject to methodological limitations. First, my young interlocutors were selected exclusively from students in their first year of senior high, which comprised the three years before the National College Entrance Examination, or *gaokao*. This decision was made reluctantly following the pointed recommendations of the Principal Zhu, who advised it was best to leave out Year 2 and, especially, Year 3 students as they were under tremendous pressure from the impending examination. My Year 1 interlocutors were mostly aged 16 and had arrived at No.99 in 2020.

At No.99, Year 1 was divided into six classes, or ‘homerooms’, each led by a ‘head teacher’ (*banzhuren*). In addition to the three compulsory classes – Chinese, mathematics, and English – students had to choose ‘to major’ in the sciences (*like*) or the humanities (*wenke*). Three of the six classes in the grade were science-based, preparing for the Physics, Chemistry, and Biology electives. The other three were humanities-based, preparing students for Geography, Politics, and History electives. The class allocation was based on the first-year midterm scores, with the highest scoring students who wished to major in the sciences being allocated into Class 5 and the highest scoring students who wished to major in the humanities being allocated into Class 6. I was informed the other classes were assigned randomly. In principle, owing to poor performance, it was possible to be reallocated to one of the lower-performing homerooms from Class 6.

Second, within my research, there has been an absence of ethnic Mongolian voices. The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has a population of about 25 million people, yet only one-fifth of that number were ethnic Mongols. During fieldwork, ethnic tensions ran high following widespread protests against governmental decisions to institute Mandarin language instruction for subjects like ‘language and literature’, moral education, and history in nominally Mongolian-language schools (see Bulag 2020).

At No.99, Principal Zhu dismissed the issue, suggesting these incidents were largely irrelevant because my field site was a Mandarin-language institution with few ethnic Mongols. Implicitly, he was suggesting that these were controversies and should be excluded from my research. The seriousness of Zhu’s suggestion was made clear when I began to face police interference in my day-to-day and was brought in for questioning about my research.

Perhaps more importantly, although some students were identified as ethnically Mongolian by their peers to me, none wished to discuss their ethnic identity openly, which could be due to my own identity. Although I was usually introduced by teachers as an ethnic Chinese from the West, and though I was usually perceived and sometimes even explicitly referred to as a ‘foreigner’ (*waiguoren*) by my young interlocutors, given the events that transpired before my arrival at No.99, I suspect my ethnic Han background positioned me closer to my Han interlocutors than to the few ethnic Mongolians that I met in the field.

Whilst I focus only on a trio of students in this paper, the limited selection of ethnographic materials here is undertaken for the sake of clarity when demarcating the three types of agentic failures I wish to portray. Overall, my fieldwork covered a much larger pool of interlocutors, and the data presented here was drawn from a set of numerous semi-

structured interviews with over two dozen students (and multiple teachers) and countless hours of informal chats (*liaotian*). Practically, my research involved strict observation in lecture-based classes like Chinese, where students were not allowed to speak unless called upon, and participant-observation in other classes like Physical Education, for example, which were not tested on the *gaokao*. Since these classes were ‘not useful’ (*meiyong*) in the words of my young interlocutors, they offered ample opportunities for me to interview interlocutors directly. Fieldwork was conducted during the course of the academic week, which officially ran from Monday to Friday, from 7:00 AM to 5:45 PM, though all students were expected to stay behind for independent study for a period of time after.

Chinese admonishments of passivity

What constituted a failure to be a ‘self-mover’ (*zhudong*) within the wider contemporary Chinese educational and aspirational setting? It is worth contextualising these admonishments within the background of family life first. Surprisingly, all of the young working-class interlocutors told me that they seldom received reprimands from parents at home. In contrast to Teacher Peng’s suggestions above, many young interlocutors suggested they have entered an age where they no longer needed their parents’ rebukes. For instance, Laolang, a student in Peng’s class, and one of the trio of students I focus on below, said, ‘My parents do not ever “talk sense” (*jiang daoli*) to me. They know we already “understood sense” (*dong daoli*).’ And consequently, he implied, parents did not feel the need to give these moralising lectures.

While it was possible to take these comments at face-value, my interlocutors’ explanations ought to be interpreted within the specific challenges that working-class families faced in contemporary China. Indeed, in the ethnographic description above, parents themselves often emerged in the context of my field site as passive players, perhaps best exemplified during the meeting with Teacher Peng. As I mentioned above, I was at first surprised to see the parents leave the classroom so quickly after the meeting concluded. Few, if any, acknowledged my presence, and nobody seemed much interested in speaking with me when prompted. When I asked the students where their parents were rushing off, they told me their parents had to hurry back to the ‘construction site’ (*gongdi*) or ‘had business to attend to in the shop.’ Thus, I suggest this passivity was a function of their own classed realities. Most obviously, for many parents, time spent away from the workplace meant deducted wages.

At a ‘socio-cognitive’ level, it was also possible that the apparent lack of admonishments from the parents at home resulted from parents feeling unqualified to levy criticism toward their children in the first place. This possibility was first brought up to me by some of the older teachers at No.99. Teacher Tang was a former Chinese teacher, who was relegated to an ad hoc administrative role to make way for younger, newly trained arrivals. She told me that in her decades on the job, she had met many parents who felt ‘they were unable to help their kids’ (*bang buliao*). She mentioned how, for many working-class parents, it was clear that their children already believed themselves to have surpassed their parents in the social hierarchy owing to their educational achievements. Comparatively, unlike in Paul Willis’s seminal study of British working-class students in the late 20th century, *Learning to*

labour, my young interlocutors did not produce their own normative standards in opposition to that of the institution in processes that Willis has called differentiation (1983: 63). Instead, they have adopted the mainstream hierarchical ordering of citizens within contemporary China – an ordering based on educational attainment that already places them above their parents. In the eyes of my young interlocutors, then, there was a fundamental difference posited between teachers, who often did levy criticism, and their own parents. While nobody dared to question the competence of a teacher openly, many students had no problems describing their parents as ‘without culture’ (*mei wenhua*). Yuanyuan, an above average student in Teacher Peng’s homeroom, for instance, described her parents as ‘peasants’ (*nongmin*), a term that is often used pejoratively to describe in the urban discourses to those who were perceived as being culturally backwards (see, e.g., Schneider 2015: 336–337).

Overall, most parents of pupils at No.99 had not attended university, and it was not uncommon for them to have only completed a junior high school education. Yuanyuan was on track to be the first person in her family to attend a four-year post-secondary institution, and hoped to become the first person in her family to enter the white-collar workforce. This was a decision she made in line explicitly with China’s developmental goals to transition into a service economy in mind (see Liu 2020: 37). In the public imagination, Yuanyuan would have certainly been perceived as doing far better than the previous generation in her family.

In this respect, during my time in the field, criticisms pertaining to passivity and the failure ‘to move oneself’ were made exclusively by university-educated members of the middle class to either their children or their pupils. Within the context of No.99, this usually meant teachers. Some of the teachers I met at No.99 told me that their own children, most of whom were attending far better schools, were also similarly passive in their educational aspirations. Consider Teacher Lun, a former mathematics teacher who worked alongside Teacher Tang, introduced above, in a similar administrative role. Teacher Lun had a son attending No.101 Senior High, the second most selective high school in Hohhot. Getting into such a prestigious school was no small feat, but Teacher Lun worried for her son’s future still. Earlier in the school year, way before the parent-teacher meeting described above, it was Teacher Lun who first used terms like ‘self-mover’ (*zhudong*) in conversation regarding her only child, who was himself hardly an outstanding student.

In the early spring, students in the first year at No.101 were to declare their track on the *gaokao*, whether the humanities or the sciences. As Teacher Lun told me, her husband wanted her son to go into the sciences for the comparatively better employment prospects. However, Teacher Lun would prefer if her child chose his own path, studying what he wanted. However, this was not a preference she had based on any intrinsic value she perceived in education. Consequentially analysed, she told me, the problem with parents dictating children’s trajectory was that students occasionally end up studying subjects they were neither good at nor interested in. From experience, this usually resulted in poor performances on the *gaokao* anyway. The problem for her son, however, which Teacher Lun believed to exemplify the child’s entire generation, including those working-class students at No.99, was that none of them knew what they were interested in, other than what their parents dictated, and this meant they were often unmotivated and lacked aspirations. As Teacher Lun also put it, these kids were ‘not self-movers’ (*bu zhudong*). My own findings in this respect cohered with

relevant existing studies, which likewise emphasise how Chinese parents since the turn of the century have sought to promote to their children a ‘hard projective individualism’ (see Kim et al. 2017: 360–361), which emphasised self-sufficiency and was normatively measured by material returns such as academic or financial successes – characteristics that typically allows for participation in the middle class.

There has been much controversy about the existence of a Chinese middle class analogous to that in the West. Here, I have found it useful to turn to David S.G. Goodman’s discursive approach to understanding the middle class, which has taken a definitive shape since the 1990s with the effects of the economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping (2014: 60–64). Within the popular imagination, the aspirational middle class delineates a life trajectory characterised by the consumption of branded goods (see also Davis 2005); participation in the ‘experience economy’ by going on vacations or learning a foreign language; and critically, the private ownership of one’s own home, particularly in good urban areas, which owing to top-down policies could yield tangible benefits for future generations (see Tomba 2004, Wu et al. 2016). And amongst my interlocutors, the attainment of these middle-class goods is perceived as possible primarily through a university education. Consequently, I propose the middle-class critique of working-class students as not ‘self-moving’ ought to be understood as some type of criticism of their inability to achieve upward mobility and participate in this imagined aspirational trajectory – to move along the rails as it were toward the middle-class lifestyle. With this in mind, I want to turn now to the ethnographic cases to explore the ways that anthropologists might conceptualise these aspirational failures in relation to theory. In addition to the ethnographic contribution, my young interlocutors offer insights into understanding the individual on the level of action or what might be broadly construed as agency specifically in the cultural context.

Self-movers and practical reasoning

None of the young interlocutors offered a straightforward definition of what it meant to be ‘self-moving’ (*zhudong*) when asked. However, they gave a few descriptions from which we may extrapolate. According to them, self-movers are independent, with ideals, aims, and aspirations that are theirs. My young interlocutors expressed this independence through their practically reflective nature. That is, they were supposed to decide what they wanted and to seek out the appropriate ways to achieve it. Here, my ethnographic research connects to theoretical debates within anthropology concerning the ‘individual subject’, as defended by the likes of Caroline Humphrey.

Objecting against Marilyn Strathern’s insistence on ‘conceiving the self as multiple and created relationally’, Humphrey demonstrates how her ethnographic analyses of the Mongols are dependent upon the belief of an essentialist self, ‘constituted by a singular “soul” (*süns*)’, reflexively recognised as ‘having an unchanging essential ability (*avias*) that lasts through their lifetime’ (2018: 40). This is not to say that Mongolians were ignorant of the possibility of conceiving of themselves as ‘relational beings’ in Strathern’s sense. As expected across multiple ethnographic contexts, kin relations often do take priority. Nevertheless, Humphrey

argues there is strong ethnographic evidence to suggest that people also have a conception of the self in the first person, as an individual subject capable of acting out one's life. She argues that it would be a mistake to preclude this possibility from any field site as an a priori commitment. And, indeed, it is this capacity to conceive the self as an individual subject that undergirds my interlocutors' conceptualisation of successful 'self-movers.' Yet, it is this idea of boundedness that is challenged by the likes of Bruno Latour. As a proponent of 'actor-network-theory', Latour's focus has been on an ethnographic insight as well: the observation that human actions are fallible and contingent. But whereas Humphrey seems to focus on the success of our actions – the way that we distinguish ourselves from other people and identify with our acts – Latour wants to stress the breakdowns that anthropologists also are familiar with in actions. In *Reassembling the social*, he emphasises this contingency in human action and the eternal possibility of failure (2007: 44):

Action is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled. It is this venerable source of uncertainty that we wish to render vivid again in the odd expression of actor-network.

Actor-network theory begins with a recognition of the under-determination of action. As the three interlocutors will illustrate, we might not accomplish what we set out to do. Moreover, we might even cause effects we did not intend to – and these effects might continue to kickstart further causal chains to which we remain oblivious. When we do accomplish what we set out to do, Latour seems to ask: how can we be certain that these goals were ours? Such a position is sceptical. How is it possible that there are 'agents' in Humphrey's sense of the individual subject who act if we accept that all our acts are fallible, rife with uncertainty and contingency? In all three of the ethnographic cases in the next section, my interlocutors all have experienced some type of frustration as actors, *owing to factors outside of their control*, in ways that challenge the notion of an individual subject.

Considering the ongoing impasse between these two positions, some anthropologists have sought to abolish 'agency' as an anthropological jargon in favour of other terms that might be more ethnographically relevant and analytically fruitful. James Laidlaw most notably has argued that 'agency' as a technical term, e.g., as conceived by Latour, is methodically muddled and ought to be replaced by more innocent concepts such as responsibility, which are suggested to be more ethnographically salient in capturing the 'everyday concept of agency' (2014: 181). I remain confused by Laidlaw's insistence there is an 'ordinary' sense of the English word 'agent' which he suggests is 'borrowed from French to describe someone who does something *on behalf of someone else*' (ibid.:180). Even if etymology should somehow dictate analytic programmes, this philological exercise is incomplete. In Latin, *agens* is the present active participle of *agere*, meaning 'to act' and 'to do.' We find no sense of 'on behalf of someone else.' Nevertheless, at a more general level, Laidlaw convincingly objects against the actor-network theorists by critiquing how their frameworks leave little space for what Peter Strawson has called 'reactive attitudes', which Laidlaw agrees with Strawson to be at the heart of interpersonal relationships that are essential to human life – attitudes like forgiveness and resentment.

In 'Freedom and Resentment', which Laidlaw draws from, Strawson argues that 'the existence of the general framework of attitudes itself is something we are given with the fact of human society' (2008: 25). Laidlaw's attack on the actor-network theorist's framework seemingly mirrors Strawson's line of reasoning: even if hard determinism is true – or even if agents are really causal networks and not individual subjects who *do* things – such realisations would not provide justification for the abandonment of such reactive attitudes, which fundamentally make us who we are. Strawson draws an analogy between the practical and the theoretical – between our commitment to moral responsibility to our commitment to the justification of induction. As Strawson put it, since Hume, the principle of induction has appeared equally 'groundless' as a metaphysical axiom, yet it remains a natural expression of who we are, without which human life seems impossible (see Hieronymi 2020 for a recent exploration of this naturalistic reading of Strawson).

Nevertheless, this need not imply, in my view, that we ought to do away with notions of agency or agentive action. Theoretically, Laidlaw gives examples of when responsibility is socially ascribed and accepted for 'unintentional' damages, cases like accidentally spilling wine at a dinner party, where there is no 'action' in the full-blooded agentive sense of intentionally doing something (2014: 191). But this example seems to me, merely a reflection of cordiality. The ascription of responsibility in these 'accidental' cases are parasitic upon the ascription of responsibility for 'intentional' action. Even in terms of reactive attitudes, there is a world of difference between someone apologising for accidentally spilling wine on me and someone apologising for intentionally pouring wine on me (perhaps he was angry before, but has since calmed down). In my view, these differences stem from the presence or absence of 'agency.'

At an ethnographic level, moreover, responsibility alone can only take us so far in making sense of the details that I have presented thus far. As the students' own complaints about their frustrated life trajectories indicate, there is a whole dimension of Chinese life – the source of their frustrations – which pertain to issues closer to the problems that Latour emphasises: *factors that are beyond our control that obstruct the attainment of our own goals*. Thus, I still insist that what we need to understand my interlocutors is a clearer conception of agency, and not to replace it with some equally nebulous concept like responsibility.

Here, I have found it helpful to turn to the traditional philosophical notion of 'practical reasoning', employing what philosophers have called 'the standard picture' of action. According to Candace Vogler, the standard picture goes like this:

Whether the content of an episode of practical deliberation makes specific mention of ends and means, the form of any episode of practical deliberation is end-governed; in non-calculative deliberation, the end is figuring out what to pursue; in calculative deliberation, the end is figuring out how to attain an end that you already seek to attain. (2002: 169)

Ultimately, there is an end that one aims at. Once established, the agent then goes on to seek out the means to attain this end. An action in this sense can be recursive. For example, to make an omelette I must break a few eggs. The latter (breaking eggs) is an end embedded in the former. It is a proximal end in the structure of the action, but it is also a means to making an omelette. This is the so-called ABCD structure of action that is presented in Elizabeth

Anscombe's *Intention*, which has occasionally been cited by anthropologists, though rarely elaborated. The letters in the ABCD structure deal with four different descriptions of one bodily movement. In the comical example that Anscombe gives, a man moves his arms up and down (A), and in doing so operates the pump (B), which replenishes the (poisoned) water supply in a nearby house (C), which poisons the house of Nazis (D). Are there four actions or just one? Anscombe replies (2000: 46):

There is one action with four descriptions, each dependent on wider circumstances, and each related to the next as a description of means to end; which means that we can speak equally well of four corresponding intentions, or of one intention – the last term that we have brought in in the series.

It is important to recognise, however, that while we discuss four descriptions – A through D – there is only one observable movement that is empirically accounted for: a man moving his arms up and down. If, as the often-cited takeaway from the text suggests, the mark of intentional action is the actor's capacity to answer 'why' he is doing something, then we can see why D has more explanatory power than the other descriptions. It helps us connect A, B, and C, which precede it. As Anscombe continues (ibid.: 46-47):

If D is given as the answer to the question 'why?' about A, B and C can make an appearance in answer to a question 'How?' When terms are related in this fashion, they constitute a series of means, the last term of which is, just by being given as the last, so far treated as end.

Since D swallows up all the previous terms, ABC, it helps us link and make sense of the preceding series as a series, instead of a mere heap of descriptions that are unrelated. By understanding the point of the ABCD structure, I plan to use it to elaborate on what I alluded to earlier about the individual: that in an ethnographically substantiated sense, the individual subject, conceived as the self-mover, really is the locus of reason. Grasping Anscombe's picture also, however, helps us recognise what could go wrong in the Latourian sense. To reiterate, I think the students' failure 'to self-move' is in their inability to act in the sense of the standard picture: there is some type of breakdown in the means-ends structure.

To be clear, my point here is not to impose a philosophical theoretical framework onto the ethnographic details, but rather, to demonstrate how these philosophical concepts might help us organise seemingly different forms of ethnographic experiences. One might object that in different cultural contexts, people might not share the understanding of 'intention' as Anscombe does. After all, her theory is an inheritance from a Christian tradition. We can at least ease some fears of ethnocentrism once we realise that Anscombe's 'intention' does not rely on any purely 'inner' acts, but rather is, in a serious sense, 'social.' To reiterate, according to Anscombe, a person's 'intention' is not some inner self-ascribed state that relies on psychological parameters not shared across cultural contexts, but something socially embedded in the explanations that people give when prompted about what they are doing – in explanations that take the ABCD structure. Therefore, this makes it especially conducive to the type of ethnographic analysis that anthropologists undertake.

Three cases of failure:

I. Xiaozi, the day dreamer

Xiaozi is a short boy – barely five feet tall – from Year I-Class 4, which was one of the poorer performing humanities classes. Most students in this class were on specialised tracks: fine arts, dance, or sports. One day, during afternoon recess, Xiaozi came up and asked me if dentistry was expensive in the West. I told him ‘It depends,’ thinking about insurance policies and co-pay options. Before long, he began to tell me how much dentists made in China compared to the average wage earner.

Xiaozi revealed to me that he harboured hopes of being a dentist one day. I was pleasantly surprised a student taking no science classes could even become a dentist. It quickly became clear after I started asking him questions, though, that he had little idea about how to become a dentist after all. He simply told me that to become a dentist, he would need to do well on the *gaokao* and go to a first-tier university.

I found Xiaozi rather amusing, but those around us did not find the situation humorous at all. Teacher Lun told me in private that this pupil was just wasting his time ‘daydreaming’ and should get real. Lun told me that as a humanities student, Xiaozi lacked the ‘basic skills’ to get into dental school. ‘The chances of becoming a dentist for him? It’s impossible!’

It was strange to see a teacher attack the ambitions of a student. Teacher Lun clarified why she was so harsh. ‘Students like him lack direction. He does not even know the requirements to get into dentistry school... he probably just went to the dentist, thought they charged him a lot of money and decided to become a dentist.’ The problem was not with the fact he wanted to be a dentist, which certainly would have propelled him into the Chinese middle class. This was a commendable aspiration, given the prestige associated with the role and its high salary. The problem that Lun identified in Xiaozi was that the aspiration the latter mentioned was nothing but a dream, an idle wish. Lun’s disapproval stemmed from the fact it was not at all intelligible what setting the goal of becoming a dentist was doing for Xiaozi: it was a practical implausibility (if not impossibility) that one might become a dentist without any science training.

In this sense, individuals failed to self-move (i.e., act) because their goals lacked any motivational force, usually because they were so out of reach that they could be nothing but a fantasy. It was possible for Xiaozi to wish for anything he wanted, but he was disparaged at No.99 because it did not seem to those around him that it was in Xiaozi’s power to become a dentist. As Lun points out, Xiaozi was academically inadequate, and it was too late to do anything about it. He had already declared which *gaokao* he was going to take, and there was no going back now. Simply put, if whoever wills the ends also wills the means, then by contraposition, the impossibility to will the means is an impossibility to will the end. In this respect, Xiaozi fails to be a self-mover according to the standard picture of action that I have relied on.

2. Laolang: striving toward nothing

The second type of failing to be a self-mover consists of those who had no substantive goal in mind, though vaguely insisted that they were striving towards something. Students who fell under this category spoke about their intentions to ‘live a good life’ (*guo haorizi*). Less ambitious ones said they were aspiring to do ‘the best that they could.’ I have already mentioned Peng’s problem with this way of looking at one’s life: this vague description of living ‘a good life’ was merely an empty formalism – one that you can neither see nor touch. In this respect, the end was not a real one at all.

Consider the example of Laolang, a student in Peng’s class, who was present that day during the class-meeting (see also Jiang 2024: 81). What did he aspire to? He told me that when he was younger, he wanted to be a translator or a truck driver in Europe. He believed both these paths would allow him to go abroad and further improve his language skills to communicate with people from different backgrounds. By language skills, he meant English, which was the only foreign language that he knew – though he was admittedly good at it, often speaking to me in English exclusively. Unfortunately, Laolang told me, both goals seemed unlikely by the time he had met me. Laolang did not have the grades for the former job, and he realised he did not have the right passport for the latter either.

One might object that high grades, like money, could have been used for all sorts of things. So even if Laolang did not have any concrete goals when it came to choosing his career path in his adult life, he still knew that getting good grades was a proximal end for him to strive towards in the moment. In this capacity, was he not self-moving? I do not deny that he believed he had to strive toward getting good grades. Nevertheless, it did not seem to me that Laolang was sure how he was to hit the proximal end either, even if he identified it. As Laolang also told me, students like him felt they were ‘perplexed/confused’ (*mimang*).

The main issue with thinking of proximal ends here is that the ethnographic context did not really permit the recursion in the way the objection allows. This is a feature of the do-or-die format of the education system. It is important to remember that in this situation, schooling was so intensely focussed on a single high-stakes exam such that if a student failed the *gaokao*, all of the student’s previous studies would have been for nothing. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that Laolang could have reviewed all night long, every night for three years, acing every classroom assessment; but, if he did not end up hitting the benchmark score for universities on the *gaokao* that year, whatever he had done in his three years before at No.99 would have been meaningless. There really is in this sense only one proximal end: the test of a lifetime. Moreover, this benchmark score was determined based on a percentile scale, so the cut-off varied depending on how all test takers in the region performed. And recall how Teacher Peng reminded her students and their parents that they were up against the highest achievers in the city. Considering all this, the proximal goal seemed faint to Laolang as well.

3. Doudou: no means, no ends

Once during Year I-Class 6's gym class, I overheard a tall girl, Doudou, complaining loudly to two of her friends about her lack of prospects. I asked if I could join the conversation. Doudou was unique amongst the students I met. Her parents were hardly involved in her life. Though I recalled Doudou sitting in the back during Peng's speech at the parent-teacher meeting, I quickly realised that her parents were missing. I had sat in her desk, which was left empty. She told me earlier in the year that her parents were 'coolies', so they were too busy to pay attention to her. She did not feel she was being neglected but rather happy. Doudou was proud that she developed a sense of independence. She said this independence made her more mature than her peers, who were reliant on parents for everything. Since her family's home was too far away to make the commute each day from the opposite side of town, she rented an apartment with two other girls in her year at No.99 nearby, without any adult supervision. As all of them were sixteen, this was illegal.

Doudou once expressed some dim hopes of making it out of Inner Mongolia by attending university earlier in the year when I had first met her. But this was a long time ago. Her failure to score above the benchmark for a first-tier university on her mock exams made her jaded. That day, she told me that she was adamant about dropping out, which she had apparently been thinking about for some time. This was possible, she told me, since she had already completed her mandatory nine-year education, though her teachers insisted that she stayed. In her own words, 'It's completely unrealistic for me to go to a first-tier university.' Well, was a second-tier school all that bad? According to her, 'It's even less likely that going to a second-rate school for the humanities will yield any career prospects, so what is the point of staying anyway?'

As Doudou reminded me again and again that day, 'Going to a bad school was the same as not going.' Her two friends agreed. But Doudou revealed she was sceptical that going to a good school was as life changing as teachers are making it out to be. As a counterexample, Doudou told me the story of her aunt, a graduate with a master's degree in English from Nanjing University, one of the most prestigious institutions in the country and a somewhat hot field of study as well. On paper, this aunt was the type of person that teachers would often tell students to aspire to, she had done well on her exams, mastered a foreign language, which was supposed to have brought her more opportunities. Yet this aunt failed to get a job anywhere else and had to come back to Hohhot. Sadly, Doudou told me, her aunt was not even competitive in Inner Mongolia. The aunt could not get a job teaching high-school English at No. 102 when she tried. This, Doudou suspected, was because her aunt did not have the right socio-economic background and thus knew nobody from the hiring committee at the prestigious school (see also Jiang 2024: 90-91).

'To be honest, for regular families like ours, education is not a way out', Doudou said to me. For these students, it was unclear what school was for. Going to school was supposed to help the students ace their exams, and doing well on the *gaokao* was supposed to be a step toward having a better life. However, Doudou was quick to object: as the counterexample of the aunt demonstrates, the teleological link had been severed in the real world. None of them thought the expected life trajectory suggested by their superiors or elders made sense.

Considering this, school was a mere heap of motions with no means-ends structure: get up in the morning, go to school, sit in class, do your homework, go home, and repeat. One could go through three years of this and still amount to nothing, making no progress toward the good life, which was supposedly the whole point of going to school in the first place.

Who acts?

In contemporary philosophy of action, there has been a tendency to set the practical limits of human action in metaphysics: setting the bounds at the will (volitionism) or even the body (corporealism). To some degree, this is a decision to draw the boundaries of the self is made from necessity to preserve the realism of human life – a decision that some anthropologists have seconded. In the beginning of this paper, I have described admonishments that teachers and middle-class parents often levied against students and their children, which would not be possible without some conception of a bounded self. As Strawson and Laidlaw would suggest, simply recognising theoretically that the actions of these students could be conceived as event nodes in causal networks will not make a difference in the practical human relationships between child and parent, or student and teacher.

Yet there remains, in my opinion, an analytic discomfort that is triggered by Latour's various objections against the notion of boundedness of the acting self, or agent. This uneasiness is captured in the three cases of failures that I have presented. The three students have failed not because of their own lack of effort but rather due to factors outside of their traditionally conceived boundaries of the self. Xiaozi's lack of knowledge about the career path of a dentist made it impossible to pursue that path. Laolang's abandonment of his previous dreams, leaving an unfilled lacuna when it came to aspirations, have left him 'confused' (*mimang*). Doudou's anxieties about her future founded upon scepticism toward the educational trajectory envisioned by teachers has sparked a desire to simply give up on getting into university altogether. As I have described, these are ethnographic examples of practical failures in the conventional means-ends model of action. However, it is worth reiterating, they are, perhaps surprisingly, not strictly problems of the will – nor are they problems of the body.

Considering what has been discussed, the theoretical contributions of Humphrey and Latour may appear to be unmatched.² Whereas one is talking about the self, in the sense of an interiorly bounded entity, the latter describes the exterior world out there. Is it appropriate to juxtapose them in the manner that I have done? While I have suggested that Laidlaw's attempts to emphasise the social ascription of responsibility over the agentic considerations of action forecloses important avenues of ethnographic analysis, in this paper, I have found his problematisation of exterior/interior dualism helpful. When it comes to responsibility, the interior/exterior duality breaks down, as one is often ascribed responsibility, for example, like our property, even when the damages have been understood to be part of some causal chains of which we were strictly speaking not part of (Laidlaw 2014: 191). Meanwhile, anthropologists like Karl Smith, drawing upon the works of Charles Taylor,

² I thank one of the two anonymous reviewers for this comment.

propose that the anthropological ‘person’ as a concept ought to be understood not as the Cartesian ego (or even the bounded body) but rather as ‘porous’, open to factors, like social others, that are typically conceived as external to the self (2012: 60). As the ethnography illustrates, this openness makes my interlocutors susceptible to the causal chains that are properly speaking not their own, in the sense of being outside their ‘wills’ or their ‘bodies’, as exemplified best by the fact that Laolang’s success as a self-mover is constitutively determined by how *other* people around him perform on the university entrance exam.

Recently, philosophers have also taken in such insights concerning the porousness of the self, not to displace agency with responsibility, but rather to expand our agential horizons. Drawing upon the works of Anscombe, Anton Ford advances a picture of ‘practical monism’, in which the self is conceptually unbounded (though not materially unbounded, obviously). Ford argues that such limits are arbitrary, and that we ought to consider how ‘the practical limits of agency are socially and historically conditioned’ (2018: 719). Ford’s argument diagnoses popular conceptions of action in his discipline as too dualistic. Even if they get past the Cartesian dualism, they cannot get past the ‘self’ versus ‘world’ dualism. One problem with dualism is that it seems inadequate at capturing the nature of ‘intentionality’. Suppose I try to flip a switch. As I move my hand toward it, I miss. However, in missing, I initiate a long causal chain of events that ultimately results in the switch being flipped. My volition aligns with the intended outcome, but did I intentionally cause it? The dualism that Ford critiques envisions a successful intentional action as simply a matching up between the self – whether conceived as the will, the body, or otherwise – and the world. In this respect, failure is simply when our representation of action does not match up to reality. Not coincidentally, this practical dualism is also the starting point of Latour’s actor-network theory, as he analytically focusses on the failures of this fortuitous match-up between the world and the self. And not coincidentally, Ford’s alternative proposal helps us get to Caroline Humphrey’s point about the individual subject being the source of action.

Ford’s positive proposal envisions all the various means (and therefore proximal ends) as being conceptually included in the self. The ‘actor’ in this case incorporates every element of the ABCD structure, using the language of standard picture schema. Practical monism takes the Anscombian slogan ‘I do what happens’ seriously by including within the province of human agency all the socially and material relevant factors that make an action successful. The reason Ford may feel entitled to include all these factors into the ‘self’ qua actor, is that they are, in a serious sense, under our control and in principle changeable. As Ford ends his paper, ‘Things that are now impossible for some of us to do (e.g., make an international phone call), or for any of us to do (e.g., fly to Mars), may yet become possible through intentional human action’ (ibid.: 716).

In light of Ford’s proposal, I suggest the problem is that Latour goes too far when insisting there are no ‘individual subjects’. That is a conceptual repudiation that I do not think he is entitled to make. With a little (or a lot) more guidance, money, or family connections, all three pupils could have in some counterfactual world, been Humphrey’s subjects, as someone who sees himself ‘creating his individuality additively through his actions’ (2018: 40). Nevertheless, faithfulness to the ethnographic data forces us to admit that often changeable ‘in principle’ is not the same as changeable ‘in real life’. So, Latour’s point about the

contingency and fallibility of human action still remains salient, even if I hope by now Latour's scepticism no longer seems domineering.

In relation to ethical life

In this paper, I have argued that my three young interlocutors have all failed to attain some type of coherent aspirational life trajectory, understood here as the relationship between means and ends. I have suggested that the obstacles that have prevented them from doing so ought to be conceptualised as obstacles to their practical reasoning, and it is in this sense that they have experienced the agentive failures that render them short of Humphrey's idealised individual subject. One issue relevant to both the theoretical and ethnographic puzzles of this paper is whether I have set the bar too high. The failures to be individual subjects capable of acting in Humphrey's full-blooded sense, described at the end of the last section, has been interpreted in this paper at the level of the grand scheme of life seemingly exclusively.³

Moreover, while the teleological aspiration toward the good life is how some have chosen to conceptualise ethics (see Laidlaw 2002), others have objected that the assumption of some grand *telos* of ethical life is itself a vestige of Western philosophical traditions, making the analysis here rather ethnocentric (see Holbraad 2018). Alternatively, other anthropologists have focussed not on the teleological relationship between the self and aspirational ends, but rather between the self and the Other – specifically the ways the self might respond to the demands of the Other (Zigon 2021). An in-depth discussion of the anthropology of ethics falls beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, my tethering of full-blooded individual subjectivity to the trajectory of some perceived good life does make it appear that agency is possible only when individuals can express themselves at the level of 'ethical subjectivity.' Perhaps this is a suspicious claim, but one that I shall ethnographically justify.

In contemporary Chinese discourse, agency indeed has been tethered to the type of grander life projects that I have been discussing. As Yan Yunxiang has commented, the Chinese conception of the subject has never been 'given', in the sense of natural and inalienable rights of personhood. It has always been the product of procedures of cultivation and successful actions in the sense of 'doing personhood' (*zuoren*), although the normative parameters of what constitutes a person obviously differs now and then despite the Confucian origins of these terms (2013: 264). Yan's emphasis here on the procedures of self-cultivation opens again the possibility of failure. If one could only express one's agency through specific ethically and subjectively salient actions, one who fails to do so would strictly speaking, not count in the social milieu as a subject in the sense I have been describing. For example, in the pre-reform past, 'The agentive side of one's moral life was first and foremost geared towards the goal of making oneself part and parcel of this collectivity' (ibid.: 268). In that context, one who failed to work towards the collective were perceived as passive, and reprimanded. Since the advent of economic reforms, however, for most Chinese citizens, what has been seen as

³ I am grateful for the other of the two anonymous reviewers for making this objection.

subjectively relevant is the ability to participate in the middle-class activities described above. Anecdotally, many of the male teachers I met at No.99, who were also fathers, told me that they refused to let their daughters marry a man who could not afford his own home or car. Not coincidentally, one teacher called people like this *useless*, or literally ‘waste persons’ (*feiren*), connoting extreme failures to act or conduct one’s agency.

We can make this point in a rather round-about albeit ethnographic way, through observing the rise of nihilistic tendencies, and the rejection of agency as an agentive response to social inequality and lack of opportunities (see also Jiang 2024: 79). In Spring of 2021, Luo Huazhong published a blog post titled, ‘Lying flat is justice,’ which praised his nihilistic lifestyle of doing nothing as a rejection precisely of this sort of ‘striving individual’ (see Lin and Gullotta 2022). After quitting his job on the factory floor, Luo lived on 200 RMB a month, eating two plain meals a day, and working odd jobs. While he described his lifestyle as ‘lying flat’, signalling a willed passivity, he surely participated in the very minute day-to-day. As he put it, he rode his bike and read his books. But from the point of view of this paper, my suggestion is that Luo was still condemned as passive and nihilistic in the public imagination, evidenced by the widespread censorship of his post, precisely for his failure to participate in the trajectory of Yan’s ‘striving individual’. In this respect, agency was also tethered to these much grander high-level projects, which Luo rejected, despite successfully undertaking these leisurely activities as an agent on lower levels.

What all this illustrates is that the standards of agency must themselves be ethnographically contextualised and liable to be changed. At a more particular level, however, the contribution of this paper has been to illustrate through the agentive failures of my young working-class interlocutors, how the individual might in culturally specific ways be conceived as exactly what some reject out of hand: as the proper locus of reason, in the sense of practical reason, conceiving of the acting self as inclusive of all the means available to it.

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