

Zhang Yi, Charlie. 2022. *Dreadful desires. The uses of love in neoliberal China.* Durham, London: Duke University Press. 280 pp. Pb.: \$26.95. ISBN: 9781478017998.

Book review by

E. Paul Durrenberger

University of Iowa and Penn State

China is the purveyor of infinite supplies of cheap labor to produce the goods required by the neoliberal world in the ceaseless activity of its factory cities. Countless individuals are called on to provide the repetitive, often mindless, and frequently dangerous work of constructing the structures, roads, and infrastructure for this national factory to working at its manufacturing tasks to fill the desires of the rest of the world for cheap goods. How does the party-state motivate its people to willingly provide this labor, to show up every day for unrewarding and often self-damaging work?

Zhang argues it does this by providing its people with a limitless imaginary “love-land”, an imaginary space filled with love, chiefly love of family. This love moves in all directions: from children to parents, spouses to spouses, and parents to children. Each of those infinite workers is risking personal harm in daily labor for the love of family, Zhang argues. The neoliberal person is completely individuated, without any ties to other humans and motivated only by self-interest. The Chinese worker, in contrast, is motivated by affect to contradict self-interest in favor of the interest of the family.

This requires articulations of affect, rationality, capital, labor, and markets. How does the party-state generate and maintain this massive hallucinatory vision, this fantasy love-land? By generating and manipulating conceptions of gender, class, sexuality, and ethno-race to keep the 1.4 billion Chinese people working to benefit those they love. In 2017, it used 176 million cameras integrated into networks of massive computing power

to monitor the processes. By 2022, Zhang suggests, the number would increase to 2.76 billion cameras—two for each person.

However, there are other ways, including the media, to define the meanings of love for people. One method is television dating programs that define desirable features of male and female individuals to provide the next generation of workers to care for their now-aging parents. Public spectacles such as celebrations of the anniversary of the Revolution are another means of producing and reinforcing the imagery of the love-scape.

In addition to universal surveillance, computers connect individuals into networks that mutually reinforce the ideas perpetuated by the love-land. For example, Zhang describes the networks of professional women who have become undesirable as mates by virtue of their success and age (late-twenties) who read and write a genre of fiction that features not the manly men of the dating games but “flower-men” who are tall, slender, sensitive, and feeling and their love, not for women who could never hope to compete with them for beauty, but for each other, in stories of boy-to-boy love this demographic favors. This defines and creates an escape-world from the unrewarding real life of absent love.

The neoliberal world is fraught with contradictions and ironies. One of the ironies is that in their manipulation of class, gender, and ethnicity-race, the Communist Party is similar to those far-right politicians of Europe and the US who deal in similar rhetoric. A major contradiction is between the border-defying market that reaches all corners of the planet and the nation-states that militantly and truculently occupy specific and bounded locations and support the corporations that organize production and distribution of infinite goods to the people of the planet.

Zhang takes readers to construction sites, silk-cocoon-producing farms, factories, small stores, and other locales of contemporary China to let us hear the words and thoughts of workers. In contradiction to Western notions of privacy, these people wanted to speak on a global platform to broadcast their various situations and views. Moreover, the author provides a voice for otherwise invisible and voiceless people. One factor that remains present in each setting but not foregrounded by the author is the ever-present armed police in the background.

Zhang also discusses the Covid-19 pandemic for this intricate yet sturdy system of motivation and control as one of the emerging contradictions, the sum of which, he argues, is the weakness of an apparently seamless system of control. It is a truly dystopian vi-

sion, though populated with warm and loving individuals and brightened with the hope that the multiple contradictions contain for change.

The book is closely and densely argued to highlight and integrate the author's ethnographic observations and descriptions of media and public displays.