The Chinese Pursuit of Happiness:
Anxieties, Hopes, and Moral Tensions in Everyday Life
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CHAPTER 6

Deriving Happiness from Making Society Better

Chinese Activists as Warring Gods

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This chapter focuses on reform-minded enthusiasts and activists in China; they are an unusual group of concerned actors in public life that includes human rights lawyers, labor rights advocates, public commentators, and non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders. They are small in number but big in influence as they affect political orientations and collective beliefs of Chinese society under authoritarian rule. Through their experiences and personal journeys as activists, I examine how they define and pursue happiness—a good life in a good society. I highlight the institutions in tension—Weber's warring gods inhabiting incompatible value spheres—that confront these activists when they devote themselves to pursuing a good public life for all of society. I examine the values to which these activists devote themselves, and the ideals of public life they are pursuing. How are those values embedded in the hearts and minds of activists, and how do they become the driving force of their actions? Their political beliefs and modes of action, as well as personal career advancement, family values, and economic needs, are mostly incompatible with each other; there is always a high degree of tension among them. Through these institutions in tension, we are able to understand an important aspect of contemporary Chinese public life.[1]

Reform-minded activists in China have always been faced with pressure and harassment from officials and governments. China does not allow free political activities common to modern democratic states. People with a passion and dedication to public and political issues mostly locate themselves in the NGO or media sector. They work on the protection of human rights or the

provision of labor dispute services for workers. Or they become so-called public intellectuals, providing commentary on current political affairs. They care for and serve disadvantaged groups, defend justice, and fulfill their ideals in life. The careers that these reform-minded activists are pursuing offer no significant benefits regarding monetary income and political power. They often criticize government policies, damage the prestige of the leadership, and are therefore regularly subjected to government threats to their own and their family's lives. These threats take a commensurate toll on family relations, and the activists have little prospect for professional advancement. Hence, wealth and status are out of reach, while pressure and harassment are a constant reality. Most people in China will not choose to become activists for social or political reform. But on the other hand, the actions of these very few activists are having a very profound impact on public life and political culture in contemporary China.

This research was conducted during the Xi Jinping administration, when China is entering a new era, the age after reform. In the more than twenty years before that, in the reform era, China was ruled by leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao. During this period, economic development was followed by ideological openness, and although one-party rule could not be called into question and no space was given for people's right to political participation and association, individual freedoms and autonomy, after all, had improved. With a significant increase in the rapid flow of information and people's awareness of their rights, so-called rightful resistance also saw a sharp increase. However, since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, civil society associations and activities have all been met with even more severe repression than in the past. For instance, in early July 2015 hundreds of Chinese lawyers, civil rights activists, and their relatives were suddenly arrested, summoned, and detained by the public security authorities. Subsequently, many rights lawyers were either put under house arrest or in prison for "picking quarrels and provoking troubles" (*xunxin zishi*) or "subversion of state power."

In December 2015, Chinese authorities launched a serious crackdown on labor rights advocates; at least twenty-one labor activists from four different labor NGOs in Guangdong were apprehended in their homes and offices. In the fall of 2016, a Guangdong province court found four of the detained advocates guilty of "gathering a crowd to disturb social order." The arrest of advocates affiliated with labor NGOs has had a chilling effect on the activities of labor NGOs.[2] The systematic suppression of civil society under Xi's rule had

not been this intense during the two or three decades of the reform era. It suggests that China's economic development and information flow have not enlarged the space for, or the content of, civil society, and have not directly brought about a better public life.

Prior to the mid-2010s, activists, lawyers, and scholars still believed that as long as they did not challenge the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party, and did not organize themselves collectively, even if they criticized policy or government officials, they wouldn't have to worry about putting their personal safety at risk. However, it turns out that under Xi's regime the government's repression of NGOs, rights lawyers, and labor activists was not temporary. The government believes they constitute a challenge to the legitimacy of communist rule. It is evident that the blueprint for the social construction and ideology of the Xi's regime, and the universal values of freedom and equality that these activists hold dear, have become increasingly distant from each other and incompatible. Although the political situation had become more oppressive, these reform-minded activists would not give up; they kept fighting in their pursuit of an ideal public society.

WHAT IS A GOOD PUBLIC LIFE IN CHINA?

My interviewees, all intensely involved activists, are eloquent, quick-witted, and thoughtful people. They include labor rights advocates Zhang Zhiru and Chen Huihai, labor rights lawyer Duan Yi, human rights lawyer Teng Biao, media commentator Xiao Shu, and environmental NGO manager Gao Guizi. I conducted the interviews in person between June 2015 and October 2016 in Taiwan, China, or the United States.

Even before interviewing them, I had been in private contact with these respondents for years because of our research exchanges and personal relations. Zhang Zhiru, Chen Huihai, and Duan Yi had all been working for workers' rights NGOs in Guangdong and Shenzhen for many years. In the early 2010s, when I was studying the labor relations of Taiwanese firms in China, I had been in frequent contact with them. They became my sources of choice in my efforts to understand China's labor relations. I also arranged for my students and graduate assistants to visit their NGOs for internships and research. In the spring of 2014, when the workers at Yue Yuan's shoe factories in Guangdong went on strike, the workers' labor NGOs all took on roles of support. I also did fieldwork in Guangdong at the time and stayed in close

contact with my informants throughout. In 2015, I went to Guangdong and Shenzhen several times to meet with them and to conduct interviews for this research. In 2014–15, while Teng Biao was a visiting scholar at Harvard Law School, I was doing research at the Harvard-Yenching Institute. I attended several private lectures and discussions, and I interviewed him several times during the spring of 2015, after which I hosted him in Taiwan for a conference to learn more about his situation and his activities in China. Media commentator Xiao Shu took shelter in Taiwan as a visiting scholar in 2015–16 because of political pressures in China. I used his time in Taiwan to get to know and interview him several times. Since the early 2010s, Gao Guizi's NGO Service Center in Sichuan has been in close contact with the research team at the Center for Contemporary China at National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan, of which I am a member. I interviewed Gao during his visit to Taiwan in 2016. Generally speaking, because I have been a friend and colleague of the interviewees for this essay, engaging with them in research and exchanges for many years, we have been able to establish a high degree of trust and understanding. The two sides of the Taiwan Strait share a language and frequently interact socially, and Taiwan's liberal democracy provides a political environment in which Chinese activists and Taiwanese scholars and media are able to maintain close relations and even friendships. Maybe it is because of the special characteristics of these cross-strait relationships that my friends and I, in addition to professional exchanges, also enjoy personal friendships that are characterized by a high degree of mutual trust and respect.

During the interviews, I would always ask the respondents to rate their happiness on a scale from one to five. The answers I got were quite similar:

"Personally I am fine. I chose what I am doing; this is a meaningful job and a worthwhile mission to pursue."

"Politically, of course, I am unhappy, frustrated, and upset."

"Socially, I am happy and satisfied with my friends, family members, and colleagues."

Throughout the interviews, I could feel they were particularly happy with the support from large and admiring numbers on social media, and the recognition from and connections with media and intellectuals from abroad.

What goals are these actors pursuing in life? Zhang Zhiru, who has been working for workers' rights and labor services since 1995, stated, "I will devote my life to the promotion of social equality and justice; an equal, democratic, and free society is my life's pursuit." Remembering what he had experienced

at one of his previous jobs, he said: "Whether in the eyes of the factory management or the local government, workers like us possess no value, no dignity. To the factory we are nothing more than a tool to make money; to the local government we are animals that can be sacrificed whenever necessary in exchange for economic development." This is what strengthened his resolve to fight for the rights and interests of workers.

Before 2012, Chen Huihai had been a worker. When his factory owed its workers wages and abruptly closed down, he led the workers in protest, fighting the company to secure their rights. Subsequently, he turned into a full-time labor activist. In our discussions, he mentioned that his transformation from a worker to a labor activist mainly stemmed from his "loving to help other people." In 2012, he was invited by Duan Yi, a widely respected Chinese labor rights lawyer, to set up a labor services center in Guangzhou.

Duan Yi devotes himself to the promotion of collective bargaining for wages for Chinese workers. In 2005, he formed the Guangdong Labor Rights Law Firm in Shenzhen, known as China's first law firm specializing in the protection of labor rights. He said his goal was to "serve those lower-class workers, such as workers on the assembly line, supermarket clerks, and miners suffering from pneumoconiosis [black lung disease]." He has been engaged in training union leaders, holding workshops, and maintaining a website, all to spread his values and help workers to strengthen their labor rights.

Teng Biao became a public figure because of the Sun Zhigang Incident in April 2003.[3] Teng Biao, together with his former classmates Xu Zhiyong and Yu Jiang at Peking University (PKU), submitted a proposal to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress for the constitutional review of the criminal detention and repatriation system. The committee later accepted the proposal, making Teng and his classmates famous overnight. Between 2003 and 2005, his legal activism was recognized and praised at home as well as abroad, and he received a series of awards.[4] But beginning in 2005, because of a series of human rights cases in which Teng was a defense lawyer, including his 2006 defense of "the barefoot lawyer" Chen Guangcheng, and his call for the rescue of human rights activist Hu Jia in 2007, Teng felt strong pressure from government agencies. When he talked about his aims in life, he said: "It's the ideal of an intellectual, [I am] assuming the responsibilities of a so-called intellectual, that's why I'm doing these things in opposition to the government."

Xiao Shu is a well-known Chinese writer, journalist, and commentator. In 2011 he was dismissed from his post as a chief columnist at the outspoken

Southern Weekly newspaper. He said very clearly: "My aim in writing commentary is to spread my values: universal values such as freedom, democracy, and human rights; and to promote the progress of civil society; I advocate an independent, middle way [Confucian golden mean], [a] moderate and rational standpoint."

Gao Guizi, an activist directing a Sichuan social services NGO, claims to be one of China's few "real intellectuals." He said: "China's real public intellectuals account for less than one percent [of all intellectuals], and the others are fake ones. You should not assume that reading some books gives you the right to call yourself an intellectual, [as] more than 99 percent of intellectuals are a fraud and I'm part of the [real] one percent." Gao takes Mao Zedong as his role model, and Gao stressed that he was not blindly worshiping Mao but had experienced his thought and vision. Gao believed the fundamental principles of socialism and would devote himself to serving people in need.

SCHOOL AND EARLY CAREER

The values these activists were championing emerged gradually as we talked: universal values of freedom, equality, and human rights, as well as the moral integrity, righteousness, and ideals of intellectuals serving and speaking out for the disadvantaged. These values are what they identify with a good public life in Chinese society. What distinguishes them from people in Western countries is that the democracy of competing political parties as practiced in democratic countries seems not to be a primary goal of the Chinese activists, nor is a democracy of competing political parties a prerequisite for the ability to exercise the universal values they are promoting. I tried to track down the sources of their values and found that they could be located in the socialist ideology rooted deeply in their minds, as well as in the values of and their faith in traditional Chinese benevolence (i.e., a strong sense of justice and willingness to help the weak).

When these activists recalled their experiences while growing up and the development of their journey, I found that all of them had started out as good students or model students who had always liked to read. In their innermost nature, they had always been opposed to dogmatism and dictatorship. They grew up in the 1960s through the 1980s. Some of them experienced the Cultural Revolution and some the 1989 prodemocracy movement. Maoism, the socialist blueprint, and the values of equality and dedication, instilled in them

during their childhood schooling, are still deeply implanted in their hearts and minds.

Zhang Zhiru and Chen Huihai both began their careers as workers. Before becoming full-time NGO advocates, both worked at foreign investment enterprises in Guangdong. After witnessing the bullying and exploitation of workers by their employers, as well as labor disputes in their respective factories, they led workers to protest in defense of their rights. This was their career turning point, turning into professional labor advocates.

Zhang Zhiru was born in 1974 to a rural household. From a young age, he excelled at his studies. When he was fifteen and in junior high school, he accompanied his cousin to work as a construction worker, moving bricks without the consent of his parents. His father did not permit him to return to school, and he later realized the importance of knowledge and kept studying on his own while working at his job. In 1993, Zhang Zhiru left Hunan for Guangdong to work at a shoe factory. During this period, he remembered, he once assisted a villager from his home village who had been arrested and held in a police station for more than four months for not having a temporary residence permit. On another occasion, Zhang saw his Taiwanese boss punch and kick employees several times, once even calling in security to beat to death a worker who had been making trouble. The boss was not held accountable. These experiences led Zhang to take on the protection of labor rights as his lifelong struggle. He recalled: "I feel like those of us who do manual labor—whether in the eyes of factory management or the local government—are just money-making tools for the factory and animals that the local government can sacrifice at any time in exchange for economic development. When our interests as migrant workers are violated, no one will stand up and speak out on our behalf. We migrant workers have become lambs waiting to be manipulated and slaughtered. We really need someone to stand up and say no to the government and the factory."

In 1994, Zhang moved to another, larger Taiwanese-funded shoe factory. The next year, when the Dongguan government was promoting the organization of trade unions, Zhang Zhiru successfully gained the support of the town government and established a union inside the factory, recruiting thirty-five members. However, the factory's owner, displeased with Zhang Zhiru for organizing the union, fired him.

Zhang returned to his home village and leased the village's farmland to cultivate orange trees. In 2002, he moved to Shenzhen to once again become

a worker. One day, while delivering goods, Zhang was injured in a car accident, but his employer refused to pay the appropriate compensation for a work injury. So Zhang Zhiru borrowed books to research the law and subsequently took the company to court. However, because he wasn't aware of relevant time limits to provide evidence, he ultimately lost the case. Through the experience of defending his own rights, he met a lot of workers whose rights had also been trampled, which inspired him to establish a workers' rights organization. In March 2004, he rented a room and formally established the Shenzhen Migrant Workers Association.

The family history of labor rights lawyer Duan Yi is unusual. He comes from a Red family; his grandfather had been a commander in the Red Army, and his father a general in the People's Liberation Army. He grew up in the circles of Beijing's "red second generation" (*Hong erdai*). Many of today's senior officials in Beijing were his classmates and neighbors when he was young. He said that from a young age he had been deeply touched by the stories of the Communist Party's efforts to gain equality and justice for the people. Familiar with, and heavily influenced by, the classics of Marx and Engels, he wanted to free the Chinese workers from the exploitation of capitalists and fight for their collective bargaining rights. Since his childhood he has also loved to read martial arts novels, whose characters' chivalrous spirit deeply inspired him. These ideological identities contributed to his decision to fight for the rights of disadvantaged workers.

Human rights lawyer Teng Biao comes from a village in the northeastern province of Jilin. He claimed that he was the product of a "brainwash education." "Up until college, I had never thought independently; I just knew my place [i.e., be law-abiding]." His opposition to authority started in 1991, the year he was admitted to Peking University, when he had to undergo a whole year of military training in Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei. After beginning his studies at Peking University, he was influenced by the liberal views of teachers still active on campus in the aftermath of the 1989 prodemocracy movement. In his second year at PKU, Teng Biao put up a big-character poster around "the Triangle," a famous square and focal point of student activism on the PKU campus. He said: "It was the Peking University's ideals that attracted and shaped me, [but] back then I just wanted to restore PKU's traditional spirit of striving for freedom, for democracy. Frankly, at that time I had no intention to oppose CCP or the state."

Beginning in 1971 at the height of the Cultural Revolution, NGO activist Gao Guizi, then seventeen, worked on a rice paddy in Yunnan province. He

planted rice for eight years until he turned twenty-five in 1979 and passed the college entrance exam, recently resumed after the Cultural Revolution. During those eight years in the countryside, "from the first month on, I ordered the *Red Flag Magazine* at my own expense. As the voice of the party's Central Committee, it was the most authoritative publication in the country." He went on to say: "I was really studying Marxism-Leninism at the time; I read the *Communist Manifesto* five times to memorize it." In those eight years in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, "every night at eight, I would tune in to the Central People's Broadcasting Station to listen to the international news."

Public commentator Xiao Shu was born in rural Sichuan province in 1962; his parents were teachers in village primary schools who had been criticized and denounced during the Cultural Revolution's "struggle sessions." His father was teaching at a school in another township and would come home every two weeks or so, bearing gifts such as reading material from the People's Liberation Army Literature and Art Department. Those were Xiao's primers but also part of his very early political initiation. From his early childhood Xiao Shu had been demonstrating academic excellence. He was determined to become a writer, and in 1981 he was admitted to the department of history at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. He recalled that the early 1980s were the most liberal era on Chinese campuses. At many universities, students ran their own publications; some were literary, but there were also a lot of political commentaries. He recalled: "I experienced the last spring of ideological liberalization; it had a positive influence on me." Back in college, he said, "I came into contact with Western democratic liberal thoughts, and my whole old ideological foundation collapsed. . . . China's intelligentsia at that time was very optimistic, very energetic about the reform policies, and full of hope for the Communist Party."

These advocates and activists pursued their notion of a good public life, focusing on freedom, justice, equality, and helping the weak. Why were they giving priority to these values? Their childhood experiences, including their political socialization, evidently left a mark on their beliefs and ideals. During the Cultural Revolution, the omnipresent slogans of Maoism and socialism also influenced them. Then, in the 1980s, when China's reform had just begun, its market-oriented reforms led to ideological openness to the outside world. The elements of liberalism turned into a popular trend. Thus their experiences as children and young people, and the social atmosphere they encountered at

the time, all shaped their idea of a good public life, putting them on track to become professional advocates and activists.

WARRING GODS CONFRONTING ACTIVISTS

The activities of these activists include expressing support and providing legal defense in court for political dissidents or religious nonconformists, giving advice on mobilization and legal process to striking workers, receiving foreign funds to organize cross-region workshops for NGOs, posting on the internet information that is deemed undesirable by the government, and criticizing government officials and policies, all of which are sensitive actions in today's political sphere in China. Conflict and tension between the personal values driving officials' actions and the values inhabiting other spheres are continual. Specifically, when reform-minded activists pursue their values professionally, conflicts tend to arise with the family sphere (e.g., providing a safe and nurturing environment for the family), the career sphere (e.g., moving ahead and earning more money), and the political sphere (e.g., obeying the government). Activists are caught between competing institutions in tension, just like Weber's warring gods that inhabit incompatible value spheres.

TENSIONS BETWEEN PERSONAL VALUES AND FAMILY VALUES

The biggest value conflict faced by activists is the tension between self-fulfillment and taking care of the family. According to family values in traditional Chinese society, a grown man has to set his parents' mind at ease by doing something glorious, and he has to take care of his wife and children. Therefore, when activists are engaged in work that carries certain political risk, their families' lives and long-term relationships face a good deal of pressure. When the activists interviewed for this study assessed the risks of politically sensitive behavior, they thought carefully about it, trying to avoid stepping across the government's red line. Their key concern was to keep their families safe and unbothered.

On the other hand, the understanding and support of family members for the careers of activists have become the driving force for these activists to continue their work. Their spouses were either partners in the common struggle or the forces that supported them behind the scenes. The focus of their worries is their children.

Zhang Zhiru started out as a migrant worker in Shenzhen in 2004. Between 2004 and 2016, he provided legal aid to more than one thousand workers. Especially in the early days, when he had no external financial support, Zhang relied on his savings and his wife's wages at a factory. He facilitated collective bargaining training for workers and encouraged workers to organize and defend their rights; he also went against employers and local governments. Beginning in 2009, the government regularly audited his taxes. During the first half of 2012, Guangdong province started cracking down on labor NGOs, forcing some to shut down their offices, others to relocate. Zhang Zhiru's offices have also repeatedly been sealed. The authorities' most common tactic has been to force the landlord to rescind the lease agreement for the activist's office space and private home, seriously impacting Zhang's normal work and family life. Also, due to the family's frequent evictions and a lack of permanent residence, his two children could not be admitted to a local school and had to stay home. On September 10, 2014, Zhang Zhiru and his family went to the Shenzhen municipal government to put up protest signs and file a petition demanding a legal investigation into, and compensation from, certain officials who had engaged in forcing his landlords to cancel his lease agreements, leaving him without a fixed residence or office space. At the same time, he was hoping to attract the attention of the wider community. In July 2015 Zhang and his wife of fifteen years filed for divorce, each taking custody of one of their two sons.

Chen Huihai, who began working for a labor rights NGO in 2012, acknowledged that one important reason why he has been able to completely devote himself to his work has been his wife's support and that he doesn't have to worry about his children. Chen has two children, both married and with children of their own. Although he was just fifty-one when I interviewed him, he already had two grandchildren. He said: "Because my children are both grownups, I don't need to take responsibility for them; otherwise, honestly, I couldn't cope with the pressure. I'd surely give up immediately; I couldn't pull that off. . . . My wife knows that I love helping others, she has also witnessed how many people I have been helping over the years. Sometimes, when we celebrate our success over dinner, we ask her to come along. And when she sees how grateful all those workers are to me, she understands me even better and supports me even more."

Chen Huihai's younger brother has been his main go-to person in times of economic need. When he was young, he decided not to go to college in order

to finance his younger brother's education. Later, his brother became a well-paid dentist. Chen said that whenever he asks him for money, his younger brother's response is always very straightforward. Around the end of 2015, when the crackdown on labor NGOs was well underway, Chen Huihai found himself at an economic impasse; the staff of his NGO had not been paid for several months. When Chen returned home and met with his younger brother, Chen said, "'Would it be convenient [to borrow some money]?' He just asked, 'How much do you want?' I told him to give me 50,000 yuan, and in under an hour, he had wired the money to my account." That was the third time Chen Huihai took money from his brother. The first time was to buy a car. "I had originally asked my brother for 50,000 yuan to buy a small car, but my brother refused, saying a car like that wasn't safe. He said that no matter what, I should buy a car for 150,000 yuan, one that is safe." The second time was when Chen Huihai was refurbishing his house; his brother gave him another 50,000 yuan. Chen said: "I'm really lucky I don't have to worry about things at home, although we have old people in the family who could fall sick or die at any time, and there always needs to be someone to take care of them, all of which costs money. But because I know my brother is around, I dare to let go. Most people are not in a position to do that."

Teng Biao came to the United States as a visiting scholar in 2015. The Chinese government refused to issue passports to his wife and children, preventing them from going abroad. They fled across the China-Thailand border and joined Teng Biao in the United States. Before then, Teng Biao had been kidnapped three times by security police in China. He told me: "After that, my wife was very worried and scared that if I was sentenced to jail our children would be deeply affected. That thought also put me under a lot of pressure. If I really went to prison, you could say the harm caused to our children would be irreversible; that was arguably my heaviest burden. I think it was the hardest part to get to terms with." Teng Biao mentioned his already deceased parents, saying it was a form of relief to him that they no longer could worry about him. In his home county, no one in his family had ever been admitted to Peking University. So when he got in, his father felt deeply honored. In 2003, when Teng Biao was named one of the top ten figures in the legal system by the Chinese Ministry of Justice and China Central Television, his father was even prouder. His father died in 2005. Teng Biao said: "It was only shortly after he had passed away that I became an enemy of the state. I feel really glad [that he didn't live to see this]."

In 2005, Xiao Shu arrived in Guangzhou to join *Southern Weekly* (Nanfang Zhoumo) and began his career as a media commentator. In 2008, he sent his only child to Australia to attend high school for two years and later for another four years of college. Being able to send his child to study abroad was a major relief. He said: "I didn't really care whether I got arrested myself, but I was worried how it might affect my child's studies abroad. So, at the time I engaged in some real estate speculation. I bought and sold two apartments and used the profits to support my child's studies. What I am trying to say is, I knew that I wouldn't be able to pursue this line of work for much longer." Similarly, environmentalist Gao Guizi sent his child to Finland to attend university. Gao and his family held the Western value system and educational ideals in even higher regard than did the average Chinese citizen. The fact that their children were abroad made the family back home in China more at ease.

As the experiences of these activists show, the moral and material support provided by family members are important factors that allowed the activists to persist in their pursuit of certain ideals. Some wives were direct partners in their endeavor; others lent financial support; at the very least, their wives were morally supportive of their commitment. Of course, children were another focus of the activists' concerns. They never wanted to sacrifice their children's well-being for the parents' activism; otherwise, the activists would not have been able to persevere as they did.

TENSIONS BETWEEN PERSONAL VALUES AND WORK UNIT VALUES

The workplace could also become a source of pressure for activists if their employer refused to support or even suppressed their actions. Employees of environmental and labor NGOs, such as Gao Guizi, Zhang Zhiru, and Chen Huihai, can in some ways be regarded as freelancers or self-employed. Since they have created their own workplaces based on their ideals, they do not have to worry about this kind of tension. However, if they are regular employees, that is, in the media or at a university, they are likely to experience tensions between their values and the expectations of their work environment.

On the one hand, activists want to live up to their ideals and values, but they also have to take into account their employer's requirements. The work units, or professional job environments they find themselves in, are frequently part of the party-state system. In the process of living up to their ideals,

activists have been confronted with institutional and political constraints. If the tensions between activists' personal and professional values could not be tolerated or reconciled, the consequence for the activists often was losing their job. Worse, they could no longer subsist inside China and had no choice but to go into exile.

In 2003, Teng Biao started teaching at the China University of Political Science and Law. To him, teaching at a top-tier university in Beijing was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. That same year, he, Xu Zhiyong, and others set up the charitable NGO Gongmeng, providing legal assistance in Beijing. They started to represent sensitive cases touching upon such issues as underground churches, family planning, and forced relocation. Of these, the persecution of Christians and Falun Gong practitioners was the most sensitive. Teng started to be a source of concern for his university and was being watched.

The university leadership put pressure on him, asking him not to participate in politically sensitive activities. In September 2004, when an online student platform at Peking University was shut down by the school, Teng Biao received an invitation to take part in a public lecture in support of the students. However, on the same day, the dean personally came to his home to convey instructions from the university's president, telling him to stay at home and not to go to Peking University. The dean also forwarded another message from the president, saying that "even if you decide to go, we will stop you at the entrance of Peking University."

The pressure mounted by the university did not stop Teng Biao's activities as a human rights lawyer outside the school. Because of his achievements as a human rights lawyer, he was selected by *Asia Weekly* as the 2005 Person of the Year in Asia. Beginning in 2005, Teng Biao and his colleagues became involved in assisting the civil rights activist Chen Guangcheng, who has been blind since birth. On several occasions, they conducted field surveys of the brutal family planning practices in Linyi, Shandong province, the hometown of Chen Guangcheng. Their field reports were eventually compiled and published as *The Chen Guangcheng Report: Coercive Family Planning in Linyi*. In 2006 Teng Biao was counsel for Chen Guangcheng, who was sentenced to four years and three months in prison.

In January 2008, when Teng was preparing to travel to Thailand to attend an international conference, his passport was confiscated by customs agents at the airport. In June that same year, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Justice canceled his lawyer's license; in December, he became one of the first sponsors

of Charter 08, a manifesto calling for greater human rights and democratic freedoms in China that was signed by more than three hundred dissidents and human rights activists. His university barred him from teaching; he would receive only a basic salary. He said he had expected something like that would happen.

What Teng Biao did not anticipate, however, was that his wife's high-paying and prestigious job in the private sector would also be severely affected by his actions. His wife, Wang Ling, started working for the Leyard Group, a high-tech LED manufacturer, in Beijing in 2000 and worked her way up to the position of supervisor. When Teng Biao visited the United States in 2014, his wife and daughter sneaked into Southeast Asia and eventually joined Teng in the United States. After that, Wang Ling ran Leyard's international department in New York for more than a year, until she was forced to leave Leyard in 2016. Wang could only share her experiences online: "After arriving in the United States, I continued to work hard for the company for more than a year. However, 'relevant departments' of the Chinese government exerted tremendous pressure on the company, forcing me to leave Leyard's international department. I didn't do anything wrong. Teng has already paid dearly himself, and now [they] want to make me guilty by association. This makes me sad and angry. But I am so proud of him."[5]

Xiao Shu's first job after graduating from university was to teach history at a medical school in Wuhan. Back then, he was considered the school's best teacher. But after the 1989 formation of the prodemocracy movement, the conservatives in the school gained control, and the school launched an investigation into Xiao's role in the events of June 4; the probe went on for a whole year. The school was originally trying to have him removed, but Xiao Shu's dean managed to retain him. Xiao was transferred to the library reference room and was not allowed to give classes. Xiao Shu felt wronged and did not show up for work anymore. Instead, he took care of the children at home and received a basic salary to get along. During that time, he spent three years writing a book; in 1995, seven years later, his academic titles were restored and he was finally allowed to return to school. Between 2002 and 2005, Xiao Shu worked as an editor at *China Reform Magazine* in Beijing and would still regularly post commentary online. When Zhao Ziyang, who had served as China's premier from 1980 to 1987, died in 2005, Xiao Shu wrote two posts on the internet that brought him to the attention of state security. He was kept under house arrest in a hotel for five days and barred from participating in a

memorial ceremony for Zhao Ziyang. Later they put Xiao on a train back to Wuhan and warned him not to return to Beijing for work.

Beginning in 2005, Xiao Shu worked as the chief commentator at *Southern Weekly*, and, he told me, from time to time also found himself in a tense relationship between "realizing the ideal of speech and taking his employer's wishes into consideration." He believed he was part of a pragmatic faction. While writing editorials for six years, despite angering the government, he did not bring about immediate danger to himself. He told me: "I was not so reckless; I had the risks under control; I understood the internal rules of the system and continued to break through those restrictions on speech. . . . If my remarks could just break through a little, I broke them as much as possible. As long as a breakthrough to 1.5 points is possible, I will never stop at 1.4 points. Probably most people think one can only break through to 1.5 points, but I had chosen to break through to 1.51 and 1.52. . . . But should you break more, you're done, and you're not just risking yourself but also the *Southern Weekly*—I wouldn't do that kind of thing."

Although Xiao Shu considered himself cautious, using all the space given to free speech at the *Southern Weekly*, all of his precautions could not prevent his eventual forced exit. During the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, *Southern Weekly* produced a series of investigative reports into the many "tofu-dreg schoolhouses" (*Doufuzha xiaoshe*). These reports pointed out that the poorly constructed schools were built while Zhou Yongkang was the main official in charge of Sichuan. At the time, Zhou Yongkang had already been promoted to a position in the central government as minister of public security, commanding even more power. During the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, a protest against corruption, poverty and political corruption in Tunisia that forced the president to step down, the Ministry of Public Security set up a task force to investigate Xiao Shu. The group produced two reports that were submitted to Wang Yang, who later became a member of the Politburo Standing Committee but then was party secretary of Guangdong province, stating that Xiao Shu was connected to the Jasmine Revolution. Later, Xiao Shu was put on academic leave; after that he quit his job entirely.

TENSIONS BETWEEN PERSONAL VALUES AND PERSONAL SECURITY

On the one hand, activists want to live up to their ideals, but they are also aware of the truth that "where there's life, there is hope." They don't wish to

become martyrs, and they manage to avoid clashes so extreme that they would result in a prison sentence. However, they continue to test state repression, trying to squeeze out small reforms. If they never collided with the state-set boundaries and did only things the state allowed, they wouldn't have become activists, let alone able to live up to their ideals. Most of them have been subject to state security surveillance, intimidation, and harassment for years. After all this time they have even grown familiar with some of the state security personnel and also tried to satisfy state security demands for information about their activities. The activists are well aware that whoever is engaged in such actions in China won't be able to keep any secrets. Everything happens under the state's watchful eye. If they try to satisfy their ideal values too directly, they will immediately endanger their personal safety. So they almost always are making tiny steps forward amid high tension and constant reconsideration. Especially in recent years under the Xi Jinping administration, in spite of economic development, China's attitude towards political dissidents, human rights lawyers, and labor activists has not become more liberal, and they believe that the government has become even more repressive. China has seen a growing incidence of harassment, detentions, and disappearances of activists, journalists, lawyers, intellectuals, and publishers. This trend has been reinforced by the passage of new, tougher security and surveillance laws in China.[6]

The individuals interviewed for this study include lawyers, activists, intellectuals, and journalists. All of them have been subjected to surveillance, intimidation, house arrest, and even assault by national security officers in the past.[7] As an active human rights lawyer, Teng Biao probably would have been jailed by now if he hadn't left China in 2014. Zhang Zhiru, Chen Huihai, and Duan Yi all have close working relationships with and links to labor activists who were detained during the purge of NGOs in Guangdong province in December 2015.

Zhang Zhiru has been a long-term person of interest for Shenzhen state security personnel. His labor service center was able to resume work only one year after the government ordered it closed in 2012. In April 2014, during the massive forty-thousand-person strike at Yue Yuen's shoe factories in Dongguan, Zhang Zhiru provided workers with negotiating tactics and legal advice through QQ groups.[8] He encouraged workers to stand up, run for election as workers' representatives, and negotiate with management. After he and Chen Huihai had finally persuaded six workers to come out and meet with them,

Zhang was taken away by state security police that same night and placed under house arrest in Guangzhou for three days. The workers with whom Zhang had been in contact during those few days also were approached by state security agents and given a warning the next day.

In December 2015, during the purge of NGOs in Guangdong province, Chen Huihai was detained by state security officers in a hotel room for five days. He was not able to contact his family for several days. During that period Zhang Zhiru, Chen Huihai, and Duan Yi all were subject to state security surveillance and warned in person that they would be taken into custody if they publicly voiced concern about the arrest of the labor activist Zeng Feiyang and other labor NGO employees. When talking about his relationship with state security officers, Chen Huihai mentioned that "these state security officers really know all about my situation. They actually agree with our practice of protecting workers' rights. A sentence the national security officers would often utter was that 'we are just executing commands from higher up; there's nothing we can do.'"

Teng Biao has also been kidnapped by state security personnel three times in the past. On the evening of March 6, 2008, he was snatched off the street and held incommunicado for two days. On February 19, 2011, for echoing the protests of the Jasmine Revolution that spread to several other countries, some activists, who may have been from outside China, called on Chinese citizens to express their displeasure about the country's lack of reforms and officials' corruption by silently meeting in front of department stores or other public areas. Teng Biao's home was raided once again, and he was put in secret detention for seventy days. During that time, he endured unthinkable physical and mental torture. However, he wasn't particularly fearful of those detentions. He understood the government's actions as a stern warning. Every time he was released he would restrain himself for several months and not actively participate. He told me: "I call this 'retreating an inch, advancing a foot.' I retreat an inch and wait until the attention has passed, then I advance a foot and will do an even bigger, more vigorous thing the next time around. For example, when I planned to do something in the past, the police or my school would try to persuade me, warn me, and I might agree to a compromise, and not go through with it, [thereby] giving them face. After a month or so, I would then do even greater things, seizing the opportunity when they were not paying attention."

Xiao Shu gained his first experience of dealing with state security agents when he worked as the executive editor of *China Reform* (Zhongguo Gaige)

magazine in Beijing in 2002. At that time, he often published articles in online forums criticizing the current politics. He recalled: "I was often invited by state security agents to drink tea. They would warn me not cause any trouble in Beijing. Otherwise, they could run me out of the city at any time." When Zhao Ziyang, China's reformist party general secretary who was removed from power and put under house arrest after the Tiananmen protests, died in 2005, Xiao Shu published two posts commemorating Zhao in an online forum. It led his being interviewed by state security personnel. He was then placed under house arrest in a hotel for five days. As Chinese New Year was approaching, the state security agents bought him a train ticket and put him on a train back to Wuhan. In addition to intimidating him, state security prevented him from attending Zhao Ziyang's memorial service and funeral. After that, the magazine where Xiao Shu worked came under pressure by state security, leading the publisher to tell him that while they would continue to edit his articles and pay him for his work, he could not return to Beijing. So Xiao Shu became a senior commentator at *Southern Weekly* in Guangdong province. Xiao Shu likes to call the time between 2005 and 2011 the "golden age" because during that period there was almost no harassment by state security agents. During that period there was an unspoken rule that China's state security would not cause news professionals any trouble. News media were supervised either by the Ministry of Propaganda or the party secretary. If state security really wanted to find someone, they would go through the newspaper's internal management channels and not target a reporter directly. But in 2011, the Jasmine Revolution's global surge caused China's national security departments particular concern. The security agents considered Xiao Shu a threat to political stability and therefore put pressure on the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee to relieve him of his duties at *Southern Weekly*.

In the minds of these activists there exists a precise evaluating system that is constantly trying to figure out the severity of the clampdown and what punishment their actions might provoke. They understand the law; they know how state security police are operating. They are also able to assess their own influence, as well as the trend of events at home and abroad. Therefore, they have been able to avoid the greatest risks during each new action they dare to take. For example, organizing political parties, an especially risky undertaking, would not even be a consideration. Nevertheless, since 2013 the power of the Xi Jinping administration to monitor and suppress civil society organizations and freedom of speech, as well as the intensity and the length of the

crackdown, has far exceeded activists' previous expectations. The risk to their personal safety is ever more direct and serious. This can surely be described as the period with the most heavy-handed rule in China's post-1978 era.

TENSIONS BETWEEN PERSONAL VALUES AND MAKING A LIVING

Activists might overcome considerations of personal safety and family, but they still require economic resources to be able to live up to their ideals. To promote its work, an organization needs funds to buy equipment and hire qualified personnel to organize events. How could activists raise the money they needed to underwrite their activities and pay for their necessities?

Many of the NGOs established by Chinese activists, such as labor services organizations and environmental groups, have long relied on the financial support of foreign organizations. In 2004, when Zhang Zhiru began to work in labor services, he and his partners working off loans for three and a half years and were without any form of income. Beginning in 2007, they received the first project-based grant by the New York–based group China Labor Watch (CLW), which subsidized the rent for their office space in Shenzhen, staff salaries, and administrative expenses, or about 10,000 RMB per month. In 2008, also relying on CLW funds, they opened new offices and a worker activity center in the Tangxia and Chang'an townships of Dongguan. Around the same time the U.S. State Department invited Zhang to come to the United States for three weeks as a cultural ambassador and visit the U.S. government's Department of Labor as well as some labor organizations in the Midwest. This provided him with renewed encouragement and moral support.

Duan Yi, another activist involved in a labor NGO, found that his family background and career as a lawyer helped him to accumulate more money and social capital than many of his contemporaries. In the 1990s, Duan Yi practiced law in Shenzhen, where he made a lot of money. In mid-2000, after getting involved in the labor rights movement, he received grants from people and organizations in Beijing and overseas in addition to his private funds. In 2012, he established the Beijing Mingde Labor Relations and Employment Institute (Beijing Mingde Laodong Guanxi Yu Jiuye Yanjiusuo). Beijing Mingde held several conferences focused on collective bargaining. Via the institute, Duan Yi also received funding from friends in Beijing. A labor rights colleague of Duan Yi's said: "We didn't know where his money came from. He wouldn't

tell us. Every time he ran out of money, he would go to Beijing and come back with a few hundred thousand yuan."

In recent years, labor NGOs in the Pearl River Delta, including those led by Zhang Zhiru, Duan Yi, and Chen Huihai, have been receiving a significant amount of funding from Hong Kong's China Labor Bulletin (CLB). However, the relationship between the labor NGOs and CLB is not characterized by par-ticular trust or harmony. Labor NGO employees have complained that CLB does not regard them as partners and puts very strict regulations on their finances and activities. "Every receipt has to be drawn up clearly; we even need to state with whom we have been eating. Even if we were invited, we need to put down by whom, their phone number, everything. For instance, if we sup-port an individual case with legal fees of 6,000 or 8,000 yuan, they want us to explicitly tell the worker that this money has been provided by CLB Hong Kong."

Complaints by labor NGOs in the Pearl River Delta about the dwindling financial support from foreign organizations, combined with the central government's crackdown on labor NGOs in the area near the end of 2015, temporarily halted the funding partnership from 2015 to 2017. Labor NGOs, including the workers' rights groups of Duan Yi and Chen Huihai, have now fallen into financial difficulties and can operate only when they receive sporadic donations from friends and private donors.

Making matters worse, on January 1, 2017, China's new Foreign NGO Management Law took effect. It led many foreign foundations and institutions to halt their programs in China and stop channeling funds or issuing new grants to their Chinese partners, in line with the stipulations of the new law.[9]

After the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Gao Guizi and his wife established the Sichuan 512 Civil Relief Services Center to coordinate civil NGOs involved in reconstruction work. In 2012, the center became the Sichuan Shangming Social Development Research Center, mainly providing training, workshops, and the like, as well as information and consulting services, to Sichuan NGOs. It employed four full-time staff, funded by national and international foundations, including Oxfam (United Kingdom), the Ford Foundation (United States), and the Narada Foundation (Guangzhou, China). In 2012, the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) also joined as a financial supporter. However, CFPA sponsors quite frequently voiced reservations about the work of the service center, causing tensions in the relationship. This had happened in 2015 when Gao Guizi refused to continue to cooperate with

CFPA. Gao put it like this: "They are lofty, very bureaucratic. We won't allow ourselves to be pushed around like that."

The activists also relied on their ability and luck to bring in more revenue, and only then were they able to realize their ideals. Apart from his relatively high salary at *Southern Weekly*, the political commentator Xiao Shu depended mainly on the investments in real estate he had made in Guangzhou in recent years to underwrite his son's education at a university in Australia. Xiao Shu said: "I sold the rooms at a profit and made some money, and I felt much more relieved after that. When my son went to Australia to study, I sold two apartments. Now that he is back home, I still have two apartments in Guangzhou, and so right now I have nothing to be afraid of, really."

Lawyer Teng Biao, in fact, had no fixed source of income when he went to Hong Kong as a visiting scholar in 2012, and that situation continued until 2014 when he moved to the United States. Until she was forced to leave her job because of pressure on her employer, his wife had success supervising her company's international department in New York. Despite her firing, Teng Biao said he has no immediate economic pressure and can fully devote himself to his work as an activist.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study discusses an aspect of pursuing a good public life in contemporary China. Based on traditional Chinese principles and CCP ideology, activists defined their happiness as pursuing universal values of justice and equality, as well as maintaining the moral integrity and ideals of intellectuals serving and speaking out on behalf of the disadvantaged. Although these values receive validation from Western democracies, they carry traces of Chinese socialist ideology and nationalism in China's authoritarian regime. These ideals and values are obviously different from concepts of individualism and civil rights in Western societies. They are products of Chinese politics and culture and therefore are indigenous to today's Chinese society. While practicing their ideals of a public life, activists have been wrestling with conflicting values and competing narratives, the "warring gods" to which Weber referred. Activists must make value choices, which are not grounded in instrumental rationality because they are commitments to causes. These conflicting values and competing narratives are situated in Chinese institutions—Chinese ideology, the Chinese family, and the Chinese authoritarian government—and their con-

figurations in China today. By coping with conflicting values and competing narratives, activists have been pursuing a better public life for the people of China and for themselves. They derive happiness from making Chinese society better.

Looking back at China's late reform era from the 1990s to 2013, it can be observed that from the start of Jiang Zemin's term as president of the People's Republic in 1993 until the first year of the Hu-Wen administration in 2003, domestic and international pressures led China to gradually improved its human rights record, allowing limited space for its nascent civil society. However, since Xi Jinping assumed office as president in March 2013, the suppression of civil society and public space has intensified, and China has lost the liberalization it had achieved in the reform era. In 1998, during Jiang Zemin's service as general secretary of the CCP, the Chinese government signed the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and in 2008, then-premier Wen Jiabao promised to implement the Convenant as soon as possible. By 2015, hundreds of lawyers and activists had issued an open letter to representatives and members of the National People's Congress (NPC), and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference strongly urged the NPC to ratify the ICCPR and guarantee the political rights entrusted to Chinese citizens by the country's constitution. Yet, since Xi Jinping's ascent to power, implementation of the Convenant has seemed less likely. The *2017 Annual Report* of the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China states that Chinese authorities have continued to use the law as an instrument of repression to expand control over Chinese society, criminalizing human rights lawyers and advocates.[10] The experiences of these activists in China in the 1990s and 2000s may not be applicable under Xi's rule or in the future. Certainly, whether they can continue to derive happiness from making Chinese society better also remains to be seen.

NOTES

1. I focus on those activists who were allowed to exist in contemporary China. Not included are imprisoned political dissidents. However, some of my interviewees are unable to return to China for political reasons at this point, and some had been deprived of their liberty for a short time in the past.

2. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "Prosecution of Labor Advocates Has Chilling Effect on Labor NGOs, Strikes Continue," January 21, 2016, updated February 22, 2017, http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis

/prosecution-of-labor-advocates-has-chilling-effect-on-labor-ngos. For more information about the December 2015 crackdown, see Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "Guangdong Authorities Arrest Labor Rights Advocates," January 21, 2016, https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/guangdong-authorities-arrest-labor-rights-advocates.

3. In 2003, university graduate Sun Zhigang was beaten to death in a Guangzhou detention center. He had been detained after being unable to produce his temporary living permit and his identity card when he was stopped by the police. Teng Biao had just received his PhD from Peking University and was working as a lecturer at the China University of Politics and Law. When Sun's death was reported, it caused a national outrage, and mounting public pressure forced the government to quickly dismantle regulations controlling the movement of migrant workers in an attempt to prevent a similar tragedy in the future.

4. In 2003, he was named one of the top ten figures in the legal system for that year by the Chinese Ministry of Justice and China Central TV. He was also given the Gleitsman Award for Achievement by the Gleitsman Foundation, an organization dedicated to recognizing and encouraging leadership in social activism worldwide. In 2005, *Asia Newsweek* named him one of China's top fourteen human rights lawyers and one of its People of the Year in Asia. In 2007, Dr. Teng received the Human Rights Prize of the French Republic.

5. Wang Ling, "A Monologue in Light Rain," *Aboluo Wang* [Apollo Net], October 4, 2016, http://tw.aboluowang.com/2016/1004/813613.html.

6. China's new national security law was enacted in July 2015 by the National People's Congress. The law lacks specificity but is worrying in its scope, potentially including every sphere of activity, foreign as well as domestic, that falls within the realm of national security.

7. While many activists have been sentenced to prison, none of the respondents interviewed for this article were.

8. QQ is a social media application by Chinese Tencent Holding Ltd. that provides microblogging, as well as group discussions and voice chat services.

9. The law requires foreign NGOs to register with the Ministry of Public Security or its local bureaus and subjects foreign NGOs to close government scrutiny and gives the police broad powers to inspect their offices, look into their documents, and even seal off their assets. As of December 2017, no groups advocating human rights, workers' rights, or the rule of law had successfully registered. As a result, some foreign NGOs have frozen all their work in China, and some have completely retreated from the country.

10. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *2017 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 2017), https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2017-annual-report.