Neoliberalism reified: *suzhi* discourse and tropes of neoliberalism in the People’s Republic of China

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Since the mid-1990s, ‘neoliberalism’ has grown in importance as an explanatory trope for socio-cultural anthropologists. This article seeks to unravel the various strands of neoliberalism’s anthropological meaning and demonstrate the blind spots of using neoliberalism as an overarching trope. I begin by analysing the contradictions between two common forms of theorizing neoliberalism. The remainder of the article then focuses the initial discussion by examining a particular case: *suzhi* discourse in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). *Suzhi* may be glossed as human quality, and *suzhi* discourse refers to the myriad ways in which this notion of human quality is used in processes of governing contemporary China. I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments of those who explain *suzhi* discourse in terms of neoliberalism and suggest ways in which this discourse might be contextualized more fruitfully than as a form of neoliberalism.

Since the turn of the century, ‘neoliberalism’ has grown in importance as an explanatory trope for socio-cultural anthropologists. While during the decade preceding 2002, less than 10 per cent of the articles published in the journals *American Ethnologist* and *Cultural Anthropology* use the term ‘neoliberal’, 35 per cent (84 out of 239) of the articles in those journals use that term over the four years from 2002 to 2005. It is invoked at a number of levels. It can refer to a type of economic policy, to an overarching economic or even cultural structure, or, closer to the ground, to particular attitudes or inclinations towards entrepreneurship, competition, responsibility, and self-improvement. While I am excited by the turn to issues of governance that this focus on neoliberalism suggests and in sympathy with some of the particular arguments put forth in the above-mentioned articles, I believe that a tendency towards the overuse and reification of the term has emerged. The time is ripe for a critical reflection on the term’s use.

The related problematics of holism and reification have been central to anthropology for a long time (Brightman 1995). During the 1980s, deconstructions of the culture concept emphasized the rhetorical sleights of hand that ethnographic works used to create an illusion of holism. One trick was to borrow concepts built up in the ethnographic literature from different parts of the world and deploy them with reference to a single national space (see Appadurai’s [1992] critique of Dumont [1980]). Another was to compose an encyclopaedic text on a particular place with a chapter structure...
implying that the diverse social actions depicted in the book comprised a social whole (Thornton 1992). Such strategies went hand in hand with the banal assumption that a single nation/ethnic group should map onto a singular territory, language, and culture (Gupta & Ferguson 1997).

More recent criticisms of the ‘ladder-like’ visions of history composed of stages in a Marxist or Morganian teleology resonate even more strongly with the critique that I am making here (e.g. Chakrabarty 2000; Gibson-Graham 1996; Kipnis 2003). In such visions, each stage forms a seemingly self-reproducing social whole that can only change suddenly and violently to an entirely different social whole through a revolution. Such teleologies both erase the multiplicity of a given era and limit social change to an impossible all or nothing phenomenon. Politically active, revolutionary thinkers are particularly prone to posit such wholes as they wish to suggest the existence of regimes that will be overturned in toto once the utopic revolution comes to pass (Kipnis 2003).

Strong anthropological analysis links human action at the micro-level, usually observed ethnographically, with larger political and social structures, and the multivalence of the term ‘neoliberalism’ reflects this ambition. But in using a single, politically and emotionally loaded term to refer to such diverse phenomena, anthropological analyses of neoliberalism risk a reification that occludes more than it reveals. In this article, I unravel various strands of neoliberalism’s anthropological meaning as I criticize the tendencies towards reification and the blind spots of using neoliberalism as an overarching trope. I begin by analysing the contradictions among different forms of theorizing neoliberalism and then examine these forms of theorization in relation to a particular case: suzhi discourse in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Suzhi may be glossed as human quality and suzhi discourse refers to the myriad ways in which this notion of human quality is used in processes of governing contemporary China. I discuss the strengths and weaknesses in the arguments of those who explain suzhi discourse in terms of neoliberalism and suggest ways in which the concept of suzhi might be contextualized more fruitfully than as a form or derivative of neoliberalism.

**Approaches to neoliberalism**

Consider two styles of theorizing neoliberalism, both popular among anthropological writers. First is the Marxian ideological critique of Jean and John Comaroff, exemplified in a special issue of the journal *Public Culture* entitled ‘Millennial capitalism and the culture of neoliberalism’. Throughout their introductory essay to this issue, Comaroff and Comaroff refer to the global unity of the current period with phrases like ‘The global triumph of capitalism at the millennium, its Second Coming’ (2000: 291), the ‘new world order’ (2000: 291), and ‘the ontological conditions-of-being under millennial capitalism’ (2000: 293). Though they refer to this holistic order often enough, the focus of their research and analysis are a series of ‘corollaries’ to millennial capitalism, corollaries that constitute the ‘culture of neoliberalism’ (2000: 293). These corollaries are often counterintuitive, as Comaroff and Comaroff depict the effects of this new world order as ugly, ironic, contradictory, and spectacular. These effects include objects of anthropological research as various as the uncivil violence of an overly masculinized global youth culture, witchcraft and other forms of occult practice, and the explosion of identity politics. Comaroff and Comaroff conclude that the many and various ‘enigmatic features of economy and society’ of the early twenty-first century ‘are

Four aspects of Comaroff and Comaroff’s analysis deserve attention. First, it would be possible to read their article as positing a ‘ladder-like’ vision of history in which neoliberalism comprises the latest ‘stage’ in a typical Marxian teleology. If anything is to be gained from their approach, this holism must be rejected for a focus upon the ‘concrete, historically specific outworkings’ (2000: 334) of the neoliberalism that they describe.

Second, in terms of economic policy, the Comaroffs’ neoliberalism is marked by the demise of the welfare state and the general retreat of the state from other walks of life, the rise of finance within global capital, and the IMF’s insistence on free markets, transparency, and private property. This is the neoliberalism of Reagan and Thatcher, a neoliberalism that posits that there is no such thing as ‘society’, that individuals meeting and competing in free markets constitute the only reasonable social ideal, the only grounds for freedom. Third, this neoliberalism is as much ideology as policy, as rarely is anything like ‘free’ markets or ‘transparent’ governance ever produced. The effects of the economic policies that do get implemented under the sign of this neoliberalism are thus strange, ironic, ugly, and counterintuitive. Finally, the Comaroffs’ method focuses on the ironic culture of neoliberalism rather than the techniques and processes of governance itself. The links between economic policies and cultural effects are suggested rather than analysed in detail.1

The second approach to neoliberalism follows Foucault’s lectures on the topic of governmentality and their interpretations by Mitchell Dean (1999), Barry Hindess (1996a; 1996b), Colin Gordon (1987; 1991), Nikolas Rose (1996), and others. Foucault and his interpreters take efforts to differentiate themselves from critical Marxian approaches to liberalism (see Hindess 1996a for a philosophical analysis of this differentiation) and often frame (neo)liberalism in morally neutral terms. Several significant differences to the approach of Comaroff and Comaroff are worth noting. First, and most importantly, rather than the focus on a retreat of the state, governmentality theorists begin with the post-Second World War German ordo-liberals, who saw state intervention as central to the project of producing a liberal, responsible, governable, and entrepreneurial citizenry, as well as properly functioning markets. For the ordo-liberals, public investments in education, for example, could be a central aspect of neoliberalism. While for Comaroff and Comaroff the heights of neoliberalism appear in the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan’s America, I have heard governmentality theorists describe the Scandinavian welfare states of the late 1970s as the foremost example of neoliberal governance. Those are the places where governments put the greatest amount of effort into producing a population with the health, housing, education, and employment necessary to act as the autonomous individuals that ordo-liberals believe a liberal society needs. Relatedly, while Comaroff and Comaroff delight in the strange and ironic effects of neoliberal culture (such as the emergence of new forms of witchcraft), the governmentality school places more emphasis on the orderly effects of neoliberal governance. Unlike the prison, which in Foucault’s analysis never produces its intended effects (Foucault 1979), the governmentality theorists exude a sense that neoliberal governance functions, that it has successfully produced responsible and governable but alienated neoliberal subjects – you and I. A version of this argument applies specifically to some analyses of the discourse of suzhi in China, where the hyper-disciplined, over-achieving only child in an urban Chinese middle-class family is
seen as one of the intended results of neoliberal governance (Anagnost 2004). In addition, the governmentality school’s focus on the production of governable citizen/subjects blends political and economic (neo)liberalism more thoroughly than Comaroff and Comaroff’s approach on economic policy. For governmentality theorists, the ideal citizen/subject is both entrepreneurial in the economic sense and reasonable, law-abiding, tolerant, and autonomous in the political sense.

Finally, while the focus of Comaroff and Comaroff’s research is on the ironic effects of neoliberal culture, the governmentality school focuses on the techniques and discourses of governance itself. This enables the best practitioners of governmentality theory to posit the simultaneous existence of several techniques and discourses that are used in the governance of the world (not just neoliberalism) and hence to avoid entirely the possibility of being read as positing a holistic order in a stage-like vision of history. Moreover, where Comaroff and Comaroff’s neoliberalism exists primarily in the policies of elite actors that provide the context for the culture of the masses, for governmentality theorists, neoliberal discourses and techniques of governance circulate across many levels and contexts. Governance includes child-rearing and the management of the self and one’s social relations as well as national-level laws and the policies of international organizations. As a result, though governmentality theorists generally do not suggest a holistic order, their definition of neoliberalism is quite broad, encompassing both political and economic liberalism and attempts to produce entrepreneurial, autonomous citizens through both government intervention and the retreat from government intervention. In part, the breadth of this vision of neoliberalism derives from the starting-point of their analyses, which is a diverse tradition of Western political writings rather than a system of policies or a set of economic structures. But for those looking at the relationship of this tradition to more specific polices, it can seem that almost any action by any contemporary governing agent may be labelled as neoliberal.

I emphasize the disjunctures between these different methods of theorizing neoliberalism to make the point that, without further specification, it is not even clear what sorts of policies deserve to be labelled as neoliberal. Public investments in a ‘competitive’ education system could be considered either the epitome or the antithesis of neoliberal policy, depending upon what definition of neoliberalism one adopts.

Another problem is that neoliberal policies, however defined, may be sincerely or disingenuously pursued. Often enough, powerful social actors mouth neoliberal slogans or ideology of one form or another in a crass attempt to grab power or exploit others. There may be no intention of actually enacting neoliberal policy or striving for neoliberal goals. This issue should be of crucial interest to those who believe (as the author of this article does not) that neoliberalism is systemic in the contemporary world. If neoliberalism is a systemic discourse (as some governmentality theorists would have it), then it reproduces itself by producing ‘responsibilized’ subject/citizens who re-create neoliberal institutions. From this vantage, disingenuous applications of neoliberal discourse would thus work to undermine neoliberalism. But if neoliberalism is an ‘ideology’ that serves merely to mask the true workings of class domination, then disingenuous applications of neoliberal ideas are central to the reproduction of neoliberalism. In such a case, the actual production of autonomous, responsible citizen/subjects would undermine neoliberalism. Few who write as if neoliberalism were systemic in the contemporary world demonstrate awareness of this contradiction.
Two examples illustrate not only what I mean by disingenuous neoliberalism but also the tendency of some anthropologists to both write of neoliberalism in the spirit of the governmentality school and illustrate their arguments with instances of disingenuous neoliberalism that suggest that neoliberalism is a mere ideology. Shore and Wright (2000) (as well as several other chapters in Strathern 2000) describe the impact of ‘neoliberal’ policies of accountability on British and European academia. They suggest that in many cases these policies have resulted in a reduction in exam scores and other performance and efficiency criteria that they were supposedly designed to enhance. In some cases the implementation of these policies has also turned a highly self-motivated and self-disciplined workforce into a dispirited bunch that aims only to fulfil meaningless performance criteria. Thus, by the criteria of the governmentality school, they have turned an ideal neoliberal workforce into its antithesis. In the process, these policies have also led to the disempowerment, demoralization, and relative silencing of many academics, which may well have been the actual purpose of many of the policy’s backers all along. If so, disempowering academics rather than achieving any form of neoliberal ideal motivated this policy, and the neoliberalism of the policy itself is purely disingenuous.

The second example comes back to the discourse of *suzhi* in China and involves companies who recruit young rural women to work as maids in China’s capital, Beijing. In an article with the Foucauldian phrase ‘neoliberal governmentality’ in the title, Yan (2003) describes how the recruiters attempt to convince young women to become migrant workers with the argument that work in the cities will expose them to cosmopolitan market culture and thus improve their *suzhi*. They thus mouth the rhetoric of neoliberal developmentalism; for the purpose of making these young women more entrepreneurial and autonomous, they need the experiential education that working as a maid in Beijing can provide. In fact, however, the recruiters desire workers with no experience who are easier to exploit and manipulate. Those who do improve their *suzhi* by becoming savvy and entrepreneurial in the urban labour market are dismissed (Yan 2003: 502-5).

There are moments when the gaps between the approach of the Comaroffs and the governmentality school to neoliberalism or between sincere and disingenuous neoliberal approaches are not large. Disingenuous neoliberalism presupposes the existence of a group of true believers, while ordo-liberal attempts to produce autonomous, entrepreneurial subjects can merge with Reaganesque projects of privatization. But just as significant are the moments when these various forms of ‘neoliberalism’ fundamentally contradict one another. To naively draw upon all types of analyses of neoliberalism without noting their contradictions leads to a hodgepodge sort of analysis in which the world as a whole and everything in it appears to belong to a single theoretical category. The reifying assumptions of such analyses are reinforced through the use of holistic expressions like ‘neoliberal system’ (Babb 2001: 106), ‘neoliberal world order’ (Speed 2006: 69), or ‘neoliberal capitalism’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999b: 307) (does anyone ever describe non-neoliberal capitalism?). Even worse are those who imagine the diverse phenomena associated with the term ‘neoliberalism’ to be different aspects of a singular system (as a few readers of this article have suggested). Such an imagination illustrates both the very definition of the word ‘reification’ and the type of thinking that caused Radcliffe-Brown to dismiss the culture concept as a ‘fantastic reification of abstractions’ (cited in Brightman 1995: 512). It further implies that neoliberalism is the latest stage in a ladder-like historical teleology.
How would I prefer the term ‘neoliberalism’ to be used? Many lessons could be derived from how the use of the word ‘culture’ has evolved. Against the assertion that a given place has a singular culture, most anthropologists who use the term ‘culture’ now either prefer the adjectival form or modify the noun with phrases that particularize it. Thus it seems more reasonable to discuss ‘the culture of Japanese baseball’ or ‘the culture of American racism’ than ‘American culture’ or ‘Japanese culture’. Similarly, neoliberalism should be particularized to show exactly which policies, or traditions of thoughts, or discursive actions the author is defining as neoliberal. To use the term in an unspecified way or as a framing device, to link it to other very general terms such as ‘capitalism’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999b: 307), ‘city’ (Guano 2002: 185), ‘state’ (Whitehead 2005: 18), or a place (as in ‘neoliberal China’ [Scott 2005: 400]), to cite authors who speak of neoliberalism in holistic terms, or to cite a wide range of depictions of ‘neoliberalism’ without noting their contradictions is to invite misreading.

The use of neoliberalism in the analysis of suzhi discourse

Over the past two decades, the concept of suzhi (human quality) has become increasingly central to dynamics of culture and governance in the PRC. The birth control policy speaks in terms of raising the quality of the Chinese population by limiting its quantity. In rural contexts, cadres justify their right to rule in terms of having a higher quality than the ‘peasants’ around them (Thøgersen 2003: 213-14). All manner of human resources decisions can be justified in terms of quality, and development projects may be bolstered by claims that they will raise the quality of the targeted population (Yan 2003: 495-6). In popular usage, the notion of ‘lacking quality’ is used to mock or discriminate against rural migrants, litterbugs, short people, the nearsighted, and the poorly dressed. Education reform is justified in terms of the quality of people it will produce (Kipnis 2001: 10), while individual Chinese of many backgrounds consume a dizzying variety of books, nutritional supplements, clothes, exercise equipment, medicines, and educational programmes in the pursuit of quality for themselves and their children. Finally, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increasingly claims its own legitimacy in terms of its ability to produce a strong and powerful nation by individually and collectively raising the quality of its citizens as well as its own cadres.

Contemporary uses of suzhi began in the early 1980s with the massive propaganda effort associated with the birth control policy. The term’s connotations shifted dramatically as a result of this propaganda. Suzhi has now come to refer almost exclusively to embodied human quality (as opposed to the quality of non-human entities or of broad human institutions like the military or industry), and the embodied qualities it refers to include those that result from both nature and nurture (as opposed to purely inborn attributes, which were more important in pre-1980s uses; for more detail see Kipnis 2006).

The rise and shift of meaning of the term have captured the imaginations of many who write about China, and anthropologists have recently written several articles, book chapters, and dissertations on the topic of suzhi discourse and its relationship to neoliberalism. Yan (2003) and Anagnost (2004), for example, draw relationships between regimes of capital accumulation in China’s ‘neoliberal’ economy and the ‘neoliberal developmentalism’ (Anagnost 2004: 197) inherent in the fables of self-improvement embodied by those who devote excessive attention to their children’s suzhi. In general, Yan (2003), Pun (2003), and Anagnost (2004) discuss the discourse of suzhi in ways that suggest it is entirely submerged in a neoliberal context, while Jeffery
(2000), Judd (2002), and Woronov (2002) provide analyses that suggest a more partial relationship between the discourse of *suzhi* and neoliberalism. Here I examine analyses that relate neoliberalism to *suzhi* discourse to make explicit both what they reveal and what they elide.

In critiquing these analyses, I emphasize ironies and contradictions that the authors fail to note. Often what the authors describe as ‘neoliberal’ in one sense of the term will appear to be its opposite in another sense. In making these contradictions explicit, I admit that I do not limit my own use of the term ‘neoliberal’ to any one definition. My point is not to come up with a singular, better use of the term, but merely to show what is hidden by arguments that do not devote attention to the problematic of reifying neoliberalism and thus fail to note the contradictory twists in the practices of governance that they are labelling neoliberal.

My first example comes from discussions with American activists working with NGOs in Beijing who describe *suzhi* discourse as a typical form of ‘blame the victim’-type neoliberal discourse. This analysis receives support in the writings of anthropologists like Judd (2002) and Jeffery (2000), who emphasize how the lack of success in China’s market economy is often explained in official discourse with reference to the low *suzhi* of the unsuccessful. While I agree that *suzhi* is often used in this manner to explain social inequality, I still find it quite different to the type of neoliberal discourse that I associate with the term ‘blame the victim’. For me, ‘blame the victim’ discourse is first of all a critique of the neoliberal welfare policies articulated in the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan. This style of discourse works by denying that ‘welfare Moms’, for example, are victims at all. It denies the relevance of structural factors to the explanation of welfare Moms’ disadvantage and asserts that if welfare Moms cannot get off of welfare, they just are not trying hard enough. In contrast to this Reagan-style victim-blaming discourse, consider this argument by an educator from Beijing, who believes that Beijing students deserve more university places than those from the province of Hubei.

A student’s overall *suzhi* is a product of social environment, school environment, teachers, family, and level of individual effort. Individual effort is only one aspect. Beijing is the nation’s economic, political and cultural centre and all sorts of information are densely concentrated here. A child who lives every day in such an information-saturated environment develops a very high level of overall *suzhi* ... The reasons behind the high examination scores of Hubei students are that schools there turn students into ‘testing machines’ and that education is the only way out for students in poverty-stricken areas. But these high scorers are not really any better than Beijing students (Zang 2000: 38)

This statement works in exactly the opposite fashion of Reagan-style ‘blame the welfare Mom’-type discourse. It emphasizes rather than denies structural differences between Beijing and Hubei, and argues that it does not matter if the Hubei students work harder and get higher exam scores than Beijing students, Hubei students are from a structurally disadvantaged place so of course they are of lower *suzhi*.

The same can be said about the typical snide discussions of rural migrants by Chinese urbanites. Very few urbanites would suggest that the ‘peasants’ do not try hard enough or do not work hard enough. Rather, the implications are that no matter how hard they try, no matter how much effort they put into wearing the right clothes (Pun 2003), getting a better education, speaking with the proper diction, or behaving politely, they will never overcome their peasant lack of quality. Both Yan (2003) and Gaetano (2004) describe the obstructionist steps and sometimes sneering attitude that urban
middle-class employers of migrant working maids adopt when, through night school or other means, these women attempt to raise their *suzhi* too far.

The divergence between Reagan-style neoliberal discourse, which can relate inequality only to lack of effort, and the type of victim-blaming discourse that is appearing here is further illuminated by Louis Dumont’s contrast between liberal and hierarchical thinking. Dumont (1980) defines ‘*Homo hierarchicus*’ as a social species of being that thinks of the relationships among the parts of a holistic society in terms of hierarchy. Individuals, in such an imagination, are not equals but relate to one another as superiors and inferiors, as members of different castes, who embody different levels of purity. Reproducing the hierarchy is a matter of moral and political agency and, thus, hierarchical discourse is an ideal as much as a fact. In Dumont’s view, liberal societies may contain inequalities as extreme as those in India, but these inequalities must be seen as either accidental occurrences or defects, and downplayed or critiqued rather than justified in moral and political discourse; in other words, in liberal societies inequalities must be reproduced silently rather than explicitly (Dumont 1977). As a human agent, *Homo hierarchicus* is an illiberal type that loudly asserts the existence of a morally justified state of inequality.⁵

Not only is Reagan’s discourse on welfare reform the epitome of neoliberal discourse in the eyes of many, but it is also liberal in Dumont’s sense. It avoids the question of inequality rather than asserting that inequality should exist. Even today, defenders of Reagan-esque welfare reforms claim that it has worked to move many former welfare recipients into employed situations and thus has worked to reduce the divide between the employable and the unemployable. Reagan’s critics point out how insecure and low-paying the jobs are of those who have moved off welfare, but neither side asserts the existence of a morally justified state of inequality. In contrast, though it does not revolve around issues of purity and encompassment (as in the case of Dumont’s discussion of caste in India), *suzhi* discourse is decidedly unliberal in its assertion of morally justified hierarchies.⁶ From a Dumontian point of view, *suzhi* discourse thus falls outside of the liberal/neoliberal continuum.

In her critiques of Chinese neoliberalism, Ann Anagnost (1997; 2004) suggests that *suzhi* discourse works ideologically to displace class discourse. She argues that because its association with the class struggle of the Maoist era taints the word for class in Chinese, many replace the over-politicized idiom of class with a de-politicized idiom of *suzhi*. While I agree that the word *suzhi* has displaced that of class, I cannot accept the conclusion that *suzhi* discourse elides discussion of class in the same way that (neo)liberal discourse does. Neoliberal discourse asserts that class difference and social hierarchies of all forms are non-existent, unimportant, or irrelevant. *Suzhi* discourse reifies rather than elides forms of hierarchical difference; it offers a way of speaking explicitly about class without using the word ‘class’. In short, while in an abstract sense *suzhi* discourse might be called a ‘blame the victim’ discourse, and while it can certainly work to naturalize and, therefore, de-politicize social hierarchy, the manner in which it does these things is rarely liberal or neoliberal.

A second way of linking *suzhi* discourse to neoliberalism is to draw an equivalence between *suzhi* and money and utilize Marxian critiques of exchange-value. Just as money enables one to make false equivalences between incomparable forms of human labour, so does *suzhi*, in its hierarchical ranking of a singular form of human Quality, enable false comparisons. Rankings of *suzhi* meet their ultimate fetishized form when an attempt is made to quantify them, either by equating *suzhi* to market-value or by

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creating some sort of exam that purports to measure suzhi accurately (Anagnost 2004; Judd 2002: 30; Yan, 2003).

Again I agree with some of the points of these analyses. Certainly suzhi results in fetishized relative rankings of incomparable objects and these rankings are fetishized even further when ridiculous numeric scales are attached to them. My problem is the equation of these processes with neoliberalism. First of all, any form of hierarchical value judgement relies upon drawing fetishized, false comparisons. Rankings based in notions of purity, as found in Dumont’s India, participate in this process every bit as much as do rankings based on the exchange-value of labour power.7

Second, while I can see some merit in describing the attempt to equate suzhi with exchange-value in the marketplace as a form of neoliberalism, such a manner of measuring suzhi does not predominate. Even where discussions of suzhi do emphasize market-value, the manner in which they do so often constitutes a rather disingenuous form of neoliberalism. For example, in impoverished rural areas, especially those with large minority (ethnically non-Han) populations, one can hear cadres who are hungry for economic development and the resultant tax income discuss the low suzhi of the population in a manner that implies that anyone who cannot earn much money has low suzhi (Lam 2000). But can officials interested in increasing tax revenue (often for the purpose of creating government jobs for their relatives) be described as ‘neoliberal’? At best, this is neoliberalism of a rather disingenuous sort. Judd (2002) provides a critical but sympathetic discussion of Chinese Women Federation workers who attempt to raise the suzhi of impoverished rural women by providing them with opportunities for training that will directly increase their earning power. In this sort of case only do I see a sincere form of a Foucauldian-style neoliberal developmentalism. And this neoliberalism is still different to a Reaganesque discourse that can only relate poverty to insufficient effort.

As one moves out of the context of rural development, discussions of suzhi tend to focus more on educational attainment and other forms of embodied cultivation than on earning power per se. In her critiques of ‘vampiric’ forms of Chinese neoliberalism, Anagnost (2004) contrasts blood-sucking denial of suzhi cultivation opportunities for the children of migrant workers with hyper-investment in the children of middle-class urbanites. While I find the adjective ‘vampiric’ powerful when used to describe this contrast, I also find the entire relationship between economic and cultural capital constructed in these cases to be rather un-neoliberal. Here the work of Carolyn Hsu (2004) illuminates. Hsu shows how entrepreneurial business people in the northeast urban centre of Harbin are divided into two categories. They are either denigrated as getihu (trading household/peddler) or glorified as shangren (businessmen/entrepreneur). While there are legal differences between the two terms in relation to enterprise size and structure, in popular usage the difference is often conceived in terms of suzhi, defined primarily in relation to educational attainment. No matter how much money they made, getihu were imagined as peasant traders with both low levels of education and questionable morality. No matter how little money they made (or how much they lost), college graduates who attempted to start businesses were conceived of as high suzhi shangren of considerable moral stature. They alone were imagined as having the ability to contribute to the proper economic development of the city. Describing this hierarchy of values as neoliberal seems quite contradictory to Western academics used to having their cultural capital denigrated for its worthlessness in the marketplace. Yet it is precisely in the arena of such forms of cultural capital that the vampiric processes described by Anagnost operate.
Finally, to equate non-market forms of measuring suzhi with the market, as Yan (2003: 497) does in her discussion of psychological tests, further exaggerates the range of neoliberal discourses. With most forms of suzhi evaluation, who is doing the measuring is crucial. When an urbanite mocks a migrant worker for his low suzhi, he is reminding the worker that it is the urbanite himself who has the right to make such rankings. When rural cadres say that they have the right to rule because they have higher suzhi than the peasants around them, they do not offer public tests and declare that anyone who takes this test and scores higher than them has a right to their job.

In practice, Party member claims to high suzhi are backed by all manner of questionable methods of credentialization. In Shandong province, I have known middle-aged rural cadres who suddenly announced to me (in the late 1990s) that they were university graduates even though a few years before they were only junior middle-school graduates. There are special schools reserved for training and credentializing Party members and even, in some elite cases, their children. Neither the processes of admission to these schools nor their training programmes are open to public evaluation, though the nation is assured, no doubt, that all of the graduates have achieved the highest levels of suzhi. Indeed Party claims to legitimacy through suzhi are possible only because, in the last instance, it is the Party itself who claims the right to declare who has the highest suzhi. In this sense the evaluation of suzhi is authoritarian rather than liberal, government-dictated rather than market-driven.

Finally, in those cases where there exist semi-institutionalized and public means for measuring suzhi, such as with the university entrance exams, or with objective tests used to select employees, the contents and objectivity of the exams are continually contested (this can be seen in the comparison of Hubei and Beijing university applicants described above).

When one measures by exchange-value, no one disputes the scale that is being used. A 100-Yuan note is worth more than a 10-Yuan note no matter who is measuring. That is how the magic of the marketplace works. While various pseudo-scientists may suggest that they have developed an objective scale for measuring suzhi, these scales are taken about as seriously as the objective tests for measuring sex appeal in a Cosmo magazine. In most instances, the politics of suzhi evaluation are the politics of arbitrary personal power, administrative fiat, or contested public standards. Such processes do not fit easily with the neoliberal ideal of evaluation in the marketplace, which depends upon the existence of an invisible, transparent, universally accepted scale of comparison.

Contextualizing suzhi discourse

What is context? Everything and nothing. Like a shadow, it flees from those who pursue it, evading the levels and categories of theory, and pursues those who try to flee from it, insinuating itself as the unnoticed ground upon which even the most explicit statements depend. If you are persuaded by the phenomenological concept of incompleteness, then context is inexhaustible.

Hanks 1996: 140

How, then, would I analyse or contextualize suzhi discourse? First of all, I would insist that the discursive uses of the term suzhi, as well as the way in which it informs
contemporary policy, have contradictory links to many forms of political discourse, including those that, by one definition or another, might accurately be described as neoliberal and those that seem to be the antithesis of neoliberalism. The above discussion has already highlighted how *suzhi* discourse is used in contexts that mark it as hierarchical rather than liberal (in a Dumontian sense) and authoritarian rather than neoliberal in terms of the relationship between government dictate and market-value in the process of evaluation. Here I continue the contextualization of *suzhi* discourse with further discussion of the relationships between *suzhi* discourse and authoritarianism, traditional practices of cultivation, nationalism, and, finally, neoliberalism.

Let me begin by continuing the discussion of authoritarianism and its relationship to the historical spread of *suzhi* discourse. *Suzhi* discourse had its origins in the so-called ‘one-child’ policy. Initially anyway, this policy was hugely unpopular and forced upon the Chinese populace in a manner that only an extremely authoritarian regime could manage. In the process of implementation, slogans that connected improving the *suzhi* of the Chinese population with limiting its quantity were reproduced on infinite occasions in meetings of cadres, in newspapers, on television and radio, and even on the walls of the remotest of villages. For more than twenty years cadres throughout China have been forced to reproduce the slogans and enforce the policy. The logic that linked improving the quality of the population to reducing its quantity could not be questioned outside of limited, private conversations. The tense politics of enforcing the one-child policy thus made improving the *suzhi* of the Chinese population into a sacred slogan of Chinese political discourse.

Here a comparison with Maoism is in order. During the Cultural Revolution, Maoist sayings constituted a sacred language used by almost everyone to express almost anything. No matter how self-serving, disingenuous, or subversive one’s intent, expressing one’s thoughts through Maoist slogans implied that one was respecting the leadership of the party, and thus offered a modicum of political protection as well as an opportunity to be heard. The language of *suzhi* works similarly today. Since the early 1980s, government workers and analysts have increasingly used notions of *suzhi* to argue for all manner of policy. Any sort of ‘development’ project can be described in the language of raising the population’s quality. Chinese educational reformers, intrigued by English-language educational theories that go under the name of ‘competence education’, translated this term as ‘*suzhi* education’, and managed to get *suzhi* education inscribed as a guiding national policy for the twenty-first century (Kipnis 2006). Human resource managers in both the public and private sectors justify recruitment and salary decisions in terms of *suzhi*. Rural cadres justify their own leadership positions in terms of their *suzhi* being higher than that of the peasants around them, and, of course, urbanites discriminate against rural migrants for their lack of *suzhi*. The language of *suzhi* has become the politically correct language of social snobbery, as well as everything else.

The historical spread of *suzhi* discourse from contexts of birth control to its now ubiquitous stature is one of the reasons why I find it discordant to analyse it primarily as a form of neoliberalism. In the governmentality sense of neoliberalism, where promotion of an autonomous subject/citizen is a primary goal, the need to display loyalty by mouthing the political slogans of the politically powerful is arguably the antithesis of neoliberalism. If neoliberalism is defined in a more Reaganite fashion, then such authoritarianism is at best peripheral to neoliberal economic policy and still
potentially antithetical to it. If the role of the state is to be minimized, then why should governments devote so much effort to articulating national ideals? Why not just let the ‘market’ determine the goals for the nation?

In addition to linguistic authoritarianism, the spread of suzhi discourse into popular culture reflects the ability of the term to blend with much older Chinese traditions of cultivation and self-cultivation. The links among cultivation, power, and moral authority as well as the conception of suzhi as an all-encompassing mental/moral/physical type of capital have deep roots in both Confucian and Confucian/Marxist traditions of thought. There are striking resonances among the practices of self-cultivation depicted in Chinese martial arts novels and films, the style of discipline enacted in Chinese schools, and the practices depicted in popular child-raising books, such as the record-breaking bestseller Harvard girl, Liu Yiting: a true chronicle of suzhi cultivation (Liu & Zhang 2000). All suggest that as long as the proper techniques are used and strict discipline is enacted, a lifetime of cultivation will lead to miraculous bodily transformations and astonishing abilities.

Chinese nationalism is a third crucial context for understanding suzhi discourse. Fong (2004) applies Herzfeld’s (1997) concept of ‘cultural intimacy’ to depict the nationalism of Chinese urban teenagers as ‘filial’. By filial, Fong means that the teenagers look upon the nation in the same way that they view their over-burdened parents – with an ‘uneasy combination of love, ambivalence, frustration and duty’ (Fong 2004: 645). The relationship between suzhi discourse and nationalism may also be conceived in terms of cultural intimacy. For as the Party shores up its sagging legitimacy by suggesting that it alone can save the nation by raising the population’s suzhi, it draws an intimate link between the individually embodied forms of suzhi that Chinese people cultivate and the collective welfare of the nation. In a national context with a historically deep tradition of debates about the comparative value of redesigning political institutions in relation to that of improving the morality of the people and their leaders (see, e.g., Jie 2004), the inherent political conservatism of an emphasis on improving the suzhi of the people is readily apparent. If suzhi improvement is the key to saving the nation, then political reform is irrelevant.

Finally, then, there is ‘neoliberalism’. Of the many possible definitions of neoliberalism that could be used partially to contextualize suzhi discourse, I here refer to those economic policies that are designed to increase competition in labour markets. Anxiety about falling behind in a competitive society drives many to worry about cultivating suzhi in themselves and their children. This insight is the baby that I do not wish to throw out with the bathwater of my critique of reified neoliberalism. I insist, however, that such economic policies in no sense make either Chinese society or the Chinese economy into a neoliberal whole. On the one hand, there exist other policies that segment the labour market and, hence, limit competition for some. The most notorious of these would be the household registration laws that reserve certain jobs, university places, and health and welfare benefits for those registered within a given urban territory. On the other hand, competition-inducing economic policies are not the only source of competition in Chinese society. For example, competitiveness in the education system, especially the ability of rural students to compete with urban students for university places, derives in part from both Maoist and post-Mao efforts to ensure that as many rural students as possible have access to a decent secondary education. Neoliberal policies designed to build competitive labour markets are only one of many techniques of governance influencing China today.
Conclusion

Suzhi discourse and neoliberalism, however defined, should be seen as belonging to the same general theoretical category – circulating forms of governmentality each with a range of associated techniques and practices, sometimes sincerely and sometimes disingenuously applied. That is to say, it would be wrong to view neoliberalism as an overarching context within which a more limited suzhi discourse operates. Both circulate in China and operate on many levels. Suzhi discourse informs the rhetoric and policy-making decisions of elites as well as the speech of everyday interactions, as do the various forms of discourse that might be considered neoliberal.

Suzhi discourse is commonplace in contemporary China both because it is a sacred language of political correctness and because it is adaptable enough to be used in a multiplicity of contexts. While I acknowledge that concepts of suzhi are occasionally used in discursive contexts that might (in at least one sense of the term) be appropriately labelled neoliberal, I think it mistaken to associate the discourse of suzhi with a supposed global dominance of neoliberalism. Suzhi discourse, after all, does not circulate in the majority of countries that are arguably more liberal, or neoliberal, than China. Crucial to its circulation within China is its ability to reinforce the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of Party member–non-Party member relationships and rural–urban relationships as well as its ability to fit discursive contexts that might be more accurately described as neoliberal.

The deficiencies of theories that posit neoliberalism as a holistic context of contemporary human action are easy enough to debunk. By drawing on disparate discussions of neoliberalism, they tend to conflate forms of neoliberalism that are often not compatible. Disingenuous neoliberalism, ordo-liberalism, and Reaganesque discourse do not simply add up to make a single neoliberal whole. Such theorizing obfuscates the non-liberal and even anti-liberal elements of governance that continue to exist alongside discourses that fit at least one sense of the term ‘neoliberal’ both in China and elsewhere. It also misses the extent to which relatively subordinated leaders and people twist an official discourse to very local ends. Finally, as with all forms of holistic theory, one is left with no possibilities for the theorization of change. When neoliberalism is seen as covering the globe from end to end, Francis Fukuyama’s (1989) end of history thesis is confirmed.¹³

The symmetry between reified uses of the term ‘neoliberalism’ and orientalist holisms deserves contemplation. For many Marxian analysts of neoliberalism, it is perhaps unthinkable that their theorizing could be seen as similar to that of culturalist works such as Dumont’s (1980) depiction of Indian hierarchy. In terms of the holistic form of social imagination, however, the similarities are more than superficial. Moreover, in the case of reified uses of neoliberalism, the holistic tropes have re-emerged after numerous pointed critiques of ethnographic holism (e.g. Appadurai 1986a, 1986b, 1992; Thornton 1992). The reasons behind this re-emergence have to do with anthropology’s desire to connect social actions observed ethnographically with larger, easily generalized social forces. Since most anthropological research proceeds ethnographically, the connections to the larger forces tend to be of an imaginative nature, and the easiest way to imagine them is as a singular structure.

Anthropologists do have resources for making such connections without succumbing to the temptation of positing a social whole. Rumsey (2004), for example, describes several different forms of ethnographic macro-tropes that enable the construction of theory in non-holistic fashion. A basis for any of these rhetorical strategies, however, is
the positing of multiple, incompatible social forces within a single, unbounded social field and the resultant emphasis on the partiality of one’s own description. But having such resources available is of little use unless one makes an active effort to resist the temptations of holism.

How, then, might neoliberalism in China and elsewhere be described? First, various forms of liberal and neoliberal thinking have to be differentiated. Then, both their points of contradiction and their points of intersection need to be described. Moreover, when powerful policy-making actors use neoliberal rhetoric of one form or another, the seriousness of their intent and the success of their policies need to be analysed. Are they producing an entrepreneurial citizenry, a competitive marketplace, or a smaller government, and do they even wish to? Finally, the place of the un-liberal and the anti-liberal should be acknowledged. Without at least a nod towards these elements, analyses of neoliberal discourse can be read as if they were asserting a social whole even when this is not the author’s intent.

NOTES

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1 An explicit debate on the virtues and deficiencies of such theorizing takes place between the Comaroffs and Sally Falk Moore with reference to another of the Comaroffs’ articles (1999a) on the culture of neoliberalism (see Moore 1999 and Comaroff & Comaroff 1999b). In other essays, Comaroff and Comaroff do make more detailed links to specific economic policies and ‘the culture of neoliberalism’, but when they do, I am not convinced that these policies constitute anything like ‘neoliberal capitalism’. For example, the primary economic factors that they link to witchcraft accusations in South Africa are the existence of stable pension incomes for the elderly and lack of jobs for the young (Comaroff & Comaroff 2004). Pensions certainly cannot be considered a neoliberal institution and youth unemployment is often extremely high in planned economies and in economies with strict conditions on the unfair dismissal of employees.

2 The case of the Maoist slogan of ‘self-reliance’ (zili gengshen) demonstrates the difficulty of locating a stable distinction between the neoliberal and the non-neoliberal. On the one hand, it is safe to say that Mao was anti-capitalist and did not think of self-reliance in terms of preparing individuals for a market culture. On the other hand, the practical use of the slogan had much in common with the themes of responsibilization and practice of welfare reform commonly labelled ‘neoliberal’ by governmentality theorists today. ‘Self-reliance’ was used to justify reducing the dependence of poorer individuals or collectivities on the disbursements of resources from more central levels of the government coffers in a call for them to enact greater self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation.

3 In relation to suzhi discourse, Yan (2003) is perhaps the best example of someone who draws upon all of these approaches to neoliberalism. She titles her article in the Foucauldian tradition of ‘neoliberal governmentality’, draws upon Marx as her primary theorist, cites the Comaroffs, and uses examples, such as the aforementioned one of the maids recruited to work in Beijing, that suggest extremely disingenuous applications of neoliberal ideology.

4 Note that the distinction between individually embodied qualities and institutionally structured qualities is not a distinction between individual and collective qualities. One may speak of the suzhi of a collectivity such as the nation or the Party, but this refers to the qualities embodied by the individual members of that collectivity. Qualities that derive from, say, the organizational structure of a company are referred to by another term, zhiliang (see Kipnis 2006).

5 Hierarchical discourse in China does not involve notions of purity and encompassment in the manner Dumont describes for India. But its roots are ancient. See Makeham (2003: 79-156) for discussions of hierarchical thought in the Confucian tradition and its possible relationship to Indian thought.

Ironically, the critique of neoliberalism that I make here is in many ways similar to that made of Dumont’s work on hierarchy in India. A series of essays by Arjun Appadurai in the late 1980s and early 1990s (1986a; 1986b; 1992) highlighted the dangers of Dumont’s totalizing vision, thereby diminishing the latter’s influence on the discipline. Appadurai castigated Dumont for his holism, for his orientalist attachment of a singular
religious discourse to a non-Western geographic space, and for its erasure of the multiplicity of India. I accept the validity of Appadurai’s critique here, but am not sure that Dumont’s demise has constituted the ‘swan song for an older [way of thinking]’, as Appadurai (1986a: 745) put it. For if Dumont’s unpopularity remains, in some analyses of neoliberalism I see a holism and erasure of multiplicity similar to that described by Appadurai for Dumont. Perhaps the only significant difference is that for contemporary analysts of neoliberalism, the singular discourse is attached to a stage of history rather than a geographic space. And if the past is a foreign country, then a temporal orientalism is just as likely as a geographic one.

9 The use of suzhi discourse to assert moral hierarchies is bolstered by the fact that suzhi now only refers to human quality and that this term in the first instance implies an overarching, totalistic form of capital Q Quality that entirely sums up a given individual or group. Here I should note that English really lacks a term like suzhi. In English, while one may speak of human ‘qualities’ (in the plural), it is de-humanizing to use the singular form to discuss ‘the quality’ of an individual or group of human beings. Though one may refer to the moral qualities of a person with the term ‘character’, the mental qualities with the term ‘intelligence’, and the physical qualities with the term ‘strength’, there is no term like suzhi that can refer to all of these things at once.

12 Elsewhere (Kipnis 2003), I have argued that the violence of abstraction that Marx associated with capitalism is implicit in all forms of language use, and thus implicit in any code of value.

13 Some of the better governmentality theorists, such as Sigley (1996; 2004) and Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) provide excellent analyses of aspects of suzhi discourse that are not so closely tied to notions of neoliberalism.

14 Post-Mao birth control policy in China has only been a ‘one-child’ policy in the urban areas. In most rural areas, parents whose first child is a girl are eventually allowed a second. In some places the policy is even more flexibly applied.

While many democratic nations have implemented eugenics policies of one form or another, I doubt very much that a democratic nation could have implemented China’s one-child policy. Especially in its early stages, the combination of the degree of intrusion it required into the intimate daily lives of families and women, the cruelty and unpopularity of this intrusion, and the fact that this intrusion was imposed upon the majority of the population rather than a dispossessed and unpopular minority all make it quite different to the types of eugenic adventures undertaken by democratic regimes. For an excellent history of birth-control policy in China, see Greenhalgh & Winckler (2005).

16 By late 2005, Harvard girl was in its sixty-third printing and had sold over 1.75 million copies. For more detailed discussions of the links between suzhi discourse, Confucian thought, and traditional practices of cultivation, see Bakken (2000), Judd (2002), Kipnis (2006), and Murphy (2004).

17 The literature on the household registration laws and their effects on Chinese society is vast (see, e.g., Cheng & Selden 1994; Solinger 1999; Wang 2005).

REFERENCES
Le néolibéralisme réifié : discours du suzhi et leitmotive du néolibéralisme en République populaire de Chine

Résumé

Depuis le milieu des années 1990, le « néolibéralisme » est un motif explicatif de plus en plus fréquent en anthropologie socioculturelle. L’auteur cherche ici à démêler les différentes significations anthropologiques du néolibéralisme et à en pointer les angles morts lorsqu’il est utilisé comme métaphore générale. Il commence par analyser les contradictions entre deux formes courantes de théorie du néolibéralisme. Le reste de l’article est consacré à la discussion initiale, avec l’examen d’un cas particulier : le discours du suzhi en République populaire de Chine. On peut interpréter le suzhi comme la qualité humaine, et le discours du suzhi renvoie aux multiples moyens d’utiliser cette notion de qualité humaine dans le processus de gouvernement de la Chine contemporaine. L’auteur évoque les points forts et les faiblesses des arguments qui visent à expliquer le discours du suzhi en termes de néolibéralisme, et suggère des manières de contextualiser ce discours qui seraient plus fécondes.
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