Modernity as a Moral Experience: Articulation of Mingyun in a Chinese County

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Introduction

I spent most of my childhood in Jinzhai, a Chinese county deep inside the mountains. It is my father's hometown. Geographically, it is located to the west of Yangtze River Delta, 373 miles from Shanghai. During my childhood, people in the county seat lived either in small self-built dwellings in the river valley or in the low-rise residential quarters built by state-owned enterprises, the legacy of the Maoist-socialist era. My father often took me to the river bend when the water was shallow. It was cold in the morning. A thin layer of mist floated above the river, shadowing the mountains in the distance.

Things began to change when I was 13 years old. Small hills were turned into construction sites. High-rise buildings gradually occupied the horizon. Paved with new asphalt, the roads became wider and smoother. People around me were talking about newly developed residential quarters, schools, and hospitals. Some praised the changes, while others expressed nostalgia. I tried to understand what happened. My parents told me it was “development.”

What happened in Jinzhai epitomized the rapid urbanization and modernization of China in the past four decades. The percentage of the population living in urban areas has risen from 17.9% in 1978, the start of China’s economic reforms, to 63.9% in 2020 (NBSC 2021, 31). The gross output of construction of various kinds has grown 21.1 times during the same period (NBSC 2021, 6). The development first took off in the coastal regions, such as Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta, then spread to inland cities and counties. At the time of Jinzhai’s rapid development in the 2010s, major urban centers in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, had already established their privileged status in terms of population, infrastructure, employment, education, and healthcare.

For a county like Jinzhai, “development” often entails the depopulation of rural villages, the construction of new urban districts near the old county seat, and the population outflow to major cities outside the county (Kipnis 2016). These trends have profoundly altered the physical landscape of Jinzhai and the spiritual world of its people since the 1980s. As people navigate themselves within the burgeoning market economy, they communicate their experiences with each other, comment on various stories they have heard, and form a joint way of seeing the world (Berger and Luckmann 1991). In this process, their personal biographies, in conjunction with historical experiences, are

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1 This paper is dedicated to my grandma, who passed away while I was finishing it.

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2 The Maoist-socialist era of China is the period from the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 to the start of China’s economic reform in 1978, which is characterized by a state-socialist structure and a planned economy.
“objectified, retained and accumulated” in their vocabulary as semantic fields around certain words (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 56).

For people I encountered during my fieldwork, one such word is mìngyún, which can be translated as “fate” in English. In this study, I investigate how people articulate the notion of mìngyún to interpret their lived experiences in a burgeoning market economy, and how this articulation serves as a response to the moral challenge brought about by a rapidly modernizing China: the changing relationship between wealth and agency.

**Theoretical Framework**

What do we mean by a “rapidly modernizing China”? What kind of “moral challenge” does it entail? To contextualize my research question, I first explore the concept of development in contemporary China from the perspective of modernization theories and their critiques. Next, I discuss human conditions in modern capitalist and industrial societies, focusing on the issue of moral confusion and alienation. Then I turn to the concept of “moral challenge,” defining what “morality” is and demonstrating why it matters for our investigation.

**Development and Modernity**

What does “development” mean in contemporary China? To answer this question, we can start with the term most commonly associated with development in China’s popular discourses—xìancái huà [modernization]. To “develop” means to become “modern,” to achieve a certain kind of modernity, whatever its definition is, on the societal level as well as in people’s daily life. In classic Western theories, modernity refers to an “all-encompassing historical break in which agricultural societies become industrial societies,” where “the postbreak societies are marked by industrialization, urbanization, capitalism, the rise of the nation-state, new governmentalities, bureaucracies and biopower, national systems of education, a concomitant increase in the number of years children spent in school, and a demographic transition” (Kipnis 2016, 6-7). This general account of modernity also constitutes the state’s narrative of China’s development during the past four decades.

However, critiques of modernization theories have pointed out that continuities and changes always exist alongside each other, and the reality is never a simple and one-time shift from tradition to modernity (Kipnis 2016). The past, said Pierre Bourdieu ([1977] 2006), “survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles” (Bourdieu [1977] 2006, 337). In his study of Zouping, a Chinese county in Shandong Province, Andrew Kipnis (2016) uses the traditional Chinese yīn-yáng diagram to visualize Zouping’s ongoing social transformation, which is characterized by the “mutual incorporation and interdependence” between the old and the new (Kipnis 2016, 14). “There is a bit of yīn in the heart of yáng and vice versa. Transformation involves different dynamic juxtapositions of the elements, not simple replacement” (Kipnis 2016, 14). This alternative conceptualization of modernity indicates the tensions people might experience when they try to orient themselves in a changing social context, as multiple rules, standards of judgment, and interpretations emerge and compete with each other during the process of transformation. This brings us to the focus of my study—individual experiences of modernization and social changes in contemporary China.

**Modern Human Conditions and Their Manifestations in China**

In Western intellectual history, there have been a lot of inquiries into the social and psychological experiences of individuals in a modernizing society. Ferdinand Tönnies ([1887] 2001) conceptualizes modernization as an ideal-typical shift from Gemeinschaft, a community bonded by kinship
ties and mutual support, to Gesellschaft, a society based upon self-interest and exclusiveness. In a Gesellschaft, “nobody wants to do anything for anyone else, nobody wants to yield or give anything unless he gets something in return that he regards as at least an equal trade-off...whatever anyone has and enjoys, he has and enjoys to the exclusion of all others” (Tönnies [1887] 2001, 52-53). Admittedly, witnessing the social dislocations caused by industrialization and urbanization in nineteenth-century Europe, Tönnies might have idealized Gemeinschaft out of nostalgia. However, his writings do convey the prevalent social feelings of his time towards a rapidly modernizing society. Tönnies’ discussion of self-interest and equal trade-off also echoes Max Weber’s ([1922] 2019) notion of instrumental rationality, where individuals rationally calculate the costs and benefits of their actions towards a certain goal (Weber and Tribe [1922] 2019). Modern human beings, said Weber, are trapped in the “steel-hard casing” (or “iron cage”) of capitalism and rationalization as they engage in the ceaseless calculation of costs and benefits, only focusing upon efficiency and material goods (Weber and Kalberg [1904] 2001, 123). Weber points out this issue in his discussion of how the Protestant asceticism and vocational calling had historically contributed to the development of capitalism in Europe:

“For to the extent that asceticism moved out of the monastic cell, was transferred to the life of work in a vocational calling, and then commenced to rule over this-worldly morality, it helped to construct the powerful cosmos of the modern economic order. Tied to the technical and economic conditions at the foundation of mechanical and machine production, this cosmos today determines the style of life of all individuals born into it, not only those directly engaged in earning a living. The pulsating mechanism does so with overwhelming force. Perhaps it will continue to do so until the last ton of fossil fuel has burnt to ashes...To the extent that asceticism attempted to transform and influence the world, the world’s material goods acquired an increasing and, in the end, inescapable power over people—as never before in history” (Weber and Kalberg [1904] 2001, 123-124)

The result, then, is the disintegration of previous moral standards as instrumental rationality increasingly dominates people’s judgment and action. In contemporary China, it is not uncommon to hear discussions about material obsession, the disintegration of “Maoist-communist morality of complete altruism and self-sacrifice,” and the evasion of traditional family responsibilities (Yan 2021, 100). What underlies these issues, said Yan Yunxiang (2021), is the dominance of market logic, where “the previous ethical definitions of good and right were subverted by the drive for market success” (Yan 2021, 111). In reform-era China, justification for the pursuit of personal interest initially served to liberate people’s thoughts and reestablish their individuality after a long period of ideological indoctrination in Maoist China (Yan 2021). Nevertheless, such a pursuit soon developed into the steel-hard casing Weber has described: the market economy gradually established itself as an irresistible force in people’s life, which dictates how people work and live, and whether they prosper or fail.

As mentioned before, social transformation does not occur as a one-time shift from tradition to modernity. The old moral standards were challenged but did not completely disintegrate. New standards began to emerge but did not completely replace previous ones. As a result, multiple standards coexist with each other, leading to a prolonged period of moral confusion and renegotiation.

Another issue associated with the dominance of capitalist economic order is alienation. A concept developed in the Marxist school of thought, alienation refers to workers’ feelings of detachment from the means of production, the products of their own hands, and their fellow workers under the capitalist mode of production (Fromm 1955; Ollman 1977). Labor is divided into scattered pieces, and each individual works as an isolated unit in the workplace (Fromm 1955; Ollman 1977). They do not possess the means of production, nor the value of the products. The only meaning of their work is to earn a wage, which is the sole proof of the value of their labor (Fromm 1955; Ollman
1977). In modern capitalist societies, money has assumed an increasingly salient role in people’s life as the measurement of everything, from one’s labor to one’s wellbeing (Fromm 1955). As a result, people no longer feel in possession of their own abilities and qualities, and they have to resort to the external authority of money to prove their agency for them (Fromm 1955). As we are about to see in my analysis, the relationship between money and agency is a central issue people have encountered in a rapidly modernizing China.

**Individual Responses to Modern Human Conditions: From a Moral Perspective**

As discussed above, the process of modernization always involves a shift in people’s way of thinking and acting. When people express concerns about this shift, they often do so by making an argument, whether explicit or implicit, about what things should be in contrast to what things are. We typically think of these kinds of arguments as “moral” arguments. But what do we mean by “moral”? There are numerous philosophical discussions on this topic. For this paper, I will focus on a more anthropological way of defining the term. Morality, as defined by Jarrett Zigon (2008, 17), “is a kind of habitus or an unreflective and unreflective disposition of everyday social life,” which is “not thought out beforehand, nor is it noticed when it is performed.” According to this definition, morality does not stand for the normative judgments people consciously make of surrounding events, but instead refers more generally to the social norms people unconsciously follow in their daily life, whether it is about performing duties, making decisions, or managing social relationships.

For Zigon, normative judgments belong to another concept: ethics. Ethics refers to a “reflective and reflexive stepping-away from the embodied moral habitus or moral discourse,” which is “brought about by a moral breakdown or problematization... when some event or person intrudes into the everyday life of persons and forces them to consciously reflect upon an appropriate ethical response” (Zigon 2008, 18). Therefore, ethics is “a conscious acknowledgement of moral breakdown” (Zigon 2008, 18), which prompts the individuals to make peace with the breakdown in order to return to the everyday un-reflectivity of morality.

The distinction Zigon (2008) has made between morality and ethics is important methodologically because it helps reframe a “moral breakdown” into an “ethical moment,” which reveals the moral standards otherwise hidden in people’s everyday actions. The idea here is similar to the situational analysis approach advocated by the Manchester school of social anthropology, which treats social events as manifestations of social tensions emerging to the surface and conscious level (Kapferer 2010). China’s social transformation can thus be understood as an overarching “ethical moment,” which pushes people out of their routine moral orbit and urges them to reflect upon various contradictions between “is” (the reality) and “should be” (the moral ideals) in their daily life.

My analysis, therefore, deals with the following questions: what are some specific ethical moments my interlocutors have encountered in a rapidly modernizing China, and how have they responded to them? One such ethical moment, I argue, is concerned with the existing pattern of wealth distribution in society, and the notion of mingyun serves as a response to it.

**Methodology**

Jinzhai, a county in Anhui Province, China, is located deep inside the Dabie Mountains, the first major mountain range one would encounter when travelling west from Shanghai (Figure 1). It is also where Anhui, Hubei, and Henan Province intersect with each other. Under the administration of Lu’an City, Jinzhai governs 3919 square kilometers of land, which includes 23 townships, 219 villages, and 10 urban residential communities (Lu’an Bureau of Statistics 2021, 10).
The county seat of Jinzhai is Meishan, the county’s administrative, economic, educational, and cultural center, where most of my interlocutors currently live. Meishan consists of two major districts: the old district of Meishan, which is located in a river valley near the Meishan Reservoir, and the new district of Jiangdian, which is located further downstream on a relatively flat land (Figure 2). The old district was built in the 1950s to house the population relocated due to the construction of Meishan Reservoir (Jinzhai Local Chronicles Compilation Committee 2013). The construction of the new district was originally proposed in 1994 by the county government and initiated in 2003 (Jinzhai Local Chronicles Compilation Committee 2013, 118). The new district underwent substantial development during the 2010s, when numerous high-rises and facilities were built and put into use. Today, the majority of government bureaus, local industries, schools, hospitals, commerce, and population have moved to the new district of Jiangdian. In 2020, the county had a total resident population of 496,501, compared to a household registered population of 683,000, which indicates that about 27.3% of the local population were working or living outside the county (Lu’an Bureau of Statistics 2021, 81-83).

In this study, I used semi-structured interviews as my primary research method to explore how people talk about their life courses and articulate the notion of mingyun. I also did participant observation at various places of gathering in the county, such as attending banquets in local restaurants with my interlocutors, taking a walk on an old bridge where people chat after dinner, and visiting the local shopping centers. The population of interest is the local residents in Jinzhai with an age between 40 and 70 years old. Most of them live in Meishan and have their own family. They are the ones who have lived through the period of China’s most rapid development during the past four decades, thus able to offer an in-depth account of their life courses in conjunction with historical experiences. In the end, I conducted 20 interviews, either with one person or with two to three related persons (such as family members) at a time. The unit of analysis is each interview, which has an average length of 1.5 hours. Participants were chosen through a snow-ball sampling method. Due to the selection bias of
snowball sampling, my interviewees are more or less related to each other and might have similar social positions and cultural views, thus not representative of the studied population. Nevertheless, it is also because of their connections to each other that I could directly observe the operation of interpersonal relationships among them.

My research design and consent protocol were carefully reviewed by Carleton College’s Institutional Review Board before I started my field work. To protect privacy, I conducted each interview in a private, isolated space where there were only the interlocutor(s) and me. I assigned each of my interlocutors a code and kept the key to the codes and their coded narratives (notes or recordings) in two separate and password-protected places. I have used pseudonyms to address my interlocutors throughout the analysis and writing process. Before each interview, I informed my interlocutors of my research purpose and asked for oral consent about data collection, note-takings and/or voice recordings. They were free not to participate in an interview or answer any particular questions, and they could stop the interview at any time.

In my interviews, I focused on three sets of questions. The first set of questions deals with how my interlocutors perceive the impact of social changes on their daily life. For example, I asked them to list some changes in the county that have impressed them the most in the past four decades, whether it is about their daily life or the physical landscape of the county. The second set of questions deals with how my interlocutors judge surrounding events and people. For example, I asked how they define “a successful person [hundehao],” “a good person [haoren],” or “a useful person [youyong].” These questions often elicit their reflections on the potential gap between “is” and “should be.” In the words of Zigon (2008), these questions create an ethical moment where people step back from their moral habitus and begin to reflect upon shifts in social norms. In the same spirit, I sometimes asked questions such as “how important do you think opportunity is compared to personal effort” and “if you have a second chance, would you change some of your life decisions” to elicit a more in-depth articulation of worldviews and standards of judgment. Finally, the third set of questions addresses some key concepts in the Weltanschauung of the locals. Does education [dushu] matter? Are interpersonal relationships [guanxi] important? How should we understand mingyun?

In addition, I used the local dialect to conduct most of the interviews. The dialect is not very different from Mandarin Chinese, but it did make a difference in my interactions with people. One of my interlocutors mentioned that it felt “amiable” that I was using the local dialect to communicate with her. It is worth mentioning that she used the word “tu hua” [‘earthy’ language] to refer to the local dialect. In Chinese popular narratives, the word “tu” is often used to describe people with a rural background, who are often stigmatized as backward, clumsy, and maladaptive to urban life. On the other hand, some interlocutors switched to Mandarin Chinese even when I started our conversations with local dialect, which might be due to their own social positions. For example, two of my interlocutors who often used Mandarin Chinese were retired or incumbent local officials, who might be expected to master Mandarin Chinese for their job. There seems to be a linguistic hierarchy where Mandarin Chinese lies on the “formal” end and the local dialect on the “informal” end, which could affect and reflect how my interlocutors perceive the nature of the interviews and respond accordingly. Nevertheless, a detailed investigation of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this research.

For data analysis, I drew inspiration from the grounded theory approach and followed an iterative process of coding, where the analysis proceeds alongside data collection (Corbin and Strauss 1990). Each time a new concept emerged in my interview, I compared it to previously discovered concepts and decided whether I wanted to incorporate it in my next interview. I entered the field with only a vague topic in my mind, namely, how the changing social context impacts people’s life. As I conducted more interviews and observations, I gradually figured out my research question based upon what people frequently talked about or alluded to in their narratives of life courses and social changes. Out of the concepts I discovered and repeatedly put to test in my interviews arise
five general categories: birth, opportunities, socioeconomic conditions, knowledge and skills, and interpersonal relationships, all of which are interconnected with each other and related to mìngyùn, the central category in my data. To illustrate how the concept of mìngyùn works in people’s narratives, I structured my analysis around the issue of wealth and agency, which constitutes one of the central moral challenges my interlocutors have experienced in a rapidly modernizing China.

Analysis

In previous sections, I have been using “fate” as the English translation of mìngyùn. Now it is time to return to the basic issue of translation: why the word “fate”? In Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, fate is first defined as “the principle or determining cause or will by which things in general are supposed to come to be as they are or events to happen as they do” (Gove 1986, 828). The word carries a sense of inevitability as it “presupposes a determining supernatural or divine agency” dictating how things should be (Gove 1986, 828). Nevertheless, the daily usage of this word also indicates a trace of human agency as people can “change” or “control” their fate through certain efforts or decisions. In this sense, “fate” refers more to one’s life course in general, which is subject to both fate in its first sense (a determining cause) and one’s own agentic actions. There is thus an underlying tension between the inevitability and the possibility implied by this word, which creates room for different interpretations. As we are about to see, the multifaceted meaning of “fate” in English fits well with the notion of mìngyùn in a Chinese context, which also indicates a tension between what can be controlled and what cannot.

But why mìngyùn? What makes this notion stand out in my interlocutors’ narratives? In fact, the word itself did not emerge frequently in my interviews. However, when brought up either by my interlocutors or by myself, the word often served as a concluding remark of people’s interpretation of various issues they have encountered in their life. In this sense, it is a “keyword” in people’s narratives of their lived experiences in a rapidly modernizing China, whose meaning is constantly negotiated and evolving “within the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change” (Williams 2015, 33). The goal of this research, then, is to uncover the meaning of this word and the socio-historical context it is embedded in.

As a notion concerned with one’s life course, mìngyùn is often discussed in a retrospective way. In my interviews, people reflected upon their own life courses, as well as the stories they have heard about others, to draw a conclusion about what mìngyùn is, and how it works. Nevertheless, life course is such a broad theme that the notion of mìngyùn can only stay in the abstract realm without something concrete and salient enough in people’s life to demonstrate this notion. One such thing is wealth.

The Myth of Wealth

In a recently published nonfiction work, Wei Tan (2023) tells the story of a group of gold hunters from Shanglin, a county in Guangxi Province, China, who went to West Africa in search of gold and wealth. Walking precariously in the grey area of local legislation, they stayed in the business for years, hoping that they would earn themselves a good life back in their hometown (Tan 2023). Numerous stories were circulating in this small county: someone made a huge fortune in Ghana and built several buildings for his siblings in his hometown; someone was initially doing well but made a bad investment later and disappeared since then (Tan 2023). How did this person make a fortune? Why did that person fail, and what happened to that person? No one knew for sure.

3For the following sections, I will use the word fate in its second sense (namely, one’s life course in general) unless otherwise noted.
“Wa jinzi de ren, yao you ‘jinming’” [Those who hunt for gold, need to have a fate for gold], people thus concluded (Tan 2023, sec. 1). These stories eventually became myths of wealth, evoking the locals’ desire for gold while reminding them of the precariousness of this business.

Wealth is probably the most precarious thing in the world. There are some aspects you can control about wealth, such as the time and effort you put into making money. There are also aspects you cannot control, such as whether you are lucky enough to come across an opportunity to make money. It is not surprising that the English word “fortune” simultaneously stands for fate and wealth. It is often through the shifting status of wealth that people conceive of the ups and downs in one’s life course. In the context of China’s economic reforms, wealth has been playing an increasingly significant role in people’s life. Nevertheless, the inherent precariousness of wealth has posed a moral challenge to people in reform-era China. The notion of mingyun, I argue, serves as a response to this challenge, both by offering an explanation of how people acquire wealth, and by offering a rhetorical device for people to assert the importance of individual agency in a rapidly transforming society.

In what ways does the precariousness of wealth constitute a moral challenge in contemporary China? How does the notion of mingyun respond to this challenge? To answer these questions, we need to dive into the socioeconomic conditions of China since the economic reform of 1978.

**Socioeconomic Conditions of Reform-Era China**

In 1978, the Chinese Communist Party announced its reform and open-up policy, which marks the beginning of China’s tremendous economic growth in the following decades (Kipnis 2016). When the country started experimenting with market economy after thirty years of planned economy, everything was uncertain, which also meant everything was possible. Once the policies restraining rural-urban migration in the Maoist-socialist era were loosened up in the 1980s (Naughton 2018), hundreds of millions of people who had long been trapped in the poor countryside started venturing into burgeoning cities in search of jobs and opportunities. Almost all my interlocutors have at least one family member, most likely their children, working or studying in a major city outside Jinzhai.

In their study of China’s internal migration, Huimin Du and Si-ming Li (2012, 75) point out that people’s major incentives to migrate are “the availability of employment opportunities in the city, the chance to improve their lives, and also the chance for improved personal development.” Indeed, as major economic hubs, cities have concentrated a variety of resources for personal development and wellbeing, such as employment, education, information, and healthcare, thus creating a strong pulling force for internal migration. The incentive to migrate is further enhanced by the poverty of the countryside in the Maoist-socialist era, the effect of which had extended into the initial years of the reform. “When I went to the countryside in 1984, I saw children walking in the snow without shoes. We felt sad seeing that. People were poor, and there was nothing to do about it. It was a planned economy and there was no market circulation. There were no businesses. The state only allowed you to do certain things, otherwise you risked committing a capitalist crime,” said ZS, an employee in a local state-owned enterprise. The poverty was the result of both the natural

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4The People’s Republic of China uses the household registration system, or the hukou system, to regulate population flow (Lin et al. 2022). Zhang and Tao (2012) offer a detailed account of the hukou system in their study: “The hukou in the Chinese context is an official identity of residency rights in a given geographic unit. The hukou system, implemented nationwide since 1958, stipulates that each citizen must register only one regular residence in only one place of permanent residence. A transfer of permanent hukou from one locale to another requires official approval, a process subject to conditions stipulated by a plethora of regulations. The locality of one’s permanent hukou registration is the only place where one can claim all attainable entitlements” (Zhang and Tao 2012, 2883). The system had been especially strict in the Maoist-socialist era since the Great Leap Forward, as peasants were practically forbidden to migrate to cities and were tied to the land in a strictly planned economy (Naughton 2018).
The peasants were allowed to farm on their small pieces of allocated land, which, in the case of Jinzhai, were often located in the mountainous region that produced barely enough to eat. The situation was worsened by the fact that in the Maoist-socialist era, the main function of the rural sector was to supply low-cost agricultural products to support the urban industry, which was achieved at the expense of peasants’ income (Naughton 2018). Little surplus was available for the rural village collectives to provide services and public goods to the peasants, leading to an entrenched rural-urban divide (Naughton 2018).

The push and pull factors (Lee 1966) have combined to produce large-scale internal migration from the countryside to the urban areas since the 1980s. QL, a government employee in Meishan, mentions the large-scale population outflow in Jinzhai since the late 1980s, when a continuous stream of people went out to find jobs and make money. People refer to this experience as dagong, which means to work (in the cities), in contrast to zhongtian, which means to farm (in the countryside). People who first went out brought back stories about the outside world and persuaded their relatives to join them.

In QL’s opinion, dagong is not just about making money. “Dagong has two benefits. One is that you can make money. The other is that your mindset starts to change. You begin to follow the tide of the economic reforms and are no longer satisfied with living in a small village.” Other interlocutors also mention this changing mindset. CZ, a retiree from a local state-owned enterprise, often travels to Suzhou, a prosperous city near Shanghai, where his son currently lives. He describes his feeling towards Suzhou during his first visit there in 1997. “Suzhou is a modern city, modern civilization... Meishan, after all, is a small place compared to Suzhou. Suzhou provides more space for your personal development.”

In their vision, inland counties like Jinzhai back in the 1980s and ’90s were associated with “backwardness,” “limited opportunities,” and “poverty,” while the major urban centers in the coastal regions stood for “modernness,” “prosperity,” and “civilization.” If we try to reconstruct the daily conversations in Jinzhai at that time, they were most likely about where to find jobs, how to make money, and people’s various adventures outside Jinzhai. Just like the stories circulating in Shanglin about the gold hunters, these conversations constantly stirred the minds of those who had been staying in the county since birth: maybe I should go out and make my fortune too. There is “gold” hidden in the vast world outside Jinzhai, waiting for courageous “gold hunters” to try their luck and find their own fortune.

“**How Convenient It Is [to Have Money]!**

**Wealth and Agency in Reform-Era China**

Among those who ventured out, some succeeded and became stories to be told, while some failed and became lessons to be learnt. In most cases, the standard of judgement is one’s wealth. When I asked my interlocutors what it means to be “a successful person” (hundehao), most of them put financial success in the first place.

> “Today we still use financial status to judge people. With money, a person can do a lot of things. How convenient it is!” – LD, a local businessman.

However, why does wealth matter? It seems to be a stupid question at first glance. Money has always been important in people’s daily life since its invention as a universal equivalent. Your labor is repaid with money, and you use money to buy various things. However, money in reform-era China stands for much more. First of all, it means material wellbeing, the significance of which is amplified by the traumatic experiences of poverty and scarcity in the past. Many of my interlocutors were born in the countryside surrounding the county seat, then moved to the county seat when
they were young adults. Several of them describe the hardships they experienced when working on
their small pieces of land in the past. “We had to work hard to take care of the land, but there
was still not enough to eat,” said CZ. In his view, this was the combined result of the poor quality
of land and the lack of agricultural technologies. Both can be attributed to the rural conditions I
described earlier: lack of investment due to the socioeconomic structure of the Maoist-socialist era,
and poor natural endowments.

Nevertheless, the past was not just characterized by poverty and scarcity. The Maoist-socialist
era, despite its extraction of rural resources and constraints on peasants’ mobility, provided at least
some entitlements to the peasants, who could rely on their land to subsist (Yang 1996). Many
of my interlocutors had left the countryside decades ago, but their attachment to the land is still
visible in their narratives. “There used to be ten thousand hectares of great farmland in today’s
new district of Jiangdian. It was during the fall when the government made the decision twenty
years ago to develop the new district. Yellow grains were shining in the sun. What a pity,” said
CZ. QM, who left the countryside thirty years ago, still used the status of the vegetables in the field
to describe the hot weather that took place during my summer fieldwork: “Vegetables in the field
have dried up these days. It’s too hot.” “The countryside has lost its shape,” QM later commented
in pity, “people all went out.”

As people left their land and migrated to cities during the economic reforms, they were thrown
into a volatile market system that guarantees nothing. Everything needs to be bought with money:
food, products, services, and home. For those who have completely severed their relationships to
the land or the work units, there are no longer any entitlements as there used to be, in whatever
limited sense, in the rural village collectives or the state-owned factories in the Maoist-socialist era.
Everything is uncertain now. A structural reform, an economic crisis, or a pandemic can easily
shake the basis of one’s livelihood, simply by cutting one’s source of income. As a result, money
becomes the only thing people can rely upon to give them a sense of security in the face of potential
life adversities.

Besides the guarantee of livelihood, money also carries the hope for a better future. As men-
tioned before, major cities in China have concentrated a variety of resources, such as education,
information, healthcare, and employment. The ability to settle down in the city is often associated
with better personal development not just for oneself, but also for one’s family, especially children.
However, due to the hukou system, people whose households are not registered in the host city
often face substantial institutional barriers to gain access to its public resources (such as enrollment
in local public schools). According to the latest hukou policy of Hefei (the provincial capital of An-
hui Province), to obtain a local household hukou (both for oneself and for one’s family), a person
need to fulfill one of the following requirements:

1. have a stable, legal employment in Hefei for more than two years and a stable, legal
place of residence in Hefei (including rented ones), plus one year of participation
in the urban social security system.

2. have certain high-level skill certifications or education diplomas (such as higher
education degrees). In some cases, there is an additional age requirement. For
example, a person with a bachelor’s degree must be under 40 to be qualified for local
hukou.

3. own a real estate in Hefei (Hefei Municipal Government 2018).

Relevant policies have already relaxed in recent years, but nonetheless still demanding for many
people. QL sent his older daughter to Hefei to attend a local public high school. He does not work

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5See footnote no. 4.
in Hefei, nor is he qualified for the second option because he is already over 40. Therefore, the only option he has is to buy an apartment in Hefei, and he did. For ordinary Chinese families, this constitutes a huge financial burden.

“I'm about fifty right now. The biggest challenge in my life was to buy an apartment in Hefei for my daughter's education. It almost took away all my deposits. I don't have a lot of money, but my younger daughter is also growing up and will eventually need that apartment too [to get access to the public schools in Hefei].” – QL

Notwithstanding the difficulties, he still chose to buy that apartment. In the parents' eyes, with a better education, their children can have a better ability to compete in the urban job market, to have a better stand in the cities, and ultimately, to secure a place in the newly-formed urban middle class. Different from the case of QL's family, CZ did not have the chance to send his son to the provincial capital or other major cities. However, he still poured a lot of time and effort into his son's education. Later on, his son went to Suzhou for college and eventually became a white-collar worker with a decent income and his own apartment in Suzhou. In the future, this apartment will give CZ's grandchildren access to the education resources of Suzhou. In this sense, CZ's family has achieved class elevation from the working class to the urban middle class within two generations. The process happened alongside a spatial movement from the inland county to the major city.

Another way to look at the importance of wealth is through its opposite: poverty. In reform-era China, being “poor” is not just about material deprivation, but also about a sense of “shame,” a lack of agency in the face of volatile socioeconomic conditions, and a perceived failure to promise a better future for those one cares about. One interlocutor, QM, talks about the hardship she experienced when she first came from her home village to the county seat after her husband passed away in the late 1990s.

“Look at how the apartments look like, right now. We three (QM and her two children) used to live in a small apartment even smaller than a living room here. It was not that we lived our life: we struggled against our daily life. I could not provide a good environment for my son to study. I made breakfast in front of a local middle school for a living. It was a tough life, so my son didn't study well.” – QM

After five years selling breakfast, she contracted with a local state-owned factory to operate its dining hall, but the factory was closed several years later due to the structural reform of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s. Then she became a sanitation worker in the county seat for more than ten years. Despite persistent financial difficulties, she still managed to bring up her children and is currently living a relatively comfortable life in her daughter’s new apartment. Like many other grandparents in today’s China, she is taking care of her grandchildren now, who live and study in a much better environment compared to her children. Two of her grandchildren are now studying in one of the top high schools in Jinzhai. In QM's life story, wealth stood for agency. If QM had money, she could have provided a better learning environment for her children. She would not have to worry about the structural reform in the 1990s and the subsequent loss of her job. It would also be much easier for her to have a firm stand in the county seat and take care of her children when she first left her home village.

In sum, wealth in reform-era China is closely associated with material well-being, a sense of security (when there is no more entitlement), freedom to move (to the major cities), access to better resources in the major cities, and ultimately, the possibility of class elevation. In this sense, money is not just a universal equivalent in a financial sense, but also a universal signifier in a symbolic sense: it signifies agency.
"Some People Were Born with a Golden Key in Their Mouth."

Determinants of Wealth in Reform-Era China

Given the significant role wealth has played in a person’s livelihood, what determines the amount of money people can get in their life? My interlocutors have identified five determinants of wealth in reform-era China: birth, opportunities, socioeconomic conditions of the time, knowledge and skills, and interpersonal relationships. Though listed separately, these determinants are interconnected to each other.

"Some people were born with a golden key in their mouth. You might not even reach their start level for your entire life. There is nothing to do about it." – ZS

Birth has historically been inseparable from social status and economic inequality. Status can be inherited. Wealth can be accumulated across generations, either through direct heritage or by transforming itself into education resources, health benefits, and social relations. The effect of one’s birth is also dependent upon the socioeconomic conditions of the time. Being born into the household of a property owner, for example, is different in the reform era than in the Maoist-socialist era. QL, who has a college degree in finance, tells me that his brother was forbidden from attending schools due to the fact that his family used to be a landlord in the village. QL himself was able to attend schools because he “was born in a good time,” when birth no longer constituted an arbitrary limit upon one’s personal development, and numerous opportunities started to emerge as the national economy grew tremendously. The reform thus gave QL access to more opportunities, and indeed, he captured one.

"They say that efforts constitute 99% of one’s success, but that’s what they say. For me, personal efforts count for 70%, and the remaining 30%, opportunities, are very important too... In college I majored in finance. The year I graduated from college happened to be the start of tax reform, so I got admitted to the County Taxation Bureau." – QL

QL graduated at a good time. The year he graduated, 1994, happened to be the start of China’s tax reform (Lan 2021), which created a strong demand for college graduates with degrees in finance. He has managed to secure a stable source of income since then.

Nevertheless, without the ability to graduate from the finance major, QL could not have captured the opportunities brought about by socioeconomic conditions. It brings us to another determinant of wealth: one’s knowledge and skills. In order to earn money, people have to compete in the volatile and demanding market, where their strengths and abilities are put to the test. This process can be quite frustrating at the beginning. DT, an official in the local government, describes his experience when he first “entered the society” at the age of 20 after three years of military service:

"They (the military service department) offered me the chance to get a job back in my hometown, but I was thinking about doing something on my own before I accepted the allocated job. I thought I had potential given my good performance in military training. I tried to be a security guard, a construction worker, and was once even coaxed into a pyramid selling scheme. After two years of striving, I returned to the county seat. At that time, I felt if a person doesn’t have benshi, or a higher educational degree, you could barely figure out a way to succeed." – DT

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6The socialist regime used to categorize people into different classes and associate it closely with the rights they have (Spence 1990). Descendants of a landlord family were not only deprived of rights to education, but also subject to constant persecutions during the Cultural Revolution and various other political struggles.

7A scheme that promises high return upon bringing a new person (with money) into the scheme. Since it involves bodily coercion and fraud, it was officially declared illegal in 1998.
DT understands *benshi* as the ability to solve problems, and an important component of *benshi* is one’s knowledge and skills, which are often determined by one’s education. After the initial setbacks, DT chose to go to college and pursue a computer science degree. He first passed the exam hiring technical specialists in the local government. Later on, he pursued a judicial degree to gain more space for career advancement. He eventually secured an administrative position in the local government, which offers a decent salary, good welfares (insurance and pension), as well as prestige.

Last but not least, interpersonal relationships, or *guanxi* in Chinese, also play an important role in determining one’s wealth. As Yanjie Bian (2018) points out, *guanxi* can help you grasp market opportunities by giving you access to key information (such as job opportunities) and bringing you closer to those who have power and resources in society. Again, QL’s story serves as a good example. QL attended the college entrance exam in 1992 and got a sound grade. However, the college admission system was not very mature at that time and the mechanism of admission was relatively opaque. Without sufficient information about the available spots in different colleges, he might not have been able to get admitted even though his score reached the general admission line. His high school teacher happened to know an official in the local bureau of education, who had the information about which colleges had available spots assigned to the county. The official was also in charge of submitting students’ files to their target colleges for consideration of enrollment. QL went to find the official and eventually got admitted to a good college in a city. QL’s story fits with Bian’s (2018) observation that the significance of *guanxi* tends to be greater when the level of institutional uncertainty is higher. Other interlocutors also point out the importance of *guanxi* as a necessary supplement to one’s knowledge and skills in determining personal success. “It does not suffice to have knowledge and skills without people recognizing them,” said CZ, “if you and I have the same level of skills, but the boss knows me better than he knows you, I am likely to be the one who gets promoted first.”

**“There Is Nothing to Do About It.”**

The Moral Challenge Associated with Wealth

What is tricky about the relationship between money and agency is that, while money can give you agency, your agency might not suffice to earn you money. Money does not come at your wish, or just through your effort. Among the five determinants of wealth, birth, socioeconomic conditions, and opportunities are not under one’s control. Also, interpersonal relationships seem to count more upon the ability of the people you are related to, rather than upon your own ability. Even one’s skills and knowledge do not entirely depend upon one’s effort. They are also influenced by one’s birth and upbringing, which determine the resources one’s family can provide for one’s education and personal development.

The uncontrollable aspects of wealth have posed a moral challenge to everyone. Ideally, the more effort one has made, the better outcome one will get. No pain, no gain. However, factors such as birth and socioeconomic conditions seem to have nothing to do with personal effort. The moral dilemma is amplified by the fact that money has been so important to one’s life in reform-era China. In order to live a good life, you need to have money. However, in order to earn money, you do not necessarily need to work hard and compete in the market economy. Some people might already have access to a huge amount of family wealth at birth. As ZS has commented, “there is nothing to do about it.” The agency you exert to earn money might not match the agency you manage to acquire as a result of money; either the former is not paid back enough by the latter, or the latter is not acquired through the former. There is thus a mismatch between “is” and “should be.” In the words of Yan (2021, 111), this mismatch constitutes a moral crisis where “the previous ethical definitions of good and right were subverted by the drive for market success,” which is measured by wealth. The notion of *mingyun*, I argue, is a response to this moral challenge, both as a system of explanation and as a rhetorical device.
1. Mingyun as a System of Explanation

Firstly, the notion of mingyun serves as a system of explanation, through which people understand and comment upon the existing pattern of wealth distribution in society. This is where the first meaning of fate comes into play, namely, “the principle or determining cause or will by which things in general are supposed to come to be as they are or events to happen as they do” (Gove 1986, 828). Things are supposed to be or happen in this way. Someone is supposed to have money while others are not.

The conclusion seems rather harsh, but it could also provide some sort of relief. If we see people as meaning-seekers looking for an explanation for various events in their life, the notion of fate actually provides such an explanation for something that is otherwise inexplicable, therefore disturbing and disorienting. It does not aim at changing the reality, namely, the existing pattern of wealth distribution or class structure in society. As Clifford Geertz famously put it in his description of the Balinese cockfight, it is “a story they tell themselves about themselves,” about who they are and how the world works (Geertz 1973, 469). To render a morally disturbing event explainable through narratives is a crucial step in coping with a moral challenge and returning to the everyday un-reflectivity of morality that Zigon has described. What comes after is an acceptance of what things are, which is mitigated by the fact that my interlocutors are living a better life compared to the past.

“I don’t compare myself to them. What’s the point of that? I know I cannot reach that status, and right now I am also living a comfortable life. You buy a T-shirt for 10000 yuan, and I buy a 200-yuan T-shirt. That’s the same comfort!” – QL

“They say someone lives a good life, but I don’t compare myself to them. I only compare with myself. I used to have nothing to eat. I used to rent a place to live, and the landlord kept asking me for rent. At least nobody asks me for rent now, and I am already satisfied with that.” – QM

In sum, people articulate the notion of mingyun to offer an explanation of the existing pattern of wealth distribution in society. It is through this articulation that they “demystify” the myth of wealth and make peace with the moral challenge associated with wealth and agency in a rapidly modernizing China.

2. Mingyun as a Rhetorical Device

However, people’s articulation of mingyun or fate does not stop at the level of explanation and acceptance. Even if my interlocutors rationalize and generally accept the existing pattern of wealth distribution in society through the notion of fate, it does not mean that they did not experience any struggles.

“One of my high school classmates failed to pass the exam and went to Shanghai. He became very successful later. The car he drives now is worth a million yuan (around $150,000). Initially I felt a little…but later on I accepted the fact. I think he also made a lot of effort at that time. There must have been at least several years of hardships and struggles for him (before he succeeded). He must have captured another chance (to succeed).” – QL

QL’s narrative forms an interesting contradiction with his emphasis on “not to compare” in his previous narrative. It turned out that he did not just accept the reality without any struggles. The reality required further justification so that it could be accepted more easily. Did the person QL talks about indeed experience a lot of hardships in the beginning years? More pertinently, has the person made enough effort so that he deserves the amount of money he earns? We do not know,
but the point is to figure out a way to account for his success, to assert a “must-have-been” to justify the successful outcome and make it subject to a morally acceptable process. In the words of Zigon (2008), the socio-historical transformation of China in the reform era has produced an “ethical moment” where people are forced to reflect upon their original moral assumptions and figure out a new moral compass to guide their action under new circumstances. I argue that the notion of mingyun, besides offering an explanation of the existing pattern of wealth distribution in society, also serves as a rhetorical device for people to mitigate the morally disturbing effect of the uncontrollable aspects of wealth and to assert the importance of their own agency in determining their life courses.

So, how does the notion of mingyun account for the gap between “is” and “should be” with regard to the issue of wealth and agency? The answer lies in the way people rhetorically leverage the relationships between the five determinants of wealth: birth, opportunities, socioeconomic conditions, knowledge and skills, and interpersonal relationships.

“I believe from my heart that mingyun can be changed by oneself. If peasants don’t work hard, the crops will not grow. If you don’t work hard in your urban work unit, how are you going to survive? If you don’t work hard, no matter how much money your parents give you, that will not be enough. Those with parents’ money in their hands are indeed rich, but if he doesn’t do things, doesn’t make an effort, people will only think of him as a fu-er-dai (“rich second generation”), which does not constitute a good mingyun. There is no value in him. The money you earn through your own efforts and struggles is different from that given by your parents.” – QM

In QM’s narrative, even though a person is born with access to a huge amount of wealth, the person must still work hard so that they deserve the money. It remains debatable whether the person’s effort can indeed match the amount of money they has, especially when compared to others who make the same amount of effort but still cannot make that much money. Nevertheless, personal effort always matters. In the same spirit, DT underlines the importance of one’s knowledge and skills in determining whether a person can secure an opportunity when it comes and retain one’s competency amidst shifting socioeconomic conditions:

“I got my opportunity when I was admitted to the local government. Opportunities are only for those who are prepared. I had many coworkers at that time (who also had the opportunity), but only I was admitted, because I have the ability to pass the exam… I always say to people that the most important thing to do is to improve one’s abilities and personal qualities. One should keep learning to ensure one’s competency at any time, under any circumstances.” – DT

Interpersonal relationships (guanxi), which constitutes another important determinant of one’s wealth, is also subject to one’s agentic actions. You might be born into a family with already a lot of connections, but you can also build connections on your own. Whether you can build and maintain your connections depends on your own personal quality. LD describes the causal relationship between one’s renpin and the business opportunities one can get. Renpin, or “personal moral quality,” basically means the way a person treats others.

“If you treat people well and do not take advantage of them, you are likely to have great interpersonal relationships, and people are willing to do business with you… Your mingyun definitely counts upon yourself… If you don’t have a good personal moral quality (renpin), your path to success will be narrower.” – LD

Moreover, if we go back to QL’s narrative, we can sense the presence of a generalized “other,” who wields the power to judge whether a person deserves the money they gets. As DT commented
during our interview, money alone does not suffice for one’s wellbeing. There is also a need for people to be recognized and respected by others. As we can see in these narratives, my interlocutors are actively bridging the gap between “is” and “should be” by highlighting the role one’s agentic actions play in determining one’s wealth, while also resisting the alienating power of wealth as the sole measurement of one’s wellbeing.

Conclusion

In contemporary China, wealth is closely associated with agency. However, the fact that people do not necessarily need to earn money through their personal effort has posed a moral challenge to my interlocutors, who believe that wealth should ideally come from one’s agentic actions. In response to this challenge, they resort to the notion of mingyun [fate] to bridge the gap between “is” and “should be.” On one hand, the notion of mingyun provides a system of explanation for them to “demystify” the myth of wealth and explicate the existing pattern of wealth distribution in society. On the other hand, by leveraging the relationships between different determinants of wealth in a strategic way, they reassert the importance of individual agency in determining one’s wealth and wellbeing.

In this study, I use the issue of wealth and agency to illustrate how the notion of mingyun works in people’s articulation of their lived experiences in a rapidly modernizing China. This choice arises from the significance my interlocutors have attached to wealth in their narratives and the moral challenges associated with wealth in reform-era China. However, as a notion concerned with one’s life course, mingyun is related to many more topics in life. Interpersonal relationships, for example, also constitute an important component of a good life, which cannot be reduced to just a determinant of wealth.

Facing simultaneously towards the past, the present, and the future, people’s articulation of the notion of mingyun encompasses retrospection, evaluation, and future actions. Do I have a good fate? What does it mean to live a good life? How can a person live a good life? There can be points of contestation in each of these questions. For example, the moral dilemma my study points out is concerned with how to acquire wealth, which presupposes that people generally take the importance of wealth for granted. However, there are also contesting moral narratives about whether wealth should matter that much for a good life. This study only investigates a tiny corner of the semantic field woven around the notion of mingyun. Future studies can focus more upon the potential tensions between different standards of good life in contemporary China.

Perhaps the best way to conclude this study is to bring up a personal anecdote I had with one of my interlocutors. One day I was travelling to a village deep inside the mountains with DF, a retiree from the local government, to help him deliver something to his friend there. His friend, who owns a restaurant in that village, warmly invited us for a meal. While waiting for lunch, DF asked me whether I wanted to take a walk along a stream behind the restaurant. The stream was shallow, and many stones emerged out of the water. DF was quite passionate about picking stones and looking for those with interesting patterns. He invited me to join him.

It was not an easy thing to do, as you needed to pay attention to the stones while watching your steps. There were so many stones out there, and it was hard to figure out which ones had a pattern. I spent a long time searching on the riverbed, but still without much progress. DF told me that it takes yuanfen (“fateful coincidence”) to meet those interesting stones. Some people are lucky enough to find one such stone, while some can only search in vain.

On the other hand, luck alone is not enough. Someone might happen to pick up a good stone. However, without knowing how to appreciate the pattern on it, the person might just throw it into the vegetable field. “It is hard to find good stones,” said DF, “but I still have the expectations, so I keep searching.” I asked him whether he had thought about buying stones from others. “I don’t have the money to do so like those rich people,” he replied, “but I can at least afford picking them
in the stream."

Over the years, he did find some interesting stones, like one with a pattern that resembles two people playing chess, and some similar to small animals. But those stones are very hard to find. Most times you end up at best with stones that vaguely resemble something. Even when you did find a good stone, it might be difficult to carry it back. During our streamside adventure, we did come across one stone with an interesting pattern, but it was too large to carry away, and we had to give it up.

In the end, I found one with a not very unique pattern, and DF found one that looks like a person meditating, though the pattern was not very clear. Not quite satisfied with what we found, I asked whether we wanted to walk a little further upstream. He said what we found was enough to call it a day. “There are numerous good stones out there,” said DF, “you cannot possibly pick up all of them.” Then we went back to the restaurant and enjoyed a good meal. The food tasted great, perhaps more so after a tiring walk on the streamside.

This story seems to be surprisingly metaphorical in light of our discussion of mingyun. You do not know whether you can meet the good stones, but you can practice your ability to discern interesting patterns so that you will not let them slip away when you do meet them. You might not be rich enough to buy good stones, but you always have a chance to pick them, as long as you keep searching. There is always an interplay between the controllable and the uncontrollable, and your agency always matters to a certain degree.

Nevertheless, it is also important to know the limitations of your ability, and when you should stop searching. You cannot possibly find all the good stones, nor are you able to carry all of them away. Many of my interlocutors mentioned the importance of zhizu, which means to be satisfied with what one already has in one’s life. This attitude can be applied to many aspects of people’s life, from material satisfaction to expectations for one’s children. Most of the parents I interviewed do not expect their children to make a huge amount of money or acquire a high social status. They just want them to have a stable income and live a relatively comfortable life, which is already a difficult goal to achieve for those who arrived as first-generation migrants in the major cities and face high costs of housing and living. People do need to relieve at least part of the stress in their life by making some external factors accountable for what they did not manage to achieve, so that at a certain point they can say to themselves: I have tried my best, and that is it. In this sense, people’s articulation of the notion of mingyun is also about recognizing one’s limits, while still retaining the strength to move on.
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