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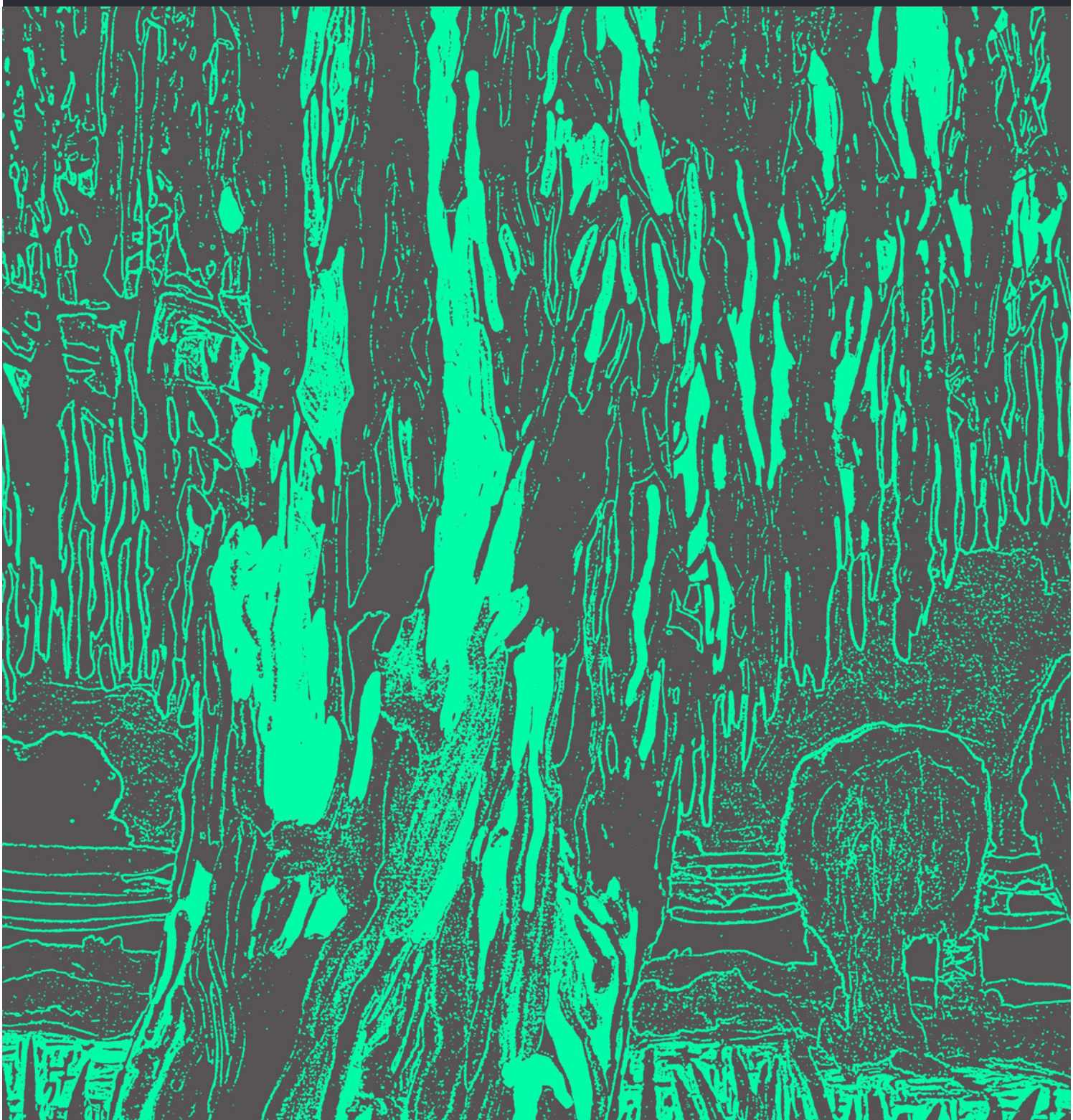

"We Want to Start With What People Are Worried About in their Own Lives": Toward an anthropology of "common concerns"

An Interview with Professor Biao Xiang, by Zdeněk Uherek, Adam Horálek[1]

Biao Xiang has been the director of the department for the Anthropology of Economic Experimentation at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale in Germany since 2020. Prior to setting up the department, one of three at the institute, he was a professor at St Hugh's College at Oxford University. Biao Xiang completed his doctoral thesis – Global Body Shopping – at Oxford in 2006. He has become a prominent personality for his work, which focuses on economic anthropology and migration. To date, he has published over 100 articles and books, many of which touch on the theory and methodology of anthropology as a whole, and the position of social anthropology in society. As the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology is a key institution for the academic community, especially in Central Europe, and an important meeting point for PhD students and senior researchers, we asked the new director about his first experiences in the position, his personal academic goals, his ideas about the direction of social anthropology, and his plans regarding communication with the academic community.

[1] This is the transcription of a discussion between the three of us in Prague on 28 October 2022. For clarity, it has been edited and expanded on in parts.

Dear Professor, the name of your department is somewhat unusual. Could you please explain its mission and primary focus?

The main mission of the department is not to tackle a particular question or subject matter. Rather, we want to explore a new style of research practice. We don't want to start with academic questions, and don't aim to only contribute to academic knowledge accumulation. We want to come up with new concepts, new perspectives, and sometimes simply new languages which people in society can use to understand their living conditions and help them to think. We want to provide tools they can use.

An example or model for me is the American pragmatic philosopher John Dewey. He promoted a philosophy for living. For Dewey, philosophy is the way that the philosopher describes the world so that people, the public, can see themselves in the world, and then they can think about what this world means to them, how they should act, and how they can think about situations. So these are the kinds of research results or tools that we are trying to develop. I call it the "common concerns approach", because we want to start with what people are worried about in their own lives.

Let's look at climate change. If you ask young people whether they are worried about the climate, they will say yes – because it's a big issue conceptually. But does it really affect their daily struggle? I doubt it. They have to deal with so many more concrete, immediate issues. And they also ask: "What can I do as an individual? The climate is really beyond my control." To be honest, some people feel resentful too, because they feel it is the elite who keep lecturing them on climate problems. They feel alienated from that kind of environmental discourse. That doesn't mean that they're not worried about climate change, not at all. If you ask them: "What are you worried about now?" You know, you need to have a bit of a chat before you can raise that question. And one thing that many young people – and especially women – in China are concerned with is whether they should give birth or not: "Should I get married? Should I have children?" And many people say no. You know, the Chinese fertility rate has dropped dramatically. One of the reasons young people are worried is the question: "Why should I bring new life into this world, when this world is ruined, and the children will have to experience all these heatwaves, unpredictable weather, and there's not much hope?" The young generation, now in their late 20s or early 30s, don't see the joy of living in this world. This is how they are concerned about the climate.

So they say: "OK, we're not going to have children." Their immediate concern is whether they should give up on family life in the conventional form. This concern is related to climate change, but there are also lots of other issues involved

when thinking about whether they should have children or not: property prices, gender roles, pressure from their parents – all these things come together. The complexity makes the concern very real. If we want to know more about what they think or might do about climate change, we have to start with their questions, like that of having children or not. These kinds of questions immediately touch their souls and make them think. If we just give them the UN data about climate change, that will raise their awareness of certain things, but it is not enough to start discussions about what is the real agency of individuals in this world, and how we can live life differently. So this is an example of what common concerns are. Common concerns are very different from predefined issues. In looking at common concerns, we are asking: How do these issues really play out in people's lives? What do we want to do to address the given circumstances? That is what the department does.

The department wants to explore how we can develop an anthropology for living scientifically. We aim to identify these concerns, and to unpack them – to figure out what the causes and especially the political economy causes of these concerns are. We don't want to produce psychological analyses. Common concerns do, of course, have psychological dimensions. But more than that, they are people's perceptions and understandings of their lived realities. Then we want to experiment with conducting "co-research" with our research subjects. We identify their concerns, describe them, and see whether our subject groups agree with our description or not. Then we will will develop a hypothetical analysis about the causes of the concerns, and what potential behavioural changes these kinds of concerns may give rise to. Then, through public media, by working with artists or journalists, we will seek feedback from the public. So we want this kind of back-and-forth movement to develop, not necessarily of theories, but of a set of descriptions, a language that people can use to reflect on their life experiences. This is our overall mission.

What is the reason for this mission?

It's quite simple. I just think that social research in the 21st century has to move on from what we had before. The education level of the public has increased so dramatically, and young people can read, and they want to read. Actually, they are hungry for quite sophisticated theories because they are thinking a lot about the meaning of life and the world. And we have the new technologies of social media and communications. Why do we have to confine ourselves to writing journal articles? If we want to make changes in the world today, we need public mobilisation. If people don't change their lifestyles and basic understandings,

then a simple technical fix will not resolve any of the important issues in the world today. Many political contestations in the world are to a great extent battles over common concerns or common sense. In the US, Trump supporters and the Democrats cannot talk to each other. What do they disagree about? They disagree about some very basic things, such as what counts as facts, or how one understands one's living conditions. Many people feel confused and anxious. The public really needs languages to help them think through their concerns. The people are the real thinkers and decision makers at the end of the day, but we want to try to provide them with tools.

Such a new approach requires a new fieldwork methodology?

Yes. We want to develop a set of methods and a programme for that. And we need a department to do that. It's not easy to start researching with common concerns – much more difficult than starting with an academic question or a recognised issue. Let me give you an example of a collective project in the department. It's led by our postdoctoral researcher Mario Schmidt, and it's about "pressure". Young people in many parts of world don't feel like they're poor, and they don't necessarily feel like they're marginalised, though they are becoming quite disillusioned with mainstream politics. Are they concerned with inequality? Conceptually yes. Inequality is a thing that you can always criticise as an objective fact. Everyone says inequality is bad, but if you look at how people think and act inside inequality, their immediate concern is how to advance within that unequal system. They know the system is bad, but what else can they do? That creates a sense of pressure. They have to struggle all the time in order to advance themselves and to be ahead of others. But morally they feel like their whole life is problematic. There is the pressure to perform, and the pressure of dealing with the moral burden. So if we can capture "pressure" accurately, we can speak directly to young people. This communication will be much more effective than general critiques about "inequality".

But this kind of research is difficult because if we start with a notion like pressure, it involves many things. Many common concerns are simultaneously about economic opportunities, personal relations, the education system, the cost of living, and so on. As we all know, life is complex! So how can we give a concern a clear technical definition? How can we link it to the existing academic literature? On the other hand, this is precisely what anthropology should capture, something that people feel acutely, but cannot articulate precisely. We need new methods and language to unpack it and to elaborate on it, step-by-step. We are still experimenting. Of course, we still need intellectual resources from

the past in order to understand the current situation. But intellectual resources from the past are often very specialised – this is a study about religion, that is about family. That specialisation shapes how we ask our research questions: Is this a question speaking to religious studies? Or is it a question about family studies? If you ask questions about general living conditions, you feel lost in an academic landscape. You can draw from philosophy, but that is not sufficient to speak about people's concerns in highly specific circumstances. We may not be able to come up with a truly "scientific" set of methods, but we hope that we will get something that is systematic – so that other researchers can apply similar methods in different cases.

So what does "economic experimentation" refer to in the name of the department? The ideas you are discussing are much broader.

I thought of the name "economic experimentation" because of my diagnosis of the world in 2019. I think that the world lost a sense of gravity or direction. After the financial crises and so on, many people expected that that there would be some systemic changes in the world economy. But even a crisis like that was not enough to transform it. Instead, we came to a situation where many piecemeal, experimental changes were taking place here and there, like the platform economy. At the same time, there's no clear sense of where we are going to. All that we can do is a kind of experimentation. It is difficult to predict anything. So when I took up the Max Planck job, I thought, it would be good to document these experiments.

And you're right, our current focus is different. How fast things have changed! We are not focusing on documenting cases of experimentation, but my basic diagnosis remains the same. The fundamental point is that we can't expect change from a top-down redesign of the world economy. The economy now is closely related to lifestyles. Platform companies are very much about social relations. They are really making money from social relations, capturing large sections of the population and changing how they feel and think. Affect and emotion have become important. Common concerns have become more complex than before, but also more important for social changes. My basic diagnosis remains the same, but the responses are different.

And I came up with the name more than two years ago, when I was still in Oxford. I was still thinking of a conventional style of research to record cases of experimentation. But now I'm moving more toward this kind of co-research, with more emphasis on intervention, speaking more directly to the people. But we'll keep the title – hopefully people won't read it that carefully [laughs].

Do you have any regional preferences?

That's a very interesting question. To be completely honest, I changed my perspective in this regard too. When I started two years ago, I was thinking, OK, I must be global and move away from China. I thought: "I'm a Chinese from China, and China is such a hot topic, so it's just not very interesting to stick to China." But then I changed my mind a bit after I had started building a team. I think we may take China as a focus. There are two reasons behind my change of mind.

Number one is that I realised that China really is a global puzzle, even for the Chinese themselves. What happens in China has direct global consequences. China is not just a case – it's a paradigm. Especially today, all the dramatic changes taking place demand close attention. Number two, common concerns are shared concerns, but the manifestations and people's feelings are always locally specific. If you want to do genuine co-research, you have to choose a particular public. You cannot engage in dialogue with a global public in a meaningful way. So this makes me think that China could be a kind of a laboratory, a starting point. So I see something in China and understand what it means in that context. Then we can have academic dialogue with scholars working in different regions, but I should not give up the base where my original ideas were incubated. I'm surprised myself that I've decided to become more China-focused. I was seriously thinking that I should resume working on India. That was our regional planning two years ago, and now I've changed my mind. Of course, there will be comparisons in research, but the focus should be sharp.

This does not mean the department will become a China studies unit. Our members are very global – and they have to be. We look for people who share our agenda, meaning that they feel there is a need for anthropological research led by common concerns, regardless of regional focus. But China may become a main source of questions, and a lab for testing some initial thought. We need go back to the classical anthropological virtue – commitment to a local society. If you are not committed to a local society, you can't even find out what common concerns they have. Anyone can go to any society to study climate change issues, and you can easily find evidence for what you are looking for. But that does not raise new questions, and it does not touch people's hearts and minds. Furthermore, we want to carry on a dialogue with the public, we want to see if our understanding is correct, what the public thinks of our interpretation. To do that, we do need local commitment.

Comparative studies will probably not be a main method. But we are actively promoting what we call inter-referencing. How is inter-referencing different from comparison? Comparison is looking at two or more discrete cases.

Inter-referencing means looking at a living condition in a local context, and thinking about it by referring to situations in other contexts. Comparison implies a position that is somehow above and beyond all specific cases. Inter-referencing means to be firmly grounded in one context, but analyze our observations in a boradly informed way. For instance, at departmental meetings we often discuss cases from our own research in different local contexts, but we are not doing it to find out how similar or different these cases are, rather we are interested in how your observation about case A will help me to deepen my understanding of case B. So it's constantly borrowing perspectives rather than just saying: "Oh this is a hierarchical pattern, and the other is a horizontal pattern…" So it's a locally grounded way of thinking. You stick to case A, I stick to case B, and neither of us are interested in elevating ourselves to a transcendental position of A+B. The inter-referencing method is what people use all the time in their lives. When a Czech colleague says "the German's organise university courses in this or that way…", you are not interested in making comparisons, you are trying to have deeper reflections on your own practices: What am I doing here? Am I doing the right thing? How could I do it differently?

What kind of theories will this anthropology of common concerns develop?

I must admit that I don't have a clear answer to that. We definitely want to develop theories. We want to describe life in a way that the public sees themselves in the picture, and sees how they can make changes. This picture is, of course, theory. What does this theory look like? I don't know. My hunch is that it may be a mix of philosophy, psychology, and political economy (which forms our foundation). Let me give you a quick example through my observation about excess competition in China. I hope this can give you a flavour of how theorisation will become part of our research practice: Young people in China feel like they're competing with each other all the time. And they find it tiring and meaningless. When you go to school, your focus is on outperforming others, rather than enjoying what you study. After completing high school, life in a college and in a company is also like that. Young people need a theory to make sense of why they're locked into a competition that they don't like and they don't want. Starting with their concern, I see something I understand as a contradiction – between fierce competition on an individual level, and the centralisation of resources and authority on a systemic level, a level that is completely anti-competition. In Chinese society, which domain is most competitive? It is not in commerce. In commerce people try to avoid competition. This is why everyone talks about "niche". To say the market is based on competition is already an ideology. Where do we find the worst or

most intense competition? Schools. Modern education is supposed to nurture every human being on an equal footing and to produce, in Ernst Gellner's words, inter-exchangeable citizenry as the basis of a modern nation-state. Right? Then school should be the least competitive and most equalising place of all. So how can we explain such hellish educational competition? I think this has something to do with systemic centralisation. Education has become so competitive because a single authority judges what is a good education and what is not. I suppose that it's the same in the Czech Republic. In China, all 1.4 billion people firmly believe that there are only two top universities. Now globally you have this hugely popular, unquestioned university league table. This is deeply contradictory. People in the US are talking about diversity all the time, but if you look at elite families' decisions about children's careers and education, it is extremely homogeneous. And this centralised power in determining how the education system should be organised makes the competition between individuals in the system extremely fierce. Everyone wants to be recognised by this single authority according to a single criteria. If more people come into the same game, then the more competitive it becomes. It is the problem of democracy without diversity.

So if we want to shake this condition, what should the starting point be? Should we somehow mitigate the power of this centralised authority? Should we encourage young people to develop new understandings about peer relations, about the nature of knowledge, of what "study" means? Or should we think of the inter-generational relations in the family, as parents both perpetuate as well as resent this pressure cooker style of education. We need "co-research" to hear their views. In this process, deeper theories may emerge. For instance, how are peer relations conditioned by institutional structures? Or how do young people judge their own value, or the value of others? And so on. You know, I said that one of the main challenges we face is that common concerns are so vague and so multifaceted, but this could be a good opportunity for theoretical innovation. As we can't use established language to capture reality, in a way we are forced to find new ways to describe the world.

What experiences led you to this approach?

I guess I have been driven by an accumulation of experiences over the years. I had a sense of alienation from academic research, and especially research after the 1990s when I came of age intellectually. I feel the same about both Chinese and English literature. I find many texts quite lifeless. I can see that a lot of anthropological accounts are meant to be impressive and touching, but they do not touch my soul, and I'm pretty sure that they don't touch the soul of the people described

in the articles either. Ordinary people are much more interested in business studies and psychology than in anthropology. And I ask, why is that? One reason could be a problematic guilt consciousness of the part of researchers. They always want to celebrate the agency of the people, and they see a virtue of anthropology as being that it makes sense of something that does not make sense to outsiders. Whatever appears absurd must have some good reasons behind it. But do people who live in these circumstances really need that? Of course people don't want to be seen as weird or incomprehensible, but is it a purpose of life to conclude that everything that happens does so for a reason and whatever one does is an exercise of agency? People want to change their own lives, they want to critique, and they are often fed up with their "weapons of the weak" way of exercising agency.

Because of this feeling of alienation, I started writing popular articles in Chinese and giving public interviews in Chinese media around 2014. I guess it started as an unconscious effort to compensate for my intellectual loneliness. I received so many responses from young people in China. I know that it's not really professional academic research, but these kinds of interactions make me think, and this kind of thinking really makes me feel happy and liberated. I am no longer just thinking through words, but am learning to think through feelings and imagination.

In China, any common concern is almost always a major political concern or issue at the same time. What possibilities are there for studying and discussing common concerns in China?

Well, any meaningful topic in China is sensitive now. In fact, common concerns are better than other topics – it's "safer" to discuss competition, pressure, or decisions about having children than discussing democracy. A new challenge in social research in China, as well as in many other countries, is the difficulty of producing evidence-based explanations. There are so many major changes happening that you may never be able to collect enough information to arrive at a conclusive, factual explanation. This is due to the lack of transparency in China, but even in countries like Germany, social life has become so complex and is changing so constantly that it's difficult to stabilise any phenomenon to identify what exactly has happened. Who can really pinpoint what led to the popularisation of the far right in Germany? Why are so many people indifferent to climate change, or opposed to COVID vaccination? In this situation, I believe that the common concerns approach can be valuable. For example, one of my latest articles is about the COVID lockdown in China. In the beginning, I just wanted to describe and analyse what went wrong. But I found that I just don't have enough information to allow me to draw any conclusions. But I see one thing

very clearly, which is a widespread feeling of absurdity amongst the population. We don't know what precisely caused the absurdity, but we do know that it is absurd, and we know how this sense of absurdity has affected people's views of the government and about life. Common concerns thus become a good entry point to engage with reality, no matter how elusive the reality appears to be. People can't wait until everything is settled in order to gather information and make sense of what happened – they are living through all the uncertainties and have to make decisions now. By understanding the immediate milieu in which they find themselves, by documenting and analysing what they found particularly absurd and why, I think we may provide some partial tools that will be useful in leading toward a meaningful life in an absurd time.[2]

What type of anthropological research will suit the needs of the 21st century?

Obviously I can't speak for the discipline. If you want to know what concerns me the most at the moment, my question is this: How does a small person live through big changes? These changes are huge, they directly impact on the lives of small people, and they are unpredictable or even appear incomprehensible to many. Just think of China, or the war by Russia in Ukraine, or the US, where we don't know what will happen in the next election. Ordinary people feel like they don't have any influence on these changes. So the concern for many people is: "How can I live an ethical and meaningful life in a time like this?" Of course, human history is full of dramatic changes, but people's education levels, communications technologies, desires, and what makes them happy are very different. The meaning of meaning is different from before.

Another question that concerns me is more technical. That is, how can we bring political economy, affect, and ethics together in understanding some of the pressing issues we face today? How do people assess their own actions, and assess others' values and actions, and how do these affect decision making? I want to bring these different aspects together, but my focus is always political economy. My goal is to understand how power relations work, how material resources are organised, distributed, and how these structural conditions shape people's feelings, and affect people's ways of judging what is good, and what is worth living. Such a picture shows readers where they are in the situation that they feel is determining their lives. Once they see where they are in the big picture,

[2] One month after the interview, protests against government COVID lockdown measures broke out across China at the end of November 2022. It is evident that the sense of absurdity was a direct cause of the protests.

and how different things are related to what they think and how they feel, they may think, OK, we can and should change ourselves a bit, take some action, or do certain things differently to change the situation.

You've presented the outlook for the coming years by mainly looking at your own projects. What about other projects in the department? Do you see room for collective discussion there?

There are some common topics. Mobility is one, but that's not something that binds us together. Topics change from time to time. But the main thing that really brings the department together is the sense of mission. You know, we do not intend to merely do academic research – rather, we want to have some impact. A mission cannot be abstract, a mission is what you can do now. To start, we should have a good understanding about the moment: What kind of conditions are we living in now? What are the main problems that we can realistically analyse? And what are feasible strategies for intervention? An important feature of the current moment is that the public, especially youth, are hungry for analyses that will help them understand a life in flux – and we anthropologsts are not good at meeting these demands. The infrastructure for us anthropologists doing so is there. So we should see our informants as creators of their own history and their own lives. We must understand how they see their problems in life, what kind of things they are struggling with, and how they try to solve those issues. In this process, some of them will become what we call victims, some may become criminals, and others will become everyday heroes. This kind of approach should bring the department together much more effectively than common topics. We do not have commonalities at the empirical level in an immediately visible way, rather we try to ask bigger and deeper questions in order to have interesting conversations. Perhaps this is part of "theory building".

I can give a couple of examples of our departmental meetings. At the last meeting, we came up with the question of "timeliness", based on all kinds of different cases. Why timeliness? We found that for many of our informants, who are very different from each other, doing the right thing at the right time is critical. Young people say: "I try what I can, but I know I cannot live a comfortable life like my parents." Why? "My parents bought this small flat 20 years ago. Now it's five times more expensive. But now, no matter how hard I work, I just cannot break into the property market. They simply bought it at the right time." This creates a sense of arbitrariness and of powerlessness, because you feel that planning or effort are pointless. We discussed the political economic causes of the arbitrary timeliness in shaping one's life, why people often actively participate in the game of timeliness, and finally what the consequences can be. That was one example.

Other questions emerging from our discussion include pressure, brutality, alienation, loneliness, and recognition. And we came up with an idea that a common problem for many young people is a kind of "speechlessness". This sounds strange as they are very active in social media. What we mean is that they want to reject many things as at odds with their values, but they can't critique them precisely. That is not because of political censorship. But rather because they feel like many things that they find unreasonable appear to be totally legitimate. For instance, pressure is basically about being forced to do something you are not happy with, but it is something that you cannot rebel against. That's why pressure can be so damaging. One of the reasons for the inability to rebel and to critique is, ironically, information overload and communication overcapacity. There is just too much information and too many opinions. This makes us realise that we should invest more in communication studies.

So this is how we hold the daily conversations in the department. For me, building a department is building a style of conversation, a shared style of thinking. This sometimes appears as a matter of taste: a sense of what kinds of questions are interesting, what is worth thinking about, or things that appear to be striking but have limited analytical value. We try to meet on the same page regarding these types of assessments. I know this all looks and sounds vague. It might be better if I could say, my department works on energy transition, or on demographic transformation and family change. Then the topic is self-explanatory and obviously important. But that is not what we do. We want to force ourselves to reach for something deeper and more subtle, something like the entangled contradictions in life. I hope our efforts at the department will serve as a kind of catalyst to generate more global discussion.

Thank you very much for your answers and for your time. We wish you the best of luck, and hope that your answers will be as inspiring to Cargo readers as they were to us.

Biao Xiang
office.xiang@eth.mpg.de

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology
Advokatenweg 36
06114 Halle (Saale)
Germany