

# Autonomous choices and patriotic professionalism: on governmentality in late-socialist China

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## Abstract

This paper argues that choice and autonomy constitute important new techniques of governing in late-socialist China. College students no longer receive direct state job assignments upon graduation, going instead to job fairs where they experience a degree of autonomy from state planning organs that was not available under high socialism's central planning. Yet even as post-Mao governmental rationalities have promoted autonomous decisions, young professionals' experiences of choice have remained framed within notions of social responsibility and patriotism. This paper examines how both neoliberal governmentality and a nationalism steeped in Maoist notions of state strength, achieved today through reform-era economic competitiveness, are intertwined in the emergence of what is called 'patriotic professionalism'.

Keywords: neoliberalism; governmentality; China; professionals; choice; subject formation.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

A new modern office building near Liberation Square in Dalian, a major port city in northeast China, houses the city's Talent Service Centre (*rencai fuwu zhongxin*) and Talent Market (*rencai shichang*). The centre, run by the municipal government's Personnel Bureau, offers a number of services to people with post-secondary degrees and marketable skills who are looking for

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new jobs. In addition to hosting regular job fairs and providing a computer database system for employers and employees, the centre helps professionals manage their employment and insurance records outside of their workplace. Such centres opened across the country during the 1980s and early 1990s, with the first established in Shenyang in 1983. Weekly and seasonal (e.g., spring graduation) job fairs held by the centres have grown dramatically in size, although their structure has not changed much over the years.<sup>2</sup> Company representatives station themselves at tables, posting announcements on the wall behind them, advertising the company, open positions, and desired credentials for each job, including degree, years of experience, and sometimes even age, gender, and height. Those looking for work read the posters and approach the tables to ask questions and participate with employers in the now commonplace practice of ‘face-to-face interviewing’.

The opening of talent exchange centres and the establishment of job fairs in China are significant phenomena. Under the planned economic system of high, or traditional, socialism<sup>3</sup>, there were no labour markets. College graduates received job assignments in line with five-year plans and then moved to where they were needed for national development.<sup>4</sup> Since these work unit positions traditionally were for a lifetime, the assignments came with the guarantee of steady salaries and the benefits of the socialist welfare package, known as the ‘iron rice bowl’ (housing, medical care, retirement, ration coupons, etc.). Getting into college and graduating into a work unit assignment denoted a guarantee of lifelong employment and stability.

This situation began to change in the early 1980s when the Education Commission initiated a series of reforms in the assignment system, followed by changes in university enrolment policies and the curriculum (Hoffman 2000, 2001). Reforms were linked to new logics of supply and demand and market competition, and to central-level pronouncements that educated personnel were critical to reform-era modernization and national development. Economists and foreign investors accused state units of monopolizing educated workers and blamed the units for ‘wasting’ talent through over-staffing, the poor utilization of their skills, and labour hoarding. The failure of the system to let talent ‘flow’ to where it was most needed and into positions where the workers would be ‘satisfied’ were newly identified as serious problems. Supporting this assessment, Deng Xiaoping (in Chao 1994: 305) argued that if talented personnel did not ‘flow’ then their ideas would become rigid and inflexible (*rencai bu liudong, sixiang jiu hui jianghua*). Job fairs, face-to-face interviews, and career counselling – new technologies of labour distribution – have taken the place of direct assignments and local implementation of state plans. Universities have had to learn what it means to ‘guide’ graduates into appropriate positions and how to help both students and work units become familiar with the new world of ‘demand-meet-supply’ exchanges and ‘mutual choice’. Graduates and working professionals now write resumes and ask questions about a potential employer’s business plan. And in the new marketplace, state owned work units as well as private enterprises present

themselves to applicants as valuing talent, using talent efficiently, and not wasting the skills and knowledge of their human resources. By the mid-1990s, rather than expecting a job assignment, college graduates across the country had come to expect an entry-level position in either the state or non-state sector, to make their own career decisions, and to manage their own professional development. 'Employees', who now also could be unemployed, have emerged in place of 'assignees' (people who had had no choice but to accept their new assignment).

In other words, various actors have problematized the command economy and new questions have been raised about 'what should be ruled, by whom and through what procedures' (Rose 1993: 285). Based on reform era reassessments of the planned economy and job assignments as containing inefficiencies and contradictions, it became *reasonable and practicable* in the post-Mao era to think that market exchanges would 'rationalize' the distribution and flow of educated labour power. In numerous interviews people suggested that the market mechanism – and not the planned economy's job assignment system – is the best way to distribute these talented workers. Particularly after 'the conceptual framework of "the market" as a mechanism of government was . . . officially acknowledged [at] the Fourteenth Party Congress of 1992' (Sigley 2004: 568), market mechanisms have become a kind of 'test' (Foucault 1997: 76; Hindess 2004: 26) or 'regulative ideal' (Collier 2005: 23) of good or efficient government in China.

This article analyses this problematization and the new technologies devised to foster the development of 'human capital' and to regulate the distribution of educated workers (e.g., choice), focusing in particular on the subject of government specified by these forms of governing. It argues not only that 'neoliberal' techniques of governing (e.g., marketization of labour, calculative choice, and fostering of a self-enterprising ethos) have emerged in place of state planning, but also that these neoliberal techniques are linking up with Maoist era norms and values of serving the country. This phenomenon is apparent in the formation of the new professional, a self-enterprising subject who also is decidedly concerned with, and has an affinity for, the nation – what I call *patriotic professionalism*.<sup>5</sup> Professional subjecthood, in other words, exhibits neoliberal elements, Maoist era ideals and expressions of patriotism, and periodic authoritarian measures – a configuration and social formation that is not accounted for in many definitions of neoliberalism. Such definitions presume an opposition and perhaps incompatibility between neoliberal projects of 'individual' improvement and self-enterprise, and notions of 'social' progress, solidarities, and values (e.g., Brin-Hyatt 1997; also Rose 1996a,b). Thus, the emergence of patriotic professionalism draws our attention to the diverse and contingent nature of 'neoliberal' governmentality, pushing us to reflect not only on emerging forms of governing and professional subjecthood in late socialist China, but also on what we mean by neoliberalism itself (Hoffman, DeHart, and Collier 2006).

## Choice as a form of governing

An important component of the Deng Xiaoping inspired change has been an official shift from a reliance on politically 'red' cadres to a preference for those with expertise and talent, recasting the role of educated and talented personnel in China (Lee 1991a,b; Whyte 1993). Talent, human resources, and human capital have been touted in official and popular discourses as important sources of national strength in the new century. In the stairwell of the building housing Dalian's Talent Service Centre is a large billboard that reads 'distribute human resources perfectly; build the talented highland of the north'. Such statements link the nation's prosperity and progress with the development of talent. Company directors, human resource officers, and municipal planners all said in interviews that they needed 'talented workers' for their various projects to succeed; as a young man from a state-owned securities enterprise explained: 'We need talented people for development. It doesn't matter what kind of enterprise it is. Everyone needs them. Talented people solve difficult problems. You can train them and they help guarantee an enterprise's future development'.

Talented employees and professional and credentialized staff thus have become important actors in – and sites of – national development. Post-Mao questions of governing have remained concerned with the 'overall strength of the nation' drawing sometimes on authoritarian measures, but also turning to 'the attributes and capacities of individual citizen-subjects' (Sigley 2004: 565). The phasing out of the assignment guarantee and the phasing in of autonomous decision-making and resume writing are important devices in the fostering of those attributes and capacities.

Many analyses of reforms in socialist planning represent choice and autonomy as freedom from the state and thus the opportunity for people to be who they 'really' are.<sup>6</sup> This study is drawn from one particular arena where narratives of freedom are especially strong and to which people often point as proof of the retreat of the state and the decline of governance in everyday affairs in China – the growth of labour markets and employment options. This perspective assumes, however, that personhood exists prior to force relations, and hence that 'freedom' from state intervention means true agency may be restored. Rather than measuring the degree to which people 'really' are or are not free in the reform era, here I ask how choice and autonomy are *a part of* the governing and subject formation processes. Freedom then is not indicative of the absence of power or governance, but is a technique of governing where the regulation and management of subjects happens 'through freedom'.<sup>7</sup> This analytical orientation shifts questions of autonomy away from state-society power struggles and towards an examination of job choice as a mechanism of governing and subjectification.

As such, job choice in contemporary China resonates in interesting ways with technologies of rule in advanced liberal regimes like the US. Advanced liberal rule governs 'at a distance' (Rose 1996a: 61) 'through the regulated

choices of individual citizens' (Rose 1993: 285), and specifies subjects of 'responsibility, autonomy and choice' (Rose 1996a: 53). New practices of choice, in a variety of fields in late- and post-socialist societies (e.g., consumerism, housing and jobs) work through the 'autonomization' of social actors, establishing new norms of behaviour and relations to the self. Employment markets for college graduates, for instance, pivot on a re-specification of social actors as autonomous in ways not possible under the centrally planned system of direct state job assignments. The post-Mao professional is no longer the expectant recipient of state socialist welfare, but focuses on self-development through career planning and is assumed to be responsible for his or her own choices, what David Bray (2005: 179) describes as the transition from the 'traditional employment mentality' to the initiative to 'create your own rice bowl'. Encouraging college graduates to view employment (i.e., their labour power) as a means to develop themselves individually serves as a more effective form of motivation for 'reform era' economic growth than the job assignment system ever could. Traditional socialist governing through structured dependency seems to have given way to rule through new degrees of autonomy from planning organs, and through choices handled responsibly, resonating with descriptions of advanced liberal regimes. Yet there are important differences in neoliberal governmental forms in socialist China and advanced liberal rule in the US, particularly in the way patriotism, which draws on Maoist notions of loyalty and a strong nation on the world stage, is infused into practices of choice and an ethos of self-enterprise. Thus, before turning to an analysis of professional subjectivity in contemporary China, some clarifications are necessary.

### **Neoliberalism and socialism in China**

While I do find compelling similarities between advanced liberal regimes and late-socialist China, it is essential to recognize that China is not the same as the US or Britain. The extensive privatization and marketization of everything from health care to insurance in advanced liberal regimes highlight the particularly *de-statized* aspect of these domains and the kinds of decisions that are made. Provisions of goods and services and decisions about them have been pushed outside the bounds of the formal government bureaucracy, referred to as the quangoization of the state (Rose 1996a: 56). In China, however, the late-socialist state, along with other actors, continues to condition the meaning of post-Mao autonomy through regulation of the domains in which and the ways that choices are made. This conditioning is apparent in the consistent use of moral education to get graduates into certain positions, specific rules about where graduates may settle their household registration, university interventions into what is called an 'unbalanced' marketplace, and the use of fines and scholarship points to encourage socially responsible, but autonomously made decisions.

The idea that the state remains an active participant in neoliberal governance is not a contradictory argument. In contrast to the ‘naturally’ existing spheres of economy and society in early, classic liberalism, in neoliberalism, and in what is called advanced liberalism, the market is not so much a natural sphere as it is an ‘institutional’ arena that needs to be maintained by government policies (Burchell 1996: 21–24; Lemke 2001: 195). The *Ordo*-liberal argument from post-World War I Germany, as well as Chicago School neo-liberalism in the US, acknowledge the role of the state in generating liberty and free competition. As Thomas Lemke (2001: 193) explains: ‘Unlike [the] negative conception of the state typical of liberal theory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the *Ordo*-liberal view, the market mechanism and the impact of competition can arise *only if they are produced by the practice of government*’ [emphasis added]. Thus, to argue that the state continues to condition the very choices professionals make – through specific restrictions in the job search process as well as through moral education that promotes national strength – does not contradict China’s implementation of neoliberal practices. The idea that markets are institutional and historical entities is built into the neo-liberalism of post-WWI Germany as well as the advanced liberalism of the contemporary US, and the late-socialist neoliberalism of China.<sup>8</sup>

My comparison of disparate regimes therefore aims to highlight parallels between welfare-to-work programs in the US and job fairs in urban China, but also to note variation, allowing us ‘to think about different versions of neoliberalism’ (Larner 2003: 510) – ones that govern through freedom and prioritize the market mechanism, but adopt other measures as well. The taking up of neoliberal practices in China references the Western liberal tradition in important ways, but it does not mean certain forms of personhood, for instance, will necessarily emerge. Patriotic professionalism is such an instance of the integration of neoliberal practices with other, even authoritarian social norms. Moreover, as Sigley (2004: 563) reminds us with his provocative term ‘liberal despotism’, ‘authoritarian and illiberal measures are constitutive of the way in which a liberal arts of government operates’, depending on the segment of the population being targeted.

Foucault (1977: 73–4) explained that he indeed ‘tried to analyse “liberalism” not as a theory or an ideology – and even less, certainly, as a way for “society” to “represent itself . . .” – but, rather, *as a practice*, which is to say, as a “way of doing things” oriented toward objectives and regulating itself by means of a sustained reflection’ [emphasis added]. Thus it is not necessarily a particular ideological or social formation that links these diverse sites of neoliberal governmentality, but rather ‘a way of doing things’ or ‘a common set of technical mechanisms’ (Collier 2005: 11; see also Larner 2003). This ‘technical approach’ to the study of neoliberalism allows us to investigate what is generalizable across sites without being forced to identify a particular form of subjectivity, for instance, as emblematic of neoliberalism. It is helpful to think of neoliberalism then as a ‘global form’, where global refers not to an

all-encompassing universal, but rather to ‘a distinctive capacity for decontextualization and recontextualization, abstractability and movement, across diverse social and cultural situations and spheres of life’ (Collier and Ong 2005: 11, also Ong 2006), opening the conceptual space to recognize the wedding of neoliberal techniques with a reform era patriotism that links self-development with state-strengthening.

### **Late-socialist practices of choice and specification of new subjects of government**

In this section I explore the intersections between practices of choice, notions of self-enterprise, and the emergence of professional subjectivity in contemporary China (see also Hoffman 2003, 2006; Hanser 2002b). At the same time that rationalities about good government and modes of national development changed in post-Mao times, mechanisms for regulating and governing the citizenry also shifted, resulting in the emergence of new forms of personhood, or subjects of government. Through the following examples, I illustrate how post-Mao practices of choice and ideas about career success help establish new norms of respectability and professional subjecthood. Employers, for instance, often told me that the recent college graduates were a distinct cohort with notions of self-development and enterprise incorporated into their working lives. Referring to such workers, the personnel manager at a large Sino-US joint venture said: ‘These young people are not the same as the white collar workers in state units, in terms of their lifestyle, their behaviour and their thinking. They are younger and better educated. They will develop and we don’t want them to leave our company.’ A well-dressed man in his thirties who owned his own company reinforced this idea in another interview when he said: ‘Young people today are not the same as before. Before no one asked questions about the company’s situation. Now, however, they are interested in their individual benefits and their development opportunities. Some do just ask about money, but others want to know if they can develop here’.

Young professionals also have adopted reform era rationalities, which drew on norms and values beyond the Party-state, ‘rendering reality thinkable and practicable’ (Rose 1996a: 42) in terms of market competition, individual achievement, and self-managed development. Thus, their talk of finding positions that match their majors (*duikou*), where they may get good experience (*duanlian ziji*), and where their abilities may flourish (*fuhui nengli*) is more than just descriptive of their dreams, for these narratives of the self exhibit a ‘style of reasoning’ (Rose 1996a: 42) about the self and about governmental interventions. They also denote a shift in focus from ‘the job unit and its location in the bureaucratic hierarchy’ to the *individual position* and potential for career development, what Hanser (2002a: 152) calls ‘job specificity’ (see also Bray 2005: 94–122). In a questionnaire I conducted with International Finance Majors at Northeast Economic and Finance

University, a majority of respondents used strikingly similar language about finding work where they could 'use their studies' and develop themselves while working. One young woman wrote that: 'This kind of job [in international finance] is very popular right now and the field has the potential to develop.' She also commented that she liked the system of mutual choice because it gives her room to make her own choices and when the hiring unit is choosing her, she also could choose them. Jobseekers speak, in other words, as talented employees or human capital – and not assignees – who want personal and professional development in work.

Liao Meili, a young Dalian University of Technology (DUT) graduate, for instance, who found a position with a tourist agency in Beijing, explained her plan for career development:

I have this plan – to go into a stable corporation, get experience, and then go to a joint venture or a foreign company . . . because there the competition is more severe and I will be able to develop myself more . . . I want to devote myself to [the new job] and see what I can do for it. Sometimes people complain the [state] units are too old and the habits can't change, but this is a new unit [where she will work]. I think I will stay longer than five years. I want to develop in the same corporation and do it from the grassroots. It is better for personal development. Now I have this plan, but I don't know about the future.

A schoolmate of hers, Zhang Long, said he wanted: first, to use his major; second, a good salary; third, to find a place where his potential for development would be good; and fourth, he hoped to be able to stay in Dalian city. 'I don't care if the work is stable', Zhang said. 'I want to use all of my abilities and have a good salary, well at least a reasonable salary. If that means I have to change jobs a lot, I don't care.' Listing priorities for a new job as Zhang did and constructing career plans as Liao did are new devices that frame their sense of self through practices of choice and experiences of autonomy from direct state plans.

Not surprisingly, other students are anxious about the reforms, the pressure they feel to find a 'good' job, and the very real possibility that they may be unemployed. Many looking for work express anxiety over the search process at the same time they profess desires to be self-reliant and to use their training and skills in their work. This suggests the emergence of an increasing commonsense-ness about choice, autonomous decision-making, and career possibilities, even as it produces worry and insecurity for many.

Interviews and experiences of 'mutual choice' in job fairs are particularly salient moments of subject formation for the graduates. They afford both the company representatives and the applicant an opportunity of deliberate self-presentation. Tang Liping, who found a position in a Sino-US joint-venture, described her experience as follows:

I heard they needed an assistant [to the manager] from a friend so I sent my materials to the manager. Then I went for an interview. They introduced the

company and I introduced my major, my hobbies, and myself . . . They asked me what I thought about salary and working conditions and I told him that working conditions and development of the company are more important than salary. Also, it is very important if I can use my knowledge and improve myself . . . I think the company will develop and grow . . . [In five years time], if I am still at this company, I will not be the assistant to the manager. I want to be the manager or a business professional, or maybe have my own trading company and be an independent company.

Tang also claimed she only wanted one-year contracts with the company in case she decided to leave. She had confidence her contract would be renewed if she worked well. 'If the work is suitable for me and the personal relations are good, then I will stay; if it is not suitable and I am not happy then I will go.'

Another DUT graduating senior, Chen Xiuping, took a job with a Canadian-Chinese firm that was willing to pay his education fee to the university. As a state-supported student in a special provincial program (a combined chemical engineering and foreign language major) he was 'required' to work for the provincial government after graduation, unless the company was willing to cover the costs of his education. 'This is the first one willing to pay for me', Chen said. He described his interview with the company at the job fair in his hometown of Shenyang as follows:

They asked me to introduce myself and then they talked about the development and future of the company. All of this was in English . . . I asked about the background of the company, as I hadn't heard about it before . . . When looking for a job you must note how devoted they are to doing business in China. I paid attention to the company's development in China, whether they made up their mind to invest in China because sometimes they make fake investments. I also asked about the industry and the treatment in the company, like salary. If you work several years they will provide a no-interest loan to buy a house. Medical care, I don't know if they provide it, but I can buy that myself. I don't care if the company gives this. From their attitude I think I would be an important man in the company. I know they want me to work there and they are willing to take special care of me . . . Just three days ago I decided to take the job.

The focus for these young graduates is squarely on their individual career plans and the autonomy they have from state plans. As they experience interviews, mutual choice, and resume writing, they face, and constantly talked about, opportunities (*jihui*), choices (*xuanze*), and insecurities not available in the planned system. Their desires also resonate with units that try to distinguish themselves from the 'inefficiencies' of the planned system that 'hoards labour' or 'disregards' skills.

Making individual choices in exchanges that reference a market model alters the meaning and experience of labour power for this segment of the urban population (Hoffman 2001). Under the planned system, labour power and skills were not 'owned' by the individual, but rather were a national resource

and part of the means of production owned by the state (Bian 1994: 51, 96); and returns on one's labour power 'were realized only in the state's production, but not on the individuals' (Cheng 1998: 23). As a part of the assignment system, work positions also embedded the college graduate in the urban welfare system of work units and redistributive economics that granted the unit immense control over its 'members'. Rather than referencing a student's personal interests or abilities, something that would have been considered selfish and bourgeois, the assignments hoped to equalize development across the country (de-emphasizing coastal areas) and eliminate exploitative labour markets and unemployment. Skills then 'were acquired for the improved performance of the organization or the fulfilment of political objectives of the central or local party leaders' and not for individual fulfilment or personal career advancement (Davis 1990: 89, 2000). Labour power, in other words, was not an individual resource to be sold in the marketplace or even to be developed for personal growth, nor was it about the 'efficient use' of labour power (Davis 1990). Job assignments of the centrally planned system were issues of *national duty* and expressions of socialist nation building. Career planning and skill development to fulfil an individual's professional goals were politically unacceptable, exemplified in Liu Shaoqi's statement that: 'It is the worthiest and most just thing in the world to sacrifice oneself for the Party, for the proletariat, for the emancipation of the nation and of all mankind, for social progress and for the highest interests of the overwhelming majority of the people' (cited in Bray 2005: 60). After the reform era began, neoliberal techniques of rule placed the market mechanism front and centre, as a 'tool' to evaluate governmental effectiveness and efficiency and to reform a governmentality 'whose abuses one tries to limit' (Foucault 1997: 75) creating new practices of choice and career planning.

Again and again the young people I met focused on their own potential professional achievements – and insecurities – often contrasting them with the experiences and attitudes of their parents. A young woman from Wuhan who hoped to work in Shanghai, is a good example. Her parents had had the opportunity to return to Shanghai, their original hometown, in the early 1990s. But, she continued:

They said no because the job would have been harder than what they had . . . They don't want to change . . . If I were them I certainly would move to Shanghai. If life is OK, then it is OK, but there is no chance for more improvement. They are used to this and their children are grown up, but to my brother and me, there still are a lot of opportunities available that we can try. I am not afraid of failure. I may have failure in Shanghai, but I am ready to face my possible failures. I don't know what I will confront. This is the main difference between the generations.

She continued saying that if the institute where she would be working as a translator gave her a good chance to improve herself, and her ability and knowledge were used effectively, then it was likely she would stay there for

many years. If not, she would go. While her parents came of age in the era of traditional socialism, this young woman believes in ideas about career mobility as a source of individual and social growth.

The notion of developing and training the self through work is not alien to China's socialist path, but the kind of self-development, career advancement, and family prosperity sought by the young (and aspiring) professionals I met is markedly different from that of the Maoist era. Employment for *rencai* (talent) is now a site of potential growth for themselves, their families' lifestyles, their employers, and also, as I will argue in the next section, the nation; as one woman put it: 'I don't know what I will confront' but 'I am ready to face my possible failures'. This woman embraces the idea of individual choice, even if that means she has to face the possibility of 'failure' that she can blame on no one but herself. She does not fear the shift of accountability from the state to the individual, exemplifying how neoliberal rationalities of self-responsibility are embedded in reforms in the job assignment system as well as everyday forms of self-governance. Similar to – although not the same as – prevailing rationalities in advanced liberal regimes that encourage people to 'enterprise themselves', these reforms govern at a greater distance and through persuasion rather than coercion, specifying autonomous and responsible subjects. It is through the very practices of making choices and feeling (relatively) free in these decisions that the post-Mao professional subject emerges – an active and responsible subject (and one who often feels quite insecure) deemed necessary for China's late-socialist development.

### **Late-socialist governmentality: patriotism and the nation**

As individuals make their own decisions about where to work, they do so in relation to statements about being 'responsible' with their autonomy. Governing in the reform era is no longer through an intense dependency on the state, but is through newfound autonomy and choices handled responsibly. An emphasis on responsible choices is rooted in neoliberal regimes of appropriate forms of self-enterprise, while also echoing Maoist demands for service to the nation and duty to one's fellow citizen. Throughout the research process, I heard people tell me that young workers should not only think of themselves as they made decisions about where to work. Their employment choices had to be informed by a sense of social and national responsibility too.

A recently published guide to help college graduates choose a profession, for instance, lists several characteristics of a career, including a profession as a way for each individual *to serve society* and their position. The other characteristics include a way *to develop* each individual's ability, a stage for realizing life's worth, and a significant part of any person's life (Liu 1999: 4–6; see also Zhang 1998). University personnel, especially those in the newly termed employment guidance offices understand they have an active role in this process of choice, guiding graduates into appropriate positions that also meet

state needs. No longer implementing mandatory plans, school administrators are encouraged to 'guide' (*zhidao*) students to learn about themselves as individuals, while also being 'aware of their social responsibilities' (Wen 1996: 276). An administrator at DUT echoed these sentiments when he said that in addition to telling students to 'think about their personality, their uniqueness, what kind of work is appropriate for them . . . and the conditions of the company. . . they must also think about what the country needs and what the situation is like in that local place. They cannot only think of their own ideals.' The vice president of a major university in Beijing also emphasized that: 'It is necessary to make it known to students that innovation is not for showing off but to acquire a sense of responsibility to the state and the Chinese nation' ('Cultivating innovative talents' 1999). And in a recent statement, President Hu Jintao said that the young should learn to 'love the motherland' as a key virtue of 'socialist honour' (with harming the motherland being a signal of 'socialist disgrace') (Olesen 2006). Moral education that promotes feelings of nationalism should not be equated with 'propaganda', however, a pejorative term in the English language that likens state ideology to brainwashing (Gries 2004). Rather, the kind of patriotism expressed by educated urbanites helps establish standards of respectability for professionals in society at large. As norms they are important techniques of self-formation, although of course never complete in daily life.

Wen Shubang, a senior at DUT, is a good example of how human capital exchanges re-specify the educated citizen as a potential source of national strength. Wen began by proudly stating he had a position in a state-run foreign trade office. 'I heard they needed someone in this office, but the application period was already closed', he explained. 'I went to talk to them anyway, and because my scores and accomplishments in college are better than others, they were still willing to hire me.' Many of his classmates coveted this type of position for it offered him training opportunities, help with transferring his household registration to Dalian, and some degree of security, as it was a part of the state system. The salary, however, was just average. 'A high salary helps a lot, but it is not that important now', Wen said, as he rationalized why he should be satisfied with the pay they offered.

I am just starting to work. I hope I will get a lot of training, and wealth, but it is not practical to want too much because I am a new worker. If you go to a private company the salary may be higher, but there are not as many opportunities for training there. What I need to see is if my salary meets my accomplishments after a year or two . . . Many units wanted to hire me, including a foreign company. I could have chosen a job with a much higher salary, but I didn't because the jobs weren't related to my major. If I go too far beyond my major and my knowledge is too broad, I won't be able to advance my career. I won't know enough about anything, so what does it solve if only your salary is high? Going to a state run unit is *my own choice*, and anyway, I should work for the country (*yinggai dui guojia fumu*). Later I can go to a private or foreign company.

His statement about having the responsibility to work for the country is reminiscent of Maoist era slogans such as Long Live Mao, reminding us that the technologies and devices that (re)produce norms may re-emerge in very different political times. Yet decisions that contemporary graduates like Wen are making are quite different from the cohort before them. They struggle with choices of working in state, private, or foreign enterprises. They also manoeuvre between wanting to fulfil individual dreams, confronting the reality of possible unemployment, managing family pressures and duties – and meeting their sense of social responsibilities, such as supporting the nation. Seeking career development and training opportunities and credentializing oneself in a marketplace that values market-oriented and transnational skills does not mean young professionals identify themselves as separate from or in opposition to the nation. Many, like Wen, are patriotic professionals who harbour neoliberal ideas of self-development as well as late-socialist patriotism. Wen embodies this responsibility in his rationalization of the average wages and in his conviction that he should be serving the nation. Responsibility in post-Mao China denotes both patriotism and individual interests.

Thus, while patriotic duty is not a new device encouraging certain activities and behaviours, making choices in these fields is. College students hear about the intermingling of individual development and competition with national strength and identification from a variety of sources, including school officials, local papers, popular publications and even parents. When I first met Mr. Wu at Dalian's Talent Market, he had recently returned from Germany and was looking for a new job. At that time Wu lived with his parents in their small apartment almost an hour's bus ride from the centre of town. He longed for the chance to go abroad again, or at least to work in a foreign company. The Germany assignment, however, was disappointing as the company failed and he was not able to meet the dream he had established for himself. Immediately after returning to Dalian he found a job with a large Sino-US joint venture. His father strongly opposed the long commute this job required and the thought of another failure for his son in a 'foreign place'. In fact, Wu's father told him that if he worked for a foreign company he could not take time off to care for him if he got sick, or if he died, resonating with what Fong (2004) calls 'filial nationalism' and with what Pan *et al.* (2005) refer to as 'the master frame of "family-nation"' in China. In other words, if he worked in a foreign company, his father claimed he could not fulfil his filial duties. 'I had to think of what my father said. I couldn't hurt his feelings.' So Wu declined the position and returned to the market. He eventually found work in a tax service company officially registered as private, but in reality it relied heavily on the subsidized labour of government employees.

Responsibility – to one's family, one's country, and even one's own professional development – could take the form of sentiments about China on the world stage or it could be expressed in terms of actually working for the state, indicating there is a dynamic and complex interplay between the

state/Party and ‘popular nationalism’ (*renmin minzu zhuyi*) (Gries 2004).<sup>9</sup> Caring for the nation, however, is no longer about the *duty to sacrifice* one’s future for the nation. In the reform era, patriotism is about fulfilling one’s potential through responsible choices, also fostering national development. In June 2005, two popular US news magazines highlighted this internalization of patriotism into acts of ‘free’ career choice. *U.S. News and World Report* began its ‘The rise of a new power’ article about China with the following vignette:

Richard Qiang could be an archetypal American. The son of blue-collar workers, Qiang thrived in school and graduated with a law degree from prestigious Fudan University [Shanghai]. Then he landed a job here with . . . a New York law firm with dozens of corporate clients . . . Only one thing distinguishes Qiang from a yuppie in Chicago or San Francisco or Manhattan: He belongs to the Communist Party. Like many ambitious young Americans who get involved in politics, Qiang’s motives are pragmatic. *He hopes to work for the government someday, helping craft China’s budding legal system.* Party membership is one way to open the right doors.

(Newman 2005: 40, emphasis added)

*Time Magazine* featured a young man (24 years old) who runs a ‘patriotic website’ that reputedly gets 30,000 hits a day. The article notes that:

Strident nationalism is particularly pervasive among Chinese urban youth. Even as they sip Starbucks lattes or line up at the US embassy for student visas, *they bridle at what they view as an attempt by the rest of the world to suppress a budding superpower. ‘America wants to keep China down’, Kang says. ‘We should all be friends. But America must accept China as a friend on an equal footing’.*

(Beech 2005: 40, emphasis added)

Imperatives to be responsible and care for the country, or ‘motherland’, affect how young professionals conceive of their present and future selves. Yet it is not required that one work directly for the state, or that one proclaims an explicit allegiance to the Party to appear patriotic, as also evidenced by Duthie’s (2006) interviews with executives in multinationals in Shanghai. One could sip lattes and work for a foreign company while also standing up for China in the world.

In the conversation with Liao, quoted above, she expressed a number of these sentiments, wanting both to make state-owned units more competitive and wanting to serve others in her life.

In the past you were supposed to work for a state-owned unit. Now many young people don’t like this because there are fewer opportunities than in a joint-venture. Habits can’t change many say . . . [but] *with my effort and the efforts of many others*, it can change some. In a state-owned unit the economic benefits are not so good and the units are not as competitive. Many young people want the state run units to change, but if they don’t try [to make changes] then they can’t change. So, I will try first to change it and help the unit, and then, later, I can

complain about the state run units. I don't want to give up hope that *state-owned units can be okay* . . . In university I made new friends, they are like me and want to try their best to change the situation, but many complain without doing anything . . . I argue with them, but they just complain.

Near the end of our conversation she explained she had 'very high expectations' of herself 'to make things better'. She talked about wanting to contribute 'to the country or to other people' by providing economic support for poor children who did not attend school or by influencing policy and decision makers. Liao's comments exhibit she is highly conscious of a sense of responsibility to be active in making changes she deemed positive in the world around her.

In addition to explicit pronouncements of a desire to serve the nation, there are numerous other devices used to frame the autonomy that is necessary for employment choice to work. As I have argued elsewhere (Hoffman 2000, 2001), universities have implemented a variety of measures to make sure graduates find work within a proper 'scope' including fines, restrictions on transferring one's registration, and the threat of not endorsing a new job. Graduates also reference the pressure they feel from parents to work in safe and stable conditions (e.g., the state), to be responsible to the country, and to stay close to home. Newly valued educated subjects thus must negotiate these varying, and often conflicting demands.

The notion of patriotic professionalism I am developing here allows us to see how ideas of autonomous self-development and patriotism are being incorporated into a single subject position, without great personal turmoil. Recent graduates' and young professionals' dreams of going abroad to work, studying for an MBA in the US, or even just getting the opportunity to train in a foreign company's office often are embedded in conversations about China, national strength on the world stage, and modernization. A young graduate who found a job with a large Korean trading firm, Pan Qing, explained she wanted the position because the company is 'world famous' and she could 'get experience' there. When I asked how long she thought she would stay, she answered: 'In fact, I don't like this company because I think I am a traitor to my country. When people are young, they think their goal is to get money from foreigners for China, but now it is the other way around' [i.e. foreigners taking money out of China]. Her long-term plan was to go to the US for an MBA followed by finding work in trade. Announcement of this plan rolled off her tongue immediately after she criticized foreign companies in China, though she avoided any mention of the 'foreignness' of the MBA. 'I want to do something to prove that Chinese people deserve recognition', she said. 'This is another reason why I want to go to the US. They have better education there and I want to compete with them.' For young women like her, these are not contradictions.

One of Pan's classmates told me that: 'Young people should go overseas to open doors, study modern things, and come home to build our own country.'

She went on to explain that a classmate of hers went to the US in their junior year. 'She told us about the US. She can't stand the discrimination in America. There are misunderstandings. In your own country, you can help your own country. She wants to come back; being in your own country is better.' Another of Pan's classmate who had found a position in a state unit, and with whom I spoke several days later, explained why her 'destiny' is to work for the state and not for a foreign company.

The foreign company can provide good conditions and comfort, but you give your talent to a foreigner and they earn money from China. Maybe in five years I will work for [a foreign company], but in ten years I will be working for the state. Maybe I will continue studying as a postgraduate in five years . . . I will definitely work for a foreign company for two to three years, but not for a long time.

She went on to say state owned companies should learn from foreign ones, because they were attracting so much of the young talent in China. 'In a foreign company, though, you can never be boss, the highest level you can reach is executive manager. You just work for a foreigner, not for yourself.' She admitted that many of her classmates did not agree with her argument that people should ultimately work for the state rather than foreign companies. Yet her narrative was filled with contradictions about what was most important – working for the state, finding the best career opportunities, and getting a high salary. In fact she had been looking for a job in a foreign company, but could not find one. It is precisely this combination of ideas about self-managed development and expressions of patriotism, either by working for the state or by making one's self and thus the nation strong that offers evidence of a new ethics of subjectivity – specified by the wedding of neoliberal governmentality and Maoist notions of duty recast in terms of reform era economic goals.

## **Conclusion**

The emergence of patriotic professionalism is a reflection of desires for talented workers in transnational labour markets, the autonomization of subjecthood in post-Mao China, and the particularities of neoliberal governmental forms in a late-socialist context. As college graduates learn they have to extricate themselves from the legacy of state dependency, and that labour is not only a national resource or part of the socialist welfare package, but rather is a site of potential individual development that should be accessed through choices made autonomously, they also learn that this autonomy should be handled responsibly. This infuses their choices with Maoist era values of loving the nation as well as reform era views on economic development, self-enterprise, material gains, and potential social mobility. This new regime of self-development suggests a self-enterprising subject that is at once autonomous from state planning agencies and still tied to the nation through

strategic expressions of patriotism, whether in the form of working in a state unit or in the form of protesting the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade or the recent revision of Japanese textbooks.

Examining the formation of professional personhood is a particularly valuable conceptual space for recognizing and making sense of a neoliberal analytic in socialist China. Subjectivity does not necessarily follow ideological lines of political projects, allowing us to understand how neoliberalism and socialism may intersect. While the analysis of China generally and of new employment markets more specifically provides an opportunity to recognize 'neoliberalism' in disparate sites, it also offers a moment to reflect on the contingent and diverse nature of neoliberal governmental forms. China has been described variously as 'a curious hybrid of command and market' (Schein 2004: 8) and as 'a hybrid Chinese socialism-cum-neoliberalism' (Sigley 2004: 566). Here I have argued that patriotic professionalism embodies a wedding of neoliberal 'ways of doing things' and reform era definitions of economic development with Maoist era norms of caring for the nation.

## Notes

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2 When I attended the weekly fair in 1993, it was held in a small room in the corner of an antique store and entertainment complex on the edge of a city park and attracted a handful of companies. Most of the visitors were retired personnel or those looking for a 'better' job with more opportunity and/or higher wages. By the fall of 1995 the centre had moved to a much larger building near the municipal library. Job seekers by then had to purchase tickets before they entered the main hall and they carried resumes as they approached the tables. After a severely overcrowded Spring Festival fair for college graduates in 1996, the Personnel Bureau decided to move the summer graduation fair to the city's new exhibition hall. The material in this article is based on studies conducted over the course of ten years of anthropological fieldwork in Dalian beginning in the summer of 1993 and extending through December 2003, including dissertation fieldwork from 1995–1996. In addition to going to job fairs regularly over the years, I interviewed human resource managers at their offices, job seekers who self-identified as talent, several classes of graduating seniors in local universities, university employment officials, and those who managed and ran the city talent markets and human resource offices. I also conducted surveys with job seekers at major job fair events and several classes of graduating students. In addition to extended formal interviews that lasted anywhere from one to six hours, I had countless informal

exchanges with people as well as social engagements with young professionals and their families across the city.

3 I use the terms ‘high socialism’ and ‘traditional socialism’ interchangeably in this article. They refer to the period known as the Maoist era (1949–78) when China followed a centrally planned command economy system. The reform or post-Mao, era began when Deng Xiaoping came into power at the end of 1978 and initiated what people call ‘market socialism’ (see Bray 2005: 204).

4 In the assignment system, universities reported graduates and majors to the province, which forwarded this to central authorities. They combined this with work unit requests and made assignment decisions. Plans were then sent back down to the local level for implementation. Early reforms in this system allowed the planning process to happen at the local rather than central level (see Agelasto and Adamson 1998).

5 In focusing on patriotism, I do not mean to imply that other forms of responsibility, such as that to the family, are unimportant (see also Fong 2004). Making ‘responsible’ decisions, both in terms of the nation and the family, overlapped with desires for success, dreams of fulfilling one’s potential, and hopes for social mobility in a highly fluid social world. Techniques of rule, in other words, cross over between state, market, and familial domains. This paper focuses on one site where these domains intersect, the job search process.

6 In arguing that choice is a form of governing, I do not mean to discount the very real and tangible changes in Chinese citizens’ everyday lives. Rather, I wish to highlight that the arena of choice is a complex and sometimes contradictory process of subject formation. It includes practices as diverse as ‘mutual choice’ where employees and employers make decisions instead of state functionaries, negotiations over the meaning of competence and success, gender-specific opinions about appropriate positions and careers, and debates about familial stability and social mobility (Hoffman 2000).

7 ‘Freedom’, in many analyses of the introduction of market competition into socialist states is understood as an ‘absence’ of government. These arguments also suggest that the state either intervenes in people’s lives or it does not, implying one could identify a social field within which one finds neither state forms of governance nor ways of knowing shared with state rationalities. My analysis takes a different view. Moreover, by choosing to write about subject formation rather than about political interests and agency *per se*, I wish to avoid the assumption that unified and unitary subjects exist outside of power relations, regulatory norms, and discursive and non-discursive practices (see also Sigley 2004: 560). For more on how the regulation and management of subjects happens ‘through freedom’ see Barry *et al.* 1996; Burchell 1996; Foucault 1991; Ong 2003, 2006; Rose 1992, 1993, 1996a, 1999.

8 My position supports the argument that we may use ‘neoliberalism’ as well as Foucault’s insights on governmentality to understand China, and places more generally with non-liberal/illiberal traditions. A number of scholars have engaged with this lively debate, for example, Anagnost 2004; Dutton 1988, 1992; Hindess 2004; Ong 2006; Sigley 1996; Yan 2003.

9 Gries (2004: 116–134) argues that the Party is in fact losing control of popular nationalism, as evidenced in protests over the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and the fervor in 1996 and 1997 over the publication of *China Can Say No* and *China Can Still Say No* (see Song Qiang *et al.* 1996a, 1996b).

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