

The Chinese Communist Party's Nervous System: Affective Governance from Mao to Xi

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Abstract

In its one hundred years of existence, the Communist Party of China has experimented with how to connect its narratives of legitimacy to people's affects. In this essay, I trace the conceptualization of gratitude, from its repudiation in the Mao era as a vestige of feudalism and imperialism to its return in the reform era as a re-verticalization of Party sovereignty. The paper addresses four examples of gratitude work: Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Yang's short-lived critique of gratitude in the name of a different conception of popular sovereignty; the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake as a day of gratitude; the detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang who are taught to be grateful to the Communist Party in a campaign of religious de-radicalization; and the refusal of gratitude in quarantined Wuhan during the COVID-19 pandemic. In these cases, the Communist Party's sovereignty stands at the threshold between bio- and necro-politics, promising life and salvation in the midst of death and destruction.

Keywords: affect; sovereignty; gratitude; 2008 Sichuan earthquake; Xinjiang; COVID-19

“The visceral response is a trained thing, not just autonomic activity.”
Lauren Berlant¹

“All people must have grateful hearts.”
Xi Jinping²

On 7 March 2020, as Wuhan entered its third month of lockdown owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the newly appointed municipal Communist Party secretary, Wang Zhonglin 王忠林, is reported to have called for “gratitude education among the citizens of the whole city, so that they thank the General Secretary [Xi

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1 Berlant 2008.

2 “Xi Jinping: suoyou ren dou yao you gan'en de xin” (Xi Jinping: everyone needs a heart of gratitude). *Xinhua*, 28 January 2014, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0128/c64094-24255551.html>. Accessed 16 April 2020.

Jinping 习近平], thank the Chinese Communist Party, heed the Party, walk with the Party, and create positive energy.”³ Instead of the desired applause, Wang’s directions met with a torrent of anger.⁴ Within hours of the backlash, the official WeChat post calling on Wuhan citizens to feel gratitude was deleted. What can this scene tell us about political life, state–society relations and structures of legitimacy in China?

This essay argues that this scene shows the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as an architect of affects through which it structures and recalibrates its relationship with society. In China, affective energies flow along discursive meridians drawn by the Communist Party.⁵ Ordinary life is entangled in what Michael Taussig refers to as the official Nervous System without being directly controlled by it or reducible to it. As the Wuhan example above indicates, the CCP’s Nervous System is subject to periodic tremors.⁶ This Nervous System of the body politic is both *under the skin* and *yet entirely external* – it “passes through us and makes us what we are.”⁷ For Taussig, however, the Nervous System is not a “switchboard of the commanding heights”⁸ exerting its control over the flows and impulses of affective life, regardless of its aspirations and representation as such. Instead, it is itself nervous, glitchy, unpredictable. It is a field of contestation, but the contest itself reinforces the party-state system.

Several scholars have observed and written on the history of the CCP’s extraordinary – yet not infallible – ability to harness and direct the power of affect to achieve its political goals. Although many of the scholars discussed in this essay describe the Chinese Communist Party’s mobilization and governance of *emotion*, I prefer the language of *affect* instead, which suggests fluid, socially mediated atmospheres, rather than discrete, psychological states. In common usage, people refer to emotions as if they were private states of being (“I feel happy/sad”), whereas to affect/be affected renders the boundaries of self/other/world porous. The Party does not implant emotions like some evil genius – it engineers the channels of expression along which affective intensities flow, traversing the distinction between public/private. These differences are crucial when analysing the production of affective states, which this essay claims is foundational to Chinese Communist Party rule.

Among the first to focus on this topic, Elizabeth Perry argues that the CCP’s “stunning victory” in 1949 derived, in part, from “mobilizing emotional energy for revolutionary purposes.”⁹ For Perry, mobilization required the deliberate

3 Bandurski 2020.

4 Wong, Chun Han 2020.

5 In Zhang Hongtu’s *Bilingual Chart of Acupuncture Points and Meridians* (1990), the artist depicts Mao’s body as a stand-in for the body politic, with meridians and acupuncture points designating key concepts and terms, such as “class struggle” and “imperialism,” along which politics and affective intensities flowed. Available at <https://queensmuseum.org/2014/11/zhang-hongtu>.

6 For a study on the metaphor of the body politic, disease and contagion, see Rojas 2015.

7 Taussig 1992, 10.

8 *Ibid.*, 2. For discussion of the nervous system applied to the context of rumour in Syria, see Wedeen 2019, 143.

9 Perry 2002, 112.

shaping of emotions into revolutionary forms. “A distinctive facet of human feelings is their ambivalence and malleability; the genius of the CCP approach lay in its capacity to appreciate and capitalize on this fundamental reality.”¹⁰ For Yu Liu, the CCP’s persuasive narrative of victimization, redemption and emancipation mobilized corresponding emotions of indignation, guilt and euphoria in the masses.¹¹ Unlike other communist regimes, Maoist China excelled in the “technique of mobilizing people to translate the national discourse into personal stories” and “to join in the authorship of it by adding their own ‘raw materials’.”¹² A defining aspect of the Mao period is that political ideas were never merely abstract concepts but “intensely *felt*” in lived experience.¹³ The Communists built, in Michael Dutton’s words, “a system based on tapping into affective energy flows and transforming these flows into political energy through a process of intensification.”¹⁴ Drawing from these studies, in a separate essay, I developed the concept of affective sovereignty to indicate how the Party’s legitimacy depends on the “extraction of affective energy” from different groups in society to serve its political needs.¹⁵

In fact, party-state–society relations in China can be thought of as different configurations of the Communist Party’s Nervous System. The Mao period saw the chairman and other Party leaders attempting to reconfigure the relationship between the Party, state and people along horizontal and egalitarian dimensions.¹⁶ To cultivate intimacy with the people, Party cadres were tasked with undergoing “genuine attitudinal change” through rectification and self-criticism.¹⁷ Ordinary people were expected to throw off the shackles of tradition and boldly inhabit their new sovereignty, which had to be learned through the Party’s penetration of the countryside¹⁸ and deployment of propaganda troops,¹⁹ work teams,²⁰ and constant political campaigns and discursive mobilizations.²¹ The upheaval of material, social and linguistic relations required a new affective life of intense “class feelings” of comradeship and sympathy among the people united in their hatred and outrage towards a constantly expanding, shifting and amorphous class enemy.²² Spiritual devotion to Mao, especially during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, revealed how horizontal egalitarianism depended on transcendental-theological scaffolding in which Mao “stood for the incorporation of the people into the body politic.”²³ When this highly

10 Ibid., 114.

11 Liu, Yu 2010, 332.

12 Ibid., 334.

13 Dutton 2016, 719.

14 Dutton 2019, 83.

15 Sorace 2019a, 150.

16 Sorace 2020, 576.

17 Mertha 2019; Cheek 2019.

18 Shue 1988.

19 Demare 2015.

20 Perry 2019.

21 Li 2019.

22 Lee 2019.

23 Lee 2016, 250. See also Sorace 2010.

dynamic yet unstable affective configuration imploded after Mao's death, the Communist Party's Nervous System also broke down in exhaustion. Since then, China has undergone a long and uneven process of economic development, punctuated by crises and political turmoil.²⁴ Instead of participating in “mass mobilization,” the masses have often been reduced to being spectators of “managed campaigns” from above.²⁵ The re-verticalization of state–society relations has entailed the re-engineering of political instruction, from a passion for class struggle to the cultivation of “positive energy” (*zheng nengliang* 正能量) and “gratitude” for the developmental achievements and “beautiful life” (*meihao shenghuo* 美好生活) provided by the Party.²⁶ In effect, political life since Mao has been progressively “depoliticized” (*qu zhengzhihua* 去政治化).²⁷ The main part of this essay is dedicated to understanding how gratitude is a key mechanism of sovereignty's re-verticalization and society's de-politicization.

Revolutionary Affect

On 1 October 1949, the Chinese people were no longer the grateful subjects of imperial benevolence – they were now sovereign in the form of the Communist Party.²⁸ As Mao himself knew all too well, the revolution did not end in 1949 but had just begun. “To win countrywide victory is only the first step in a long march of ten thousand li ... The Chinese Revolution is great, but the road after the revolution will be longer, the work greater and more arduous.”²⁹ The newly liberated Chinese people still needed to be emancipated from the servitude of traditional ways of feeling, thinking and speaking.³⁰ True to its Leninist roots, the Communist Party would teach and be taught by the people how to be sovereign.

For the people to emerge as sovereign, it was first necessary to dismantle the discursive and “bureaucratic machinery of amazing grace” established in the imperial court of the Qing.³¹ Sovereignty was maintained in state rituals, which embedded sentiments of imperial “grace” (*en* 恩) and expectations of reciprocated “gratitude” (*gan'en* 感恩). The emperor's grace and benevolence were to be affirmed, felt and manifested in the grateful dispositions of court officials, gentry and commoners alike, even if the requirements for their expression differed. According to Christopher Atwood, it was a logic of “imperial grace, self-

24 Wang, Hui 2010.

25 Perry 2011.

26 Chen, Zifeng, and Wang 2020; Sorace 2019b.

27 Wang, Hui 2010.

28 For a discussion of the complex and changing composition of “the people” in the Chinese context, see Guan 2019.

29 Mao 1949.

30 For the political theorist Jacques Rancière (2010, 139), “politics invents new forms of collective enunciation” when people whose complaints were previously “deemed to be the mere noise of suffering bodies” articulate new claims to being in common. Rancière, however, recoils from the Chinese Revolution in which the political upheaval of social order was orchestrated by state power.

31 Atwood 2000, 96.

abasement, and repayment by striving” in which imperial grace was never deserved, and therefore could never be repaid, establishing a relationship of ceaseless subjection and service.³² The Qing court deployed the term for grace – *en* – in multiple compounds that emphasized the unique beneficence of the emperor. “Grace examinations” (*enke* 恩科) were periodically conducted in order to mark special occasions such as imperial birthdays or accession to the throne. Starting in the mid-Qing, the court “conferred through grace” (*enfeng* 恩奉) imperial titles to princes who had not earned them through merit (*gongfeng* 供奉). Newly appointed officials were to prostrate themselves in ritualized devotion, facing the direction of the emperor, to express their unworthiness of their title and “gratitude to the emperor” (*xie'en* 谢恩) for bestowing it.³³ It was imperial grace, not the merits or needs of those involved, which granted favours and pardons,³⁴ distributed relief during times of disaster, and awarded promotions, salaries, titles and land.³⁵ In return for its gift of grace, sovereign power demanded ritualized displays and written pronouncements of gratitude from both its administrators and ordinary subjects (*chenmin* 臣民).³⁶

The People's Republic of China was ushering in what it saw as a radical break from the imperial order of grace and benevolence.³⁷ Maoism was an unprecedented attempt, and failure, to cut this cord. In the Mao years, gratitude was denounced for its affirmation of sovereign power, even as it was reproduced in practices of devotion to the chairman and self-sacrifice for the revolution.³⁸ The transcendental-theological impulses of gratitude, however, found other modes of expression, such as “soldier-martyr” Lei Feng's 雷锋 desire to become a “revolutionary screw that never rusts” in what Gloria Davies describes as the “eternal machine of communist revolution.”³⁹ For what could express gratitude more than giving one's own life? On the one hand, positive usages of “gratitude” and “grace” disappeared from the political lexicon. In a text search of the *People's Daily* from 1946 to 1978, discourse analyst Qian Gang finds that the word gratitude only appears in 163 articles, the majority being pejorative references to vestiges of feudalism in China or to “Thanksgiving Day” associated with the imperialist and capitalist West.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Mao's word and image were elevated to sacrosanct status: the sun which nourished, and also destroyed, life below. Although Mao, as a thinker of communist modernity, acknowledged that the source of his power was the creativity, affective energies

32 *Ibid.*, 91.

33 *Ibid.*, 89.

34 *Ibid.*, 93.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Personal conversation with John Williams, 18 May 2018.

37 As Mao famously said in 1949: “The state apparatus, including the army, the police and the courts, is the instrument by which one class oppresses another. It is an instrument for oppression of antagonistic classes, it is violence and not ‘benevolence’.”

38 I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer.

39 Davies 2019, 92.

40 Qian 2020.

and acclamation of the masses, he remained the embodiment of political sovereignty in China. In this way, sovereignty circulated, in different configurations at different historical moments, between Mao, the Communist Party and the people.

Maoist China drew up new political cartographies in which hierarchies and values were inverted, requiring new modes of orientation, speaking and feeling.⁴¹ During Land Reform (1947–1952), work teams prohibited villagers from displays of gratitude which were feared would reproduce hierarchical feudal relations.⁴² Instead, guidelines suggested that: “it should also be repeatedly stressed [in these meetings] how to be the master of one’s own fate (*zuozhu* 做主), how to emancipate oneself (*fanshen* 翻身), who exploits whom (*shei boxue shei* 谁剥削谁), and who provides for whom (*shei yanghuo shei* 谁养活谁); this is the only way to raise the consciousness of the poor and farm worker peasant class.”⁴³ This process was not only based on intellectual argument but on affective incitement. What the Party referred to as “thought reform” (*sixiang gaizao* 思想改造) was not limited to beliefs and propositions but aimed at remolding affective relations and attitudinal dispositions.⁴⁴ As Jeffrey Javed notes, “speaking bitterness” (*suku* 诉苦) sessions conducted during Land Reform were tear-laden performances in which villagers denounced their oppressive and venal landlords.⁴⁵ According to Xin Huang, many who spoke bitterness gained “a sense of liberation and empowerment, as *suku* enabled the ‘mute body’ to speak” and “provided the possibility for constructing new subjectivities.”⁴⁶ For the first time in history, the Chinese masses spoke on the stage of world history, even if only to recite a script authored by the Party on their behalf.

The paradox of Leninism is that sovereignty is located in both the vanguard Party and in the masses. It has been unable to provide a process of representation which would resolve the question of who is sovereign: the people or the Party?⁴⁷ At the height of the Cultural Revolution, this tension came to a head in the political theological role of Mao, which sanctioned the rebellion of the masses against the Party.⁴⁸ Haiyan Lee articulates this complex configuration of affect as follows:

Like all things Maoist, class feeling needs to be grasped dialectically. On the one hand, it is comradely love for brothers and sisters from one’s class. It is a horizontal, fraternal feeling that extends equally to all other members of the proletariat, but finds its most intense and sublime expression in the love for the supreme leader, Mao Zedong. On the other hand, it is hatred and resentment for the class enemy, usually belonging to the former propertied classes.⁴⁹

41 Anagnost 1997; Apter and Saich 1998; Rofel 1999.

42 I would like to thank Jeffrey Javed for bringing this to my attention.

43 Northern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee 1950, as cited in Javed 2017, 117–18.

44 Cheek 2016; 2019.

45 Javed 2019.

46 Huang 2014, 597.

47 Thornton forthcoming.

48 Sorace 2010; Wang, Ban 2014; Lee 2016.

49 Lee 2019, 23.

Maoism's extraordinary attempt to eradicate gratitude from the grammar of sovereignty became ensnared in the discourses and passions of devotion and sacrifice. The deadlock and downfall of Maoism was, in the last instance, its attachment to Mao.

Know your place: the re-imposition of "gratitude"

By the late 1970s, the Nervous System of revolutionary struggle was frayed and in need of repair.⁵⁰ For many Party leaders who suffered from the turbulence of the Mao period, this meant diverting its affective intensities into economic production and consumption.⁵¹ Sovereignty was re-verticalized; it would no longer flow through the convulsive Nervous System of the masses activated by mobilization campaigns. Economic modernization supplanted class struggle as China's fundamental orientation; technocrats replaced "reds" in the upper echelons of Party leadership;⁵² mass democratic practices, such as writing big character posters (*dazibao* 大字报) were formally banned. As a result of these processes, the CCP restored its organizational cohesion and authority vis-à-vis society. Dispelling doubts about the composition of party-state-society relations, in his 1979 speech on the "Four cardinal principles" (*si xiang jiben yuanze* 四项基本原则), Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 affirmed that, "the entire nation pins all its hopes for the future on leadership by the Party ... In reality, without the Chinese Communist Party, who would organize the socialist economy, politics, military affairs and culture of China, and who would organize the four modernizations?" Deng's message was resoundingly clear: everything depends on the Communist Party. No more chaos, no more violence; instead, order, science, prosperity. As part of this ideological process, the Party sought to cultivate new affective and attitudinal dispositions that would be appropriate for the times.

The deployment of gratitude in official Party discourse begins in the Hu-Wen period (2003–2012) as part of the ideological vision of "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) and appears for the first time in a *People's Daily* headline in response to the SARS epidemic with the lines: "Disaster reminds each and every one of us that we must have a grateful heart."⁵³ The discursive re-emergence of gratitude accompanies the awkward embrace of Confucian concepts, values and practices by the Communist Party and their revival throughout society, marked by the ephemeral appearance and disappearance of a statue of Confucius on Tiananmen Square in 2011.⁵⁴ In the past several years, China has witnessed heated public debates over how to demonstrate filial gratitude,

50 Ci 1994.

51 Dutton 2019, 84.

52 Andreas 2009.

53 Qian 2020.

54 I owe this point to Patricia M. Thornton. On Confucianism and moral legitimacy in the Xi era, see Kubat 2018.

“gratitude exercises” (*gan'en cao* 感恩操) in schools, public displays of kneeling (*xiagui* 下跪) and recitations of gratitude in corporate culture.⁵⁵ The terms of these debates are usually over whether China is returning to a feudal culture of social inequality and stratification or restoring its venerable traditions.

But as this essay suggests, gratitude points beyond culture to the vertical structure of political sovereignty. In his study of the Soviet Union, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov describes the “Soviet gifts of modernity” as a “unilateral imposition of sovereignty” and “apparatus of capture” by imposing an obligation of reciprocity, in the form of gratitude, on its recipient.⁵⁶ The gift transforms its target into a permanently indebted subject. The subject, in turn, is evaluated on how it expresses its thanks in what it does with the gift. As I have argued, Mao’s China both resisted and embraced this logic of the gift. For the same reason that Mao and his generation of revolutionaries repudiated gratitude, today’s Chinese Communist Party embraces it: gratitude de-politicizes and re-affirms social hierarchy. It binds each person in concentric rings of dependence on their parents (for the gift of life), their employer (for the gift of work) and the Party (for the gift of the conditions in which life and work take place). To be ungrateful, especially in a time of national rejuvenation and prosperity, is to forget to whom one is indebted. In this context, manifestations of discontent with the political system and society are re-coded as pathologies of the individual.⁵⁷

Replacing the revolutionary intensities of class feeling, in China’s reformed Nervous System, the Party’s benevolence is reciprocated in people’s gratitude.⁵⁸ As the Mao era showed, this outcome was not destiny. Since then, different re-configurations of sovereignty have been dreamt in art studios, fought for and crushed in Tiananmen, and even debated in Zhongnanhai 中南海. In the rest of the essay, I examine this ongoing internal conflict: how the Party’s gratitude imperative functions as a mechanism of affective governance and depoliticization and how at least one Party leader envisioned a communist politics *sans* gratitude. I begin with a contrasting example of public Party theorizing about gratitude: Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Yang’s 汪洋 short-lived critique of gratitude in the name of a different conception of popular sovereignty. His, however, appears to have been a minority voice in the halls of power. I follow with two cases of Party gratitude work: in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, and in recent years in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region where Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other minorities detained in concentration camps are taught to be grateful to the CCP in a campaign of religious de-radicalization. In all three cases, the CCP sovereignty stands at the threshold between bio- and necro-politics, promising life and salvation in the midst of death and destruction.⁵⁹

55 Liu, Changhai 2010; Chen, Meiyuan 2015.

56 Ssorin-Chaikov 2017, 96, 101.

57 Yang 2015.

58 Shue 2004.

59 Mbembe 2019.

An alternative theory of sovereignty

In the months before Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the party-state in the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, current Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Yang, who was at the time the Party secretary of Guangdong province and once considered to be a liberal reformer, issued a report at a meeting of the 11th Guangdong Provincial People's Congress in May 2012. Wang's main platform was "happiness is not bestowed grace" (*xingfu bu shi enci* 幸福不是恩赐),⁶⁰ meaning that people's happiness is their own responsibility and does not issue from the benevolence of the sovereign.⁶¹ Although this may seem like another convoluted Party formulation to the untrained ear, the connotations of Wang's statement immediately generated controversy in Chinese social media and require explication.

The semantic connotations of *enci* 恩赐, translated as "bestowed grace," are historically rooted in imperial China. As discussed above, the character *en* 恩 means grace, kindness and charity, and forms the linguistic compound for the word gratitude, or *gan'en* 感恩, which literally means to feel or perceive, *gan* 感, kindness and charity, *en* 恩. In gratitude, the sovereign's benevolence reverberates in the sensations of its subjects. The Party/sovereign displays grace and the subject expresses gratitude. The sovereign circuit is complete; the world is in order. The character *ci* 赐 means to bestow or confer. Like *en* 恩, most of the compounds with *ci* 赐 relate back to imperial China. For example, *tianci* 天赐 to be conferred by heaven; *cifu* 赐福 to bless; *yuci* 御赐 to be bestowed or granted by the emperor; *sici* 死赐 to commit suicide on orders of the sovereign; *cixing* 赐姓 to bestow a surname (used in relation to how the emperor named ethnic groups). *Ci* 赐 is not an act that anyone can engage in, but the privilege and right of sovereign authority. Therefore, *enci* 恩赐 arranges state and society in a *vertical* relation of benevolence and supplication, glory and gratitude. Wang Yang's statement implicitly casts the Party's demand for gratitude as a vestige of imperial power and no longer appropriate for China.

In their coverage of Wang's speech, the Chinese version of the BBC elaborated *enci* as a specific epistemology of power. The presumption of "bestowing kindness" implies a vertical relationship from which leaders "live high and look down" on the people below.⁶² From their elevated position, leaders expect gratitude from the people, similar to how a performer on stage is animated by applause from the audience. The article further suggests that Wang's statement is an indirect rebuke of the Party's catechism, "without the Communist Party, no new China," even raising the possibility that Wang's statement may contain

60 Dong 2012.

61 Wang Yang's phrase sounds uncannily similar to dissident Fang Lizhi's famous quote that "democracy is not a favour bestowed from above" (*minzhu bushi enci de*), with the obvious and significant difference that Wang uses the term for "happiness" and not "democracy." I owe this point to Timothy Cheek.

62 "Wang Yang: 'Xingfu fei enci' lun yinqi wangming zhengyi" (Wang Yang's theory that "happiness is not bestowed grace" has aroused controversy online). *BBC*, 11 May 2012, https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese_news/2012/05/120511_wangyang_ccp_theory. Accessed 25 May 2020.

an “alternative theory of political legitimacy” in which the CCP limits its role in economic and social activity. Wang’s call for the “eradication of the mistaken understanding that the people’s happiness is grace bestowed by the Party and government” moves in a counter-hegemonic direction to Xi Jinping’s insistence that the Communist Party is the unshakeable foundation of China.⁶³

An editorial published by the *Nanfang ribao* 南方日报 a few months after Wang Yang’s speech picks up the theme of dialectical tension between the supplication and sovereignty of the people.⁶⁴ It argues that according to the *enci* model of state–society relations, “the people frequently are only the spectators and recipients of decisions” made on their behalf. Even if the sovereign’s intentions are good and produce beneficial results, the people are still reduced to the role of providing “acclamation” for the “foresight” of the Party leadership. From this perspective, the masses are those who are “in need of help” and unable to govern themselves.

The commentary emphasizes the people’s position of submission with the repeated use of *bei* 被, the grammatical particle for the passive voice. “The people cannot be their own masters, they can only be made beautiful, made to participate, made active, even to the extent of being made happy” (*renmin zuo bu liao ziji de zhu, renmin zhi neng bei meihao, bei canyu, bei zhudong, naizhiyu bei xingfu* 人民做不了自己的主, 人民只能“被美好,”“被参与,”“被主动,”乃至至于被幸福).⁶⁵ In this context, *bei* means to become the instrument of another’s will. The antonym of *bei* is *zhu* 主, which means master and forms the compound for sovereignty, *zhuquan* 主权, and its metaphors, such as *zuozhu* 做主, meaning to make decisions and be responsible for them, and *zhurenweng* 主人翁, to be master in one’s own house. Instead, the author tactically enlists Mao’s saying that “the people are the motive force in the making of world history” to advocate for economic pursuit without Party interference. In this framework, the political category of the people is shattered into individual, economic sovereigns. In place of gratitude would emerge a new dominant affect in the “feeling of sovereignty” (*zhuren gan* 主人翁感). To achieve this would require a corresponding “conceptual change” of political epistemology from “parent official” (*fumu guan* 父母官) – a term which designated prefectural (*zhou* 州) and county (*xian* 县) officials in imperial China, whose role was to “directly exert governance on the body of the people” and carry out court edicts⁶⁶ – to the “mentality of a public servant” (*gongpu yishi* 公仆意识). Such reconfigurations of political legitimacy and state–

63 Dong 2012.

64 “Rang renmin dadan tansuo ziji de xingfu daolu” (Let the people fearlessly explore their own road to happiness). *Nanfang ribao*, republished on *Sina*, 10 May 2012, <http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2012-05-10/080624394798.shtml>. Accessed 25 May 2020.

65 *Ibid.*

66 *Ibid.* On the concept of “parent official,” also see “Gudai minzhong duidai ‘fumu guan’: qiwang, shi-wang, zai qiwang” (Parent-official treatment of the people in ancient times: expectation, disappointment, expectation again). *Renmin ribao*, 16 November 2015, <http://www.chinanews.com/cul/2015/11-16/7624794.shtml>.

society relations are out of sync with the aggrandizement of the CCP presided over by Xi Jinping.

Disaster Gratitude

In contrast to the Mao period's attempt to mobilize the masses to liberate themselves, the Communist Party under Xi has begun to overshadow the people as the main pillar of Chinese politics, society, economy and culture. Although society's dependence on the Party ordinarily remains the background noise of official propaganda, in moments of disaster this legitimating bond is made palpable in the Party's demand for gratitude for the gift of life itself. On 12 May 2008, a 7.9 magnitude earthquake devastated the largely mountainous Wenchuan 汶川 region in Sichuan province. The scale of the disaster is beyond comprehension and barely reflected in the statistics of over 85,000 deaths and 5 million people left homeless. In the aftermath of the earthquake, both international and domestic news media praised the Chinese authorities for their emergency response and for taking the unprecedented step of granting unrestricted media access to the disaster zone.⁶⁷ Grassroots NGOs proliferated as volunteers poured into the area, and ordinary people from across the country donated money and relief supplies.⁶⁸ Such outpouring of public emotion and display of civic feeling prompted several scholars to describe it as the emergence of civil society in China.⁶⁹ But with the clearing of the rubble, reports began to surface of the deaths of several thousand school children owing to the collapse of shoddily constructed schools, referred to as "tofu-dreg schoolhouses" (*doufuzha xiaoshe* 豆腐渣校舍). Despite initial promises to grieving parents that they would investigate, the Party's response was to fall back on its reliable methods: censor the media, crack down on protests and assert control over the discourse, insisting that the earthquake was a "natural disaster" (*tianzai* 天灾) and not a "manmade catastrophe" (*renhuo* 人祸).⁷⁰

The Party went further than damage control; it transformed the post-earthquake reconstruction into a showcase of state capacity, benevolence and international reputation.⁷¹ It promised to engineer a secular "miracle" (*qiji* 奇迹) by providing all of the disaster survivors with new homes and achieving 30 years of infrastructural development within a two-year period of intensive reconstruction activity. This reconstruction narrative formed a national echo chamber in official media reports, artistic tributes and commemorations, and was prominently displayed at the Shanghai World Exposition in 2010.⁷² For reasons beyond the scope of this essay, the reconstruction process did not increase public perceptions of Party legitimacy among earthquake victims but often

67 Repnikova 2017.

68 Xu 2017.

69 Teets 2009; Shieh and Deng 2011.

70 Sorace 2017, 1–6.

71 Sorace 2017; Kang 2015.

72 Hubbert 2017.

resulted in a deterioration of local state–society relations. Regardless of their situation, victims were expected to feel grateful.

To repair the broken circuit of reciprocity after the Sichuan earthquake, the Party launched a “gratitude education campaign” (*gan'en jiaoyu huodong* 感恩教育活动) in schools and workplaces throughout the earthquake zone. The campaign consisted of recalling one’s gratitude, reciting poetry, writing essays, singing songs and participating in activities to “engrave the Party’s kindness in memory.”⁷³ The punitive side of this culture of positivity was expressed in a speech given by Qing Lidong 青李东, who was then Wenchuan county Party secretary, emphasizing how a culture of gratitude was necessary to ensure “social stability” and alleviate the social contradictions that arose during the reconstruction process.⁷⁴ “At this time, we need to promote a culture of gratitude and use this culture of gratitude to eliminate socially unharmonious elements and increase members of society’s sense of happiness by making people’s agitated, blind and impractical attitudes return to reason.”⁷⁵ The inability to show gratitude locates the problem at the level of the individual and not the system;⁷⁶ as a result, those deemed ungrateful become subject to what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe as the practice of “correction, forcing itself with mechanical violence upon the incorrect, the uncorrected, the ones who do not know to seek their own correction.”⁷⁷

Gratitude discourse was not just an immediate response to the crisis but is an ongoing narrative of legitimation. On 12 May 2018, the tenth anniversary of the earthquake was officially commemorated as a “day of gratitude.” The CCP’s benevolence found its reflection in the expressions of gratitude and reminiscences of earthquake survivors. A month prior to the anniversary, the Wenchuan county government livestreamed on its WeChat account an earthquake commemoration. Above the stage was a red horizontal banner with the words: “Cultivation of grateful feelings engineering project” (*gan'en qinghuai peiyu gongcheng* 感恩情怀培育工程).⁷⁸ The WeChat coverage of the event included stories from survivors, videos, photographs and poetry; readers were also encouraged to contribute their own “positive energy stories from the earthquake.” The report concluded with excerpts from the speech given by Wenchuan county Party secretary Zhang Tongrong 张通荣, who described the reconstruction as rebirth: “the motherland gave Wenchuan a second life; all of the people of the entire nation gave the people of Wenchuan the strength of being reborn.”⁷⁹ Zhang reminded the audience that the government’s “kindness” should be “transformed into

73 Shifang Elementary School 2009.

74 On 21 November 2019, Qing Lidong was sentenced to 16 years in prison for causing “significant damage to national interests during his tenure as Wenchuan county Party secretary” (*zaocheng guojia liyi zaozhou zhongda sunshi*). Yue 2019.

75 Qing 2010.

76 Sorace 2019.

77 Harney and Moten 2013, 78.

78 Wenchuan County Propaganda Department 2018.

79 Ibid.

morality” and reciprocated in the virtuous acts of citizens. Gratitude is not simply a paean to the Party’s kindness but also an “emergency brake on the decline of moral standards.” For the “individuals who need to dispel bad thoughts,” Zhang suggested that feeling grateful would help them fall in line and “strive with the Party and state towards a moderately prosperous [society].”⁸⁰ According to this line of thought, gratitude towards the Party becomes a social service to the citizenry itself, bringing the order, peace and prosperity they desire.

The motif of “rebirth” was visually represented in videos and photographs of children laughing, playing, holding flowers and waving at the camera. On the surface of the image, the children symbolize innocence, hope and futurity.⁸¹ They are the direct heirs of the future built by the Communist Party’s benevolent striving. This happens to be a future that does not include, or even mention, the 7,500 children who died in the earthquake, subject to the double erasure of both their lives and memories.⁸² To commemorate the earthquake anniversary as a “day of gratitude” means to interdict mourning while encouraging “positive energy” without regard to the memories of the dead and traumas of the living.

This discourse of gratitude has not gone unchallenged. On the eve of the anniversary, Weibo account Left Hand Ink Marks (*Zuoshou moji* 左手墨迹) published an essay titled: “Day of disaster becomes a day of gratitude – who is dishonouring the survivors who walked out of the ruins?” (*zainan ri biancheng gan'en ri, shi shei zai xiuru feixu zhong zouchulai de xingcunzhe* 灾难日变成感恩日, 是谁在羞辱废墟中走出来的幸存者), which was quickly censored.⁸³ Rejecting the assumption that traumas from the earthquake have already healed and that the past can be transcended and forgotten, the author writes: “If the wound stops bleeding and a scar forms, it does not mean it will no longer be painful.” Despite the pain and sorrow people continue to feel, the author accuses “some people” – a thinly veiled reference to party-state officials – of being “shameless” in their “inability to wait” to “take credit” for the process of recovery and reconstruction. The author even accuses the Communist Party of instrumentalizing the death of others. “Being grateful for disaster is scarier than the disaster itself, in fact, it is even more intolerable.” Following the logic of gratitude to its absurd conclusion, the author sarcastically argues that Chinese people “should be grateful to war for devastation and trampling ... [and to] flooding, earthquakes, tsunamis and viral devastation!” Prescient words when viewed from the Party’s attempt to conjure gratitude in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the same day, Hong Kong-based digital media outlet *Initium* published an essay titled: “Our day of disaster is not their day of gratitude” (*women de zainan ri, bushi tamen de gan'en ri* 我们的灾难日, 不是他们的感恩日), discursively

80 Ibid.

81 Edelman 2004.

82 On the political aesthetics of mourning, see Sorace 2014.

83 *Zuoshou moji* 2018.

distinguishing between “us” (survivors) and “them” (officials) on the basis of a refusal to abandon the past in exchange for the future on offer.⁸⁴ “We all had to step over other people’s fresh blood to be here, this should be a black day.” The visceral image of stepping over the corpses of loved ones and strangers is contrasted with the staged photographs of Party officials standing in the rubble; what separates them is a boundary of experience and intimate, affective knowledge of the disaster. Undone by loss, who would celebrate the earthquake as a day of gratitude?

Bowed heads, grateful hearts

In ethnic minority regions, gratitude discourse is woven into the texture of patriotic education through which minority subjects are required to perform rituals of national loyalty and ideological rectitude. The underlying expectation is that ethnic minorities hailing from China’s less developed, peripheral regions should be grateful for the party-state’s unstinting efforts at development, transfers of wealth and provision of modernity’s public goods.⁸⁵

On the periphery of the nation, the ubiquity of gratitude discourse exerts disciplinary effects and policing on the bodies and minds of China’s minority populations, to bring them into line with national values and official ideology. The logic of debt becomes the foundation of submission to Party rule and the justification for emergency powers and policing. The debtor (ethnic minority) must continuously satisfy the demands of its creditor (the party-state) through displays of gratitude, loyalty and submission.

In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, gratitude education campaigns are used as a direct instrument of control within re-education camps in which it is estimated over one million of China’s predominantly Muslim Uyghur population are indefinitely detained then forcibly transferred to supervised labour.⁸⁶ To prove they are rehabilitated, Uyghurs must convincingly demonstrate their absolute loyalty and gratitude to China, the Communist Party and Xi Jinping. According to a *Reuters* report: “Hour upon hour, day upon day ... detainees in far western China’s new indoctrination camps had to disavow their Islamic beliefs, criticize themselves and their loved ones and give thanks to the ruling Communist Party.”⁸⁷ In the words of someone who escaped the camps: “Internees are told to repeat those confessions to the point where, when they are finally freed, they believe that they owe the country a lot, that they could never repay the party.”⁸⁸ Successful converts are expected to share their stories as educational lessons and warnings. According to the testimony of one so-called

84 Chen, Qianer, and Lin 2018.

85 Yeh 2013.

86 Byler 2018; Brophy 2019; also see the University of British Columbia’s Xinjiang Documentation Project at <https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/media/documentaries/>.

87 Shih 2018.

88 Ibid.

“graduate” from what the Party euphemistically refers to as “vocational training” (re-education camps): “If I wouldn’t have come here, I can’t imagine what would have happened. Perhaps I would have joined those religious extremists and taken the criminal path. The Party and government have found me in time and saved me, giving me a chance to reform and start anew. I am very grateful.”⁸⁹ In this passage, religious sublimity radiates through the Party’s secular authority, which claims to offer the only genuine path to salvation.

Xinjiang camps reveal the underlying governance logic of so-called “restive” minority regions. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s definition of the “the camp” as “the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule” is an apt description of what is happening in Xinjiang.⁹⁰ For Agamben, the camp is a site produced through the suspension of the law in which sovereign power (in this case of the Party) directly intervenes on bare life (in this case on the Uyghur population). The camp is not limited to fixed spatial coordinates, but becomes a modular form of sovereign power. In Xinjiang, the Communist Party’s sovereign power extends into the affective lives of its subjects through the demands for gratitude. Mosques have been required to transform their prayer and religious ceremonies to include acclamations of gratitude to Xi Jinping instead of God, and gratitude to China instead of religion.⁹¹ According to new regulations, religious services in the city of Hotan 和田 must begin with the lines: “We are all children of the motherland, the motherland is mighty and great. Hurry and bless, bless the harmonious stability of the motherland, bless the thriving and prosperity of the motherland” (*women dou shi zuguo de haizi, zuguo weida, kuai lai zhufu, zhufu zuguo hexie wending, zhufu zuguo fanrongchangsheng* 我们都是祖国的孩子，祖国伟大，快来祝福，祝福祖国和谐稳定，祝福祖国繁荣昌盛).⁹² The Party is substituting itself for God as the site of spiritual meaning and sovereign creation. By using the word for blessing – *zhufu* 祝福 – in the aforementioned passage, the Party becomes the one who is blessed. In addition to replacing God, the Father, the Party also substitutes itself for the role of Mother. Containers of free milk distributed by the Party in Xinjiang are decorated with lyrics from the song: “Party, dear mother” (*dang a, qinaide mama* 党啊，亲爱的妈妈).⁹³ In place of the mother’s breast, the Party is the source of vital nourishment. Through the constant reminders of the need for gratitude, peripheral subjects are absorbed into the homogenous, liturgical space of state power and national belonging. What is being extracted from them is recognition that the Party, not God, is sovereign.

Expanding outward from the camp and mosque into spaces of ordinary life, gratitude discourse saturates public space in Xinjiang. In April 2017, a large-scale

89 Koetse 2018.

90 Agamben 1998, 168–69.

91 Ramzy and Buckley 2019.

92 Xin 2017.

93 “Xinjiang’s free milk program comes with old Party song.” *Global Times*, 22 April 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1099195.shtml>.

study campaign of “three adorations, three oppositions” (*san ai, san fan* 三爱, 三反) was launched in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang.⁹⁴ The campaign exhorts Xinjiang residents to “adore the Party, adore the motherland, and adore the large family of the Chinese people” (*re'ai dang, re'ai zuguo, re'ai zhonghuaminzu da jiating* 热爱党, 热爱祖国, 热爱中华民族大家庭) and to “oppose separatism, oppose extremism and oppose violence” (*fan fenlie, fan jiduan, fan baoli* 反分裂, 反极端, 反暴力).⁹⁵ One month later, the list was expanded to include the “three gratitudes, three wishes” consisting of “gratitude to General Party Secretary Xi Jinping,” “gratitude to the Communist Party,” “gratitude to the mighty motherland,” “wishing General Party Secretary Xi Jinping a healthy life,” “wishing the mighty motherland glory and prosperity” and “wishing for ethnic harmony.” These ritualized incantations and repetitions, officially referred to as “recitational activities” (*beisong huodong* 背诵活动), are intended to generate an affective atmosphere of gratitude and compliance.

In the words of Wen Mila 文米拉, the head of the Women’s Federation of Chaohuo’er 绰霍尔 township in Xinjiang: “Be grateful to the motherland, be grateful to the Party – maintain stability.”⁹⁶ The corresponding article written by Wen enumerates a list of positive policies that the party-state has given Xinjiang residents, including subsidies for grain cultivation, agricultural machinery, animal husbandry, housing, subsistence welfare, medical insurance, free school, lodging and lunch meals for children. She reflects: “I repeatedly ask myself, why do some people not treasure and endorse such wonderful days? Could it be that our ethnic group is ungrateful, an ethnicity without a grateful heart?” (*women de minzu nandao shi ge wang'enfuyi, meiyou gan'en zhi xin de minzu ma* 我们的民族难道是个忘恩负义没有感恩之心的民族吗). The author intimates that were such failure to spread, China would start to resemble the negative example par excellence of Middle Eastern countries that are “enveloped in the flames of war” in which “families are destroyed and the people are dead.” In a rhetorical accusation, she asks her fellow Uyghurs: “Is that what you long for?” (*shi nimen de chongjing ma* 是你们的憧憬吗). Without gratitude, one is a failed citizen, object of surveillance and target of affective education.

The Sovereign and the Corpse

In its one hundred years of existence, the CCP has perfected how to connect its narratives of legitimacy to people’s affective environments. In the Mao period, the Party mobilized affects of compassion, suffering, outrage and devotion in pursuit of class struggle. After Mao’s death and the nervous exhaustion of the

94 This point was brought to my attention by Yi Xiaocuo.

95 The “three adorations, three oppositions” campaign is based on the “model” (*mofan*) Uyghur farmer Kurban Tulum (1883–1975), who has been elevated into a symbol of ethnic harmony. On 11 January 2017, Xi Jinping wrote a letter in reply to Kurban Tulum’s eldest daughter. Wang, Se 2019.

96 Wen 2018. It is worth noting that although this post is no longer accessible, the same lines appear attributed to different authors on the Xinjiang government website. They are recyclable text.

body politic, the Party's message is that China's stability and the people's prosperity are dependent on the continuation of its rule. In the post-Wenchuan earthquake reconstruction, the Party provided the infrastructure of life; in the case of Xinjiang, a necropolitical infrastructure of surveillance, coercion and trauma. Together, these comparative examples reveal how gratitude in China is more than an ethical disposition – it is a structure of sovereignty.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China's demands for gratitude have expanded globally.⁹⁷ The CCP has asked for gratitude and recognition for China's "heroic steps to fight the virus"⁹⁸ and its aid to foreign countries that are in dire need of medical equipment.⁹⁹ In some cases, China's ritual of gratitude has been requited, such as when "the Serbian president kissed the Chinese flag as he welcomed a shipment of medical supplies on the tarmac."¹⁰⁰ In others, it has caused alarm and furthered anti-Chinese sentiment.¹⁰¹ Gratitude diplomacy as a new modality of soft power may extend beyond the pandemic emergency, as China also seeks displays of appreciation from recipients of developmental aid.¹⁰²

In Wuhan, however, the people rejected gratitude without need of instruction from Maoist work teams. The municipal Party secretary's call for gratitude could not have come at a worse time: people were still under quarantine and dying from the virus. In a poem written by a nurse working in one of the makeshift hospitals in Wuhan, the poet refuses the instrumentalization of duty, risk and courage: "Please don't decorate me in garlands / Don't give me applause / Spare me recognition for work injury, martyrdom or any other merits."¹⁰³ All she wants is to be left alone so she could "breathe undisturbed," "rest, sleep" being "more important than your praise." While the Party celebrates its heroic accomplishments, the author challenges those in power: "I invite you to go look, if you are able / At those washed-out homes / Does smoke rise from the chimneys / The cell phones drifting about the crematorium / Have their owners been found?" In these lines, the underlying tension between the Party and people becomes a necropolitical rift between the sovereign and the corpse.

In a vein similar to Wang Yang's censored speech, journalist Wang Zhi'an 王志安 refused gratitude with an assertion of the people's sovereignty. On 7 March 2020, he posted the following on Twitter:

This is how I see the issue of gratitude. For a modern government, disaster relief is an obligation and not a favour (*en-ci*). It is only appropriate to do a good job. Those who do a bad job should be held accountable. This is the source of political authority in modern society: people pay taxes to support the government. The government takes the taxpayers money to serve the people (*wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务). This is a kind of contractual relationship. What is called "gratitude"

97 Sorace 2020b.

98 Wong, Edward, and Mozur 2020.

99 "Commentary: institutional strength: China's key to beating novel coronavirus." *Xinhua*, 10 March 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/10/c_138863498.htm. Accessed 17 April 2020; Qian 2020.

100 Allen-Ebrahimian 2020.

101 Ibid.; Erlanger 2020.

102 Conversation with Maria Repnikova. See also Van Staden 2019.

103 Wei 2020.

is the political ethics of feudal society. Is that Wuhan official disinterred from the Qing dynasty? (*na wei Wuhan de guanyuan, shibushi cong da qingchao chutu lai de* 那位武汉的官员，是不是从大清朝出土来的?)¹⁰⁴

These powerful sentiments have been widely covered in the English-speaking media. But there is a penchant among scholars and journalists (myself included) to magnify the importance of such moments of discontent which the system has repeatedly proven it can absorb and metabolize.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, perhaps there is a tendency to underestimate the Party's blatant instrumentalization of gratitude as a mechanism of affective governance. It is affective because like Taussig's Nervous System, it is already under the skin. People are constitutively vulnerable to others on whom their lives depend.¹⁰⁶ Especially in moments of crisis, when taken-for-granted infrastructures begin to collapse, gratitude can feel like repair.

The refusal of gratitude is an ethical and aesthetic gesture which, at most, makes a temporary cut in ideology. But the skin of ideology heals quickly. For a new world to be possible, it will be necessary to invent new Nervous Systems. As we enter uncertain times, it is worth asking: what might it feel like to cut free from the affective tendrils of gratitude without ignoring our constitutive dependence and collective need for each other? Perhaps the best response to the demand for gratitude is given in the black radical tradition by theorist and poet Fred Moten who writes: "you can't count how much we owe one another."¹⁰⁷

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Conflict of interest

None.

Biographical note

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104 Wang, Zhi'an 2020.

105 Thornton 2009; Sorace 2017; Repnikova 2020.

106 Butler 2004.

107 Harney and Moten 2013, 154.

A Century of Chinese Labour (forthcoming). He writes at the intersection of political theory and comparative politics. His current research focuses on the crisis of democracy, air pollution and urbanization in Mongolia.

摘要: 建党以来的百年里, 中国共产党一直实践着如何将其执政合法性的叙事与人们的情感相结合。本文探索感恩这一概念的形成, 从毛泽东时代的反对感恩, 视其为封建与帝国主义的遗毒, 到改革开放以来中共重提感恩, 以便重新塑造其等级化的主权。本文通过四个例子探讨感恩的运作: 中央政治局常委汪洋出于对人民主权的不同定义对感恩短暂的批评; 汶川地震十周年纪念日被确立为感恩日; 在新疆“去极端化”工作中, 被拘留的维吾尔人接受对共产党的感恩教育; 以及在新冠肺炎爆发、武汉封城期间人们拒绝感恩。在这些例子中, 中共以绝对权威的姿态立于生命政治 (biopolitics) 与死亡政治 (necropolitics) 间, 在死亡和破坏中许诺生命和救赎。

关键词: 情感; 主权; 感恩; 2008 汶川地震; 新疆; 新冠肺炎

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