Panel Title: From excellence to good-enoughness: On living a good life in everyday China

What is a good life? Scholars often attempt to answer this question by examining people’s ideals. Exemplified by Joel Robbins’ call of “the anthropology of the good,” anthropologists are encouraged to make ethnographic inquiries into qualities that are “imaginatively conceived” to be desirable and even “outstripped” the immediate realities (2013, 457). In other words, the scholarly examination of the “good life” has long been domesticated in the realm of thoughts and beliefs, insulated from that of the lived experiences.

Taking one step forward, this panel aims to turn scholarly attention from ideals to everyday experiences and practices by examining how people live a sufficiently good life in contemporary China through the theoretical lens of “good-enoughness,” with an emphasis of well-being over moral qualities (Winnicott 1987; Miller 2023; Bialski 2024). Dedicated to describing qualities and practices, “good-enoughness” is premised on tolerance for imperfection and acknowledgment of limitations imposed by human capacities and external circumstances. A good enough life is an acceptance that despite the efforts of adaptations and negotiations, not all ideals that supposedly bring about an excellent life can be directly or fully realized in mundane life. Nevertheless, one can still live a satisfactory and comfortable life rather than a bad life with all the imperfections and flaws.

In today’s Chinese society, good-enoughness is an especially fruitful way to describe contemporary Chinese experiences of economy, kinship and family, how to get by in the world, and more. Often in unspoken ways, good-enoughness has already permeated itself into every layer of mundane life as a familiar worldview. Young people increasingly embrace tang ping (lying flat) that rejects societal pressures of overachieving and perfection for a comfortable enough life; more women prefer to live a materially precarious but emotionally satisfactory single life over marriage and family that are traditionally associated with feminine ideals and happiness. In this panel, we attempt to answer the following questions: What do people do to pursue, compromise, and negotiate a good enough life in post-socialist China? Is the rise of good-enoughness an acceptance of their averageness and “mediocrity” (Bialski 2024) or an effective coping mechanism that contributes to defining new ideals of “good”? How can the practices for achieving a good enough life serve as a diagnosis for the sociocultural, political, economic, and affective situations in contemporary China?
Considering the multivalent nature of “good” as a concept, we invite papers focused on topics such as, welcome scholars at all professional levels to contribute to our discussions on, but not limited to, personhood, materiality and material culture, political economy, gender and sexuality, and social studies of science and technology.

Please submit a 200-300 word abstract to Iris Wanqing Zhou (Brandeis anthropology, wanghaiingzhou@brandeis.edu) by July 15th, 2024.
Bibliography


