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# Bittersweet China: New Discourses of Hardship and Social Organisation

Michael B. GRIFFITHS and Jesper ZEUTHEN

**Abstract:** This paper argues that new interpretations of “eating bitterness” (吃苦, *chiken*) have firmly entered the landscape of China’s social organisation. Whereas the bitterness eaten by heroic types in China’s revolutionary past was directed towards serving others, now the aim of eating bitterness is self-awareness. Furthermore, bitterness-eating, which once pertained to rural-urban migrant workers as opposed to discourses of urban “quality” (素质, *suzhi*), has now also been taken up by the urban middle classes. A new cultural distinction, therefore, adds dignity to migrant workers while potentially marginalising a wide range of unproductive people, both urban and rural. This distinction ultimately mitigates risk to the Chinese regime because the regime makes sure to reward those who eat bitterness. This paper is based on ethnographic data gathered in Anshan, from the rural areas surrounding Chengdu, and our analysis of a TV show about a peasant boy who becomes a Special Forces soldier.

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**Keywords:** China, urban, rural, bitterness, discourse, *suzhi*

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## Introduction

During the autumn of 2007, the sign “People’s commune” appeared on the outskirts of Chengdu, pointing the way towards high-class, newly-built gated community apartments. Simple restaurants, marketed as “rural amusement establishments” (农家乐, *nongjiale*), were scattered around this community. These were packed with visitors from the city. Meanwhile, in villages further away from the urban centre, official propaganda hailed rural-to-urban migrant workers as “the industrialists of tomorrow”. These resignifications of rural socialist hardship go against the grain of China’s drive towards economic development and urbanisation, the drive which has shaped Chinese society since the “Open Door and Reforms” policy eclipsed the era of the Cultural Revolution. Official pride in rural China also contrasts with urban middle class fears regarding rural migrants’ “bodies” occupying the urban space (Anagnost 2004). This article aims to map this shift in discourse, and interpret the significance of these changes.

At the same time as these observations were being made in Chengdu, a television drama series called “Soldier Crash Course” (士兵突击, *shìbīng tūjī*) was aired on Central Chinese Television (CCTV) Channel 1. The show charted the rise of a young peasant boy named Xu Sanduo, from his harsh and oppressive rural home to success in the People’s Liberation Army. The drama became the most popular show of 2007 and “Xu Sanduo” was the most popular internet search term in China that year. These facts, like the fictional narrative itself, are remarkable because Xu Sanduo is not at all like one of China’s typical military heroes. Whereas earlier Lei Feng-type narratives bolstered Maoism by emphasising altruism and self-sacrifice in the cause of service to the people, Soldier Crash Course has a highly individualising focus (Yan 2009).

It is unthinkable that a soldier and popular hero in China would not be kind and helpful to his comrades, and also patriotic; and this is the case with Xu Sanduo. But Xu Sanduo trains, works and fights hard primarily for his own objectives, rather than as a service to any higher order. In contrast to the diet of Second World War resistance against Japan served daily to China’s citizens via CCTV, Soldier Crash Course identifies no enemy as such – Xu Sanduo’s biggest enemy is himself.

Television shows promoting individuality are not new in China. We need only look to the “Supergirl” phenomenon for an example of

where the state has been content to allow individualism to flourish. But *Soldier Crash Course* promotes a particular kind of individuality, very different from the popular struggle to realise fame and celebrity status. Indeed, throughout the series Xu Sanduo is contrasted with comrades who might more readily appeal to the consuming public. Whereas other soldiers are portrayed as strong and handsome, intelligent and skilful, eloquent and socially fluent, Xu Sanduo is weak and unattractive, stupid and clumsy, inarticulate and socially inept. Short in stature, uneducated and excessively timid, Xu Sanduo appears entirely unsuitable for soldiering, still less as heroic role-model material in the age of China's rise.

*Soldier Crash Course* is not so much a tale of Xu Sanduo's struggle to overcome these disadvantages, however, but more a parable which enhances the values of a particular set of virtues. Xu Sanduo rises to an elite unit, frustrating those around him with the naïveté and stubbornness that viewers are to understand makes him so valuable. Contrasts are drawn with Cheng Cai, the talented son of the village mayor from Sanduo's own village, who is nevertheless cast adrift by the Special Forces on account of his self-seeking ambition, narcissism, lack of comradeship, and in particular for giving up in the face of adversity. We argue that *Soldier Crash Course* is paradigmatic of a new cultural distinction which utilises novel interpretations of "eating bitterness" (吃苦, *chiku*).

Bitterness is a theme long familiar to China's people. It was used to mobilise China's masses during Mao's rise to power and the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, it was what Lei Feng willingly ate until he died in the service of the collective cause (Selden 1971). Bitterness-eating in this context was defined as "the capacity to endure hardship, make sacrifices, and work hard". We argue, however, that bitterness-eating discourse today has new meanings, and increasingly refers to self-development without sacrifice to a higher purpose. We will further argue that actors from across Chinese society, including the urban middle classes, consider this new form of bitterness to be a necessary and useful way of identifying themselves, and that the state has maintained control over this change in meaning.

We define discourses as plural, overlapping collections of representations; the meaningful matter of moralities, ideologies and the classificatory systems by which we assert ourselves (Foucault 1988). In the performance of discourse, we recognise that individuals are

made subject, even as we believe ourselves to be free, and so sustain a particular focus on tensions between “technologies of the self” and discourses of collective or national development (Foucault 1988). We seek to unpack the interplay of these elements without privileging the agency of either China’s “subaltern” types or the “domination” of state actors. China scholars, including Tamara Jacka, have used similar optics to analyse how evolving societal discourses impact on cultural norms and societal organisation (Liang 2010; Sun 2010). Jacka shows, for example, how media articles in the 1990s and 2000s portrayed migrant workers as heroes of national development because of their ability to eat bitterness to meet their personal aspirations (Jacka 2009: 53).

We ask how discourses of bitterness-eating are evolving, how they are performed in different contexts by different actors, and to what social and political ends. We address these questions by combining our analysis of *Soldier Crash Course* with ethnographic data gathered in Anshan city between 2005 and 2010, and from interviews conducted with rural-to-urban migrants, townspeople and officials in rural areas surrounding Chengdu in 2007. We integrate these data in order to demonstrate how people in different situations make use of evolving discourses of bitterness-eating. In this way, our analysis incorporates perspectives derived from the observation of actual practices with the analysis of forms of cultural representation in popular media, official communications and interviews, and as such seeks to go beyond the particular limitations of any one of these approaches.

Firstly we discuss how discourses of bitterness-eating and self-cultivation have functioned during the era of the People’s Republic; then we turn to look into *Soldier Crash Course* as an element of propaganda. Next, we analyse how entrepreneurs and migrants with varying degrees of success make use of the new bitterness-eating discourse, and how it impacts on the way local politics are justified. We conclude with recent observations on how China’s urban middle classes have taken up bitterness-eating discourse and related practices.

## **Bitterness: From Hardship to Cultivation and Back Again**

Eating bitterness has long been regarded as a rural virtue in China. Indeed it was on the basis of this particularly rural form of bitterness-

eating that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established its political legitimacy. The peasant classes had supported the revolution, but the post-1949 economy was rigged so that rural poverty was a consequence of the systematic bleeding of rural areas, while urban industry functioned to cushion China's peasants rather than develop new investments or technological improvements (Christiansen 1993). Mao's rise, moreover, was grounded in the willingness of his elite urban cadres to "sacrifice" themselves for the sake of the masses by eating bitterness in the spartan conditions of the CCP's rural base camp (Selden 1971). The "sent down" (下放, *xiafang*) movement of the Cultural Revolution, when cadres, intellectuals and students were banished to rural areas, saw similar sacrifices many years later.

Therefore, despite the importance of the countryside in bringing the Communist State to power, the urban-rural boundary is believed to have been vital to the self-preservation logic of a distinctly urban state in both China's centrally planned economy and that of the post-reform market (Wang 2005).

After market reforms were introduced from 1978 onwards, the state was no longer the sole mediator between the urban and rural economies, and the urban-rural divisions built into the political system began to have less impact on people's lives (Whyte 2005; Zeuthen and Griffiths 2011). The aftermath of the Cultural Revolution saw civilising discourses pitched against the harsh realities of rural life that had characterised the revolutionary period, and a high "quality" (素质, *suzhi*) – that is, a state far removed from physical hardship – became a defining feature of emergent middle class discourse (Anagnost 2004). In this context, China's urban-rural boundary, institutionalized through the household registration system, became a central signifier in the distinction between people of a "high quality" (素质高, *suzhi gao*) and those of a "low quality" (素质低, *suzhi di*) (Guang 2003; Murphy 2004; Jacka 2009), between exploiters and the exploited (Chan and Alexander 2004; Chan and Buckingham 2008; Pun 2005; Solinger 1999), and between official state organisations and basic collective organisations (Ho 2005; Huang 2008; Wang 2005; Wong 1997).

From the 1980s onwards, and especially since Deng Xiaoping shifted his focus from rural to urban development during his inspection of southern China in 1992, China's central leadership invested itself in these emergent middle class discourses and began to sharpen

propaganda about improving the “population quality” (人口素质, *renkou suzhi*) of the rural masses. The leadership lent increasing support to the idea that the government should refine China’s population quality by allowing the most advanced cities to develop as rapidly as possible, while also ensuring rural areas and less advanced regions did not inhibit overall national progress (Deng 1992). This discourse allowed the state to retreat from the already limited welfare provision in the countryside by giving peasants the responsibility for attaining higher quality through sheer hard work. Through hard graft, rural people were expected to attain a “personal quality” (个人素质, *geren suzhi*) which would gain them recognition, yet still remain categorically inferior in the eyes of urban residents and elites (Murphy 2004).

Andrew Kipnis (2007) and others have analysed how quality has been fostered as a cultural distinction that functions to legitimise contemporary China’s ostensibly “neo-liberal” capitalist market economy. It is significant that, as migration within China increased, urban citizens began to manipulate quality discourse to enhance their own personal quality by engaging in various forms of personally determined projects; that is, by practising techniques that would realise a different kind of quality altogether from that attained simply by hard work and endeavour. Both Murphy (2004) and Pun (2005) assert that the quality of the rural masses essentially inheres solely in the capability to offer their labour for exploitation in the service of the capitalist system, while elites may aspire to ever-higher levels of sophistication simply by locking themselves into a gated community, or by paying to obtain university degrees, for piano lessons, and so on. Urban citizens conceived of this latter kind of quality as an indefinable value buffering the urban sphere against the rural. Categorically, it did not have to be realised by bitterly hard work. The struggle to succeed in urban China’s educational arms race (Fong 2007; Woronov 2011), or to master musical instruments or classical art forms, was seen as befitting only people of the requisite kind of quality – that is, those with urban status.

Under Jiang Zemin, China’s central leadership clearly identified itself with the socially divisive discourses of the urban middle classes. This was less clearly the case under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, however, who responded to public pressure and raised the plight of rural China on the national political agenda. This new agenda was radically exemplified in Chongqing, one of China’s two nationally assigned

experimental districts of urban-rural integration (城乡一体化, *chengxiang yitibua*), where Bo Xilai, the Party Secretary disgraced in 2012, sent local cadres to the countryside for self-cultivation (*The Economist* 2011). With current President Xi Jinping's "Beautiful China" motto, exemplified by the pursuit of a countryside that is poverty-free rather than beautiful per se, problems in the Chinese countryside plainly remain amongst the administration's top priorities.

Our paper argues that this shift in high-level policy with respect to rural China has been accompanied by a new discursive focus on eating bitterness. The focus is significant because it opens up the possibility of re-embracing some of the communist virtues against which the economic reforms were, and to some extent continue to be, defined. It may also indicate a more universal notion of Chinese citizenship. The bitterness, which once encompassed the suffering of China's rural masses and the willingness of the Party elite to sacrifice themselves on their behalf, runs distinctly counter to quality discourse: eating bitterness connotes sacrifice in the countryside, while quality discourse strongly conjures up urban life as the object of one's strivings. We argue, however, that the discourse of eating bitterness has recently been reconfigured to refer to a much wider range of peopletypes, though the discourse is characterised by a very specific emphasis on a particular set of virtues and still enables forms of social division and exclusion.

## Soldier Crash Course: A Parable of Authentic Individuality

The Soldier Crash Course TV show sees Xu Sanduo maintain his rural naïveté throughout. The other soldiers in the show are portrayed as streetwise in comparison, but also as mixed up and lost, variously given to sloth, decadence and self-seeking ambition. However, despite being incompetent and lacking in self-confidence, Xu Sanduo is driven to do something of significance. While the others idly pass the time playing cards, Sanduo takes pride in arranging his bed and uniform for an inspection that will not take place. Above all, Sanduo embodies an immense capacity to eat bitterness; indeed he positively wallows in it. While he loads his pack with bricks for a long training march, the others load nothing. While he labours to complete the construction of an abandoned road with his bare hands, his com-



rades get drunk and hurl ridicule at him. Sanduo's naïveté ensures that he remains oblivious to the cruelty of his bullies. It is primarily by way of this indomitable ignorance, rather than by heroic effort per se, that he comes to embody the regiment motto: "Never give up; never lose hope".

Sanduo becomes the object of ridicule and disgrace on account of a series of potentially life-threatening mistakes. Viewers realise that the problem is, not merely Sanduo's lack of ability, but his lack of self-belief: he must be self-reliant or perish. A watershed moment comes when he must wield a sledgehammer to ram home a pin that his officer holds to the tracks of a tank, despite Sanduo's protestations that he "can't do it". When Sanduo promptly breaks the officer's hand, the officer presents the pin to Sanduo again, holding it in his other hand. Crying, roaring, and with visions of his persecutors flashing before his eyes, Sanduo strikes the pin home. That night, his first-person narrative tells viewers that he goes to sleep knowing he is no-more lacking than anyone else. From here, Sanduo is assigned to the Special Forces, where contrasts are drawn with Cheng Cai from Sanduo's own village. Cheng Cai consistently demonstrates outstanding performance, but is nevertheless ultimately cast adrift on account of his self-seeking ambition, narcissism and lack of comradeship, and for failing to internalise the motto of their first regiment.

Soldier Crash Course was phenomenally successful. The drama became the most popular show of 2007, and "Xu Sanduo" was the most popular internet word-search term in China that year. Recruitment for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is said to have risen rapidly, and many more Chinese women reportedly wanted to marry soldiers as a result of the show (*Yantai Wanbao* 2008). Websites detailing favourite quotes from Xu Sanduo abound, and fans zealously refer to these in everyday life. These quotes include statements such as: "People can't be too comfortable; if you're too comfortable, a problem will surely arise". The spirit of willingly enduring adversity that the show enshrines echoed particularly powerfully in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, when *Soldier Crash Course* was re-screened on multiple channels. Related cultural symbols that circulated at the time included an iconic image of a dead child's hand protruding from the rubble, still gripping his pen, and the story of "Strong-Willed Pig" (猪坚强, *zhu jianqiang*), a pig that survived under

the same devastation for 36 days and was selected as China's most inspirational animal for 2008.

In December 2007, following Soldier Crash Course's initial screening, a guest-show programme on CCTV 3, entitled "The Art of Life" (艺术人生, *yishu rensheng*), honoured Wang Baoqiang, the actor who plays Xu Sanduo. Viewers learned that Wang was born in 1984 and grew up in the most deprived of families in the very poorest of villages in Hubei. Therefore, Wang had a real-life historical narrative rooted in bitterness-eating, and was very different to most celebrities who appear on The Art of Life. As a young boy, Wang wanted to be a film star so badly that he left his village for the Shaolin Temple at Songshan, Henan, and spent six years learning Chinese kung fu there, no doubt eating considerable bitterness. Wang eventually went to Beijing, and sat resolutely in front of a TV production studio waiting to meet someone who could help fulfil his destiny. Just like Xu Sanduo, Wang would not let anything deter him from his task. He funded himself doing ad hoc construction site work, and even slept in a tree. Eventually, Wang was offered a movie opportunity with film director Feng Xiaogang who cast him to fame as a goat-herding Tibetan peasant boy in "A World Without Thieves" – a role which reflected his real-life naïveté of character.

The Art of Life invited all the main actors from Soldier Crash Course onto the show. Each star was given a prize, but the final prize was saved for Wang Baoqiang, a "prize for the most able to eat bitterness" (最佳吃苦耐劳奖, *zuijia chiku nailaojiang* – that is 耐 for patience and 劳 for bitter work). When Wang received the prize, a throng of urban middle class fans rapturously applauded him. Judging by the media hype surrounding Soldier Crash Course at the time, together with the show-host's demeanour, the maddening rapture of the fans' endorsement, and the overall stage-managed feel to the event, this represented something of an epochal moment. This was a moment when the lowliest of persons was bestowed the highest of public honours, and applauded wildly for his perseverance, for demonstrating spirit in the face of impossible odds, and for enduring the punishment and discrimination he had received at the hands of others better placed than himself in the contemporary order. We argue that this moment consolidated a shift in the utility of bitterness-eating discourse, where China's urbanites and ruling elites extended a

form of appeasement to all of China's citizens who might identify with Xu Sanduo and Wang Baoqiang.

Following *Soldier Crash Course's* initial screening, director Kang Honglei gave an extended interview to the Chengdu media (*Chengdu Daily* 2007) which supports our interpretation. Kang does not simply say that Xu Sanduo is able to eat bitterness; he has a more nuanced viewpoint, which we paraphrase here:

In this fickle, fast-paced society, we think our effort and ability alone is sufficient to deal with social changes. But our so-called cleverness is why we fail. We may be smarter than others but we are not wise. We are undermined by our own intelligent design. Xu Sanduo, on the other hand, cherishes everything, every opportunity and interaction. He may have a dreadful appearance, he may be stupid and incapable of fitting into society, but he is great. He's not a model person; he is a "Chinese person". He has an outstanding moral quality: his stubbornness, his lowliness, the kindness he displays to others. These are Chinese characteristics. He has China's outstanding agricultural civilisation in his bones (*Chengdu Daily* 2007).

Kang affirms that *Soldier Crash Course* positions the naïve virtues of a rural society against the self-centred characteristics of modern society. Whereas other people who would more obviously qualify as contemporary role models for China's rise set themselves ambitious goals and pursue them to the exclusion of all else, Xu Sanduo has a more modest, resolute approach. His significance lies not in intelligent design or a drive to succeed, but in his willingness to relinquish high-minded personal ambitions and to be magnanimous and tolerant. He cheerfully cherishes every moment of the life he must endure, and stubbornly perseveres, not for higher purpose, but simply as a function of finding his way.

Kang goes on to explain his rationale for making *Soldier Crash Course*:

I wanted to provoke viewers into seeing through contemporary social norms, and rediscover their roots. I wanted to say something about how we should live and act today. What should we really strive for? What should we really look back for? In this fast-developing and rapidly-changing economy, what place is there for us to express our spirit? Your internal world (内心的世界, *neixin de shijie*), including the most treasured traditional things in the depths of your hearts, how often do you bring these out? How often do

you expose this? How often do you hide it? How often do you extinguish it? Viewers love *Soldier Crash Course* because it delivers a resonant message for our times: the final two steps on the road to success definitely don't depend on your ability, your experience or your connections; the final two steps are all about your true-self (本我, *benwo*). You can have all the skills in the world, but still fail if you are not self-aware. How much do we recognise ourselves? How deeply? We must know what we can do and what we can't do, and be content with that. We shouldn't rush ahead in pursuit of success, for we will fail. Xu Sanduo's value lies in his origin, his naïveté, his down-to-earth nature and his low profile (*Chengdu Dai-ly* 2007).

*Soldier Crash Course* is a discourse of authentic self-awareness, closer to Taoist or Buddhist discourses than Confucian and Communist discourses, which have framed individuals only in terms of their roles within social collectives, such as relations to the family, the community, and the nation. In *Soldier Crash Course*, success is not about having the best strategy or coming out on top, nor is it about fulfilling one's responsibilities to society or self-sacrifice; it's about doing your best, and being in touch with yourself. In Kang's view, Xu Sanduo's significance is that, despite his faults, he is attuned to his innate individuality. This form of selfhood is firmly located in an essentialist view of "China's agricultural civilisation"; indeed, that is part of what makes it true in Kang's vision. But this is nevertheless a form of selfhood that otherwise applies universally for all Chinese, and Kang urges viewers to see through contemporary social norms and embrace this also.

The search for authenticity in Chinese popular culture is not new. There was the "root-seeking movement" in art and literature in the 1980s when "searching for the roots" (寻根, *xungen*) films like *Yellow Earth* and *Red Sorghum* by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou were popular. The emphasis then was on capturing the mythological Chinese characteristics that could be used as the building blocks of an imagined "Chinese modernity". The movement was a collective, national project. *Soldier Crash Course*, however, and the popularised narrative surrounding the real-life story of the actor who plays Xu Sanduo, emphasise the individual's struggle to take control of his life and achieve significance. Despite Kang's retrospective references to "roots", "tradition" and "looking back", *Soldier Crash Course* is not obviously nostalgic. Rather, it is distinctly contemporary and existen-

tial; it urges Chinese people to be in touch with their roots so that they can find their way in today's world.

Official discourse in China has long enhanced the values of the everyday or folk wisdom of the ordinary people, a popular mechanism contrived to bypass so-called "elite" cultures that threaten dangerous ideas like universal respect for individual autonomy (Festa 2006). Here, however, it appears that *Soldier Crash Course* encourages a form of unique individualism.

Our interpretation is that Xu Sanduo is a man for all Chinese; he stands for the underdogs. The explicit message is that, if Xu Sanduo can achieve success, then anybody can, as long as they are attuned to their innate selves and embrace their objective struggle. *Soldier Crash Course* celebrates ordinary Chinese people's most fundamental shared cultural characteristics, and gives them something to believe in – a hero from within their own ranks. Xu Sanduo, meanwhile, becomes the unlikely national champion of a cultural reappraisal; exemplar, no less, of civilisation, as Kang would have it. The authorities provide Xu Sanduo with the opportunity to prosper, and his humility and effort see him rewarded.

This discourse speaks first to China's peasants and migrant workers, and then to others of the poor masses, about how even the most lowly and downtrodden of persons can rise to significance as long as they are bone-headed enough to eat bitterness. At the same time, this discourse also enables new forms of social division. Where lines of social distinction had previously been drawn based on household registration status, now there is a new criterion for categorising boundaries – your capacity for bitterness-eating. Where rural people had been cast as categorically inferior to urban people, there is now the myth of a level playing field, and even the promise of poetic justice for all involved.

Any association with China's ruling elite is of course implicit. We cannot prove that *Soldier Crash Course* is a deliberate strategy of central government. Besides, proving such a connection is not in our interests anyway, because strategy from the perspective of discourse analysis is not about deliberate pre-meditated intentions, but organic fusions of multiple overlapping interests, some aligned, some much less so, the product of countless practices, processes and power relations (Chia and Holt 2009). The meaning of *Soldier Crash Course* is fluid and subjective, emergent in the interaction of the director, pro-

ducer, script writers, TV network, government censors, and the media consumers who internalise, diffuse and reconfigure messages afresh in the act of interpretation. All we can do here is to chart the traces of new and existing discourses in *Soldier Crash Course*, and position these in relation to other practices and representations.

## Bitterness-Eating Discourse: Structure and Function

We now turn our attention to examining how individuals in various objective social situations make use of this evolving discourse of bitterness-eating, with a view to demonstrating its structure and uses. Our aims are to develop the claim that, whereas in the past the hardship endured by Lei Feng-type heroes was directed at serving others, now the aim of eating bitterness is self-awareness. We also seek to show how the bitterness-eating discourse, which was once reserved primarily for rural-to-urban migrant workers, in contrast to the personal quality discourses of urban middle class, has now been firmly adopted by the urban middle classes.

Consider Zhang Xiuzhen, an informant in Anshan, Liaoning province, where Griffiths conducted participant observation between 2005 and 2010. Zhang interprets her rise to success from nearby Xiuyan where she was born in 1970, in terms that would not be unfamiliar to Xu Sanduo or Wang Baoqiang:

I used to ask my mother and father what life was like outside the mountains, and they would say to me, “You study well now, and after you’ve got into university, you will see the magnificent sunlight; you will change the fate of your life” (Anonymous 6 2007).

Zhang never made it to university. She had two younger sisters and two older brothers at a time when women were severely underprivileged, especially in rural areas. She tells us that, when her father fell into a coma for five years at the age of 42, she was obliged to single-handedly care for her mother, her siblings, and her elderly grandmother:

While my brother had to study a craft and was allowed to leave home to study driving and mechanics, I stayed at home and worked the fields, burnt the coal, cooked, worked manure into the land, and planted trees. As the heavy responsibility of life fell up-

on my body, I worked in factories doing heavy work suitable only for men, and suffered horrific injuries (Anonymous 6 2007).

In 1992, Zhang decided that learning about computers would give her a competitive advantage. She applied for work experience at a hotel in Dalian. She was one of 35 shortlisted from 400 applicants, and then one of five selected from these. Zhang tells us that she would get up at 3 a.m. to study English even if she did not need to rise till 7 a.m. In due course, Zhang found herself working in an entertainment facility owned by the son of the one of the most powerful industry magnates in Anshan, eventually marrying this boss and becoming a full partner in the business.

Zhang interprets her extraordinary success in terms of migration: “By moving you can live” (人挪能活, *rennuo nenghuo*). And she can now speak as if she has arrived: “It was all because of my own struggling that I got to where I am now”. Though Zhang has sacrificed much for her success, her perception is that the exchange has added value, a form of self-realisation that could not have been achieved in any other way or by anybody else, one that was broadly guided through-out its genesis by her force of intent. This is a post-rationalisation, of course, and tales of bitterness are often more intentional than the actual experience of bitterness-eating. Zhang’s intent will probably have been more like a simple self-belief or faith, similar to that of Xu Sanduo. Yet bitterness tales are told while being lived as well as lived while being told, and Zhang’s tale is no less real or compelling for being framed in this way.

Indeed, bitterness-eating discourse can be in the present, as well as retrospective. Today, Zhang puts this same intensity of focus to use in the cause of developing her company. She still apologises for lacking “culture” (文化, *wenhua*) relative to her husband’s “intellectual” urban family, but she is now the leading distributor in Anshan for an up-scale U.S. direct-marketing firm. She tells us at length how she cultivates her business in much the same fashion:

People without pressure will fall away; a well without pressure will not spurt oil. But you must go step-by-step; you must walk on the road in an earnest and down-to-earth manner. I’m this kind of person. I rely on my own perseverance and striving; there is nothing I can’t do. But only if you’re willing to do things in the proper sequence, with perseverance and the right attitude, can you do it. It will never be the case that you get positive feedback every time

you invest effort in something; sometimes you will try very hard and not get any results at all. But if you don't try, you can be even surer that you'll never get anything back. Life is fair, we all have 24 hours per day, but how we live is up to us. Life is never easy, never plain sailing. You've just got to try and strive with all your might. I always say, "There is nothing difficult in front of me. When the car is at the bottom of the mountain, there must surely be a road; you don't need to think too much about it" (Anonymous 2007).

Note Zhang's emphasis on going step-by-step and on walking on the road in an "earnest and down-to-earth manner" – just like Xu Sanduo. Zhang also share a likeness with Xu Sanduo by emphasising the cumulative value of comparatively insignificant victories, by her stress on "perseverance" and by having the "right attitude" towards setbacks on the way. Another similarity with Xu Sanduo is her choice to cherish life "24 hours per day". Finally, Zhang alludes to the uncertainty that must be embraced: life is fair; it doesn't matter how hard you strive, you can never be sure whether it is your effort and bitterness-eating or something else that does the trick; something like faith, luck, or that element of imagination which roams free of the will. In other words, bitterness-eating must always be complemented by an external element beyond agency itself – "fate", as Zhang puts it elsewhere – so that intentionally engaging in projects of self-becoming does not preclude an advance that can only occur when individuals shift their focus and see the way forward – the "car at the bottom of the mountain", as Zhang puts it.

Exercising the self in this way, therefore, requires something of an authentic realisation of the possible existence of an individual agency, including its inevitable finitude (Heidegger 1962). To pick up director Kang's vision of *Solider Crash Course* discussed above, authentic self-awareness requires that you be resolute in the face of your existence, including an ever-present imminent death which lies outside your capacity for final coherence, thus making coherent narrative sense of your present from all possible futures and from interpretations of the past (cf. Heidegger's *Authentic Dasein*). In other words, in the sense of individuals being truthful, they achieve awareness of what they, and they alone, already had. But this process need not be conscious and certainly not rational. "You don't need to think too much about it", as Zhang puts it. "Fate", she explains, is "not [that] easy to get".



Thus, like a Chinese version of the classical “American dream”, bitterness discourse, as exemplified in narratives such as Zhang’s, systematically validates the striving of China’s lowly working classes. It makes them individuals, with inspiring stories and passionate feelings. It legitimises their lack of education, their naïveté and ignorance, and lauds their hopefulness and vitality. It brings them under the wings of legitimate society, within a new inclusive/exclusive boundary drawn by the broad dimensions of an existential work ethic. However, while this sugar-coated pill once swallowed represents a form of appeasement to China’s lowly classes and a calling for them to belong to a community bigger than themselves, this pill is still a bitter one to stomach because its highly empowering message also serves to deny any suggestion that China’s government may be the root cause of suffering among many of its poor and lowly citizens.

This reading differs little from Rachel Murphy’s studies on how quality (素质, *suzhi*) functions in rural middle schools: the universality of the new discourse serves to shift responsibility for the predicament and prosperity of the citizens onto individuals themselves, who must now improve their capacity to eat bitterness, just as they must also improve their quality. We are keen, however, to emphasise that, while quality discourse is distinctly urban in its origin and condescending to rural people, the manipulation of bitterness-eating and these other contemporary manifestations in Soldier Crash Course emphasises the element of rural people’s striving and makes this a central factor. These manifestations also make the discourse accessible to everyone who strives, and it is this latter feature that makes them most interesting. Whereas China’s peasants have long been seen as capable of enduring hardship, they are no longer seen as the only ones who have this capability, nor is the capacity for bitterness-eating seen as inherent to rural people by default.

The new discourse certainly seems democratic. However, since it charges individuals with greater self-responsibility than ever before, it also marginalises lazy and unproductive people, both rich and poor, just as it marginalises people unable to lift themselves out of a lowly predicament. From a neo-Marxist perspective, this might amount to just another form of “neoliberal governmentality” (Yan 2003); the new discourse certainly benefits the state since it functions to maximise productivity whilst also offloading responsibility for the livelihood, social security and well-being of the citizens. Rather than see

this discourse as exploiting China's subaltern types, however, we argue that the state promotes this new discourse primarily as a necessary function of political survival. Indeed, as a result of the citizen-making aspect to this new discourse, China's political elite and their allies in the commercial middle classes must now also engage in narratives of bitterness-eating themselves, or risk being judged decadent, unproductive and privileged.

## Bittersweet: Negotiating Middle Class Status

An enduring reflex reaction of well-off people when they find themselves confronted by the need to justify social inequalities has, of course, been to allude to effort. China's urban middle classes, however, anxious that their material and lifestyle gains might be exposed as exploitations of the failings of communism and reversed due to a lack of political rights, must invest in the bitterness-eating discourse as a fundamental requirement for social survival. Their discursive performances can be viewed as adapting and extending earlier techniques of "speaking bitterness" (诉苦, *suku*), which were used by cadres during the Communist Party's land reform campaign in order to make peasants realise who their oppressors were and how they could liberate themselves by attacking landlords. Then, in the 1950s, those peasants who were considered most eloquent at speaking bitterness were incorporated as Party activists (Hubbert 2009). Today, tales of middle class bitterness accrue a different form of symbolic capital, and function to reduce the resource "gap" with labourers even as this is also justified (*siv*).

Successful entrepreneur, Liu Zong, lives by a principle, she says:

By eating the bitterness of bitterness you can become a person above persons. If you cannot eat the bitterness of bitterness, you will not get the sweetest of all sweets (不吃苦中的苦难得甜上甜, *buchi kuzhong de ku, nande tianshang tian*). The reason for my success is mainly that I can eat bitterness. How can I put it? It's all the effort (辛苦, *xinku*) I have expended. I took my entire essence and put it into managing my business: enterprise, culture, management, and so on. It was definitely not physical bitterness – eating on my body; rather it was my entire spirit that I invested. Perhaps other people would have used this time playing mah-jong, eating, dancing, and so on. But my time was entirely invested in work. Several years ago, when I was setting up the business, my hours of

work every day were extremely long; I only ever slept for a few hours (Anonymous 3 2008).

It is significant that Liu claims to have eaten considerable amounts of “spiritual bitterness”. She says that her bitterness was not primarily physical, which marks her difference from rural-born manual labourers such as Zhang mentioned earlier. By making this form of social distinction, however, Liu simultaneously stresses the intensity of bitterness eaten and the duration of bitterness undergone, and in doing so alludes to a quality that stands in direct contrast to earlier forms of quality which found their realisation simply by living in gated urban communities, paying to attend university, or for piano lessons. The whole point of quality discourse was that quality was supposedly intrinsic to urban people: although rural people could enhance it, they categorically could not attain it. This new kind of equity, however, has no categorical basis except for the fact that it must be earned through hard work. This new kind of emphasis, moreover, is distinct from urbanites’ grumbles about inflation in the 1980s, job insecurity in the 1990s, or rising house prices in the 2000s. Bitterness-eating is a discourse with a particular social and political utility – that of drawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

In a related work, Yan Hairong shows how discourses of bitterness-eating and quality improvement need not necessarily be at odds with each other. It is not necessarily the case that quality is for the urban middle classes and bitterness-eating is for rural people; indeed, being able to eat bitterness can be a manifestation of good quality. However, bitterness-eating is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for high quality (素质高, *suzhi gao*), which inheres in the urban middle classes alone (see above). Yan charts the way in which state and individual actors promote “self-development” discourse (自我发展, *zìwǒ fāzhǎn*) as the means to raising peasant quality (Yan 2010: 187), concluding that this discourse “erases”, in other words, denies any discussion of economic class inequality (Yan 2010: 190). Our own analysis, however, goes beyond this neo-Marxist critique by contending that the new discourse of bitterness-eating as a paradigm for self-development has expanded and explicitly become more inclusive, accessible to anyone who strives for a living, whether urban or rural.

Consider Lin Wei, the successful owner of the restaurant in which Griffiths washed up dishes in order to better understand rural-urban migrants (Griffiths 2010). Lin’s retrospective narrative about

overcoming humble beginnings and bitter trials is relevant here. From a base of “extreme bitterness” (特别苦, *tebie ken*), as he tells it, Lin built himself up bit by bit, starting out as a painter-decorator before opening his first restaurant six years ago. Lin claims that his father dying early in life gave him a good foundation, teaching him that he should tackle every situation independently and with purposeful application (努力, *nuli*). Lin went on to say:

Success is something that everyone must achieve for themselves. Everyone must eat the bitterness of their own struggle. You must be hardworking. Whatever it is, you must do it yourself; you must not be lazy. You must not be idle; you must be hardworking and fond of physical labour (Anonymous 2 2007).

Now that Lin has become rich, however, he is in fact extremely idle, and rarely lifts a finger except to smoke, eat or drink. He is certainly not fond of physical labour. However, although he appears to only ever hang around with his friends and to make trips to the shops, he denies that his life is “leisurely” (休闲, *xixian*). He prefers the term “relaxed” (轻松, *qingsong*), perhaps because he senses that he risks being judged as decadent. Now that he has lots of money and all the spare time in the world, does Lin seek to improve himself? “No, I’m too old for study”, he replies, “I don’t read; I watch TV”.

Lin’s discourse still represents an investment in the kind of quality that derives merely from material wealth. He is divorced from the action necessary to qualify as bitterness-eating, although he likes to suggest otherwise. The new discourse of bitterness-eating, which finds its most crystallised expression in the Soldier Crash Course TV show, marginalises people like Lin. Indeed, Soldier Crash Course speaks directly to the decadent nouveaux riches who watch the television show from their plush living rooms; even to those urban middle classes who have recently begun to consume commodified representations of the bitter rural past through authentic rural tourism as described below – to make sure they have heard this validating message and taken note of the reconfigured social boundaries it circumscribes. Ironically, these decadent nouveaux riches are the people for whom the lack of bitterness-eating is the most popular excuse given for social inequality; that is, these are the people who promote the notion that, if only the poor worked harder, they’d be better off.

Thus, this new configuration of bitterness-eating discourse not only serves to offload responsibility for the self-development and

social advancement of poor and lowly people onto those individuals themselves, but it also speaks directly to China's well-moneyed urbanites who have condescended to the rural poor for so long. The discourse functions to "civilise" them to respect those who are less wealthy and less powerful, and encourages them to have empathy for all productive men and women regardless of status and power, lest China's downtrodden yet upwardly-mobile hardworking poor, empowered by this discourse, should rise up against them. However, since well-moneyed urbanites are also those who have begun to challenge the state monopoly over discursive categories through their new-found consumer freedom, this new discourse is also wide enough for them to embrace and molly-coddle their changing sensibilities, as long as they are also productive.

## Governing Through Bitterness: Migrants as New Role-Models?

We turn our attention now to Chengdu Municipality, which together with Chongqing is China's other designated zone for urban-rural integration experiments. Chengdu comprises large urban and rural populations. Our aim is to show how the evolving discourse of bitterness-eating informs and facilitates the ways local authorities legitimate their grip on power, and how they justify their actions to the higher authorities. In the more than 200 interviews Zeuthen conducted with townspeople, cadres, and rural-to-urban migrants in model townships around Chengdu at about the same time as Soldier Crash Course was being screened, and from our analysis of local government documents, media campaigns and official communications, we found indications that local authorities reward and celebrate bitterness-eating in ways which resonate with Xu Sanduo's and Wang Baoqiang's stories, and with those of the migrants and middle classes analysed in the preceding section (Zeuthen 2010: 220–251).

In one newly-built settlement of terraced houses in Yang'an, a model township near Chengdu which is home to many rural migrants who have returned from large cities, state propaganda hailed, "The manual labourers of today [are] the industrialists of tomorrow". Similar exhortations included, "Loafing around without a decent occupation is a disgrace; going away for a job is glory". These statements promote a view of rural migrants quite different from Anagnost's

contrast between the “bodies” of manual labouring migrants and the higher forms of quality attainable only by the cultivated urban middle classes (Anagnost 2004). Far from denigrating migrants as inferior, in Yang’an migrants were glorified. The local government was actively working to make Yang’an an attractive place for migrants from the area to return to (Zheng 2007).

Again in Yang’an, a local government official asked Zeuthen what he thought about the locals playing mah-jong and cards in the streets at night. The official explained how this was the result of building a “harmonious” town, where returned migrants worked in industry during the day and enjoyed leisurely games during the evening (Anonymous 4 2007). A giant engraved rock by the newly-built town square in front of the local government offices similarly invoked the notion of “harmony”, a clear reference to then President Hu Jintao’s vision of a “harmonious society”. Dancing was organised on the square every night, and the government had invited a teacher from the county town to teach interested locals how to dance. This notion of citizens who have experienced migration being the legitimately leisurely occupiers of a public urban space, even as positive new social role models, is quite disconnected from quality discourse which cast migrants as unwanted, polluting elements in the city.

When asked about their attitudes to the work/life balance, Yang’an peasants said they believed they should find jobs, work hard, and strive to start a business. Living off agriculture alone was not an option (Anonymous 5 2007). The term “quality” was not frequently used. What really mattered in Yang’an, however, seemed to be the ability to make money. Most people interviewed felt they needed to have “capability” (能力, *nengli*), which refers to being canny, having the connections necessary to get things done, and being skilful; that is, somewhat the opposite of what bitterness-eating implies. Many people, however, clearly valued an ability to endure hardship and make sacrifices, including those people considered to be of high capability.

Bitterness-eating and capability were certainly required in equal measure for cadres to gain legitimacy and promote policies; or, at the very least, campaigning politicians had to document their own bitterness-eating narratives when communicating with the public. By far the most popular village Party Secretary in the township was an industrialist who had returned to her home village, officially because

she was asked to do so, but she also knew that she would have access to cheap land for her new factory. Villagers saw this woman as superior to old-school, non-industrious officials on account of her entrepreneurial acumen. During her pitch for re-election as village secretary, however, she felt it necessary to promise that she would pay for the fuel for her official car herself. The local press also reported how she had recently invested several days and several thousand yuan of her own money to save a two year old child who had almost drowned. These commitments were seen as evidence of her inclination to endure hardship and make personal sacrifices (Yang'an 2007).

Yang'an residents had been migrant workers beyond the city limits for years, so it was probably nothing new for hard work to be ascribed a certain status in the township. The many state-run training programmes for helping peasants secure better jobs were possibly not new either (Murphy 2004). What did appear new, however, was the effort to provide aesthetically-pleasing spaces for those who had undergone the experience of migration, a space to entertain themselves, and in particular the initiative to offer these benefits as rewards for migrants' hard work. The new urban space was created in order to show that enduring the hardship of being a peasant was truly glorious. Through the creation of the new urban space they were incorporated in to China's urban sphere.

Though often quite well compensated for the loss of their land in urban development and resettlement projects, peasants closer to the city were much less valued as citizens. Thus, a district government report on unemployment among peasant youth on the outskirts of Chengdu city proper concludes:

Some of them [unemployed youths whose families held a share of valuable collective land until recently appropriated for semi-illegal urban development] have a wrong attitude towards employment, with their eyes aiming high, but their hands low; they are highly dependent, they are afraid of eating bitterness, they don't want to endure the hardship of starting a business, they don't want to work in labour intensive industries, and they don't want to go away from home to temper themselves (Zeuthen 2010: 137).

This report went on to contrast local peasant youth with the approximately 500,000 rural-to-urban migrants believed to be living in the district. According to the report, migrants were willing to take jobs local youths did not want. Local families, moreover, had supposedly

made considerable amounts of money by subletting their homes to migrants, both before and after resettlement; thus, migrants benefited the local economy in multiple ways. However, the report claimed that both this income and the large amounts of cash redistributed from reforming agricultural villages (sometimes as much as 10,000 CNY per person per year) were factors contributing to local youths' unreliability. The social problem was perceived to be work-shy peasant youths who were over-reliant on their parents, not rural migrants.

The report acknowledged that these peasant youths had lifestyles and expectations similar to those of Chengdu urban youths, but concluded:

From the perspective of our objective, the present gap between [local] rural [youths] and urban people, in terms of ideas, their knowledge level, consciousness of social participation, the [modern] contract [system], [economic] competition and requirements of modern times, of course, shows that they still lag considerably behind. Such differences must be narrowed to make them reach the quality level of post-urbanisation as quickly as possible (Zeuthen 2010: 138).

Local peasant youths on the city fringe were thus clearly seen as inferior to centrally-located urban persons and hard-working rural migrants living in and coming from peripheral villages. In contrast to the urban people, they lacked quality and they displayed an inability to eat-bitterness, to take jobs that migrants from elsewhere were willing to do, to be competitive and independent; in short, they lacked major factors in this respect.

As we saw above, the positive view on rural-to-urban migrants was echoed in the migrants' home villages. In Yang'an, the quality (素质, *suzhi*) element of courses offered by the Labour Directorate had been changed so that the focus was now on informing migrant workers of their legal rights. The Directorate even had an office in Guangdong Province to serve migrants (Zeuthen 2010: 148–151).

The negative view towards former peasants – now landlords – on the outskirts of the city was not only found in government reports. It was reproduced by many people, even by some former peasants themselves. A former peasant in his sixties who hinted about corruption among village heads claimed:

A district Party Secretary from a mountainous [i.e. backwards] area couldn't even be like a sub-village leader here [three administrative



levels lower]. Our sub-village leader here gets several hundred yuan per month. A Party Secretary of a mountain district only gets a little more than one thousand yuan per year (Zeuthen 2012: 695).

Local authorities close to the urban centre used the low quality of peasants on the urban fringe as an excuse to appropriate land and integrate local collective land-based economies into the city economy through what they called “proper” urban development. But this only worked because local authorities were able to claim that local peasants were lazy, picky, and of low moral standards, quite unlike the hard-working migrants and supposedly cultivated urbanites. Similar arguments were sometimes used to transfer political authority from informal village leadership to the proper leadership of the city district. An internal district report thus seemed very much in line with the critique expressed by the man in his sixties above:

Many village cadres only work for those above them, not those below them. They don’t value the interests of the masses, they produce fake reports, and they exaggerate and produce superficial documents to cover things up. They turn a deaf ear towards hot issues and problems impacting the people; they deal with them sluggishly or rudely (Zeuthen 2010: 135).

In this part of Chengdu, as with the surrounds of many of China’s metropolitan areas, rural migrants had long taken much of the blame for crime and other social problems. Now, however, discrimination against rural migrants by local authorities is no longer considered appropriate. Blame for social problems is attributed elsewhere, and migrants have almost become role models.

## Sweet Bitterness

In the context where the global financial crisis has seen tens of millions of rural-to-urban migrant workers return home from China’s coastal manufacturing centres, and where the engines of China’s economic growth are increasingly shifting to major inland and lower-tier cities such as Chengdu, bitterness-eating capability is proving to be an ever more important point of differentiation when hiring migrant workers. In some cases the only question prospective job-seekers are asked is, “Are you able to eat bitterness?” (Pun 2005). This was the first question Griffiths was asked when reporting for washing-up duty alongside migrants in the hotpot restaurant. In this way, mi-

grants are valued for their ability to eat bitterness, and distinguished by their colleagues and neighbours as genuinely competitive compared with allegedly lazy peasants.

Migrants themselves are well aware of their increasingly competitive symbolic advantage in China's new citizenship project. Younger, more optimistic and forward-looking migrants, that is, those who trade on the new value popularly identified with bitterness-eating, do not refer to themselves in terms of "having to eat bitterness" or "of being of low quality", for this would be to replicate the urban disdain that has kept them for so long at the bottom of the urban social strata. On the contrary, we find a largely positive and upbeat narrative, often centred on adventure, enterprise, and the joy of experiencing urban life. Younger migrants talk as if they had willed their own circumstances, like Zhang Xiuzhen mentioned above. Older migrants, on the other hand, still refer to themselves as having to eat bitterness: "It's all we can do; we have no education" (Griffiths 2012: 132–153).

However, it is also noticeable that urban Chinese denigrate peasants and migrants less than they once did. While some older urbanites who have not benefited from China's improved economic opportunities remain hostile towards peasants, most urban residents, as shown in the debate around the publication of *An Investigation of China's Peasantry* (Chen and Wu 2004), hold rural people in a more sympathetic light. Moreover, the urban middle classes are prone to see hardworking rural migrants as having positives that single-child urban youth lack. Parents who experienced the Cultural Revolution often interpret their experiences of being "sent-down" in positive, constructive and nostalgic terms, whilst accusing contemporary urban youth of being pampered, over-educated and possessed of little capacity to recognise bitterness, let alone live off it. To put it another way, while urban youths do experience considerable bitterness, they tend to experience bitterness of a different form.

While positive regard for the lower classes' ability to eat bitterness can easily be traced back to the migrant worker labour regime as it functioned during the early 1990s, our observations of how bitterness-eating discourse is taken up by China's urban middle classes today suggest a new trend altogether. We have shown how wealthy urban citizens, such as the above-mentioned Liu and Lin, reconcile themselves to hardship as the new signifier of legitimacy in contemporary Chinese society. We have also reviewed research which indi-

cates that in certain social sectors and for certain sorts of urban people, the consumption of idyllicised representations of the rural – and in particular of the eating of rural bitterness – has become a desirable form of leisure (Griffiths, Christiansen, and Chapman 2010). Here bitterness is linked to evolving discourses of health, nostalgia, authenticity and taste (Griffiths 2012).

Whether through rural tourism, Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants, wholegrain foods, and even fashion trends, China's urban middle classes now voraciously consume romanticised representations of the rural, where the bitterness once associated with Marxist and nationalist politics of deprivation and high morals, morphs into a nostalgic and self-indulgent caricature of raw suffering, domesticated as middle class virtue (Griffiths, Christiansen, and Chapman 2010; see also Davies 2005; Hubbert 2005; Tapp 2008). Through the bodily integration of authentic countryside produce, modern urban consumers exorcise the agricultural root that connects all Chinese to the land, and reappraise the objects and modes of consumption that even the most lowly and common of Chinese consider desirable, beautiful, wholesome and tasteful. Where bitterness-eating recently indicated a negative social category, new forms of virtue are found in it today.

Related developments can be noted in the areas of farming, housing and schooling, where well-off urban residents eat bitterness to the extent of buying houses in the countryside to till a patch of land with their own hands (Anonymous 1 2007). Others choose to send their children to schools in rural areas, specifically so that they learn to eat bitterness (*Southern Metropolitan* 2007). Reports on university professors running their own volunteer charity programmes in the countryside are also very new (Thøgersen 2009). The white-collar professionals who volunteer at the weekends to farm plots of land, reallocated as “traditional” organic agricultural communes, are certainly new (Cody 2014).

## Conclusions

Bitterness-eating is undergoing a discursive morphology, created in a dynamic yet asymmetric relationship between popular demand and the stability-seeking needs of the Chinese state. The bitterness, which was once used to mobilise China's masses during the Cultural Revolution, is today used to mark self-reliance and indomitable persever-

ance. More inclusive than earlier and still active quality discourses, which explicitly pit China's sophisticated urbanites against imagined "wild rural mobs", these new interpretations of bitterness-eating create the semblance of dignity for rural-urban migrant workers while potentially marginalising other less productive people. These tensions are vividly codified in the Soldier Crash Course television series and surrounding story, where a real-life migrant becomes idolised as an accidental hero by the urban elite and hard-working peasants alike.

Soldier Crash Course and its unlikely star, Xu Sanduo, speak not only to hardworking rural migrants of whom he is the exemplar, but also to so-called "lazy peasants", so judged because they have not migrated for work, as described above. They speak to the decadent nouveaux riches like Lin, and even to more cultivated entrepreneurs like Liu Zong, who know their behaviour must match their words. Certainly they speak to the often-pampered single-child offspring of the middle classes. Even the powerful elite, officials and state-owned-enterprise bosses who remain in pole position in Chinese society, yet largely beyond all public accountability, must today demonstrate that they have inherited their position by virtue of training schools and intense study. Hard work may be insufficient to achieve social distinction in contemporary China, but it is now a prerequisite for legitimacy.

Bitterness-eating today has also become a marker of existential plight in the face of impersonal single party rule. Quite different from Mao's struggle against capitalism and Western imperialism, when people from myriad walks of social life used the expression "eating-bitterness", today bitterness-eating has become an almost ironic signifier of acceptance and acquiescence to a state in which individuals have very little stake – a form of symbolic slavery to the machinations of the new socialist market economy. The term can still signify self-determination and honest struggle, but in a signifying process, which at once marks an appeasement by the state to China's down-trodden and unfairly exploited persons, the asymmetric power relation with its subjects is also implicitly acknowledged.

For China's elite and the hard-working masses alike, bitterness-eating has come to signify deference to single party rule and assent to the new economic order. You may be indomitable in your striving, you may be intent in your ambition, but the signifier is at once a truly bitter marker close to nihilism, despair and hopelessness. Without any mass revolutionary ideology to sustain them as a collective force,

China's citizens today are truly on their own, and the revolutionary spirit which sustained them throughout much of the last century finds its final death in this paradox of individual awareness, political exclusion, lack of rights, economic servitude and the complete signification of the pointlessness of resistance. For in the final analysis, we cannot be sure if Chinese subjects are so invested in bitterness-eating discourse because pseudo-socialism is good for them, or whether Chinese subjects have to eat bitterness in order to withstand this pseudo-socialism.

The discourse of bitterness has today been reconfigured to include a much more diverse range of people-types, both rural and urban, both poor and rich; though the discourse still enables a very particular kind of social division and exclusion. Close enough to the Yan'an Way (Selden 1971) to be recognisable as distinctly communist, and yet close enough to individualising market forces to avoid any direct criticism of the established economic order, the discourse surrounding Soldier Crash Course is the Communist Party's third-way forward.

Bitterness-eating in this instance, like the rural-urban migrants who meekly and almost automatically reply "yes" when asked if they can eat bitterness upon reporting for sweatshop duty, is an ironic mark of servitude. China's citizens today must increasingly help themselves, or perish in the absence of an adequate social welfare system. Just like the motto of Xu Sanduo's military unit, they must "never give up; never lose hope", even though they have little real hope of ever transcending their objective circumstances. To paraphrase director Kang's reading of his own production, they must be "true to themselves". Subtle and insidious, depending on your perspective, the sophistication of this new form of social engineering might even go beyond "manufactured dissent" as a tool of social organisation.

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