



## INTRODUCTION

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The societal transformations of the post-Mao era in China have been accompanied by increasing anxiety about the quality, authenticity and value of people, goods and words. While China no longer suffers the general lack of vitality and modernity that once made the country appear to be ‘the sick man of Asia’, a century of political and economic sea changes has produced more specific states of lack and much uncertainty as to what is true, beautiful and good. This uncertainty often seems to be articulated as doubts about the interior make-up of things. Suspecting that persons, objects, institutions and ideologies are not what they seem, critical voices accuse them of emptiness and they are thus laid open to new investments of meaning and value. Ethnographies of contemporary China describe how state discourse on population quality constructs ‘the people’ in terms of lack of quality and present this perceived lack as a key to the coding of social differences in China. The growing popular interest in religion over the past decades is likewise said to stem from a lack, a moral or spiritual vacuum, and the valorization of authentic inner selves thus goes hand in hand with critique of an exterior world deemed to be hollow and false. Diagnoses of lack seem to cut across a whole range of different domains: people in search of a new faith, educational reforms, counterfeit goods, housing bubbles, conspicuous consumption and official rhetoric are all described as embodying a variety of vacuities – lack of quality, moral bearings,

strength, value or fulfilment. The seemingly pervasive concern with states of lack and emptiness suggests that people and things are seen to be drained of content, value or meaning, and in this volume we pursue the idea that a focus on emptiness and fullness may offer important insights into ongoing negotiations of quality, authenticity and value in China.

## **Emptiness in Contemporary China**

In contemporary China, politics and emptiness go hand in hand. Since president Xi Jinping introduced his new political slogan of ‘The Chinese Dream’ (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦) much speculation has gone into discerning its meaning and scope. Chinese citizens ask themselves ‘is this empty rhetoric or does it have some political content?’ Chinese slogans are commonly interpreted as depicting the opposite of present social reality (Steinmüller 2011; Thøgersen 2003). Former president Hu Jintao, for example, presented the idea of the ‘harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) at a time when growing social unrest represented a serious threat to the party. President Xi Jinping’s invocation, quoted in the *Economist* (2013), that ‘young people should dare to dream’ should likewise be understood in the context of a rapid decrease of chances for social mobility. And at the same time even though the actual content may seem empty, such rhetorical flourishes will most probably have political consequences. Profound scepticism and sometimes outright cynicism is widespread in China, and the content of China’s changing political slogans remains mysterious and opaque, even to party members themselves, but few Chinese citizens doubt that the government has the capacity to implement far-reaching plans.

During the Mao era, political slogans at the height of the Cultural Revolution became so exaggerated and disconnected from social reality that the aftermath has been described as a period of returning from heaven back to earth (Croll 1991: 11). Today, billboards scattered across urban China promote slogans such as ‘Patriotism, Virtue and Civilization’ accompanied by futuristic images of high-rise utopias that look like wishful thinking. It is not an uncommon experience to return to China to find that seemingly unrealistic plans for high-rise development have already been executed, but it also happens that they prove to be Potemkin villages, superficial beautifications that are known in China as ‘face projects’ (Steinmüller 2011: 22).

In an article called ‘The State of Irony in China’, Hans Steinmüller gives two compelling examples of ironies about past and future that speak forcefully about the present condition of China. We recount these two stories here because they share common ground with the theme of political and moral emptiness discussed in the chapters in this volume. First, Steinmüller tells the story of an old cynical peasant cadre who is the laughing stock of the village, because he nostalgically longs for a Maoist past. Despite the fact that he suffered real hardship under the Cultural Revolution, he now idealizes the Maoist era and dismisses the contemporary political slogans of transforming

the Chinese countryside as empty. ‘What they call a “model village” and a “new countryside” is really just a “face project”, Lao Ma said with indignation. They just use some part of the resources they get from higher government levels to paint the facades of the houses next to the public road and then “eat” the bigger part of public funds themselves’ (Steinmüller 2011: 22). Second, Steinmüller recounts the cynicism expressed by Lao Chen, the narrator in a dystopic science fiction novel called *The Fat Years – China 2013*. The novel paints a picture of life in China in the year 2013, where prosperity goes hand in hand with social amnesia. There are no problems in the People’s Republic and everyone is happy in the new harmonious society. A very small minority, however, is concerned with a month that has gone missing, and Lao Chen is gradually convinced that something important occurred in that missing month. However, no one really remembers what it was and all public records from the time appear to have been retrospectively cleansed. While the majority has forgotten the Cultural Revolution and the events of the missing month (a reference to the political turmoil of 1989), Lao Ma and Lao Chen find that something crucial has been lost. ‘While everyone else is fully aware that “times have changed”, Lao Ma is stubbornly sticking to the Maoist mores of old. While everyone else lives happily in the new age of prosperity, Lao Chen is struggling to conceal his cynicism and growing disbelief’ (ibid.: 24). In Lao Ma’s case, the gaps in contemporary Chinese society become apparent by contrasting the present with a lost age of Maoist morality. In Lao Chen’s case, the present is measured against the fat years of a not-so-distant future, but this golden age turns out to be hollow because it builds upon amnesia in the present. Measured against the past or the future and diagnosed with either a lack of morality or a lack of memory, contemporary China is presented in these two stories as a society struggling with different forms of lack. We suggest that the gaps and absences pointed out by Lao Ma and Lao Chen are indicative of a broad societal concern with emptiness, and this emptiness, and the ways it becomes manifest in different domains in Chinese society, is what we set out to explore in this volume.

## **Lack and Desire in the Ethnography of Contemporary China**

Among the first to point out the central role of conceptions of lack in contemporary Chinese politics, Ann Anagnost described how elite discourse on population quality contributed to ‘the concerted construction of “the people” in terms of lack, unready for political sovereignty but, as we shall see, being disciplined and rendered docile for the employ of global capital’ (1997: 78). Iterating themes from the May 4<sup>th</sup> modernizers of the early twentieth century, this renewed concern with low quality and lack of civility in the late twentieth century provided the Communist Party with a new sense of purpose: As vanguard modernizers, only they could help the Chinese population escape from their state of general backwardness (ibid.). Deferring claims to political sovereignty and citizenship among native populations with a ‘not

yet' was central to the colonialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and it was hardly unusual for newly independent elites in nations with (semi-) colonial pasts to adopt a view of their countrymen as being, in some respects, lacking. In the case of India, Dipesh Chakrabarty thus notes a 'tendency to read Indian history in terms of a lack, an absence, or incompleteness, that translates into "inadequacy"' (2000: 32). At the level of the population, the perceived absence of political maturity served as a justification for continued colonial rule, but ideas about lack also operated at the level of subjects, who were deemed to lack the sort of education, individuality and private life that would justify political rights as citizens. This reading of constructions of lack as part of a governmentally orchestrated deferral of full subjecthood and rights to political participation may contribute to elucidate the contemporary discourse of lack, backwardness and low population quality. But there are many other kinds of lack in China: while the party-state propagates the idea of a lack of quality, party members are themselves criticized for their lack of morality and for having created a society without moral bearings.

Chinese society is often said to be troubled by a 'moral crisis' or 'spiritual vacuum' that has lasted ever since the end of Maoism. A widespread concern with a perceived lack of public morality is not only evident in popular discourse, but has also been integrated in anthropological analyses such as Liu Xin's (2000) description of the 'immoral economy' of rural Shaanxi and Yan Yunxiang's (2003, 2009) account of the emergence of the 'uncivil individual' as an unfortunate outcome of the socialist state's attack on traditional social institutions in rural China. In a more recent anthology entitled *Deep China*, Kleinman et al. (2011) explore how subjectivities in China are affected by this lack of moral consistency. Delving below the surface of government policies, social institutions and market activities in order to elucidate how the person has been remade in China over the past three decades, Kleinman (2011) sees indications that the interiority of the person is deepening and complexifying and he suggests that 'the divided self' is an apt description for persons who live with internal divides between public and private selves and who are simultaneously complicit in and critical of the workings of the authoritarian state. While Kleinman highlights the positive side of this process by describing how people embark upon individual quests for moral purpose and meaning in a variety of ways, the backdrop to this expansion of subjectivity and interior space is an exterior world troubled by immorality and meaninglessness.

Where the socialist state operated at the level of public morality, Lisa Rofel (2007) would argue, the postsocialist state operates at the level of desire, and the shaky state of public morality in contemporary China reflects the emergence of the desiring subject, an individual whose sexual, material and affective self-interest is deemed to be legitimate and natural. People in China did not simply cast off socialism and discover inner selves; rather, such interiorities grew out of engagements with public culture and gradually became furnished with the longings and desires appropriate to a neoliberal economy.

Like Kleinman, Rofel emphasizes the emergence of complex inner selves in the postsocialist era, but while Kleinman tends to describe the expansion of interiority more as a retreat from a morally dubious society, Rofel suggests that these new subjects with interior aspirations and desires are shaped by their engagement with a neoliberal economy. Lack is not an explicit issue in Rofel's analysis of the production of desire in contemporary China and desire is conceptualized by reference to Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari rather than to Lacan (Rofel 2007: 211 n. 43), but the production of desire would seem to go hand in hand with the production of lack. If desires, longings and yearnings have an object, the absence of that which is desired must first be established and in this sense, as the flip side of desire, lack is an implicit theme in ethnographies of desire.

## Reading Lack Otherwise

Whether presented as a concern with low quality, as a moral crisis, or as an implicit corollary of the production of desiring subjects, constructions of lack and desire play a central role in the contemporary ethnography of China. While drawing inspiration from these different approaches to emerging subjectivities, this volume is an attempt to heed Chakrabarty's injunction 'To read "lack" otherwise' (2000: 34). In the alternative reading presented here, lack of civility and lack of morality are simply two among many forms of lack that shape desires in contemporary China. We argue that such specific forms of lack, absence, incompleteness and inadequacy may be interpreted as indications of a more pervasive concern with emptiness that haunts contemporary China in a variety of ways, an emptiness that is not only at work within emerging subjectivities and the semiotic world of signs but equally manifest in the phenomenal world of bodies and objects. By subsuming lack under the broader category of emptiness, we attempt to lift the lid on a Pandora's box of ethnography that shows how emptiness pertains to words and things as well as persons and populations and how it can be simultaneously threatening and productive.

'Lack', in Bruce Fink's reading of Lacan,

is the first step beyond nothingness. To qualify something as empty is to use a spatial metaphor implying that it could alternatively be full, that it has some sort of existence above and beyond its being full or empty. A metaphor often used by Lacan is that of something *qui manque à sa place*, which is out of place, not where it should be or usually is; in other words, something which is missing. Now for something to be missing, it must first have been present and localized; it must first have had a place. (Fink 1995: 52)

Discussions of lack may point to symbolic structures in which it becomes manifest, but according to Lacan, lack is also a necessary corollary of coming into being as a subject:

The most anguishing thing for the infant is precisely the moment when the relationship upon which he's established himself, of the lack that turns him into desire, is disrupted and this relationship is most disrupted when there is no possibility of any lack, when the mother is on his back all the while, and especially while she is wiping his backside. (Lacan 2014: 53–54)

If all its needs were immediately satisfied, a child would never have cause to learn how to speak, and it is through lack and its attendant desire, Lacan suggests, that a child comes into being as a subject. In this volume, we attempt to bring lack out of the intersubjective relationship between mother and child and explore more broadly how lack generates new desires and imaginaries in contemporary China and how it becomes an issue, not only in the becoming of subjects, but also in reforming and evaluating institutions, ideologies and material objects. The fact that Lacan has 'de-essentialized' Freud's libido from biological drives and emphasizes the role of language makes his ideas more clearly relevant to anthropology, as Sangren has pointed out (2004: 114). In this volume, we draw inspiration from Lacanian ideas about lack, but in order to bring contemporary China into focus, we have aimed to capture emptiness rather than lack. In China, we suggest, lack may be understood as a form of emptiness, and in contrast to lack, emptiness is a term that has a whole range of connotations in the Chinese language.

## Emptiness and Fullness

In Chinese philosophy, emptiness is not so much seen as a static reference to a symbolic system in which something is missing, but rather as a harbinger of change: 'Emptiness is not merely a neutral space serving to defuse the shock without changing the nature of the opposition. It is the nodal point where potentiality and becoming interweave, in which deficiency and plenitude, self-sameness and otherness, meet' (Cheng 1994: 51). The form of emptiness that we have in mind, is not, in the words of Francois Jullien (2004: 110), the non-being of Buddhism (*kong* 空) but the functional emptiness of Daoism (*xu* 虛) that operates in relation to fullness, an emptiness that animates things and forms and augurs changes in the stasis of excessive fullness. Emptiness appears to have a particular cachet in the changing social landscape of contemporary China, and the chapters in this volume explore the implications of emptiness and fullness in education, politics and religion, as well as in buildings, bodies and gemstones. As a common point of reference, we take the Chinese word *xu*, which literally means empty and has the added connotations of false, weak and virtual. The opposite of being empty is to be full (*shi* 实), which also implies solid and real. Taken together, these terms constitute a classical binary that runs through Daoist philosophy, Chinese medicine, military strategy, linguistics and landscape painting. But while they carry rich philosophical connotations, ideas of emptiness and fullness are also embedded in mundane practices and everyday language.

In a book entitled *Appetites* (2002), Judith Farquhar explores shifting desires for food and sex in contemporary China and points to the dyad of *xu* and *shi* as a key to understanding the ‘pathologies of uneven distribution’ (ibid.: 124) that have affected not just individual bodies but also the People’s Republic of China as a whole. Rendered as depletion and repletion in the domain of Chinese medicine and as deficiency and excess in the domain of economics, Farquhar’s reading of Chinese texts on medicine and food suggest that emptiness and fullness describe not only medical problems, but also social ones:

Whatever the domain of material life, these sources suggest, the logic of excess and deficiency can accommodate and clarify a wide range of experiences. Further, because this dyad is of special concern in Chinese medicine, one can read the social from a foothold in medical practice. Rather than understanding medicine as a figure that *expresses* the form of a broader contextualizing society or social structure as *analogous* to the biological body – medicine and society are not separate entities like text and content or map and territory – what I seek is a certain level at which Chinese medicine shares forms of habitus and common sense with other, parallel yet overlapping domains of the social, in this case eating and writing about eating. (2002: 136)

The contributions in this volume support Farquhar’s claim that the logic of depletion and repletion is widely known and applied to a variety of phenomena in China, but as the chapters abandon Chinese medicine as a foothold and pursue the dyad through different field sites, it becomes clear that it is not so much fullness as emptiness that causes concern in ethnographic settings ranging from rural homes to urban, underground churches, from educational institutions to movements for cultural revival, and from ghost cities to the workshops of jade carvers. It also becomes clear that the specific instances and invocations of emptiness and fullness addressed in the individual contributions lend themselves to interpretations from a multiplicity of analytical vantage points.

## The Chapters

Through the lens of emptiness and fullness we here present new ethnographies that shed light on the relationship between the state and ideology, words and action. Zachary Howlett in the chapter ‘China’s Examination Fever and the Fabrication of Fairness: My Generation was Raised on Poison Milk’ addresses the ideology of the Chinese national college entrance exams (*gaokao* 高考) through the lens of what he calls ‘the fabrication of fairness’. He points to what is seemingly a paradox, namely that despite glaring social differences in China, in particular between urban and rural areas, most Chinese believe that the college entrance examination is a relatively fair vehicle for social mobility. Therefore preparing students for the exam is like drilling soldiers for combat. High-school life thus resembles what Steven Sangren has called an

‘instituted fantasy’ (Sangren 2013), by which he points to the tension between institutional arrangements and the ideals towards which those arrangements are oriented. Ultimately unrealizable, they obscure the exploitative aspects of those arrangements. In this way Howlett argues that the achievement of fairness through examination represents an unrealizable ideal that nevertheless captivates many of those whom it institutionally disadvantages. As one high-school principal put it, ‘If we did not have *gaokao* there would be a revolution’ (Howlett, this volume).

Whereas Howlett’s ethnography tells us about the lack of social mobility from China’s marginal regions, Anders Sybrandt Hansen has carried out fieldwork among young Chinese elite party members in Beijing. 1 October 2009 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the People’s Republic of China and sixty years of rule for the Communist Party of China. Hansen took part in the celebration of the occasion, which involved a military parade, a mass pageant, and finally an evening gala on Tiananmen Square. President Hu Jintao held his address to the nation from Tiananmen and Hansen was initially intrigued to find that none of the students he spoke to, who had participated in the mass pageant, could bring to mind anything the president had actually said. Where the protagonists in Steinmüller’s account both point out the emptiness behind the scenes and the meaninglessness of contradictory slogans, Hansen in this volume sets out to answer an intriguing question; namely, why is it that ‘officialese’ (*guanhua* 官话) appears to work even when it is regarded as empty talk? He argues that the actual *content* of political slogans is largely beside the point. According to Hansen, we need to place the performance of *guanhua* in its social context of political ritual to appreciate how it manages to reinforce political compliance. Above and beyond the contents of ‘officialese’, *guanhua* rituals manage to convey to the Chinese public that the Chinese Communist Party has the right to declare and to compel silence, and that it has the ability and authority to choreograph social reality. The very fact that such ritual choreography is achieved ‘demonstrates the power of its designers and discourages its audience from alternative political engagement. *Guanhua* ritual in this way bolsters political compliance by reaffirming the seeming inevitability of the current political order’ (Hansen, this volume).

The fact that *guanhua* may to a large degree produce political compliance does not mean that Chinese citizens have no potential for imagining alternatives. In some cases, Susanne Bregnbæk argues, the fact that the Chinese Communist Party slogans strike listeners as empty and false partly explains the widespread conversion to house-church Christianity among young well-educated urbanites. As one of her interlocutors, Bolin, put it, ‘We have been brought up in a bubble of lies. And then when you get to a point where you totally disbelieve the government, then what can you believe?’ For Bolin, Christianity constituted an alternative moral horizon, a space of hope carved out in the emptiness and corruption of the public sphere. In other words, the sense of moral emptiness is here phrased and experienced as an inner void that conversion to Christianity can fill out. In this sense, Bregnbæk argues, what may at first glance appear as a retreat from politics into private house-churches



and a turning inwards, can also be a way of restoring a sense of agency and exercising the freedom to imagine alternatives.

From lack defined morally, politically and existentially, Michael Ulfstjerne's chapter 'The Tower and the Tower: Excess and Vacancy in China's Ghost Cities' speaks of emptiness in the concrete material shape of unfinished construction projects that were repositories of investment capital and wild fantasies during the economic boom and then came to serve as shelters for migrant workers with less ambitious projects once the bubble burst. Focusing on a real estate development called the Coal Tower, Ulfstjerne tells the story of the 'ghost town' of Ordos, which from being a poor outpost characterized by outbound migration and infertile soil became one of the fastest developing regions in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR). His ethnography conveys a chilling story of real estate speculation and the futuristic fantasies that underlie a cycle from economic boom via bubble to bust over the course of just a few years. Towards the end of 2011, the local real estate market crashed and turned millions of square meters of ongoing construction into premature ruins. The vacant space in the Coal Tower was initially read as a glorious future waiting to be filled out and imbued with a transformative potential that inspired utopian dreams of prosperity and practices of conspicuous consumption. However, when the real estate market collapsed entirely a few years later, the vacant spaces precipitated a reshuffling of social relations; as the occupants turned on each other in struggles over outstanding debts, migrant workers moved into the empty office space, and it became clear that the tower was not so much a promising real estate development as a ruin.

Kevin Carrico's chapter takes us from fantasies about the future to fantasies of the past. Focusing on the so-called Han Clothing Movement, whose members anchor their utopian longings in the glorious past of the Han Dynasty (From 206 BCE to 220 CE), Carrico describes the resurgence of this popular traditionalist majority ethnonationalist group and its paranoid fantasies about Manchu control. According to the Han Clothing Movement, the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 (which is generally understood as an anti-colonial revolution that brought Manchu rule to an end) was in fact only a first strike against Manchu domination and violence in a permanent Xinhai revolution that continues to this day. Far from today's urban China and what these members see as an empty wasteland of high-rise buildings, decadent clothing styles and individualized cut-throat competition, they envision a long lost world of courtyard houses, authoritarian harmony and national glory. The emptiness of the present, the members of this movement claim, is caused by the cultural barbarism of Manchus, who continue to occupy central places of governance, and Carrico shows how these young nationalists dream of filling the void with real and authentic Han Chinese culture. Somewhat like Steinmüller's old cadre, Lao Ma, the emptiness of the present for these young nationalists lies in the fullness of the past. Obviously, the Han Clothing Movement exhibits an unusual intensity in its desire to rebuild a glorious past, but President Xi Jinping's vision of the Chinese Dream would actually

seem to tap into similar sentiments by encouraging the Chinese people to overcome a century of colonial humiliation and contribute to the renaissance of Chinese civilization.

When members of the Han Clothing Movement suggest that the Chinese state apparatus, notably the National Health and Family Planning Commission, is animated by a demonic Manchu cabal with genocidal intentions, these paranoid fantasies bear an uncanny resemblance to the stories of possession recounted in Mikkel Bunkenborg's chapter. Taking emptiness in rural China as a point of departure, Bunkenborg presents cases of a local category of diseases known as 'empty diseases' (*xubing* 虛病) and suggests that possession by wild ghosts, spirits of deceased relatives or deities is predicated upon a prior condition of emptiness that lays the victim open to invasion from the outside. The emptiness that precedes possession is sometimes construed as a somatic depletion in a way that resonates with Chinese medicine, but emptiness also seems to occur as an effect of disrupted social relations and experiences of meaninglessness. Bunkenborg's use of the term 'horror vacui' alludes to the fact that emptiness is mostly associated with disease and danger in this part of China, but it is also a reference to a classical postulate in physics to the effect that there are no voids in nature, as they would immediately be filled with surrounding material. While possession by ghosts and deceased relatives may be horrifying, becoming a spirit medium may actually be a change for the better and the common denominator of the cases is that emptiness drives transformations and draws stuff from the outside into the interior of depleted bodies. Arthur and Joan Kleinman have argued that 'the study of depression in society shows us the sociosomatic reticulum (the symbolic bridge) that connects individuals to each other and to their life-world' (1985: 429), and the same might be said of these empty diseases that appear to be simultaneously somatic, social and semiotic. The causal connection between emptiness and possession makes it possible to speak of transactions across the boundaries of these distinct domains, and thus it offers a distinct way of thinking about the interconnections between body, society and self.

Henrik Kloppenborg Møller's study of the jade trade in south-west China shifts the focus from emptiness in bodies and persons to emptiness in material objects. Jade is initially traded in the form of 'betting stones', raw boulders with an opaque skin that may conceal precious kingfisher jade, and Møller describes how the deceptive surfaces of these indeterminate and potentially worthless boulders invite human investments of value, labour and meaning. While traders tend to regard jade stones as passive receptacles of economic value ascribed by humans, the carvers tend to present jade as having certain agential capacities in relation to the humans who deal with the stones. Jade stones are sometimes said to be predestined for certain owners, the carvers claim that the material guides the carving, and the finished pieces are said to absorb the energy of the wearer. When jade stones circulate as commodities, their indeterminacy constitutes a form of emptiness that invites ascriptions of value and suspicions of forgery. At the same time, however, jade stones are construed as being full of meaning and determination in ways that spill over

into the domain of humans. Relations between humans and jade stones thus are mutually constitutive, and Møller demonstrates how jade and people shape each other through processes of emptying and filling.

## Conclusion

Contemporary ethnography often describes the formation of subjectivities in post-Mao China as an ongoing construction of lack and desire, where subjects are made aware of their shortcomings through the state-sponsored discourse on population quality and trained to desire in appropriate ways through public culture. Reading ethnographies on China also gives an impression of a pervasive sense of moral crisis in contemporary China, a spiritual vacuum that has lasted pretty much since the death of Chairman Mao in 1976. This vacuum, however, is seldom addressed in any detail and it generally comes across as a context for processes of subject formation, not as an integral part. The point of departure for this volume is the idea that these two distinct developments, the formation of subjectivities through lack and desire and the widespread complaints about emptiness, are intimately connected and that experiences of emptiness play a crucial role in the formation of subjects and the transformation of contemporary Chinese society.

‘Who are you?’ is the central question that people ask the victims of empty diseases in the Hebei village studied by Bunkenborg, and emptiness is clearly not a context here, but something that affects the interior of subjects, something that makes it doubtful who they are and renders them open to possession and transformation. In a similar vein, Bregnbæk’s interlocutor experiences the general lack of morality in society at large as an inner void that was filled by conversion to Christianity. While it may be experienced in the interior of the person as physical exhaustion and spiritual want, emptiness is imagined as something that exists in the exterior world, and the contributions in this volume explore how institutions and ideologies as well as buildings and gems are prone to suspicions of emptiness and engage humans in processes of emptying and filling.

Discussions of emptiness in China serve to question whether things are what they seem and what they should be, and such discussions are critical points for understanding not just contemporary social realities but also the symbolic orders that these realities are measured against. Lack emerges as a problem in relation to an imagined modernity that is perpetually deferred and the building spree in Ordos seems to attest to a desire for instant modernization. But the infrastructure that was built to attract and harness such development remains empty and it now marks the gap between the present realities and the perfect modernity that might have been. For the members of the Han Clothing Movement, what is lacking in the present becomes apparent when they measure contemporary society against an imagined golden age, and emptiness seems to grow just as well in the gap between past and present as it does in the gap between the present and the future.

While the ethnographies of persons and things in this volume suggest that emptiness facilitates change and renders things open to new investments of meaning and value, the contributions that deal with social institutions seem rather less hopeful. Party rhetoric appears to work even without political substance and while the audience may balk at the emptiness, they do not appear to envision any possible alternative and much the same goes for the instituted fantasy of fairness in the university entrance examinations, where people note the discrepancy between ideals and realities without much hope that this emptiness will lead to meaningful changes. Presenting fresh ethnographic data from a broad variety of settings in China, this volume explores the critical role of dynamics of emptying and filling in China, and while the diversity of these ethnographic accounts militates against any single conclusion as to what this emptiness really is, they do suggest that experiences and suspicions of emptiness are integral to the ongoing transformations and enduring conflicts that shape subjectivities in the social landscape of contemporary China.

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