On returning home one day in early 2000 to the neighborhood (xiaoqu) where I lived in northwest Beijing, I noticed that colorful banners had been affixed to all the streetlight poles in the neighborhood, each bearing this slogan:

Tigao renkou suzhi
Kongzhi renkou shuliang.

[Raise the quality of the population
Control the size of the population.]

At the same time, signs were posted at the entrances to the apartment buildings, with this rhyming slogan:
Renmin suzhi yao tigao.
Yousheng youyu hen zhongyao.

[The quality of the people must be raised.
Eugenics and properly raising children is very important.]

A few days later I bumped into one of my neighbors and mentioned these new signs, adding that I assumed the banners and signs were the work of the local neighborhood committee. “Banners? Signs? Where?” my neighbor responded. I pointed to one hanging not far above our heads. “Oh, more suzhi notices,” she shrugged offhandedly, as if that explained everything. “When did those go up?”

At the time, I assumed that my neighbors’ nonchalance reflected the relative meaninglessness of these slogans — that they were examples of ubiquitous government propaganda\(^1\) and bore little relation to ordinary peoples’ lives and beliefs. But since then — and after conducting two years of field research at three elementary schools in Beijing — I have realized that the relative invisibility of the banners and slogans indicated not that they were meaningless, but instead that they expressed such commonsensical notions that no one needed to read them. The link implied in the slogans between lowering population quantity and raising population quality, and the understanding that child rearing is key to the process, were commonsense concepts in Beijing around the turn of the millennium; in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, they came without saying because the content they expressed “goes without saying.”\(^2\) As other researchers have noted, the actual definition of suzhi or “quality” is highly contested.\(^3\) Yet everyone I spoke with in Beijing firmly agreed that such a thing as suzhi exists, that its level is too low in the Chinese population, that the collective suzhi of individuals produces the suzhi of the nation as a whole, and that raising the suzhi of children is a particularly important step.

Chinese references to the need for population control and for eugenic improvements in the suzhi of the population can be troubling for many Western observers of China, who see them as evidence of the totalitarian nature of the Chinese state and are disturbed by China’s interventions into the “private” domain of the family and child rearing. However, as many other researchers have argued, this can also be understood as a kind of gov-
governmentality. Michel Foucault described governmentality as “the conduct of conduct,” defined as “all endeavors to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others . . . and to govern oneself.” Governmentality, or the “government of self and others,” has population as its object and “ask[s] the best ways to exercise power over conduct individually and en masse so as to secure the good of each and all.” Governmentality is thus positive in the sense that it is productive and, though it may have a negative impact upon some subjects, it is intended to increase the health, safety, and well-being of a target population. Instead of reifying the state and calculating the power it wields over children and families through state-based institutions such as schools, birth-control organizations, and the media, a study of governmentality addresses “mechanisms of government that are found within state institutions and outside them, that in fact cut across domains that we would regard as separate: the state, civil society, the family, down to the intimate details of what we regard as personal life.” For a study of the governmentality of suzhi, the analytic questions raised are not related to how suzhi is defined, nor to the specifics of how disparate policies aimed at raising suzhi do (or do not) reform social practices. Instead, such an inquiry asks: What are the problems to which suzhi is the solution?

This article focuses on suzhi jiaoyu or “education for quality,” one set of suzhi-related policies, practices, and ideologies that were very much at the forefront of discourse about children in Beijing at the turn of the millennium. Ostensibly, the problem suzhi jioayu is intended to solve is the production of a generation of children who will be able both to inherit and contribute to China’s efforts to modernize and become economically and politically powerful on the global stage. But as I discuss in greater detail below, this is inherently a contradictory project, one in which state-led efforts chafe against disciplines of the market economy. A study of how children today are learning to govern themselves using the discursive and material resources at their disposal shows how the state sets the conditions of possibility for raising high-quality children, but also demonstrates the limits of the state’s power to fix boundaries around the concept of “quality.” Thus children, parents, teachers, and state agents may all agree that raising children’s suzhi is important, but each group has different ideas of how this may best be done, and these differences reveal the changing limits of state power.
I explore these contradictions through a study of one aspect of *suzhi jiaoyu*: educational efforts to raise children’s “moral quality” (*deyu*). The first section of this article locates *suzhi jiaoyu* as part of a historical strategy of biopolitics, intended to raise a generation of children who can bring China to its long-held teleological goal of wealth, power, and international respect. I then investigate the specific practices or techniques of *deyu* and how they teach children “the conduct of conduct.” This ethnographic focus enables a close look at how, in Gupta’s words, the government of children’s morality “. . . cut[s] across domains that we would regard as separate,” including education, the family, and public discourse about appropriate child rearing. The final section looks at what Liu (2008) calls “competing subjectification regimes”: the competing and contradictory messages and disciplines that are intended to produce a moral child. In this case, I argue that efforts at *deyu* highlight a particular ideological problem in reform-era China: how to link the next generation with the nation’s past, yet prepare them for the future. These tensions—between past and future, between a theory of moral child rearing and its actual practice, between collectivist and individualist ideals, and between exhortations to consume more and the moral ambiguities of excessive consumption—highlight the contradictory ways both the state and the market are working to produce children as moral subjects suitable for the nation’s future.

**Suzhi Jiaoyu as Biopolitical Strategy**

In a 2001 article, Foucauldian scholar Nikolas Rose describes what he calls “two great state-sponsored biopolitical strategies” that took shape across the West and its colonies at the beginning of the twentieth century. The first was a series of efforts to maximize the fitness of the population by paying attention to the individual habits of the population—like hygiene—“via the machinery of the domestic realm and the school,” linked with “disciplinary and tutelary measures” such as medical inspections of schoolchildren. The second was related to reproduction, as states sought to “improve the body politic and relieve it of social and economic burdens in the future by acting upon the reproductive capacities of people in the present.” Although Rose argues that these strategies of biopolitics have ended in the advanced liberal
societies of the West, I argue that in China today suzhi jiaoyu still sits squarely at the intersection of these two biopolitical regimes and demonstrates how governance operates today in a non-Western, nonliberal polity.14

Suzhi Jiaoyu and High-Quality Children

The problem that renkou suzhi (population quality) is supposed to solve is the nation’s advancement into a future of wealth and power within the highly competitive global field. Children’s suzhi is thus a particular concern, for children are seen as embodiments of the future: not only do they represent the future, but their bodies are the site upon which the terms of the national future are being worked out. Just as national economic development is predicated on rational management, capital investment (particularly in high technology), and the production of high-quality commodities for export, so too is the goal of raising children’s quality predicated on the use of child-rearing methods that have been proven by scientific experts, capital investment in equipment such as computers, and the orientation of children’s developmental goals to the foreign market.15 Single urban children are now both a marker of a family’s modernity and potential “saviors of the Chinese nation.”16 Various efforts to raise children’s quality are subsumed under the general heading suzhi jiaoyu, or “education for quality.”17

The term suzhi jiaoyu is a neologism; it first appeared in educational journals in the early 1980s to describe various kinds of educational interventions and practices aimed at raising the suzhi of schoolchildren.18 By the early 1990s, the term was widely used among educators and had expanded beyond the confines of formal education to embrace family-based child-rearing practices that were intended to raise children’s quality, as well as aspects of the wider social climate. Throughout the 1990s, different Chinese provinces and municipalities implemented different kinds of reforms in their schools in the name of raising children’s suzhi. In June 1999, the Ministry of Education codified and standardized these disparate and often ad hoc reforms with a formal policy on suzhi jiaoyu.19

This policy is extremely broad, stipulating sweeping changes in pedagogy, curricula, teacher training, and the structure of the educational system from kindergarten to university level. Notably, this breadth is matched by
a singular lack of specificity: precisely how the changes are to come about is never clearly defined. In this respect, the suzhi jiaoyu reform is less a blueprint for designing the nation’s future through interventions in the lives of its children than it is an imaginary, or a national dream of the nation finally reaching its long-elusive and postponed goal of strength, wealth, and quality. The suzhi jiaoyu policy poses the question of how children’s suzhi should be raised. Suzhi jiaoyu is a technique, or set of techniques, of government, which attempts to raise the quality of Chinese children through a variety of interventions in their daily practices. The goal of these interventions is a “well-rounded” or “fully developed” (quanmian fazhan) child, who is developed intellectually (zhiyu), morally (deyu), physically (tiyu), and aesthetically (meiyu). These four developmental categories, in place for over a century in China, derive from both Spencerian understandings of Aristotelian theory and Marxist theory. All suzhi jiaoyu materials address one or more of these categories, and all educational practices are justified as raising children’s quality in one of these areas. In practice, however, these categories are extremely fluid and overlapping. Suzhi jiaoyu — indeed, all social reproduction — is understood to take place at the intersection of school, family, and “societal” education, thus blurring the institutions and categories of education. In children’s daily lives, textbooks on moral education teach the importance of physical fitness, while materials related to studying and testing include advice to parents and children about appropriate food to eat during exams. In this way, children learn the conduct of conduct across all realms of daily life.

**Teaching Morality**

Between 1999 and 2001, I spent two years working with elementary and junior high school students across a range of social classes in Beijing, trying to understand suzhi jiaoyu as it was practiced across the city. Much of that time was spent observing classes and talking with teachers, children, and parents at the Pine Street Elementary School, a small school serving children in a quiet working-class neighborhood in Haidian District in northwestern Beijing.
During one of my first weeks at the Pine Street School, a fourth-grade teacher, Teacher Cui, invited me to her Morality Education class. Cui told me that this weekly class was specifically intended to help children develop their moral characters and raise their suzhi. Handing me a copy of the teacher’s manual that matched the children’s textbook, she brought me along to observe the class.

That day, the topic in the textbook was the importance of physical fitness. Chairman Mao provided the model for the textbook lesson: “Ever since he was young, Mao Zedong placed great importance on physical fitness. He believed that people not only need to be highly moral and knowledgeable [gaoshang de daode, fengfu de zhishi], they also need strong and healthy bodies in order to be able to shoulder the responsibility of developing and protecting the motherland.” His favorite activities to build his strength and endurance were swimming, hiking (even in bad weather), and taking cold baths at dawn.

After having the students read the text aloud, Teacher Cui led them through the discussion questions at the end of the chapter. “Why is exercise so important?” the book asked. Divided into small groups of four, the students discussed this question among themselves. To facilitate student discussion, the text gave several examples of different exercise practices and asked students to analyze any mistaken ideas contained therein. One example read: “Xiao Zhu participated in gym class, and then every day after school she did half an hour of exercising on her own. After a few days, however, her legs ached from the exercise, and she decided to stop.” “What do you think?” asked Teacher Cui. The students clamored: “She shouldn’t stop! Exercise is too important!” Two other examples followed in the same vein, with the students responding in the same way, making the appropriate links between exercise, individual health, and national strength, whereby exercise improves each student’s health and self-discipline, which then contribute to national strength.

The final exercise in the text involved a small, blank grid printed in the students’ books. The students were asked to evaluate their own exercise and health practices, checking off boxes in the grid according to how much exercise they got, how often they got it, and the willingness with which they participated in sports.
Cui glanced down at the teacher’s manual, which was quite clear as to the main pedagogic goals of the lesson: students should learn that bodily strengthening requires hard work, diligence, and willpower (yili). They should emulate Chairman Mao in order not only to become strong and healthy, but also to learn to overcome hardship and obstacles and press on diligently. Only once they understand this aspect of the lesson, the book continued, would children learn to be conscious and aware (zijue) of their own exercise practices and why fitness is so important.27

“How much exercise do you do every day? Are you conscientious [ren-zhen] about exercising? Do you exercise on your own initiative [zijue de]?” Teacher Cui called on individual students to share their responses to these questions with the class. “I wrote that I exercise every day,” said one. “I play outside every day after school.”

“I’m not very keen,” another said, matter-of-factly. “I only exercise when my father makes me.”

Cui pressed for more information. “Do you follow Chairman Mao’s model and swim regularly? Climb mountains? Hike outdoors?” She then called on individual students to read the answers they had entered into their grids.

“How often do you go swimming?” she asked one boy.

“Never,” he replied.

“Then you’ll take Chairman Mao as an example and begin swimming to exercise?” she asked.

The student looked up at her quizzically, apparently surprised that his answer had led to a suggestion that his behavior could be improved. “I like to swim,” he replied, “but the last time I went to a pool I caught a cold and now my mother won’t let me go anymore.”

Cui sighed, then asked another boy who also said he had marked “never” in his grid: “How about you?” He, too, looked surprised that this answer seemed to require an explanation.

“But I’m scared of water!” he said plaintively.

Cui sighed again, then asked another child who also had a “never” checked in her grid: “What about you?”

“I don’t know how to swim,” she answered. “I’d like to learn but my dad says he can’t afford lessons for me.”
“Me too!” piped up another child. “I asked my mom to take me swimming, but she said that the admission tickets are too expensive.”

Teacher Cui then tried another tack. “Do you climb mountains? Go hiking like Chairman Mao?”

Several students enthusiastically agreed that this was a great idea and said they had noted on their grids that they enjoyed hiking. Cui called on one girl: “How often do you climb mountains or hike?”

The girl checked her grid, then looked up. “Never,” she replied. “It’s too far, and once you get there you have to pay for admission to the parks to be able to climb the mountains.” Several students nodded in agreement. The teacher called on one more boy with a sad expression. “How often do you go to the mountains?” she asked.

He, too, looked at his grid, then said: “Never.” Cui asked, “Will you use Chairman Mao as an example and begin to exercise diligently outdoors?”

“I don’t think so,” the boy responded sadly. “My parents work every day, even on weekends. So nobody has time to take me to a park to exercise.”

When the class was over, I walked back to the teachers’ room with Cui, anxious to hear her assessment of the class. I mentioned that I was surprised at how the students had rated their own actions and intentions, even when they clearly went against the moral of the story. She grinned. “That’s because they’re only in fourth grade. By fifth or sixth grade they’ll have done enough of these exercises to figure out that there are right answers to all those questions, and they’ll give those answers instead.”

“But what about the moral of the story, that exercise is important, that it builds strength of character as well as the body? They didn’t seem to get the main point, either, about diligence and perseverance and all.” The whole thing had seemed to me to be a pedagogic failure.

Cui, however, cheerfully disagreed. “Some of them got it,” she replied. “But that happens a lot in Morality Class: the way the kids and their parents live isn’t always the way the book expects them to.”

There are many possible ways to interpret this story. Some could use it as evidence of the totalitarian nature of the contemporary Chinese state, which seeks to indoctrinate even young schoolchildren into its forms of rule via textbooks. Others might see this as an example of how the ideological
formations of the Chinese revolution teach children to “lie” about their true feelings and opinions. Instead, I argue that this story highlights several of the techniques of government currently brought to bear on the production of moral, high-quality children.

**Disciplinary Grids: Children and Technologies of the Self**

The first point I wish to make about Teacher Cui’s story is related to the use of the self-rating grid at the end of class. An extremely common pedagogic tool in contemporary Beijing, this type of assessment is a form of governmentality par excellence. By examining and rating their own behavior, attitudes, and consciousness, children are self-individuated, quantified, and disciplined as high- (or low-)quality subjects.

Across the curriculum, children in the classes I observed in Beijing were asked to evaluate themselves on an almost daily basis, not only on how well they performed certain tasks, but also on how willingly, diligently, and conscientiously they did so. Weekly classes on “loving labor” asked them to examine how cheerfully they cleaned their classrooms and washed the blackboard between classes. Grids arrayed on handouts given to children preparing for exams queried students on the times they went to bed and got up in the morning and whether it was necessary for their parents to intervene to regulate their bedtime. In the younger grades, their Chinese-language textbooks asked students to rate whether or not they protected their eyesight by avoiding sitting too close to the television and by using appropriate reading lamps. In addition, virtually every week teachers assigned essays asking children to discuss their strengths and weaknesses, their interests and dislikes, and the areas in which they needed to improve themselves.

At its most extreme, the end-of-semester assessments of children’s moral *suzhi* included a series of rating grids on their attitudes, behavior, and willingness to act morally. According to the official report booklets issued for each child by the education authorities (*jiaowei*) of Haidian District, children in elementary school are to be assessed twice a semester on their morality (*sixiang pinde*) and their attitudes (*taidu xiguan*). Topics of assessment in the lower grades include respecting the national flag, knowing the words to the national anthem, and behaving with appropriate respect at the weekly flag-
raising ceremony; respecting classmates, teachers, parents, and elderly people; greeting teachers and other adults politely; being obedient to parents; using polite language (no swearing); treating strangers politely; and knocking on doors before entering. In the older grades, children are also assessed on such things as bathing regularly, washing hands before eating, and brushing teeth twice a day; being prepared for class and listening attentively to the teacher; participating actively in physical education and daily exercises; helping parents around the house with cooking, cleaning, and washing chores; getting on and off buses politely and surrendering seats to elderly or disabled persons; and making efforts to save water, electricity, and other resources. All children are rated on their respect for teachers and parents and attitudes toward physical fitness. Older children are also judged on frugality, respecting public order and school discipline, and the extent to which they recognize their own shortcomings and work to overcome them.

In each category, children are rated as “excellent” (henhao), “good” (hao), “fair” (zhuanhao), “needs improvement” (jinbu), and “apply more effort” (duo nuli). For every child, each attitude and moral category is evaluated four times: by their classmates, their parents, their teachers, and themselves. I observed this process in the fourth and fifth grades at Pine Street Elementary and at University Elementary, an elite school for children of academics and intellectuals in the capital. In both schools, the assessment was handled in identical fashion. First, the students were handed the booklets and asked to take some time to evaluate themselves on their morality and attitudes. Then they formed groups of four to evaluate each other. The teachers collected the booklets, read them carefully and added their own assessment, then sent the booklets home with the children to receive their parents’ grades. The whole process, Teacher Cui told me, was designed to ensure objectivity. I was skeptical, but she said that in general, the four people assessing each child tended to come to similar conclusions. Having children rank each other in groups of four tended to prevent children from misjudging their friends or enemies; any gross misevaluations of themselves or others would be glaringly obvious as the booklets were passed around the classroom and the teachers’ room and then brought home. The results, she said, were quite accurate; the other teachers I spoke with agreed.
I would like to make three points about these lessons and assessments. First, the kinds of activities on which children are evaluated form a remarkable hodgepodge, combining seemingly random elements from what Westerners generally see as discrete and separate realms: public and private; intellectual, affective, and physical; political and academic; and family, classroom, and nation. The point, of course, is that these are by no means random: high-suzhi children are clean, studious, well-mannered, physically fit, respectful of their elders and superiors, patriotic, and concerned for others, and children’s morality encompasses all of these attributes. Attention to these qualities across institutional sites ensures that all forces contributing to children’s development—parents, teachers, and members of the public—work together to achieve a moral outcome. Pedagogically, the prescriptions work mimetically: a moral child has a clean body, living within a clean body politic, producing a clean and moral future. At the same time, these activities show how morality is inculcated through embodied disciplines, and how both state and non-state agents and institutions (teachers and schools; parents, friends, and the home) mobilize training techniques for the management of moral bodies.

The specific technology of the evaluative grid is the second item to note. These grids are, in Foucault’s terminology, a particularly acute disciplinary technology, one that objectifies and measures children’s internal states, opening their feelings, plans, desires, and dreams to inspection and counting—a central example of how disciplines “acquire a hold over individuals by opening up and inscribing what is hidden, unknowable and inaccessible.” The grid individuates children by rendering their morality “visible,” arrayed for inspection—by taking a set of internal states, objectifying and quantifying them, and turning them into material inscriptions. This is a typical technique of modernizing regimes, one of “the mundane tools that represent events and phenomena as information, data, and knowledge.”

Third, the assessments govern children by showing them how to “become ‘experts of themselves,’ to adopt an educated and knowledgeable relation of self-care in respect of their bodies, their minds, [and] their forms of conduct.” Very simply, grades are based on how well children govern themselves, for grades are assigned not only on the basis of children’s behavior, but on how well they self-consciously choose to carry out correct activities. Learn-
ing these self-assessment techniques permits children to “effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” Care for the self is always at least partially a pedagogic project: it is both state-sponsored and exceeds institutional boundaries, and, while homogeneous in its standards, it also individuates.

**Models**

In China, morality is presented to children in the form of models, most commonly embodied by heroes of the revolution. For example, Premier Zhou Enlai, a revered figure across China, appears in almost every Morality Education textbook as a model of rectitude and concern for others. In some stories he takes time from his demanding schedule to ensure that his guards have had a chance to eat and rest; in others, he visits classrooms around China, expressing concern over how hard the teachers and students are working. Zhou’s wife, Deng Yingchao, goes out in a heavy rainstorm to give umbrellas to the soldiers guarding her home. Another story tells how, during a break in his battle against the Japanese, General Zhu De arrived in a small town with his weary, battle-torn soldiers, and lined up for a haircut. Upon recognizing him, his soldiers insisted that he move to the front of the line, but General Zhu refused, saying that he too was just a soldier. The use of exemplary figures as models for teaching has a venerable history in China, dating back to imperial times, and the use of revolutionary heroes for teaching children appropriate moral behavior is also a long-standing practice. Perhaps understandably, in the elementary curriculum these revolutionary figures are depoliticized; the emphasis is placed on appropriate moral behavior rather than political stance. But how appropriate are Mao, Zhu, and Zhou as models for Beijing children at the turn of the millennium? For example, when their teacher asked first-grade students at Pine Street School to tell me what they had learned during a recent visit to Chairman Mao’s mausoleum on Tiananmen Square, several of the boys in the class jumped out of their seats and demonstrated a series of kung fu–style kicks and punches, an imitation straight out of a Hong Kong wuxia movie.
“Chairman Mao was great!” they told me, between their kicks and shouts. “He kicked ass when the Japanese invaded [Ta da le Riben guizi]!” Their teacher rolled her eyes at this performance, sent the boys back to their seats, and with a sigh reminded them: “Boys and girls, Chairman Mao was a great leader and a founder of the New China. He liberated us from the Japanese. Your grandfathers and grandmothers will never forget him.”

This comment about their grandparents’ gratitude toward Chairman Mao was particularly striking, directed as it was to a roomful of children wearing Michael Jordan jackets and carrying Mickey Mouse backpacks and pencil boxes covered with images of Pokemon and Sailor Moon. As Stephanie Donald notes, children she interviewed in Beijing and Shanghai cited Harry Potter as their favorite hero.40 Putting Mao, Zhu, and Zhou in the elementary curriculum is supposed to link children with their grandparents’ generation. But if these revolutionary heroes have such different meanings to today’s children, how do they understand the values and morals these models represent?

In this way, the discipline of the models reflects an interesting problem embedded in China’s reform era. In children’s disciplines, China’s revolutionary heroes are depoliticized, providing avuncular models for moral behavior both inside and outside the state system. Mao, Zhou, and Zhu are models of care for the self, the development of individual qualities of determination, punctuality, and humility—not revolutionary fervor or collectivism. Revolutionary goals of collective action have been transposed into “being nice to others”; the irony is that Mao and his cohort have become the model for this transposition. This is made possible by the depiction of the revolutionary war as an anti-Japanese struggle (KangRi) rather than as a civil war against the Nationalists. In this way, the heroes of the war are depicted as Chinese patriots rather than representatives of any particular ideology. Mao and Zhou’s morality thus becomes a model of patriotism, making care for the self a new form of loving China. And the teacher’s efforts to reduce the gap between these children’s ideologies and that of their grandparents only highlights and reproduces the tremendous distance between the generations.41
Disciplinary Excess: Eating Bitterness

Even a cursory glance at the content of the elementary school curriculum in Beijing shows that the lessons Teacher Cui tried to teach were repeated over and over again. A particular concern voiced in the elementary curriculum is that contemporary children are unable to tolerate hardships and do not have the persistence to persevere in attaining their goals, particularly when faced with setbacks. The need to develop these abilities is repeated in virtually every class the children take. Even some activities that struck my middle-class Western sensibilities as potentially harmful, such as having children run laps around the courtyard in the snow or having first-graders stand for hours in unbearable heat, were justified as building children’s strength and ability to tolerate hardships (chiku; literally, “eat bitterness”) and to teach them that attaining all worthwhile goals requires significant, focused, and sometimes painful effort. As discussed above, the ultimate example of these qualities, presented to children over and over again, is China’s war against Japan: China’s heroes succeeded in their protracted war only because they tolerated terrible hardships and persisted in spite of many setbacks. Children are clearly and repeatedly taught that only by cultivating these qualities can they be successors to the glorious heroes of the revolution, reworked as the war of resistance against Japan, and be worthy inheritors of China’s future.42

Children’s perceived inability to tolerate hardships and setbacks is the subject of much adult grumbling about “kids these days” and is a popular topic of newspaper columns and editorials. Adult fears seem directly proportional to urban children’s ability to resist efforts to make them better at chiku. My favorite example comes from a television news report I watched one summer evening with a friend and her daughter. One branch of the Beijing Communist Youth League organization had arranged at the end of the school year to take its new members (aged about fourteen) to the forests of the Northeast (Dongbei, or Manchuria) for several days of rustic hiking and camping, with the goal of teaching them persistence and the tolerance of hardships. The location is important: the forests and swamps of the Northeast were a primary destination for sent-down Beijing youth during the Cultural Revolution, and in Beijing the area is synonymous with poverty,
adversity, and suffering. A news team from a local Beijing television station followed these young teenagers to their rural destination. Upon their arrival, the reporters asked the youth to display the contents of their backpacks to the viewing audience. Horrified editorial commentary accompanied the sight of the expensive, imported junk food they all carried: bottles of Sprite and Coke, packages of Oreos and Fritos, chocolate bars and Japanese crackers.43 My friend, a former sent-down youth who had spent several years in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, tsk’d in disapproval; her teenage daughter laughed.

Consuming for Quality

The adults I spoke with seemed particularly mortified by this story and frequently used it as a cautionary tale about children’s low *suzhi*. They generally had two points to make. First, as discussed above, the ability to “eat bitterness” is a form of embodied patriotism, seen as the ability to steel the body and emotions to tolerate whatever is necessary to build the nation. Adults have long feared that the coddled single children of the reform era have not been properly “tempered” to meet the challenges of building China’s future.44 That these campers are unable to live without their imported goodies for even a few days indicates to many parents that they will later be unable to tolerate the hardships that might accompany any need to defend China. Second, adults fear that children not only have soft bodies but also require immediate gratification. This is improper, immoral consumption, for consumer goods should come only after long struggle and saving. Adult morality argues that only those able to delay gratification will have the staying power to struggle through life’s difficulties and the competitive challenges of the market economy.

It is possible to argue that bringing candy bars and soda to a Party-sponsored “boot camp” is a form of “resistance,” a classic “weapon of the weak,” used to challenge authority.45 Instead, I suggest that there is a problem in the state’s efforts to use “eating bitterness” as a goal of moral behavior for contemporary Chinese children. Embodied in this concept are several of the contradictions pointed to above. First, the ability to “eat bitterness” is a collectivist value, held over from the Mao era, which is directly countered
by the individuation of current disciplines of morality. At the same time, children and young people can rightly question the implied link between eating bitterness and patriotic morality. These young people are extremely patriotic, and they express their love of China freely and frequently. But why does their patriotism have to take the same form as that of their parents? Why does loving China mean giving up chocolate? The same logic can be extended: If high suzhi is directly associated with national development, then there is a logical link between morality and development. Eating imported junk food is surely a sign of development; hiking in the Manchurian swamps just as surely is not.

In fact, consumption is an essential aspect of building children’s suzhi, so much so that urging children to “eat bitterness” by practicing self-denial is directly countered by exhortations from teachers and officials, as well as the media, for families to spend large amounts of money on educational commodities, including food, books, supplies, and life experience. Children have to consume in order to become appropriate subjects for the reform era and the future; their quality depends at least partially on their ability to consume the right products, foods, and life experiences. For example, during the long Chinese New Year school break in 2000, parents and teachers in Beijing were urged to give children less homework to keep them busy, and instead encourage them to engage in educational activities around the city. High-suzhi children, the media proclaimed, did not spend all their time memorizing facts in textbooks, but instead hiked and swam, visited museums and the aquarium, and planted trees in the Fragrant Hills. If the weather did not cooperate, children should stay home and learn more computer technology, surf the Internet, and play with educational software: “There are many things to do during your vacation other than study: read a book you’ve always wanted to read, go to the countryside and bring books; do labor in society; help parents around the house; visit a museum or aquarium.” The fact that all of these activities are expensive — admission tickets for the aquarium cost more than many families earn in a week — was elided in the media. So was the fact that these practices reproduce suzhi discourse, because consumption, too, is seen as a trade-off of quantity and quality: goods have become ubiquitous, so children need to learn to choose the right things, in the right time and place, to become moral subjects.
While an in-depth discussion of children’s consumption is beyond the scope of this article, these questions highlight some of the inconsistencies in moral education. At the same time that children are expected to reproduce the self-sacrificing moral values of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, they are also told that becoming high-quality subjects for the nation’s future requires investment, appropriate consumption, and training in making choices in the consumer market. And while, in theory, moral education is meant to produce a unified, homogeneous cohort of high-quality children, in practice it differentiates children—and their families—along class lines.

In the tremendous ambivalence about the morality of consumption, then, we can see some of the fractures in the current system. The discourse of collectivist morality is contradicted by practices that deeply divide children and families; the goal of producing a generation of high-suzhi children for the nation’s future is belied by these differentiating practices.

Conclusion

Raising the moral suzhi of China’s urban children is fraught with difficulties. In spite of—and, indeed, because of—the many disciplines arrayed around the bodies and minds of children in Beijing, there is still no consensus on what constitutes a high-suzhi moral child, nor have these disciplines produced children as unified national subjects. This is not unexpected. As Timothy Mitchell notes, all disciplines are inherently messy and potentially contradictory: “Disciplines break down, counteract one another, or overreach.” In the case of suzhi jiaoyu, the goals of moral education contradict each other, as do many of the state and market disciplines arrayed around children; these both reflect and reproduce the many contradictions of China’s current reform era. Moral suzhi demands that children exhibit the moral qualities of the socialist era by tolerating hardships, expending focused and concerted effort, and demonstrating discipline, diligence, and constraint. Yet market disciplines produce children as consumers and encourage the playful construction of self through the immediate gratification of market goods. Suzhi jiaoyu is both a fetish of entrepreneurialism and the future construction of market value and, at the same time, a massive pedagogical effort directed at making children entrepreneurs of themselves through rigorous
disciplines that attempt to rein in, contain, and restrict the ways they interact with the market. And while creativity is espoused as a central tenet of suzhi raising, children’s bodies and minds are regimented through school- and street-based disciplines. On the one hand, creativity, initiative, and entrepreneurialism are important qualities for children to learn, for they will produce the highest value on the global labor market when the children grow up. On the other hand, as Tomba (this issue) notes, these same qualities must be controlled and managed by state agents, so as not to produce the wrong kinds of subjects, who crave new goods, consume immoderately, or challenge the collectivist morality of a harmonious society. The result is a contradictory pull and push: for children to become moral and display morality through consumption practices that mark and enable them to enter the new middle class, while at the same time demonstrate a (revisionist) historical continuity from the (socialist) past to the nationalist future.

This brings us back to the story at the very beginning of this article, of the unnoticed banners flying overhead in Beijing, urging citizens to lower the population’s quantity and raise its quality. The state is made visible through ubiquitous discourse about suzhi, which exhorts children and their families in Beijing to maintain behavioral standards across all aspects of their lives, just as Tomba (this issue) points out in his discussion of the book How to Be a Lovely Shanghainese. Schools are part of this process, attempting to extend their efforts at raising children’s morality into all aspects of children’s lives. But as Teacher Cui pointed out, the ways children and their families lead their lives are not always in concordance with state dictates about morality, particularly as practices to raise moral quality are linked to new commodities. Thus, as discussed above and in Sigley’s article in this issue, suzhi jiaoyu is derived historically from techniques for making citizens by molding basic attitudes and bodily movements, but it is also very much part of the current moment in China, straddling state and market. Suzhi jiaoyu can best be understood as “an assemblage of authorities, knowledges, and techniques that endeavor to shape the conduct of individuals and populations in order to effect individual and collective welfare.” These various and contingent disciplines homogenize and individuate children, arraying their bodies and minds, teaching them the conduct of conduct, and leading them to become experts of themselves.
Notes

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10. This is not a new process, for since the early Republican era, the China State pedagogies has designed and carried out pedagogies intended to produce national subjects. See, for example, Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and Robert Culp, “Setting the Sheet of Loose Sand: Conceptions of Society and Citizenship in Nanjing Decade Party Doctrine and Civics Textbooks,” in *Defining Modernity: Guomindang Rhetorics of a New China, 1920–1970*, ed. Terry Bodenhorn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).


13. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


23. The names of all schools, teachers, parents, and children have been changed to protect their anonymity.

24. The name of the class is Sixiang pinde. Sixiang is translated as “thought; thinking; idea; ideology”; pinde is translated as “moral character.” Chinese-English Dictionary, rev. ed. (Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1997). Morality education has a very long history in China. Historians have looked at school-based pedagogies of morality during the Late Imperial era (see, e.g., Barry Keenan, “Lung-Men Academy in Shanghai and the Expansion of Kiangsu’s Educated Elite,” in Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600–1900, ed. B. Elman and A. Woodside [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994]), the Republican era (see, e.g., Robert Culp, “Rethinking Governmentality: Training, Cultivation, and Cultural Citizenship in Nationalist China,” Journal of Asian Studies 65, no. 3 [2006]: 529–54), and the Mao era (see, e.g., Jonathan Unger, Education under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960–1980 [New York: Columbia University Press, 1982]). A detailed discussion of the parallels between these historical educational forms (including, for example, self-criticism as a pedagogy and form of subject production during the Cultural Revolution) and contemporary Sixiang pinde classes is beyond the scope of this article.


26. Ibid.


30. These assessment categories were found in the Xiaoixuesheng zhiliang pingjia shouben for Haidian District, Beijing, for the academic year 1999–2000.


36. Foucault, quoted in ibid., 153.
38. See, for example, Bakken, The Exemplary Society; Donald Munro, The Concept of Man in Contemporary China (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan Press, 1977).
39. See, for example, Unger, Education under Mao. The institution of using models for students to self-assess moral actions is beyond the scope of this article.
40. Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Little Friends: Children’s Film and Media Culture in China (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 104.
41. Farquhar and Zhang, “Biopolitical Beijing.”
42. See, for instance, Unger, Education under Mao, 97.
43. Frito-Lay, Coca-Cola, and Nabisco are all very popular brands among Beijing youth.
44. Anagnost, “Children and National Transcendence.”
49. Donald, Little Friends.
50. For extended discussion of the relationship between szuzhi and class differentiation, see Tomba, this issue; Sun, this issue; Yan, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism”; and Anagnost, “The Corporeal Politics of Quality.”
51. Mitchell, Colonising Egypt, xi.
52. See Gupta, “Governing Population.”
53. Inda, Anthropologies of Modernity, 7.
Governing China’s Children: Governmentality and “Education for Quality”

T. E. Woronov

This article is a close study of the discourses and practices of suzhi jiaoyu or “Education for Quality” in contemporary Beijing. Through a study of efforts to raise the “quality” of the capital’s children in order to raise the “quality” of the Chinese nation and its future, this article frames suzhi jiaoyu as a form of governmentality, dedicated to teaching children the “conduct of conduct” in postsocialist Beijing. Based on ethnographic research conducted in elementary schools, among families, and in public spaces in Beijing, the article focuses on how attempts to define and raise children’s “moral quality” are linked to changing forms and practices of state power.