

Unemployment Policies and Neo-liberalism in China

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Introduction

It is almost a truism to say that China's economic reform has led to spectacular economic growth, but also created serious social and political problems. Unemployment (*shiye*) is one of such social problems that demand immediate government attention. In various government announcements, employment is taken to be about "people's livelihood" (*minsheng*) and consequently "nation's stability" (*guo'an*). Thus, unemployment is now deemed one of the most politically explosive issues to challenge the Chinese government's overriding priority of social stability. Despite being officially acknowledged only since 1994, unemployment, in the sense of a serious imbalance between the number of job-seekers and the number of jobs, is not an unprecedented policy problem.¹ According to recent government announcements, China has in fact entered the third of three employment peaks (*jiuye gaofeng*) since the death of Mao: the first peak hit China when send-down youth of the Cultural Revolution returned to urban areas; and the second peak was caused by *xiagang gongren* (off-post workers, or the so called "40/50" -- male workers over 50 and female workers over 40 -- who were hardest hit by SOE restructuring in the 1990s. That said, the current economic, social, and policy context means that the social, economic, and political implications of unemployment are unique.

How to solve unemployment in a country whose economy is increasingly dominated by market logic, but whose political system continues to be one-Party rule? The Chinese regime "exploits both the capitalist economy and the communist ideology to support its legitimacy, while leaving the merits of socialism nowhere."² Conceptual

framework that dichotomizes China either as capitalist or communist/socialist no longer captures the complexities of Chinese political, economic and social landscape. In this paper, I argue that unemployment is such a policy area where the Chinese government mixes governance techniques of both neo-liberal and Chinese communist orientation. Specifically, I argue that although China is not a liberal democracy, it increasingly uses neo-liberal ways to govern, and that this has been true in the way China has addressed the unemployment issue. “Liberalism” in this context means a specific way of providing positive conditions for optimum economic performance at “minimum economic and *socio-political cost*”³ One prominent feature of neo-liberal governance is the attempt to govern *through* the freedom of individuals. Indeed, the rationale behind this policy direction is the seemingly paradoxical one that freedom is necessary to governance. In neo-liberal governance, individuals are encouraged and steered in the parameters within which they govern themselves.⁴ However, this argument does not imply that Chinese governance is shifting towards Western neo-liberal governance, it does argue that the Chinese government mixes and matches both neo-liberal and communist government rationalities to deal with challenges deriving from its “socialist market economy” programme.⁵

The post-Mao Chinese government continues to rely on campaign/*yundong* style of policy implementation, although campaign/*yudong* is now replaced with activity/*huodong*.⁶ In the policy area of employment, for example, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security [MoLSS] has launched various nation-wide activities such as “Re-employment Assistance Month [Zaijiyye Yuanzhu Yue]” and “Spring Breeze Action [Chunfeng Xingdong]”. Further, these government-sponsored activities make state

power visible: the visibility of the state power is what distinguishes Chinese state and neo-liberal state that must be seen to “govern at a distance”. The Chinese state needs to make its power visible in order to claim itself as the sole legitimate player that represents the interests of the Chinese people. This paper, however, focuses on the neo-liberal techniques the Chinese government is adopting in regulating the unemployed in order to address the unemployment problem. The research presented here suggests that unemployment has been a fertile ground for Chinese government experiments with administrative initiatives resembling neoliberal ones in the West. The experiments include the emergence of community/*shequ* as a new space of local governance,⁷ and services such as training and counselling that are designed to improve the employability of the unemployed and more generally to encourage the employed to seek self-employment and flexible employment.⁸ These initiatives are seen to institutionalize (*zhiduhua*), professionalize (*zhuan'yehua*) and humanize (*renxinhua*) its approach to governance, an approach that also meets international norms and standards in employment regulation.⁹ Further, these international norms and standards fit nicely with the Chinese government effort to turn current and former state employees away from “organizational dependence” on such government programs as social welfare.¹⁰ Unemployment policy, like the wider framework for social policies and the even wider problematic of governance, has been widely discussed in academic circles in China.¹¹ Yet outside Chinese policy and academic circles, very little analytical research has been conducted on the new forms of organizations involved in regulating Chinese unemployment or the mundane practices of unemployment regulation. This paper is an initial report on this burgeoning area of job training centres, employment centres,

community service centres; and the application process these centres employ for unemployment insurance and job counselling in Shanghai.

Data for this paper is drawn in part from fieldwork conducted in Shanghai in the summers of 2004 and 2006. It has also been informed by Chinese government documents; publications on unemployment and career counselling published in China; Chinese newspapers; and expert and technical advice from such international organizations as the ILO, OECD and World Bank,¹² and works by Chinese social scientists and social workers who inform government policies. The present interpretive analysis seeks to understand the discursive practices operative within and outside government, and to trace their origins and transformations.

Before beginning this analysis, a few caveats are in order. Shanghai is one of a handful of China's leading cities, both in prosperity, in outward orientation, and in sheer scale. What works in wealthy coastal regions such as Shanghai may not be applicable elsewhere in China: as the following discussion will show, successful Public Employment Service Centres require enormous financial and human resources. But national government documents and announcements do point to a wider turn away from political/ideological solutions to unemployment to technocratic ones. This technocratic vision of solving unemployment is certainly a leading element in the experiment at public employment service centres (*jiuyefuwu zhongxin*). Work at these centres emphasizes turning the unemployed from "government dependence" to the independence of self-steering individuals. But paradoxically, the government has felt itself obliged to intervene as the guarantor of self-steering individualism amongst China's unemployed,

rather than allow the self-steering individualism of the market itself to exercise its own disciplining force alone.

The “Retreat” of the State and the Emergence of the Social

In analyzing Europe’s transition to capitalism in the 18th century, Karl Polanyi famously theorized that the emergence of the socially dis-embedded “self-regulating market” represents one movement within a society’s transition to capitalist modernity. But Polanyi added that social and political forces, acting primarily in defense of the irreducibly non-market goods that underlie the fictitious commodities of labour and land, commonly arise as a second, stabilizing counter-movement. The results of this double movement are social and political institutions that serve to contain or re-embed the market. He argues that self-regulating market as a coherent system was a practical impossibility, and that such a system would blow apart before being fully realized, without the second of these two movements. For this reason, Polanyi argues that “social not technical invention was the intellectual mainspring of the Industrial Revolution.”¹³

The Chinese state, since it launched economic reform in 1979, has actively intervened to create a market society. After a number of interim stages, it has ultimately opted for a largely self-regulating market, in many respects very much in keeping with nineteenth-century Europe.¹⁴ Against this trend, resistance to the full commodification of land and labour has arisen in both rural and urban areas. Increasingly, state initiatives such as social security policy, “community building”, and government-mediated non-governmental organizations have sought to address some of the key perceived sources of such unrest. In a political system which rejects many of the classic organizational forms associated with Europe’s “double movement”, these state initiatives do nonetheless

intend to help re-imbed the market so that market economy can flourish in a stable social environment.

One of the state's tasks in creating a "self-regulating" market has been to create a labour market virtually from scratch – that is, to commodify labour-- and it has had to do so in a form that is compatible with a cost-competitive, flexible-accumulation development strategy.¹⁵ One of the prominent features of China's emergent labor market is the rapid increase in internal migrant workers, especially in coastal areas. Rural to urban migration was made possible by de-collectivization and by the loosening up of the household registration system, both of which once limited people's freedom of movement. The state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which operated both as economic institutions and as social ones, are being dismantled. The introduction of the contract labour system to SOEs in 1986, one of the first steps to replace the Maoist "iron rice bowl", was followed ultimately by the widespread privatization of SOEs in 1997. Even though workers are not allowed to form independent trade unions, workers' resistance is widespread in China, both in everyday forms and in protests and strikes more familiar in Western contexts. Protests and strikes are especially prominent in the northeastern China and China's interior, where state-owned (SOE) and heavy industries previously predominated.¹⁶

As the state "retreats" from providing for social welfare to its employees through the SOEs, "society"/"the social" (*shehui*) emerges as hegemonic discourse in policy and academic circles. But in the Chinese context, what is society and what counts as the social? It seems at this moment in history, *shehui* in China is an abstract and reified vessel, or a black hole. It appears to mean whatever market and government deem not to

be economic or political, and therefore whatever lies outside the responsibilities of either of these institutions. This is a delicate position for the government to adopt, as it faces mounting social problems that it is inclined to police as a source of “social turmoil”.

To solve this conundrum, the Chinese government calls on social forces themselves (*shehui lilian*) to involve themselves in addressing social causes (*shehui shiye*). In general, social conduct now properly becomes a sphere for regulation by a much more complex web of actors—social scientists, professional social workers, and so on. Crucially, however, this notion of the “social forces” that are to address (non-state, non-economic) “social” problems does not distinguish between profit and non-profit organizations. Thus, the central dividing line in official government rhetoric about the sources of solutions is clearly the divide between government and non-government organizations, and not between market and non-market ones. Privatization and user fees are therefore considered efficient and desirable ways of delivering social services. Indeed, the profit motive constitutes the first principle of this new “subsidiarity”: if companies are not now to deliver social services, social services are to be provided *as if* a company were providing them, in many instances in the sense that the for-profit form is applied to social service provision.

From the perspective of economic development policy, the logic behind this move is clear enough. Government, especially at the county and township levels, is reluctant to invest in social spending because it is seen to hurt economic development strategies that stress cost-competitiveness. That China’s economic development model is based on cheap labour does not augur well for the demand for and creation of government social policies beyond the realm of the market. From a Polanyian perspective, however, this

problem has the distinct disadvantage of addressing the consequences of market rationality by the further extension of market rationality. The logic of the Polanyian double movement seems to imply that the Chinese government's distinctive appeal for "social" forces of this market-oriented sort to deal with "social problems" would tend ultimately to exacerbate, rather than reduce, social polarization.

To some extent, the Chinese state realizes the danger of not dealing with social redistribution: rapid, market-driven social polarization has been officially discussed as a key source of large-scale social unrest. China's policy is not silent on the social implications of its population's encounter with the market system. In view of the need to build social security system, the Ministry of Labor was changed to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MoLSS) in 1998. On the other hand, the Chinese leadership continues to view economic growth as the overriding national priority. Consequently, any social assistance schemes such as minimum living guarantee (*dibao*) and unemployment insurance are meant to be temporary, and are aimed at helping the unemployed to find jobs as soon as possible. Here is a transition from what Andrew Walder calls the "organizational dependence" of the *danwei* system under the socialist planned economy to active labour market policies. The latter aim at getting people off government assistance and employed as soon as possible. The "retreat" of the state from certain areas of economy does not mean the weakening of the state, rather it means "regrouping" of the state—the state has been re-organizing so as to intervene in areas it deems essential, but leave areas that belong to "society" to be take care of by "society".¹⁷ As Lee points out, with the state's retreat from regulating employment relations, "the increasing importance of the law [National Labour Law] and the market frees workers

from their past economic and political dependence on a particular work unit or official department. Yet the “freedom” to choose and to change jobs comes at a high price.”¹⁸ In fact, workers are encouraged to use their new-found freedom to become active job-seekers in the market economy, rather than cling to their old identity of state employees.

Let us now turn to consider the significance of such policies on a comparative basis. Welfare policies during the twentieth-century in most Western liberal societies may be construed as the state’s response to those disadvantaged in the market, above all in order to contain class struggle. For Keynesians and for students of “Fordism” alike, however, minimum income guarantees also serve to stabilize consumption in economies oriented primarily to a domestic market. But the classic Western welfare state does not have a more direct purpose with respect to entrenching the social preconditions for the market itself. Its primary functions are social and non-economic.

Neo-liberal government, by contrast, aids the worker by reinforcing market behavior, actively re-inserting the subject of assistance back into the market. The classical example of this is the emergence of the Western workfare program, but the turn in orientation is evident both substantively and at the level of policy “rhetoric”. For example, The Canadian Employment Insurance Act of 1996 signaled the Chrétien government’s turn from passive to active employment policy and its drastic reduction in overall policy coverage by substituting “Employment Insurance” for the former “Unemployment Insurance”. In the United States, President Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, better known as the welfare reform bill. Such shifts to active employment policy reflect what Bob Jessop calls the “Schumpeterian Workfare State”: welfare provision is devised with the

aim of making the overall social formation more competitive in the market economy.¹⁹ In other words, welfare provision focuses on the supply side of the labour market, emphasizing improvement in the employability of the unemployed through training and counseling.

When we consider the recent emergence of public employment service centres in China, it is crucial to note as well the neo-liberal turn in global institutions and the impact of this turn on the roles and functions of Public Employment Services (PES). The global transition from welfare state to workfare state is reflected in the changing roles and functions of ILO-mandated Public Employment Service (PES).

The PES became involved in special employment measures to alleviate unemployment often on a much larger scale to their traditional job-broking activities. Remedies for unemployment were increasingly sought in supply side of the economy. ..[T]here was a belief that over-generous and indefinite systems of unemployment compensation were creating a problem of “benefit dependency”. Renewed emphasis was given to the role of the PES in applying work tests to those drawing unemployment benefits.²⁰

The OECD Jobs Study (1994) also suggested that Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) should replace passive income support.²¹

Evidence emerging from my preliminary research and the still-limited literature on unemployment in China shows that government is increasingly opting for a market-oriented employment policy (*shichang jiuye*) and devolves the financing of employment programmes to local government.²² The establishment of public employment service centres, active labour market policies, and wholesale departures from “standard

employment norms”²³ are entirely in line with global trends. The ILO provides expertise knowledge and advices on labour market mechanisms, of which public employment service (PES) is one. Shanghai municipality, in 1996, introduced the concept of informal employment [fei zhengguijiuye] from the ILO in order to help the city address large-scale restructuring of the SOEs and the increasing demand for people working in the ever expanding service industries.²⁴ The two-way flow of information between the global and national levels is important to emphasize. The China Employment Forum, set up between China’s Ministry of Labour and Social Security and the ILO, seems to be the main channel through which ILO expertise knowledge and advises flow to China. On the other hand, statistics and experiences from China become part and parcel of the global knowledge base of employment policies and practices.²⁵

From “Iron Rice Bowl” (tiefanwan) to Flexible/Informal Employment (feizhenggui jiuye)

“The shift to a service economy in many of the highly developed countries has resulted in a greater share of low-wage jobs than was the case when manufacturing was the leading sector.”²⁶ This observation can be applied – with appropriate adjustments – to China as well. In the Chinese government’s push to restructure SOEs, every effort has been made to shrink state sectors and expand private sectors; as well as to shrink primary and secondary sectors and expand service sectors such as restaurants and tourism. The goal of expanding the latter service sectors tends to result from growth in high tech and financial sectors (to list just two examples), above all in big cities such as Shanghai.²⁷ The paradoxical coexistence of well-paid jobs in high tech and financial sectors, and lower-paid jobs in service sectors is characteristic of global cities throughout the world.²⁸

But I would argue such a characteristic is not limited to global cities. What we are witnessing in any Chinese city is that the growth of financial sector, high tech sector and tourism has created the need for many more people to clean office buildings, act as security guards (*bao'an*), clean hotel rooms (*baojie*), and so on. The growing middle class also creates spectacular market growth for fine dining, and hence for appropriate waiters. The same can be said for a series of other services to the new middle class as well as aging population, such as ground maintenance staff and security guards at prosperous residential areas (*xiaoqu*), domestic work service, and so on.

To ensure the successful restructuring of China's economy, more and more people are channeled to such rapidly growing non-state, small- and medium-sized service sectors. In Polanyian terms, these new sectors are precisely oriented to guaranteeing the reproduction of (middle-class) labor by specifically market mechanisms. But paradoxically, these sectors, as Sassen points out, tend to have "a greater share of low-wage jobs than was the case when manufacturing was the leading sector."²⁹ They therefore contribute to problems of labour reproduction in the new working classes.

One might also add that workplace ownership also affects wage in China, and disproportionately more women found themselves employed in informal sectors. Generally speaking, state sectors still have better paid jobs, and disproportionately hire full-time and permanent workers. But this sector is shrinking. Those employed in SOEs decreased from 50% of all urban employees throughout 1980s to 30% by 1999. Women who were laid-off took up 62.8% of all the laid-off workers by 1997.³⁰ Those who are laid off from SOEs typically find less desirable "flexible" employment.³¹ According to a survey of selected cities conducted by All China Federation of Trade Union, 80%-90% of

laid-off workers who found re-employment by the end of 1999 were employed in the informal sectors.³² Share-holding companies, joint ventures, individual households (*getihu*) and private enterprises (*siren qiye*), in particular, prefer flexible employment, but these are the sectors that are growing.³³

In order to encourage people to work in service sectors, which have disproportionately low-wage jobs, government is no longer able to re-assign or otherwise compel them directly. It has to change people's attitude that part-time and informal/flexible jobs are "not real jobs". According to statistics from the fifth national census and the 66-city survey of employment and social security conducted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security in 2002, fully two-thirds of those who found employment in the two years before the survey was conducted, had found temporary jobs (*lingshigong*)³⁴ Those who refused to work in these low-paid jobs are commonly characterized in both public and expert discourse as too picky and lazy, workers in short who are still "stuck in the past" with respect to what employment should be. One thing I heard the most while in China from staff working in employment service centres is that many jobs are available, and that therefore, "it all depends on whether you want to work". Here, "many jobs" refer to many low-pay temporary jobs.

This line of analysis is popular amongst employment officials and experts, but does raise questions about the nature of the work available. Several independent front-line workers did say to me during my research trips that even workers on the minimum basic living guarantees (MBLG) would commonly refuse work. While this could be interpreted as laziness (or as a symptom of more general psychological depression over a life without hope or meaning) it could also be read as a perfectly rational individual

calculation of the kind neo-liberal rationality encourages: what is the rational choice between the alternatives of receiving the MBLG, or receiving a similar amount in wages in return for many hours of service labour?

One problem I encountered with this line of analysis may be seen in a parallel analysis of youth unemployment, now being discussed openly as a particularly severe social problem.³⁵ A new term, “gnawing the old generation,” (*kenlaozu*), refers to young employable men and women, usually in their 20s and 30s, who are unemployed, but are said to prefer to rely on their parents than to look actively for jobs. As staffs in local community (*shequ*) offices told me in Shanghai, it is easier to get *xiagang* workers to actively seek for jobs than it is to influence these younger workers. The older workers have a stronger sense of responsibility to their own families, and presumably a stronger lifetime commitment to paid labour. They are consequently characterized as being more willing to take up flexible employment in the service sectors than many who have never experienced non-market labour policy.

In sum, employment in China is undergoing a shift from “iron rice bowl” to “flexible” employment policy. The problem becomes one of making the workers flexible as well. More and more people are subject to free market dynamics, and are thus more vulnerable. On the other hand, the existing social security system remains decentralized and the levels of assistance remain highly variable, a legacy of workplace-based welfare provision during the Maoist period. The new national priority of maintaining high economic growth is given as a rationale for the state’s social security system emphasizing the re-insertion of the unemployed in the market, rather than shielding them from it.

From Off-post/*Xiagang* Workers to the Unemployed/*Shiyerenyuan*

The Chinese government only collects data on registered unemployed with urban *hukou*. Rural jobless migrants are not even counted as the unemployed because, first of all, it will significantly raise the already high unemployment rate, and secondly, to be recognized as unemployed is to have access to still-limited government services to help find jobs.³⁶ The unemployment rate also does not include off-post/*xiagang* workers because they are still considered part of the enterprises. As Solinger argues there is simply no way to find out China's actual unemployment rate.³⁷ While it is the only officially stated figure, the unemployment rate of 4.5% is widely considered far below the actual number, reflecting more the government target than the actual number.³⁸ Even though government increasingly turns to technical solutions to unemployment, unemployment rate is still considered a sensitive political matter.³⁹

“Off-post” (*xiagang*) workers from SOEs and collectively owned enterprises have lost their *danwei* as both economic and social institution, but their official relationship with their employers is not officially severed. These workers are considered a historical category unique to the Chinese situation, when these sectors of the economy were restructuring, but China's current social security system was not in place. In order to help off-post workers to make the transition, enterprises were required to set up re-employment service centres (*zaijiuye fuwu zhongxin*) for their workers. These centres were considered societal intermediary organizations (*shehui zhongjie*), namely organizations that act between the government and the market.⁴⁰ But to be qualified as off-post workers, most workers have to have joined SOE as full-time regular workers with tenure (*zhengshi gongren*) before 1986, when contractual employment system was instituted. Furthermore, they must have been laid off because their enterprises had to

restructure; they must not have terminated their labour relationship with enterprises, and must not yet have found employment. Those hired as contract labour, but whose contract had not yet come to term, were also qualified as off-post workers. It is clear that government is attentive to the needs of former “labour aristocrats”, who have been considered in official party discourse to have made great contributions to the society, and who are now making another sacrifice, this time for reform. Furthermore, of China’s urban population, off-post workers are most likely to have experienced dramatic social dislocation. They therefore, had the most likely to complain about the present, and to feel nostalgic about the past.

In order to receive social insurance and medical care, these off-post/xiagang workers had to enter a reemployment service center established by the employer under government obligation, and sign a contract with the center. By signing the contract, the off-post workers agreed either to look actively for work or to accept jobs referred by the center. In return, these workers received a “basic living guarantee” of no more than 120% of local unemployment insurance, and the center continued to pay both for the workers’ training and the employer’s portion of the workers’ previous social benefits. According to the contract, if the off-post workers twice refused work referred to them or did not find employment within three years, then all benefits would be withdrawn. In any case, under these contracts, off-post workers that were still unemployed would also end their relationship with their employers within three years. They would then have to look for jobs as regular unemployed workers, which entailed a much less generous level of support that itself lasted only two years.⁴¹ In this sense, then, reemployment service centres were created to help off-post workers to make the transition from reliance on the

state to independent, active job seeking in the labour market. This, however, was a privilege temporarily enjoyed by off-post workers who had worked as permanent SOE workers. By 2002, reemployment service centres for off-post workers were expected to have been replaced with public employment service centers modeled on ILO practices. Thus, in the new century, the unemployed seeking employment through the labour market becomes the standard category, but this practice is praised as China finally “connecting to the global track” [of employment policy practice]. And off-post workers’ disappearance as a historical phenomenon coincides with China’s shift to active employment policies. The transformation of off-post workers from “person of the plan” [jihua ren] to “person of the market” [shichang ren], is, in Yang Yiyong’s words, “a process of being reborn...It is a silent revolution.”⁴² As the World Bank Employment Policy Primer writes,

the objectives of active labour market programs (ALMPs) “is primarily economic – to increase the probability that the unemployed will find jobs or that the underemployed will increase their productivity and earning...With economic reform, increasing liberalization of markets and growing concerns about the problems of unemployment, ALMPs have increasingly become an attractive option for policymakers.”⁴³

Besides encouraging a more flexible attitude to acceptable paid labour, active employment policies also aim to encourage people to seek self-employment (*ziwo jiuye*); government subsidies are available to encourage people to start and run their own small- and medium-sized businesses. These initiatives are uniformly called “Start and Improve Your Own Business” (SIYB) or “Start Your Own Business” (SYB) in Chinese

newspapers and government documents and publications: as direct borrowings from ILO best-practices documents in the area of job creation, these acronyms signal China's convergence with "international best practices".⁴⁴

This link to the ILO's program is more than borrowing catchphrases. On the ILO official website, SIYB is described as "a globally recognized trademark and the program has been introduced in more than 80 countries." (<http://www.ilo.org>). The same website reports on a Chinese TV drama series called "My Future is Not a Dream" (*Wode Weilai Bushi Meng*). This program was a joint production between Sichuan TV Station, the Chinese Ministry of Labour and Social Security, and the ILO's SIYB Programme. The series is about how rural migrants start their own businesses and become successful entrepreneurs. As the chief technical advisor for SIYB-China Project points out, "the aim is to catch [migrants'] interest, encourage them to start their own businesses, and tell them about the training services available to help them make the first important steps." (<http://www.iol.org>) The key message is that rural migrants are as capable as urban people in starting their own businesses and becoming "modern" entrepreneurs in China's competitive market economy (<http://www.ILO.org>).

In turn, the ILO's SYB/SIYB programs seem to have caught the attention of the government because they are seen to "kill two birds with one stone": the unemployed who become business owners solve not only their own employment problem but others' as well. More significantly for government, the unemployed who turn to successful small- and medium-sized business owners act as "model citizens", and can be held up for the others to emulate: take your own initiatives to become entrepreneurs, but do not wait for the government to help you!

Briefly, then, active employment policies stress the supply side of the labour market. With them, government subsidizes training that is hoped to lead to employment. The training programs are to improve the quality (*suzhi*) of the labor forces to meet the demands of an emerging “knowledge economy”. The change from off-post/*xiagang* workers to unemployed/*shiye* is not just a change in terminology: instead, it signals a government shift in dealing unemployment, from working through the state owned enterprise system to working through market mechanisms. The term “unemployed” (*shiye*) means that employers have terminated their relationship with employees, and that the expectation is now that they have to turn to the market to look for jobs. The Chinese government’s employment policies put the individual’s ability to find employment first, in combination with market-mediated employment. Government’s role in employment is not to create employment, but to promote it. This promotional work favours multiple channels of employment (*duoyuanhua jiuye*), including self-employment, employment in private and foreign owned companies, and diverse forms of part-time, temporary and flexible employment.⁴⁵ Ultimately, individuals have to rely on themselves to navigate the labour market. Such employment policies are not unique to China, but are compatible with global trends. And the ILO, World Bank and OECD countries are ready to provide expertise knowledge and policy advices.

Shanghai Public Employment Service Centres

1. The Physical Layout and its Message

I visited Public Employment Service Centers in two districts in Shanghai in the summer of 2006. Both centers shared a similar physical layout. When one enters the centre, one finds oneself in the middle of a large hall. The hall is clean, spacious, and

open (*changkaishi*). There are stand-alone computers in the hall ready for those who know how to use computers to search jobs, construct resumes, and apply for job on the job net (<http://jobs.12333.gov.cn>). On the walls are large screen TV monitors that air Q & A session between a client and a staff. On one side of the hall, there is a counter, and behind it, many small rooms with glass doors where many different services are delivered to individual clients. These services include help with constructing resume on-line, techniques on how to conduct a successful job interviews, and counseling those who have psychological barrier in successfully finding jobs. These small rooms provide one-on-one services, and despite their glass doors, their very existence in the Chinese context signals a desire to differentiate these services, and to protect clients' privacy. The physical layout of the center signals a shift in governance approach: the impersonal bureaucratic architecture of earlier periods in modern Chinese history signaled an official orientation to handling standardized problems of undifferentiated hordes. The layout of these centres emphasizes human-centred services (*renxinhua fuwu*), designed specifically for clients with different needs. The openness of the main hall may be interpreted as an atmosphere of welcome, as if to say to clients that the officials are ready to serve them. In a word, employment services centre's new rationality is to serve "clients".

2. Human-Centred Services (*renxinhua fuwu*)

As we have seen, Public Employment Services (PES) in China are modeled on ILO best practices,⁴⁶ and come under the jurisdiction of Bureau of Labour and Social Security. According to public education brochure distributed in Shanghai's Public Employment Service Centre (*gonggong jiu'yefuwu zhongxin*), the centre plays four roles: job brokering; labour resources management; unemployment insurance management; and

assistance to those who desire to start their own businesses (*ziwo chuangye*). In other words, center's mission is not to create jobs, but to create favorable conditions for its clients to find employment on the labour market.

The centre's customers are Shanghai residents with Shanghai hukou status, or university graduates whether or not they enjoy Shanghai hukou status. In the past two years, the Shanghai municipal government has started to stress assisting those who want to start their own businesses. My informants told me that this was done because those who start their own businesses, create jobs not only for themselves, but also for others. The centre's mission is to provide services to clients, facilitating their job hunt in the labour market, or their start-efforts in business.

This implies that age-old coercive administrative measures (*xinzheng shouduan*) are assumed not to work any longer (if indeed they ever worked). In order to govern better and more effectively, the Chinese government, like its neo-liberal counterparts in the West, also assumes that it cannot govern everything. The concept and practice of human-centred service delivery is just one example of a more general shift in Chinese governance, one explicitly borrowed from recent trends in public administration in the West.⁴⁷ Humanization (*renxin hua*) in general is now officially described as being compatible with China's modernization, and the latter is expressed with a dual focus: first, on national strength; and second, on "individual comprehensive development" (*ren de quanmian fazhan*). "Individual comprehensive development" includes, among other things, individuals' ability to design their own lifelong project, or more narrowly, their career ambitions. Translated into employment, it means that individual client must strive to become active job seekers. The PES centres provide services to help achieve that goal.

Inherent in these services are the rationales (*linian*) that different clients have different needs, and that they must be divided up for different treatments.

3. Dividing Practices (fenlei) and Disciplinary Power

To serve clients better, clients have to be divided up in order to be provided different service—this is described as “human-centred service” delivery. Clients at these centres are divided into those who can navigate the site by themselves (self-steering); those who need help to navigate the site to fill out resume form, those who need face-to-face job counseling; and those who need psychological counseling.

But such dividing practices have an economic logic as well as a purely administrative one. I was told the dividing practice on the part of the government is to maximize its resources so that no resources are wasted on clients who can help themselves or only need some help. Such rationale is provided as well by the World Bank Employment Policy Primer: “PES can be organized into “tiers” with some general services available to everyone (e.g., job brokerage services) and more intensive programs only available to clients identified as needing those services. ... Tiered service delivery can help allocate public resources as efficiently as possible.”⁴⁸

But dividing practice is closely linked to disciplinary power, as Foucault warn us.⁴⁹ So for example, those who can help themselves in navigating computerized labour market information do not need hands-on help from staff. Even for those who need help, there are different degrees of need. One staff member used the revealing analogy of medical patients to explain the rationality behind the PES center’s dividing practices. Patients, depending on their illness, can seek medical help ranging from over-the-counter medicines, clinical help, and specialists. Similarly, the unemployed can be “diagnosed”

as to how “sick” they are by the staff, and then are subject to different kinds of treatment, so that they might recover from “dependency syndrome” and conform to the new self-steering norms of subjectivity in an increasingly marketized economy.

When clients register with the centre, government has detailed knowledge about them. On the continuum of conformity with the latter norm of independent subjectivity, the most dependent (and thus most difficult to employ) are older people (anyone over 49 years old) with low education. Those people often do not even come to the centres, an action which already demonstrates a degree of agency. Government needs different techniques to get to know those who do not come to the centre. Employment assistants (*jiuye yuanzhuyuan*) in communities (*shequ*) organizations were created to target this group of difficult, “inflexible” and passive cases. Usually in Shanghai, the most difficult to employ are provided with “public interest jobs” (*gongye xing*) as employment categories of last resort. These jobs include public hygiene, public security and grounds maintenance (*baojie, bao’an, baolü*). District-level government usually pays the wage difference between the pay for these jobs and the municipal minimum living standard, and also pay for premium on pension, medical and social insurance.

The job of employment assistants involves knocking on residents’ doors, and getting to know every household that has an unemployed member. Once every month, these assistants have to update information on the unemployed. They then turn to finding job vacancies and matching them with the unemployed in their neighbourhood. Employment assistants thus continue the tradition of resident committee work, but with different goal. This time, employment assistants collect detailed knowledge of each household’s employment status, and try to match those unemployed with job vacancies

available. Further, the employment assistants work on contract signed with local bureau of labour and social security.⁵⁰

4. Technologies of the Self

Job counseling (*zhiye zhidao*) is a new service offered in Shanghai Public Employment Service Centres. The service targets the most difficult clients: those who face psychological difficulties are understood to have problems of personality type and/or (in strikingly Foucauldian terms) an improper understanding of the self. The job counselor, armed with expertise in psychology, works with a client for a 1- to 2-hour session, sometimes with follow-up visits. Based on my observation of one such session and books on job counseling, it appears that job counseling is aimed at molding clients' attitude and behaviour so that they have a "proper understanding of the self" (*ziwon de renshi*), so as to compete more successfully in the labour market.

More specifically, the job counselor steers the client to properly understand her own capabilities and Shanghai's labour market conditions; figures out the client's pragmatic goals; and then outlines strategies to seek employment in the competitive labour market. To quote the main job counselor I interviewed, a job counselor's job is to readjust the client's understanding of oneself, and then to "reconstruct" oneself. One book on job counseling told its readers (typically university graduates) that a correct knowledge of oneself is a first step in helping university graduates to rationally design their career goals. The author of the book then quoted an American job counselor expert in saying that career choice includes three steps: knowing self; knowing conditions for a successful career, and decision-making. The author then concludes that a correct

assessment of one's own characteristics and of factors relating to one's career choices is an important precondition to choosing one's career correctly.⁵¹

All this should sound strikingly familiar to experts in contemporary reforms of Western welfare states. In analyzing "advanced liberalism", Rose argues that

[I]ndividuals are to become "experts of themselves", to adopt an educated and knowledgeable relation of self-care in respect of their bodies, their minds, their forms of conduct and that of the members of their own families. ..Those "excluded"...are to be assisted not through the ministrations of solicitous experts proffering support and benefit cheques, but through their engagement in a whole array of programmes for their ethical reconstruction as active citizens—training to equip them with the skills of self-promotion, counseling to restore their sense of self-worth and self-esteem, programmes of empowerment to enable them to assume their rightful place as the self-actualizing and demanding subjects of an "advance" liberal democracy.⁵²

In turning the unemployed from dependence on government and family, to independence, we see an array of techniques at work in Shanghai employment centers. Some of which are borrowed from the advanced liberal societies, particularly the ILO and World Bank; some drew from Chinese own practices such as mobilizing neighbourhood to get to know the unemployed.

The successful individual in the modern market economy is someone who is constantly on the move to assess one's capability and one's life chances in the ever-changing labour market. One then needs to design the course of one's life by constantly improving one's life chances. As Baum points out, "it is individual men and women on

their own who are expected to use, individually, their own wits, resources and industry to lift themselves to a more satisfactory condition and leave behind whatever aspect of their present condition they may resent.”⁵³ The very media in use at these job centers speak to this model of flexible self-improvement. Computerized job-net systems in Shanghai’s employment service centres facilitate this principle of flexibility: clients can constantly update their history of employment and change of skills through access to a personal computer file. Paper forms are in a sense part of an older order passing away: they cannot be changed, and can be difficult to locate. Flexible job markets – and hence flexible workforces – require a degree of agency on the part of individuals, but do not independently produce such agency.

Conclusion

China’s policies towards unemployment cut across the distinction between authoritarianism and liberalism. In the area of active employment policies, the governance approach is of a new kind: freedom itself is being framed and mobilized to steer people to government’s desired policy goals. The Chinese government does so for several apparent reasons. First, a growing consensus, mirroring an international consensus, claims that these policies seem to work elsewhere, and therefore provide valuable experience to Chinese government in handling this potentially explosive political problem. Second, these policies are compatible with the government’s effort to channel the unemployed away from “dependence” on government to becoming active individual job seekers in the labour market. Third, the Chinese government wants to show to the international community that it is “modernizing” and institutionalizing its employment policies, even though China is a late-comer in this area. Finally, mobilizing

individual freedom in employment policies can be presented as simultaneously respecting individual's agency, a value increasingly viewed as key to "individual comprehensive development", and as an integral part of enhancing overall national strength.

China is an authoritarian regime, but as I argued in this paper, it is increasingly adopting international norms and standards of employment policies common in the West, through the mediation of ILO, World-Bank and OECD standards and practices. Adopting neo-liberal ways of governing in this area, however, does not necessarily mean China is turning towards liberal democracy, any more than "people's courts" in an earlier stage of Chinese development were less repressive, simply by virtue of their insertion in a larger revolution with emancipatory intent.⁵⁴

Aihwa Ong has recently made the provocative claim that neoliberal practice is positioned as the "exception" in China and several Southeast Asian countries, whereas it is positioned as the "norm" of the entire system of governance in Western liberal countries.⁵⁵ This certainly points to an important caveat in analyzing such borrowings from a Western-influenced international rule system. But the distinction risks being dichotomized into a new post-Cold War Orientalism, one that exaggerates both the flexibilities of Chinese governance and the increasingly repressive rigidities of governments in the West. Restrictions on the participatory liberal-democratic character of the overarching system of Western governance, for example, has been a keystone of international neoliberal practice that dates at least to the Huntington "ungovernability" thesis on Western democracy, presented to the Trilateral Commission in the early 1970s.⁵⁶

¹Unemployment defined as the imbalance between the number of job seekers and the number of jobs has always existed in China, but it was never recognized officially. Unemployed rural migrants continue to be excluded from being considered as unemployed. During the Maoist period, unemployment was made “invisible” by “over-staffing” SOEs, creating the category of “people who are waiting for jobs (*daiye renkou*), and sending urban youth to the countryside (the sent-down youth) after peak of the Cultural Revolution. See, for example, Chen, Shaohui, 2003. *From Employment under Planning to Employment under Market [Cong Jihua Jiuye dao Shichnag Jiuye]*. Beijing: Chinese Finance and Economic Press; Gu, Edward X. 1999. “From Permanent Employment to Massive Layoffs: the Political Economy of Transitional Unemployment (1993-1998), *Economy & Society*, 28 :2, pp. 281-299.

²Lansdowne, Helen and Wu Guoguang, eds. *Socialist China, Capitalist China: Social-Political Conflicts under Globalization*.

³Burchell, Graham. 1996. “Liberal Government and Techniques of the Self.” In Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, eds. *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism and Rationalities of Government*, 19-36, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴Cruikshank, Barbara. 1999. *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Foucault, Michel, 2000. “‘Omnes et Singulatim’: Toward a Critique of Political Reason.” In *Michel Foucault: Power*, edited by James D. Faubion, translated by Robert Hurley and Others, 298-325, New York: New Press; Foucault, Michel. 2000. “The Political Technology of Individuals.” In *Michel Foucault: Power*, edited by James D. Faubion, translated by Robert Hurley and Others, 403-417, New York: New Press.

⁵For similar argument in understanding changing government rationalities in China, see, journal *Economy & Society* special issue on governance and China, especially the introductory article: Sigley, Gary. “Chinese Governmentalities: Government, Governance in the Socialist Market Economy.” *Economy & Society*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2006, pp. 487-508.

⁶The rationale of campaign/yudong during the Maoist period, as Bennett points out, “is a government-sponsored effort to storm and eventually overwhelm strong but vulnerable barriers to the progress of socialism through intensive mass mobilization of active personal commitment.” (Bennett, Gordon, *Yundong: Mass Campaign in Chinese Communist Leadership*. Berkeley, Center for Chinese Studies, University of Berkeley.) Unlike *yundong* which involves large-scale mass movement and more coercive, *huodong* is a smaller-scale mass movement, targeting particular areas, and rely more on volunteering. On comparing *yundong* and *huodong*, also see Judd, Ellen. 2002. *Chinese Women’s Movement Between State and Market*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 11.

⁷Bray, David. “Building ‘Community’: New Strategies of Governance in Urban China.” *Economy & Society*, vol. 35, no.4, November, pp. 530-549; Xu, Feng. “New Modes of Urban Governance: Building Community/Shequ in Post-Danwei China.” André Laliberté and Marc Lanteigne, eds., *The Chinese Party-State at the Turn of the Millennium: Legitimacy and Adaptation*, (London: Routledge). Forthcoming.

⁸Ministry of Labour and Social Security. 2003. *China’s Active Employment Policies: Documents from National Re-employment Work Conference (2002) [Zhongguo Jiji de Jiuye Zhengce: Quanguo Zaijiuye Gongzuo Huiyi Wenjian Huibian]*. Beijing: China Labour and Social Security Publishing House; Ministry of Labour and Social Security. 2004. *Questions and Answers on Employment and Training Policies [Xinbian Jiuye yu Peixun Zhence Wenda]*. Beijing: China Personnel Publishing.

⁹cf. Kasserly, C. 1994. *Employment Counselling, Career Guidance, Occupational Information Provided through a Public Employment Service*. ILO, Labor Administration Branch. Geneva: ILO. <http://oit.org/public/english/employment/skills/empserv/public/publ/index.htm> (September 25, 2006); Thuy, Phan, Ellen Hansen and David Price. 2001. *The Public Employment Service in a Changing Labour Market*. Geneva: ILO; OECD. 2001. *Labour Market Policies and the Public Employment Service*. Paris: OECD; Hansen, Ellen. 2006. *Career Guidance: A Resource*

Handbook for Low- and Middle-Income Countries. Geneva: ILO.

¹⁰Walder, Andrew. 1986. *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹¹See, for example, Yu, Keping. 2005. *Incremental Democracy and Good Governance [Zenliang Minzhu yu Shanzhi]*. Beijing: Social Sciences and Academic Press; Lin, Shangli. 2005.

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¹²See, for example, OECD 2001; ILO. 2004. *An Employment Agenda for China: Background Paper for the China Employment Forum*. Geneva: ILO; World Bank 2002

¹³Polanyi, Karl. 1957. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon, p. 84

¹⁴ It does not mean that China has established a free labour market, as a rural-urban divide continues to exist, but rather its desire to build a labour market has led to increasing commodification of labour. See, for example, Tomba, Luigi. 2002. *Paradoxes of Labour Reform: Chinese Labour Theory and Practice from Socialism to Market*. London: Routledge; Knight, John and Lina Song. 2005. *Towards a Labour Market in China*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵Chen, 2003; Gu, 1999.

¹⁶Lee, Ching-Kwan. 2000. Pathways of Labor Insurgency," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, eds. E. Perry and M. Selden, 41-61. New York: Routledge; Cai, Yongshun. 2002.

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pp. 327-344; Solinger, Dorothy. 2002. "Labor Market Reform and the Plight of the Laid-off

Proletariat." *China Quarterly*, June, 170, pp. 304-326; Hurst, William and Kevin J. O'Brien.

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¹⁷ Edin, Maria. 2003. "Remaking the Communist Party-State: The Cadre Responsibility System at the Local Level in China." *China: An International Journal*, no. 4, pp. 1-15; Yang, Dali. 2004.

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¹⁸Lee, Ching-kwan, ed. 2007. *Working in China: Ethnographies of Labor and Workplace Transformation*. London: Routledge, p. 4.

¹⁹Jessop, Bob. 1993. "Towards a Schumpeterian Workfare State?: Preliminary Remarks on Post-Fordist Political Economy." *Studies in Political Economy*, 40: 7-39.

²⁰Thuy et al., 2001

²¹Ibid., p. 6.

²²Yang, Yiyong. 2002. *The Employment Problem in the Transition Period of China* [Zhongguo Zhuanxinshiqi de Jiuyewenti]. Beijing: China Labour and Social Security Publishing House; Chen, 2003; Yang, Yansui and Zhao Jianguo. 2006. *Various Job & Flexible Employment Mechanism: A New Rule, Dream of Freedom*. Beijing: China Labour and Social Security Publishing House.

²³Vosko, Leah. 2000. *Temporary Work: The Gendered Rise of a Precarious Employment Relationship*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

²⁴Yang and Zhao. 2006, pp. 125-128.

²⁵See, for example, Howell, Jude. 2002. *Good Practice Study in Shanghai on Employment Services for the Informal Economy*, Working Paper. Employment Sector, ILO; Ministry of Labour and Social Security. 2002. *Skills Training in the Informal Sector in China*. Geneva: ILO.

²⁶Sassen, Saskia. 1991. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 27.

²⁷ See, for example, Yatsko, Pamela. 2001. *New Shanghai: the Rocky Rebirth of China's Legendary City*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.; Ross Andrew. 2006. *Fast Boat to China: Corporate Flight and the Consequences of Free Trade ,Lessons from Shanghai*. New York: Pantheon Books.

²⁸Sassen, 1991.

²⁹Ibid., p. 127.

³⁰ Li, Qiufang. 2005. "Flexible Employment and Women's Rights [Linghuo Duoyang de Jiuye Xingshi yu Funüliyi Yanjiu]." Tan, Lin and Liu Bohong, eds. *Review on the Chinese Women's*

Studies in Recent 10 Years, 1995-2005 [Zhongguofunuyanjiu Shinian], Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, P. 237

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³²Jiang, Yongping. 2005. "Pay Attention to Gender Equality in the Labor Market [Guanzhu Laodongli Shichang zhong de Xinbiepingdeng]." Tan, Lin and Liu Bohong, eds. *Review on the Chinese Women's Studies in Recent 10 Years, 1995-2005 [Zhongguofunuyanjiu Shinian]*, Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, p. 266.

³³Yang and Zhao. 2006; You, 2005, Chapter 5.

³⁴Ibid., p. 180.

³⁵See, for example, Huang, Yihua. "China's Third Employment Peak is Under Way." *Jiangsu Workers' Daily*, June 24, A1; You, 2005, pp. 200-203.

³⁶There seems a policy shift towards providing migrants services such as training and counseling to help them find employment in cities, in accordance with the "people-centred" development and building "harmonious society" under the Hu leadership.

³⁷Solinger, Dorothy. 2001. "Why We Cannot Count the 'Unemployed'." Research Report, *China Quarterly*, 671-688.

³⁸Solinger, 2001.

³⁹I was repeatedly told, during my field research, that unemployment rate is a sensitive issue.

⁴⁰Gu, Donghui. 2004. *Support and Response: Research on Laid-Off Employees through the Lens of Social Work [Zhichi Yu Huiying: Shehui Gonzuo Shiye Zhong de Xiagang Zhigong Yanjiu]*. Beijing: Social Sciences Documentation Publishing House.

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⁴¹MoLSS 2004; Lee, Grace and M. Warner. 2004. "The Shanghai Re-Employment Model: From Local Experiment to Nation-Wide Labour Market Policy." *China Quarterly*, March (77), 174-99.

⁴²Yang, Yiyong. 2002, p. 35.

⁴³World Bank, 2002, *World Bank Employment Policy Primer*, no 3, pp. 1-7.

⁴⁴See, for example, Ding, Bing. 2006. “Suyu: SYB Enables Off-post Workers Find “Way out” [Suyu: SYB ran Xiagangrenyuan Zhaodao “Chulu].” *Jiangsu Workers’ Daily*, June 26.

⁴⁵MoLSS, 2003.

⁴⁶See, for example, Thuy et al., 2001.

⁴⁷Yang, Dali. 2004; Greenhalgh, Susan and Edwin A. Winckler. 2005. *Governing China’s Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 176-181

⁴⁸World Bank, 2002. p. 4.

⁴⁹Lawson, James and Feng Xu. “SARS in Canada and China: Two Approaches to Emergency Health Policy.” *Governance*. April, 2007.

⁵⁰Cf. Dutton, Michael. 2005. *Policing Chinese Politics: A History*. Durham: Duke University Press. As Dutton points out, China’s policing has shifted from mass-line policing to contractual policing in the post-Mao era, chapter 5.

⁵¹Wu, Wei, ed. 2005. *Job Guidance [Jiuye Zhidao]*. Shanghai: Eastern Normal University Press, p. 156.

⁵²Rose, Nikolas. 1996. “Governing ‘Advanced’ Liberal Democracy.” In Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, eds. *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism and Rationalities of Government*. 37-64. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 59.

⁵³Baum, Zygmunt, 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, p. 135.

⁵⁴Foucault, Michel. 1980. “On Popular Justice: A Discussion with Maoists.” In Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, chapter 1.

⁵⁵Ong, Aihwa. 2006. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁵⁶Crozier, Michel, Samuel P. Huntington and Joji Watanuki. 1975. *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York: New York University Press.