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# Cultures of labour: aspiration, developmental futures and the materiality of memory after Chinese economic reform

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## ABSTRACT

This article argues for attention to the affective investments that motivate working people's life choices in contemporary China by tracing the materiality of the development of aspirations in a rapidly developing context. Turning to the work of Bernard Stiegler, the article contends that for working people, the demand to labour is based not just on the alienation of the means of production (*savoir-faire*), but also the means of living a good life (*savoir-vivre*), which is displaced into a future made knowable within the material world in the present. The article shows how the developmental standard-making that produces senses of progress and legitimizes aspiration, thus compelling economic action, is alienated within the materiality of working people's rapidly changing worlds. By referencing these temporal displacements, developmental subjects assess their own presents by comparison, justifying difficult circumstances by making progress tangible. Understanding the mechanics of aspiration and cultures of labour is vital in light of critiques by labour geographers of the equation of labour agency with traditional, formalized labour politics, as there remains much work to be done to understand how and why people become workers in the first place.

## Les cultures du travail : l'aspiration, la construction de l'avenir et la matérialité de la mémoire après la réforme économique en Chine

### RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article soutient que l'on doit accorder plus d'attention aux investissements affectifs qui déterminent les choix de vie des travailleurs dans la Chine contemporaine en recherchant la matérialité du développement des aspirations dans un contexte qui évolue rapidement. Il aborde la pensée de Bernard Stiegler et soutient que pour la classe active, l'exigence pour le travail se fonde non seulement sur l'aliénation des moyens de production (le *savoir-faire*), mais aussi sur les moyens pour une bonne qualité de vie (le *savoir-vivre*), déplacée dans un avenir qui devient connaissable au sein du monde matériel contemporain. L'article montre comment la

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normalization du développement qui engendre des sensations de progrès et justifie les aspirations, forçant ainsi l'action économique, se retrouve restreinte au sein de la matérialité des univers en évolution rapide des travailleurs. En faisant référence à ces déplacements temporels, les sujets du développement évaluent comparativement leurs propres présents, et justifient des circonstances difficiles en achevant des progrès notables. Une appréhension des mécanismes de l'aspiration et des cultures du travail est primordiale compte tenu des critiques des géographes du travail concernant l'équation de l'agentivité du travail avec ses politiques traditionnelles et formelles, car il y a encore beaucoup à faire pour comprendre comment et pourquoi les gens deviennent, avant toute chose, des travailleurs.

## **Culturas del trabajo: aspiraciones, futuros de desarrollo y la materialidad de la memoria después de la reforma económica en China**

### **RESUMEN**

Este artículo aboga por prestar atención a las inversiones afectivas que motivan las elecciones de vida de la clase trabajadora en China contemporánea, rastreando la materialidad del desarrollo de las aspiraciones en un contexto de rápido desarrollo. Aspirando al trabajo de Bernard Stiegler, el artículo sostiene que para los trabajadores, la demanda de trabajo se basa no sólo en la alienación de los medios de producción (*savoir-faire*), sino también de los medios para vivir una buena vida (*savoir-vivre*), que se desplaza hacia un futuro que se hace conocido dentro del mundo material en el presente. El artículo muestra cómo la elaboración de estándares de desarrollo que produce sensaciones de progreso y legitima las aspiraciones, obligando así a la acción económica, está alienada dentro de la materialidad de los mundos rápidamente cambiantes de los trabajadores. Al hacer referencia a estos desplazamientos temporales, los sujetos del desarrollo evalúan sus propios presentes en comparación, justificando circunstancias difíciles haciendo tangible el progreso. Comprender los mecanismos de las aspiraciones y las culturas laborales es vital dadas las críticas de los geógrafos laborales a la ecuación de la agencia laboral con las políticas laborales tradicionales y formalizadas, ya que aún queda mucho trabajo por hacer para comprender cómo y por qué las personas se convierten en trabajadores en primer lugar.

## **Introduction**

As work regimes evolve at a rapid pace, geographers have begun to rethink the traditional terms through which we research labour. New labour geographies are pushing beyond longstanding preoccupations with the materiality of production and consumption, transnational economic networks (typified by the movement of goods, workers and capital), and the power relationships of ownership and alienation in 'traditional' workplaces typified by stable employment (Coe, 2013; Raj-Reichert, 2023; Strauss, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). Instead, labour geographers are probing other aspects of labour relations, subjectivities and politics, urging focus on the discursive (Anant & Coe, 2021), ontological and

epistemological (Raj-Reichert, 2023; Strauss, 2020a) aspects of labour and, notably, pushing us to re-evaluate agency, contestation and resilience beyond collective workplace politics (Anwar & Graham, 2021; Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Coe, 2013; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Strauss, 2020a). In particular, developments like the rise of 'platform' economies (Graham & Anwar, 2019; Johnston, 2020), automation (Bissell & Del Casino, 2017), and the spread of precarity (Strauss, 2018, 2020b; Waite, 2009)<sup>1</sup> have compelled new modes of analysis as workplaces expand and push deeper into everyday life. As labour grows both in intensity and extent, feminist (Bhattacharya, 2017; Mezzadri, 2019) and affect-based approaches (Lazzarato, 2014; Massumi, 2015) to labour subjectivities have expanded what counts as labour to include not just social reproduction but also other unwaged, value-generating action prone to extraction, including consumption, relations of credit and debt, automation, data harvesting and the production of desires.

Expanding what counts as labour and recognizing the seepage of labour into more terrains of life highlight that geographies of labour have often siloed labour away from other parts of life, society, and what we might call 'culture' by focusing on industrial labour relations in the formal economy. But culture is important. As economic conditions evolve, it is not only labour formations that change as more people are drawn deeper into the wage economy with greater intensity. For this expansion of capitalism to be possible, people must also come to know and learn to navigate their new economic realities. Through this process, people situate themselves as sellers of their labour power in service of their own goals. That is to say, the decision to labour *at all* always involves a degree of agency, even if it is highly circumscribed.

To illustrate this point, this article examines cultures of labour in a context in which both standards of living (and thus conceptualizations of a good life) and the material realities of the economy that allow this good life to be pursued are in rapid flux – contemporary China.<sup>2</sup> It does so through a case study of the 'Yu' sisters and their small restaurant on a peri-urban shopping street. In the course of narrating their life stories, the Yu sisters draw connections between their economic agency and their changing material world. It is through these connections that they form attachments to forms of labour that appear to diminish their wellbeing in the present because of the promise of better futures to come.<sup>3</sup> Although the paths people take towards economic subjectification are diverse, the story of the Yu sisters reflects a set of common themes among the small traders lining the shopping street that housed their restaurant, and it provides a useful case study of how, in a developmental context like that of China, people become motivated workers in a system that requires their labour but has a mixed track record of delivering its promises.

China's rapid capitalist transformation after the first experiments in market economics began in 1978 has not just caused dramatic social changes but *demanded* these changes to create development (Rofel, 2007). After all, development is not just a set of policies, but it is enacted through the labour of the huge numbers of people who form the economy. Here I propose a material basis for the aspirations that motivate the workers powering China's capitalist turn by reassessing developmental imaginaries as technologies of remembering the past and assessing futures still to come.<sup>4</sup> My aim is to show how capitalist transformation and economic growth, which necessitate the enrolment of lives into marketized relations of production and consumption, are aspects of an affective project that is not just cultural but also material and sensuous. To see how a globalized

economy is possible, it is imperative to understand the everyday economic action of the billions of people who run the economy with their own labour and in service of their own apparent interests. The allure of a better future, alongside heartbreak at its shattering, are just as important as more obviously material needs that force participation in the market economy, not just in China, but worldwide.

Why do people participate so enthusiastically in developmental projects that produce the class inequality they are on the losing end of? It is easy to point out the forms of compulsion that make participation mandatory, from the dismantling of the state-owned industrial sector (Dai, 2016, Gu, 2001) and Mao-era social programmes (Croll, 1999; Smart & Smart, 2001) to the stagnation of rural wages (Rozelle, 1996) and skyrocketing urban housing costs (Li et al., 2020). But it is my contention that these 'push' factors are inadequate to explain the emotional investment people have in participation in the market or, specifically, the widespread culture of entrepreneurialism that has emerged in post-Reform China. Across China's new class divides, people do not just survive, but they try to eke out better futures for themselves, their children and wider allegiances like their neighbours, ethnic kin or nation. That is to say, there is a psychological aspect to the demand to work, even in jobs that are not particularly fulfilling or desired. People participate in the economy on their own behalf because they hold aspirations for other futures, aspirations that take shape within framings not just of what is desirable but also of what is possible. Capitalist aspirations are not 'natural' phenomena inherent to the human experience, but emerge within semiological and material contexts that induce neoliberal forms of subjectivity through the ubiquity of social facts like those of 'the entrepreneur, individual success, competition, social Darwinism, and so on' (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 101). By reforming subjects en masse in accordance with neoliberal sensibility, these semiotic-material contexts reproduce themselves as the *real* itself, producing expectations and aspirations alongside materializations of this real as people make economic choices within the confines of what feels possible (Fisher, 2009; Lazzarato, 2014; Massumi, 2015). This pattern of *the real* demanding labour to reproduce itself is particularly apparent in places experiencing the tumults of rapid development like China, where changes to the real are so fast that evidence of past reals remains all around.

Studies of class in China have tended to focus on factory and construction work (cf. Lee, 2007; Pun, 2005, 2016; Swider, 2015). This article, by contrast, considers a different kind of new subject under Chinese capitalism – small-scale, independent tradespeople in a small city in China's Shandong Province. Unlike factory and construction workers, the traders of the market street I have pseudonymized as 'Taohua Street' are their own bosses. Their labour is not expropriated by an exploitative capitalist they can organize against. *What motivates them to be their own bad bosses?*<sup>5</sup> Here, I turn to the writings of Bernard Stiegler (1998, 2009, 2010, 2013), who considers proletarianization not only in terms of ownership of the means of production (*savoir-faire*), but also in terms of the ownership of the means of life itself (*savoir-vivre*). Although Stiegler did not write about developmental subjects explicitly, his historical view of human development as congruent with material and specifically technical change and his diagnosis of its risks provide useful insights into the formation of developmental subjects today. From Stiegler's alternative account of the proletarian, I argue that the alienation of *savoir-vivre* (i.e. the removal of the ability to live well from subjects into external objects, creating dependencies on these objects) creates opportunities for the expansion of capitalism into new, personal territories as the traders

of Taohua Street pursue an alienated imaginary of a good life. I characterize this alienation as taking the form of *developmental knowledges*, that is, knowledges of the changes that development has brought and can be expected. These developmental knowledges, I contend, are distributed within workers' material environments and are key to the emergence of cultures of striving or, considered otherwise, the alienated labour subjectivities that power the market economy. As the traders of Taohua Street consider their environs, they see the material consequences of development everywhere. The changes in their environs represent the materialization of developmental knowledges, which subjects can access to understand their pasts and keep track of progress towards a 'developed' future. The affordances of these material changes shape subjects' working lives, record economic development and legitimate aspiration, while also inducing pressure to give more and more of life to labour. Thus, as the frequent refrain on Taohua Street goes, as the country develops, you must improve yourself too. Improve yourself, or face the very real risk of being left behind.

By documenting these developmental knowledges and their material entanglements, this article makes three main contributions to labour geographies. First, it follows Mezzadri's (2019, p. 37) plea to attend to the 'actually-existing labour and labour relations' that the majority of workers exist within, rather than continue to circumscribe labour as an object of study within the bounds of formalized labour politics (Strauss, 2020a). In this vein, geographers have begun to depict other kinds of labour politics and agency in locations beyond the factory or construction site (cf. Alford et al., 2019, Carswell & De Neve, 2013, Rogaly, 2009). However, more work is still needed to show how the choice to engage in labour – the choice at the core of labour agency – is embedded in desires for a *good life* and expectations about how this good life can be achieved. A key contention of this article is that this *good life* emerges within ecologies of feelings, knowledges, expectations and desires about what standards of living are possible, acceptable and desirable, and about how these might be pursued.

Encouragingly, geographers are increasingly working to understand affective investments in labour (Bissell, 2021, 2022; Cockayne, 2016; Marotta, 2020; Straughan et al., 2020). However, so far, this research has focused on the Global North, where anxieties about worsening quality of life and downward mobility are rife; as a result, the affective investments that suffuse labour in the developmental contexts in which most labour occurs remain unseen. This article's second contribution is to draw attention to aspirational attachments as a central node in labour agency and politics, without which development would be impossible. Foregrounding cultures of labour from a developmental context counters this tendency to view labour cultures purely in terms of loss and alienation. As Nguyen et al. (2024) argue, 'in late-socialist Asia [...] while the present may be precarious, it holds out new spaces, desires, and opportunities that would have been unthinkable in the time of central planning and draconian state control, engendering a pervasive sense of abundant possibilities for future making' (2). For Nguyen et al., precarity then does not just remove agency from developmental subjects, but also provides opportunities for action in pursuit of better lives. This is to say, precarity is not solely experienced as loss – it also provides possibilities for imagining and striving towards more liveable futures. These possibilities, however, are unevenly distributed, producing inequalities in life in the present as well as in the future, and in what kinds of futures can be pursued in the present. In examining these imaginaries and their effects,

the article also responds to calls from geographers to attend more specifically to the attachments that shape lives around expectations of what potentials they contain (cf. Anderson, 2022; V. Zhang, 2024).

Finally, the article builds on developments in the philosophy of labour and class to expand how we conceptualize materialism to include the entire milieu in which workers live their lives. Using Stiegler's work on the alienation of the 'means of living' (*savoir-vivre*) through technical prosthesis, the article shows how the aspirations that drive development are rooted in developmental memory that is fundamentally material. To understand development, workers on Taohua Street judge their current circumstances against the past through comparison with their present environments. Just as labour is not confined to traditional workplaces, nor are the cultures of aspiration that motivate labour. In this way, the Chinese developmental context denaturalizes standards of living, showing how these develop over time and both produce and are produced by workers' material realities.

## Taohua street

The account of development and aspiration to follow is based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out from 2017–2018 in and around Taohua Street.<sup>6</sup> Taohua Street is a market street in the declining centre of a small city here pseudonymized as 'Lainan', which lies in the province of Shandong on China's east coast. During fieldwork on Taohua Street, I ate most meals with small shopkeepers and restaurant-owners. In this way, I carried out daily participant observation and conversation, alongside more formal interviews, at a range of sites, eleven of which became significant. The Taohua Street shops I studied were small and often transient – few had existed in their current sites for more than a couple of years. Most shops were run by couples, occasionally alongside other family members like siblings or parents, with a few run by solo entrepreneurs. Most, like the Yu sisters, came from the nearby countryside and had previously worked in agriculture; a smaller minority were interprovincial migrants, and only one had grown up in the city itself. Regardless of their origins, most participants had experienced a high level of variability in their careers. Few had worked consistently as small entrepreneurs, with most having either spent time in factories, on farms, in offices or some combination of the three as they navigated a turbulent economy.

The analysis to follow is based on a case study of the Yu sisters. I chose to focus on the Yu sisters because their narrative exemplifies a kind of story I heard many times on Taohua Street. My claim in this article is not that the Yu sisters' experiences are representative of Chinese workers of their class, or even of the traders of Taohua Street specifically. Rather, this case study allows me to make an ontological claim about the production of the aspirations that motivate labour. This claim is based on the logic of the case itself, rather than its statistical significance (Small, 2009). As Mitchell (1983) argues, in making inference from case studies, 'the extrapolation is in fact based on the validity of the analysis rather than the representativeness of the events' (190), and this kind of logical inference proceeds independently statistical significance.

However, the use of masking techniques necessitated by the political context of the fieldwork complicates this argument, removing a degree of context that would allow readers to properly assess the specificities of the case study and the resulting limits to its generalizability (Jerolmack & Murphy, 2019). Here I would like to reiterate that the purpose of the case study is not to present a representative case through which the experiences of all Chinese small traders can be grasped. Instead, it is to show how these traders are navigating a common set of problems and circumstances posed by this shared developmental context, which can serve as a starting point for speculation into broader trends. Future researchers might investigate, for example, how working-class people in a range of different contexts conceive of development according to local conditions. They might probe how different kinds of experience affect and are affected by the aspirations that working-class people hold and how these, and the entrepreneurial subjects they are entwined with, change over time. Or, following Yuk Hui (2016), they might question the cultural specificities of technical relations to the material world in and across China (and beyond!), particularly in a context of rapid globalization. There remains a great deal of work to be done to situate neoliberal cultures of labour within the material worlds of development, which can be assisted by the Steglerian analytical tools established in this article.

In the following sections, I first recount the recent history of the expansion of labour in contemporary China. To rebuild the Chinese socio-economic system around market principles, the populace had not only to be rebuilt as desiring and entrepreneurial, but also as aspirational and trusting in a better future which hard work and sacrifice in the present would bring about (Rofel, 2007). However, the amount of hard work and sacrifice demanded, as well as this labour's spoils, are unequally distributed across Chinese society. To understand how aspirational futures still shape economic subjects despite the entrenchment of inequality, I refer to Stiegler's work on class as the uneven distribution of not just the means of production but the means of living itself. Thinking about class in terms of the distribution of *savoir-vivre* expands the affordances of class from the workplace to the broader world in which lives are lived and moulded towards labour. To illustrate this argument, I draw on the experiences of the Yu sisters, showing how their memories of less-developed pasts, as made accessible within the affordances of their environments, contrast with developmental presents to give form to a future-to-come in which present labour pays off. Here, the materiality of Taohua Street and the hometown provide material touchpoints for measuring progress towards a better life. I conclude that understandings of labour subjectification in China and beyond demand attention to changing conceptions of both progress and what a 'good life' entails.

### **Materializing developmental futures**

China's early reform period was marked by a number of iconoclastic events, among the most memorable (if possibly apocryphal) of which was the declaration by reformist leader Deng Xiaoping in 1984 that 'poverty is not socialism' (China Daily, 2020). Socialism requires work, but it does not require poverty. The task of the reformist state, then, would be to pursue wealth for its citizens as a goal of socialism, with their



cooperation as labourers building this wealth. The imaginary of a future in which wealth and equity were not complementary or subtractive but could coexist remains compelling. However, inequity would be an inevitable consequence of market reform until, someday, the contradictions of capitalist economics would give way to the next stage of development.

Deng's trade-off was that the rewards of labour would be felt most profoundly in the future rather than the immediate present. This is a deferment not just in the sense that work provides products and wages to be consumed and enjoyed after it is completed, but also because work enables the flourishing of life. In a developmental sense, hard work in the present is justified by a long-term focus that may not be realized as immediately improved conditions. This spectre of delayed gratification is the reality that the hundreds of millions of Chinese factory workers have had to accept and which they generally have accepted for the past four decades.<sup>7</sup> But off the factory floor, it is also the condition that the self-employed are expected to impose on themselves in pursuit of a vision of the future.

The drudgery and difficulty of labour as an expression of a hopeful future rather than to enact a liveable present is compounded both by capital's expansive and expanding demands and the lack of immediate payoffs it brings. On Taohua Street, self-employed traders rise early in the morning and go to sleep late in the night. In between, they endure hours of boredom and tedious jobs that often bring little joy, but they perceive few alternatives. Their jobs, which are so time-extensive that they are nearly coterminous with their lives, feel permanent because social mobility has stalled, but temporary because the future is uncertain. Thus, there is little other choice than to work hard in the here and now. Unlike in the factory or on the construction site, when you are your own boss, you have only yourself to identify as the hand that cracks the whip. But things were not always this way. What expectations motivate these workers to leave their agricultural pasts and pursue such difficult yet apparently self-driven careers?

## Taohua Sushi

Nearly every shop on Taohua Street was run by people who have done just this – they left their farming villages to work for themselves in China's rapidly expanding cities. Most, including the Yus, had storied careers including factory and self-employment alongside the other odd bits of work people take to adapt to the booms and busts of the local economy. Although the traders of Taohua Street often referred to the freedom that self-employment allows, this freedom demanded long hours and often poor working conditions. But expectations of a better future to come, reinforced constantly by the proof of development materialized all around, kept people motivated to persist through difficult presents.<sup>8</sup>

When I met Mrs Yu, she was in her early thirties, and had recently opened a sushi restaurant on the far end of Taohua Street with her elder sister.<sup>9</sup> The restaurant felt upscale compared to its neighbours, though without feeling truly permanent. The walls were covered in wainscoting, stained a light maple. The two tables were small but still took up too much of the limited floorspace. Most of Ms Yu's business was delivery. Customers ordered food online, which would be collected by a member of



**Figure 1.** Inside the Yu sisters' restaurant (photo by author).

the army of moped couriers who combed the city in their helmets and yellow and black uniforms, like a swarm of bees descending before mealtimes and dispersing soon after (see [Figure 1](#)).

The shop was at the far end of Taohua Street, close to the junction with a busy, shop-lined thoroughfare. This end of the street was residential, but its proximity to a major road and its commercial offerings brought clients with deeper pockets. Locals old enough to remember told me that, as recently as the late 1990s, this was the end of town, after which began a barren expanse that was too rocky even to farm. By the time I visited, the area hosted a small shopping mall, old enough according to the frenetic pace of Chinese economic reform to have already passed through the stages of life and death, transitioning from roaring success to bankruptcy. The only activity left on its corner was focused on the supermarket occupying the basement.

A year earlier, before its death, the mall was the draw for the Yu sisters to open their shop on Taohua Street. The sisters' original vision was very ambitious. They were going to have a shop in the new development area to the south as well, and gradually open more locations in neighbouring towns. But the economy took a downward turn, with the result that the sisters became less and less sure whether Taohua Sushi had a sustainable future. The queues of the previous summer had waned, so much so that I could usually get a seat when I would stop in, despite the dearth of space. Although the Yu sisters had big plans, the downturn put a damper on this dream, and the sisters began considering other options.

But things could be worse, Ms Yu told me as I got out my recorder. Life has gotten better. The Yus were obviously not living to the standard of Lainan's high-rolling business-people. But they weren't the most abject by any means either. They no longer had to work for a boss (上班), and their incomes were a bit higher than those of their friends and families back in the factories, although the sisters were not rolling in money either.

— It seems like living conditions are pretty [or relatively] good (比较好), right? <sup>10</sup>

**Mrs Yu:** You mean here, now? They're good I guess, but I wouldn't say they're 'relatively good' (还算好, 谈不上'比较好')!

— Why isn't it right to say that they're 'relatively good'?

**Mrs Yu:** Because in Lainan there are lots of people whose work environments are better than mine. So you can't say that mine is 'relatively good'.

But, Mrs Yu was quick to emphasize, quality of life in Lainan really has improved, and it has improved quickly. In 2018, when these conversations took place, Mrs Yu was 30 years old and her daughter only four. The life her small daughter was leading, however, was already a world away from the world of her own childhood just three decades ago:

**Mrs Yu:** There used to be just one bus a day from our village. Now, the streets are full of buses. Back then, my mother couldn't bear to part with even a single yuan to give us. Now if we give our kids one yuan, they'll say, what can I even buy with this?

And so, despite its uncertain future, Mrs Yu continued to dedicate herself to her shop, putting in long hours nearly every day with the expectation that the streets would only become more open to the world and that her daughter would live a life of material comfort that she never had. Life had improved in many ways, and although *the good life* might still appear illusory, it was very possible to imagine its arrival in the future on the basis of hard work in the present.

## New proletarians

The expansion of labour to dominate more and more of what constitutes *a life* is a form of class differentiation. It is central to the ambiguities behind the divergence of Maoist *class* (阶级) and technocratic post-reform *stratum* (阶层) discourses (see Anagnost, 2008, Guo, 2012). These ambiguities revolve around slippages in definitions of class as relations of production and exploitation on one hand and definitions focused on the question of who gets to live what kind of life on the other. Stiegler (2010) refuses a dichotomy between these by positing the removal of the ability to live *a good life* as the grounds for proletarianization. He proposes a model of life itself that, like the means of production, is exteriorized into objects, such as writing or computers, which then must be engaged with to conduct fundamental tasks like memory that would previously have occurred autonomously within the human organism. The risk of this exteriorization is that the loss of human autonomy to technical objects might prevent independent flourishing and demand relations of dependency that can be deleterious to the subject.

The expansion of external, material dependency from the realm of production (to produce the means of living) to consumption (to consume the means of living well) defines contemporary proletarianization for Stiegler. In both production and consumption, human capacities – to survive and to live well – are exteriorized within technical objects. The Marxian account of production shows how technical innovation binds workers to the owners of tools, which also progressively reduces worker autonomy by capturing the gestures of production – knowledge (*savoir*) – within increasingly sophisticated machinery. Stiegler sees the same dynamic in consumption, as the objects of consumption increasingly prevent meaningful living that does not rely on them by exteriorizing the knowledge of how to live well. And, like the machines on the work floor, these

consumptive objects are also not fully within the control of the consumer, nor can they be produced independently, locking consumers into exploitative relations of consumption (Stiegler, 2009, 2010).

Crucially, there is no *faire* or *vivre* outside of human-technical relations. Technical objects relate to humans in a prosthetic capacity. Humans have always used tools to increase ability and efficiency and to overcome limitations of the body while decreasing demands on it. As a result, technical objects are fundamental to the individuation of the human (Stiegler, 2013, pp. 14, 20–21). The trade-off made for increased ability and efficiency is dependence: we become dependent on these technical objects to fulfil the same needs that would have been accomplished with our unaided bodies in the past, and in the process these objects become a part of us, and vice versa. This relationship of mutual dependence differs by degree but is ultimately inalienable: the human is inseparable from technical prostheses. The ambivalence of this trade-off is part and parcel of our relationship with technics: Stiegler describes them as *pharmacological*, as both the poison and the cure (Stiegler, 2009, 2010). If the human is constituted through relations with technics (in contrast to the Heideggerian view of the technical as external augment, enhancer of, competitor to, or even eraser of the human), it is not just the removal of the ability to produce and the consequent capture of labour by the (capitalist) owner of technical objects that creates the conditions for exploitation. Rather, it is the ability to live well in both productive and consumptive senses that is alienated into technical objects, producing subjects who lack autonomous knowledge and ability to create and live and exposing them to the deracinating effects of rapid technological change. This process of alienation Stiegler theorizes as *grammatization*, or the ‘discretization of gestures’ (Stiegler, 2010, p. 33), as living becomes based on productive and consumptive systems that the individual does not control.

### **Class and the good life**

The hours Taohua Street’s traders spend on their smartphones, for example, represent an obvious salve to long, boring days at work. Phones enable labour both directly, facilitating electronic payments and purchases of supplies, and indirectly, as they make an unbearable job less unbearable. But in this article, I want to move beyond high technology as the analytical object of human-technical relations. Rather than focusing on technical objects and consumption, as geographers using Stiegler’s theorization of grammatization tend to do (cf. Ash, 2012; Kinsley, 2014; Wilson, 2014), here I want to focus on grammatization as the material enactment of a commercial society imbued with particular expectations and desires on top of what had been a socialist social structure, so often depicted as the advent of freedom over a background of constraint (see Rofel, 2007).

Stiegler’s working class looks rather different to the one Marx described a century and a half ago.<sup>11</sup> We are all ever more dependent on systems that we do not control in a way that was less true in past eras when more autonomous ways of living might have still been possible. How has a rapidly shifting economic system transformed what it means to have ‘a life’ and as a result created new dependencies and desires that open working people to exploitation? Rethinking exploitation along these lines is particularly important for understanding the realities of small traders, for whom there is no capitalist boss to blame. The

separation of small traders, as members of the petty bourgeoisie, from the working class in Maoism is premised on this difference, which is also understood to have real effects on the political orientations that these groups are prone to adopt (see Eddy, 2014). Understanding class in terms of the alienation of not just *savoir-faire* but also *savoir-vivre* thus demands attention to what the purpose of class analysis is and what kind of politics it engenders. My focus here is not on *how* technical objects exteriorize memory through what Stiegler refers to as the ‘tertiary retention’. It is on *what is exteriorized*: namely, the possibilities of collective individuation it entails, which enable the expansion of capitalism into pre-capitalist and non-capitalist structures like the individual business trade, the family business, friendships and neighbourhood solidarities.

What constitutes a ‘good life’ does not exist ideationally or *a priori* but is based on assemblages of material affordance that continually circulate and renew within what becomes abstracted as culture. But what does it mean to speak of culture in this way as impacting something as fundamental as what can be expected in an entire life? It is too easy to portray desire for a better life as if it could simply be modulated through the circulation of ideas or of models of how a life can be lived and towards what ends. Rather than delving into psychoanalytic explanations of the desiring self, the analysis here takes an alternate route that is not dependent on a psychic interiority that is impacted upon by external stimuli. Following Stiegler’s explanation of collective individuations avoids demanding a pre-formed psychic individual who would live in a relatively stable world (Keating, 2019), a world that would be highly alien to the vast majority of people living in contemporary China. A focus on the technical affordances of life emphasizes the ceaseless evolution of the environment in which people have been made to desire and understand their own lives differently. But rather than viewing the technical world solely through the lens of affordance, which implies an optionality of engagement, a view of technical change in Stiegler’s terms, in which the human is indivisible from the technical, can help explain how individuations like the production of class occur collectively. Instead, knowledges of wealth and lack, made knowable by engagement in and comparison with one’s environment, affect how people evaluate their own economic standings and the quality of their own lives. As the goalposts of what a good life is shift, so does the economic basis through which this good life would be achieved. The pursuit of a good life is enabled and limited by possibilities that do or do not exist in the coming future and the ways that the economy as it exists today provides for those who participate in it.

## Development as pharmakon

The constant flux of reality in a context of rapid development keeps the goalposts of a good life constantly in the distance. The difficulty of achieving a good life is compounded by the ambivalence of development, which has brought not just benefits but also its own pressures. Housing prices, for instance, have gone up over ten times in a decade. But there are many new conveniences too. Just look at the streets, full of cars. This ability to go places and have new experiences would have been unthinkable during the Yu sisters’ childhoods:

— Did you feel like there were things you were lacking back then?

**Mrs Yu:** We knew what it was that we were missing, but we didn't have much exposure to these things. They weren't there at school. After school, we'd come home and help our parents with the chores. They didn't have spare money for us to try new things.

There are so many things that are different now. I already said about money [...] In those days, whatever mother cooked, we ate. But now, whatever our kids want, we cook! [...]

Up here in Shandong we generally eat mantou (馒头 steamed bread), and rice only rarely. In the winters, we would eat cabbage. During the winter, pretty much every meal was mantou and cabbage. It isn't like this anymore. Back then, there weren't any other vegetables for us to buy, but now the streets are filled with vegetables. So, whatever you want to eat, you can cook. Living conditions today really are so different.

— Did you find it hard eating so much cabbage back then?

**Mrs Yu:** No. Back then we were happy eating our cabbage! Really!

— Why was it happy?

**Mrs Yu:** Because back then we were kids, we were happy. We could do what we wanted. We could go to the seaside to play. And when we got older we would help out our parents, we'd cut the grass, and we'd get a taste of life (去体验一些生活). But now, kids' lives are little more than going to after-school tutoring and studying. Back then, it wasn't like that for us. We didn't have tutoring. We just had chores, or we'd make plans with our friends to go to the seaside and dig up clams or catch crabs and go fishing.

What child today would have the time? They're all so busy with tutoring so they can get into a good university. Back then, our parents didn't have much of a concept of education. That's to say, if you got in you got in, but if you didn't, no one would force you to keep trying. There wasn't any tutoring back then. That's how it was. So back then, they didn't value education that much. But it's not like that anymore. All parents think education is really important. Our way of thinking has changed.

Development itself is the pharmakon, not *the poison that is also the cure*, but instead, *the cure that is also the poison*. Although there is no space for doubt that life is better, there is, paradoxically, a lot of doubt that it is better than it once was. This doubt is confusing. Now we have so much more. How could we possibly yearn for the privation of the past? But on the other hand, this past is very present:

— Are you nostalgic at all?

**Mrs Yu:** Yeah, of course. There are some things you can't get or do anymore. For example, getting three of your friends together to go to the seaside and catch crabs – there aren't any crabs to catch anymore!

— Because of pollution or because too many people have bought them? [...]

**Mrs Yu:** I'm not sure. But either way, there's less and less seafood now. Back then, I remember my parents going out to sea to fish, and there was so much to catch! But nowadays there's much less. You find almost nothing.

— It seems like you're saying that there are both good and bad aspects to these changes.

**Mrs Yu:** There's good and there's bad, yes. Some stuff is better, like our children's education. Our way of thinking really was very conservative back then. But now, we've received all these influences from elsewhere, and our way of thinking has become much more open (开阔). So,

there's good and there's bad with this stuff. All I can say is that, as the country develops, you also have to improve yourself (自我提升).

This troubled relationship between the past and the future echoes the *Ostalgie*, or nostalgia for the Communist period, of the former residents of East Germany (Boyer, 2006). The parallels are palpable: life during that simpler time may have been hard, but it was predictable and lacked many of the stresses that accompany the apparent freedom of the capitalist present. There is undeniably selective memory and the past is apt to be viewed through rose-coloured glasses, but there is more to it than that. The material settings and relationalities of life itself have changed during the processes of development. Village housing has given way to urban high rises. Farms have given way to factories. The promise of the teaming sea has given way to the promise of the obedient and studious child. At the same time, the standards by which quality of life – the *vivre* of *savoir-vivre* – are to be judged have shifted so quickly that past versions, now highly divergent, are still remembered relatively well. After all, it isn't the Yus who have moved, but the material world they inhabit that is in a lengthy but extreme process of reformation, materializing memory in the changing affordances of their communities.

This is the memory that greases the wheels of the economic system that the labour of people like the Yus supports.<sup>12</sup> It is no longer the case that, as people on Taohua Street were apt to repeat, 'back then we were poor, but we were *all* poor', because we are no longer *back then*. People like the Yu sisters now know better what life could be like and can see a better future on the horizon, distant though it may be. Not only do they possess this developmental knowledge, but they know what they need to do to prevent themselves from falling behind: 'as the country develops, you also have to improve yourself'. For the Yus and countless others, developmental knowledges honed within interactions in their changing material environments are therefore key to their subjectification as aspiring labourers working to build China's developmental future. That is to say, it is this exteriorized memory that has made the expansion of labour that powers Chinese capitalism possible.

## Conclusion: changing standards

The impetus for this article is a recent blooming of research by geographers into the affective investments that characterize labour relationships (Bissell, 2021, 2022; Cockayne, 2016; Marotta, 2020; Straughan et al., 2020). This growing interest in 'cultures of labour' reflects increasing recognition that labour formations and politics are much more complex than trade unionism in industrial settings. This is not just because there are many more kinds of workplace than the factory or construction site or because there are many more kinds of worker agency than formal labour politics. It is also because workers' lives are larger than their labour. As Tithi Bhattacharya argues, 'people do not go to work in order to have money. People go to work in order to live [...] it is not the wage that concerns the worker. It is what the wage can achieve, which is life' (in Varela, 2019, pp. 403–404). This article contends that what this *life* looks like is of primary importance to understanding labour. To understand how and why people pursue certain lives through their work

(why, for example, they might aspire to be their own ‘bad bosses’), the article has drawn on the writings of Bernard Stiegler (1998, 2009, 2010, 2013) to show how the ‘means of living’ (*savoir-vivre*) is alienated into the worlds workers inhabit as the materialization of developmental memory. This memory, in turn, precipitates the aspirations and attachments that motivate labour. The exteriorization of memory upholds the edifice of the better future lurking on the horizon, achievable through hard work, but ever mirage-like, always demanding more sacrifice. It allows for knowledge of progress and for this knowledge to motivate aspirational sacrifice in the present. And so, amid the whirlwind of rapid development, workers continue in their sacrifice to build a future that feels tangible in the present.

The context of this article – the rapid development of the Chinese economy – reveals the importance of questioning static conceptions of what a good life is. But metrics like relative deprivation and the Gini coefficient only tell a very rough story, because the temporal aspect of comparison and the dynamic ways that subjects of development regard themselves become hidden behind static figures. In a world that demands continual acculturation to rapid changes in lifestyle and environment, people like those on Taohua Street must continuously evaluate themselves and their environments based not only on their knowledge and imaginaries of the wider world but also based on the affordances of memory and projection into the future. They remember pasts of simpler, more difficult and crueller lives with a mixture of nostalgia for this simplicity and the relative equality of lack that coincided with it, but their memories are tinged with relief that these subjects now live in a more comfortable present in which society is going somewhere and past wrongs seem on track to be righted.<sup>13</sup>

In developing these attachments, the material reality of the worlds these economic subjects inhabit, in a constant developmental flux, becomes a memory aid. As Chio and Neves (2023) argue, in such a developmental context, ‘memory itself is a device of the future: looking backwards to remember how the future used to be imagined and forwards to imagine what the future might want to remember’ (194). There is a politics to this: traces of the past and of an arriving future in the landscape provide the contrast to create the sense of relative inequality. This inequality is not just important to the production of senses of wellbeing and personal success or failure compared to others in the present, which creates disquiet for those on the losing end. It also extends over time, prompting comparison with one’s own circumstances over the course of a developmental history that shapes one’s own trajectory. Put simply, these subjects do not just compare their own circumstances with other people they know, but also with past and future versions of themselves. The pressures of the present – overwork, bills, the prospects of the younger generation, and nostalgia for a simpler past – are balanced by proof of improving conditions, with examples being borne out in every neighbourhood, producing optimistic expectations for the future.

The rapid expansion of consumption-focused economics has transformed class relations by moving the emphasis from ownership of the means of production to the means of living itself (Stiegler, 2010). This is not simply a biopolitical question about the reproduction of bodies for the needs of the state and the economy or the kinds of bodies that are allowed or made to live or die. Rather, it is a question of



what kinds of relations lives are made to live within to serve these complexifying needs. The role of high technology in contemporary Chinese biopolitics is a major topic of interest at present (cf. Hansen & Weiskopf, 2019; Roberts, 2018). ‘Smart’ and surveillance technologies extend and contract the body through complex technical systems that do change the extent and meaning of the human and the possibilities of life within them, as do the various technologies now being grouped under the rubric of ‘social credit’ (Zhang, 2020). But the biopolitics of producing an entrepreneurial population to feed the market economy out of socialism is much more profound than this. This article asks: what does it mean to think of *technical objects*, the material entanglements of life, not just as enabling constraint but also as fundamental to the constitution of entire populations of aspirational workers, both in and beyond China? Stiegler’s conceptualization of technics invites us to rethink this intersection of the material and the human as constitutive of that most basic capability that determines how life is lived: memory.

## Notes

1. While precarity has become a flashpoint in the Global North, particularly in response to Standing’s (2014a, 2014b) work on the rise of the ‘precariat’, there is increasing recognition that precarious and informal modes of labour have long histories in much of the Global South (Munck, 2013) and, indeed, in the metropole as well (Strauss, 2018; Waite, 2009).
2. Since the late 1970s, China has been embarking on an extensive set of reforms to what was previously a Maoist planned economy to a mixed market economy. The reform process has resulted in the dramatic shrinkage of the state sector and mass migration to cities. Economic opening can be seen to have started with ex-farmers, some of whom were China’s first post-Mao entrepreneurs, working semi-legally as street vendors in cities still dominated by state employment (Solinger, 2013).
3. This phenomenon – both the propensity of Chinese workers to defer the rewards of their labour and the economic reality that results in workers getting ‘stuck’ so that the rewards of their labour must be deferred – has been widely commented on by scholars of labour and class in contemporary China. See, for example, Xiang (2021) on ‘suspension’ (悬浮) and Zhan (2015, 2023, p. 433) on ‘strategic postponement’.
4. The account of developmental memory I develop in this article parallels state discourses about development that make reference to past achievements to justify developmental action in the present – what Shin et al. (2020, p. 249), following Simone and Pieterse (2018), refer to as ‘eventuality’. A difference here is that the processes of memory described in this paper appears to operate at a grassroots level at a remove from the state or top-down economic governance, in what Li Zhang (2024) refers to as ‘bottom-up’ dreams of the good life (212). As Shin et al. (2020) argue, for the Chinese developmental state, ‘the politics of futurity is rendered one-dimensional, with the incorporation of everyone’s memories, dreams, desires, times and lives into the state agenda as the kernel – what the party-state would label as the “Chinese Dream”’ (247). It is, in fact, the aim of this mode of governance to swallow the grassroots futures that emerge from ‘developmental remembering’.
5. This account of being one’s own ‘bad boss’ in a traditional business due to the dynamics of the supply chain is more diffuse and variable than similar accounts of self-employment in other industries. Work on ‘sticky labour’ in the platform economy, for instance, shows how nominally ‘flexible’ jobs like food delivery are becoming inflexible, intensive and heavily managed as workers lack independence from the online platforms they are employed with, which have a monopoly on customers and strong incentives to increase productivity (Sun et al., 2021). For truly self-employed small traders, the pressure to overwork comes from one’s

- own aspirations, social norms and the pressures of the market economy, although I would argue that not even personal aspirations are controlled exclusively by individual workers.
6. The fieldwork referenced in this article was conducted as a part of a doctoral programme at the University of Bristol. Fieldwork plans successfully underwent risk and ethics assessments by the University of Bristol School of Geographical Sciences' Research Ethics Committee before departing for fieldwork. I have written about the ethical and positional considerations of this project elsewhere; see Berlin (2019).
  7. While labour disputes or 'mass incidents' are common in China, their goals are limited by strained class consciousness, stunted civil society and authoritarian governance that is extremely sensitive to autonomous political organizing (Chan, 2012, Howell & Pringle, 2019, Xu & Schmalz, 2017). As a result, demands tend to be framed in terms of the protection of existing rights rather than the pursuit of individual or class interests (Franceschini et al., 2016). This does not mean that workers accept the status quo, but it also does not mean that workers have confidently put forward an alternative vision to counter the developmental narrative within which they operate.
  8. This research was conducted before the recent economic downturn following years of rolling COVID-19 lockdowns, shocks in the property market and rising unemployment, which has likely shaken the surety of these expectations.
  9. Mrs Yu's 'sister' is a close cousin but called 'older sister' by the conventions of contemporary Chinese family life in an era of low birth-rates.
  10. The word 比较 (*bijiao*) means 'comparatively' or 'relatively', but it is also used to mean 'pretty' or 'rather'. This second meaning is the one intended in my question, but Mrs Yu understood my question in line with the first.
  11. Stiegler's theorization of class is based explicitly in Marxist thought but diverges dramatically from Marx in deciding who is proletarianized: almost everyone. I diverge from Stiegler's argument in this regard to avoid flattening the differences in quality of life that emerge from the different forms this exteriorization takes among working-class people.
  12. As Zhan (2023) demonstrates, it is not just the memory that ties developmental subjects into these labour formations, but also the narrativization of memory, which is itself a form of 'epistemic labour'.
  13. See Lagerkvist (2010) and Lu (2002) for more on this future-oriented, modern nostalgia in Chinese megacities. Lagerkvist (2010, p. 234) describes the recursive (rather than linear) movement of time in this context as a kind of 'retromodernity'. Lainan has a different, un-'modern' history, and as a result this kind of nostalgic remembering has a different temporal logic to it. But like retromodernity, the nostalgia described in this article lacks the gloom or conservatism often associated with nostalgia (Scanlan, 2004).

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