

Bio

Anna Iskra is Post-doctoral Fellow at The University of Hong Kong. She researches the intersections between self-help industries, spiritual movements, and self-formation processes in urban China. Her newest research project focuses on the growing popularity of Indian new religious movements in the People's Republic.

Title

Purging tensions. Emotional release practices and the embodiment of state ideology in the Chinese Body-Mind-Spirit milieu

Abstract

This paper examines the idiom of emotion (qingxu) as a crucial site for the interplay between individual self-construction and the embodiment of state ideology in urban China. It focuses on the case study of the Body-Mind-Spirit (shen xin ling) self-cultivation networks that crystalized out of a growing interest among mainland Chinese urbanites in Euro-American alternative spiritualities, historically known as New Age. One of the central practices in this milieu are collective emotional releases that consist in guided purging of anxiety, sadness, or anger, tied to personal problems such as marital discord or financial difficulties. The study examines such affectively saturated practices as sites for the privatization of social suffering, where structural inequalities are dismissed and their influences on individual lives reconceptualized as caused by emotional mismanagement. While many Body-Mind-Spirit practitioners problematize the trials and tribulations that inspire their emotional releases by resorting to language borrowed from official state discourses on gender, wealth, or entrepreneurialism, this study rejects the simplistic view on the embodiment of state ideology along the lines of conformity-rebellion and authenticity-performativity. Instead, it argues that looking at such self-cultivation practices through the analytical lens of emotion allows to complicate the view on how ideological discourses penetrate people's subjectivities, providing a language that allows ambiguity, re-invention, paradox, and play.