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# “A new worker, for a new order, in a new era”: English, power and shifting ideologies of reflexivity in a Chinese global workplace

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a historiographic and ethnographic analysis of how reflexivity, as a communicative practice and valued personality trait, has been understood, regulated, legitimised and used to control Chinese workers from the planned-economy era to the present. Using a Shanghai-based multinational company as a case study, I document how and under what conditions English-mediated reflexivity, with its stress on self-entrepreneurship, came to replace former Mandarin-mediated reflexivity supporting a notion of collective workerhood. Special attention is paid to reflexivity’s changing roles in shaping, managing and evaluating workers and facilitating understandings of labour, power and agency. The paper argues that the emerging English-dominated reflexivity represents a required linguistic shift for the creation of a new worker type in the current globalised economy as it normalises managerial technologies of discipline, stratification and exclusion.

**Keywords:** China; English; labour; reflexivity; technologies

## 1 Introduction

A good worker needs to be reflexive. This is always right no matter what era you are in. But now it’s much harder since you must reflect in English [...] You must learn English first. (Pilot Survey, 13-07-2020)

一个好员工要会反思。无论你在哪个年代，这都是对的。但现在难多了，因为你必须用英语反思[...]你必须先学英语。

The above is the response of Ping, one of my participants, to the question “What makes a good employee?” in a survey I distributed to Chinese workers in Shanghai to understand the significance of English and the notion of a “good employee” in global workplaces. For 29 years, Ping worked as an engineer for the Customer Service

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Department of TOS, a multinational tire-manufacturing company headquartered in Shanghai, China's largest economic centre. Ping witnessed TOS's shift from an enterprise within China's centrally planned market to today's global market. Ping was laid off from TOS in June 2021 due to the company's "simplification" plan, purportedly designed to make up for the economic losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a follow-up interview, Ping attributed his unemployment to his inability to master "reflexivity" (反思力), in which an employee is asked by their employer to analyse and articulate their working capabilities in English. Ping explained that since 2017, reflexivity has become a vital indicator for staff performance appraisals at TOS, used by HR alongside other qualitative indicators such as creativity and leadership to legitimise the regulation and stratification of workers. Ping's unemployment thus shows the importance of reflexivity, specifically reflexivity in English, for employment in Chinese global workplaces.

Ping's quote gives initial insight into the sociolinguistic processes in which "reflexivity" at TOS is understood and invested as a valued communicative practice and personality trait. He underscores the links between workerhood hierarchies and what TOS's management and employees refer to as "reflexivity", stating that he believes being a good worker means being able to meet certain standards of self-reflection. Moreover, Ping considers it valuable that reflexivity be enacted in English, a view that, as I will argue later, represents a historical shift in how reflexivity is linguistically encoded (in the past, reflexivity was performed in Mandarin). Ping's story also indicates how reflexivity articulates processes of exclusion at TOS, linking the capacity to be reflexive in English not just to the ranking of workers but to managerial principles that justify their firing. Finally, Ping normalises the link between reflexivity, English skills and workerhood hierarchies at TOS to the extent that he does not question but internalises the idea that his exclusion from the labour market has resulted from his incapacity to meet certain standards of reflexivity. In so doing, Ping constructs "English" as an obstacle, imposed by reflexivity, in his pursuit of workerhood.

To understand how and the conditions in which reflexivity is conceptualised, valorised and adopted, this article offers a historiographic and ethnographic analysis on the managerial technologies of discipline, promotion and exclusion implemented by TOS. The article also explores the changing ideologies of language and workerhood that inform the introduction of these technologies, examining how English-mediated reflexivity came to replace Mandarin-mediated reflexivity in China, and how this shift serves current processes of production, regulation and evaluation of workers. In analysing how reflexivity is regulated and legitimised at different moments in TOS's history, points of continuity and discontinuity are revealed, with visible tensions emerging between TOS's former Mandarin-mediated reflexivity, which supports the notion of collective labour, and the current English-mediated

reflexivity upholding a view of self-entrepreneurship. The paper thus examines how China's shifting political and economic principles – in particular, the rationalities through which economic actors understand and manage workers and the market in which they operate – impact companies' construction of and investment in reflexivity, its consequences for power, the making of difference and inequality at work.

This paper contributes to current sociolinguistics discussions on reflexivity and its communicability (Del Percio 2022; Kelly-Holmes 2010; Pérez-Milans 2017), as well as research on the politics of English in Asian global workplaces (Kubota 2013; Lorrente 2017; Park 2021), much of which has challenged the idea that English's global hegemony under neoliberalism derives solely from its economic value. Building on this literature, this paper argues that the way specific registers of English are valorised in Chinese global workplaces needs to be understood as connected to changing conditions of power, shifting understanding of workerhood and reframed regimes of morality. The article stresses the newness of these processes while demonstrating that these shifts are never clear-cut: English's dominance and articulation within new modes of understanding and managing reflexivity, while embedded in new ways of understanding workers, power and agency, are sometimes continuous and sometimes discontinuous with older ways of managing labour and language in the Chinese workplace. Analysing such complex articulations is the core of this article.

The next section is a theoretical review of the politics of English and reflexivity, followed by Section 3, comprising the context and methods of this study. Section 4 traces the history of TOS's changing work regimes, examining the managerial logic that has informed its shift from Mandarin- to English-mediated reflexivity, while Section 5 explores the company's implementation of English-mediated reflexivity through its four-step management device utilising scripts, routines and evaluations for shaping desirable worker personae. Section 6 conceptualises the continuities and ruptures in the regulation and impact of reflexivity at TOS over time, and Section 7 concludes the article by discussing the lack of resistance to the disciplining and exclusive nature of reflexivity, which thereby reproduces and naturalises inequality at TOS.

## **2 The politics of English and reflexivity in global workplaces**

Global workplaces such as TOS have become important research sites for interdisciplinary inquiries into the politics of English and the neoliberal management of labour (Duchêne and Heller 2012). According to the neoliberal notion of human

capital within the knowledge economy (Urciuoli 2008), English competence is an essential asset for corporate actors' professional development and socioeconomic mobility (Park 2011). Multinational companies share an ideology of English as the language of globalisation (Park and Wee 2012), which consequently affects language policies and linguistic practices at work and legitimises English for new formations of power relations, thereby making claims over ownership of authenticity, flexibility, and competitiveness (Duchêne and Heller 2012).

Academic studies on language have frequently discussed the politics and power of English in the world, and its connection to the expansion of capitalism (Holborow 1999; Kachru 1986; Pennycook 2007). O'Regan (2021) argues that English functions as a free rider for the never-ending accumulation and circulation of capital within the capitalist world-system, which in turn maintains the continuous global domination of English in a standard form. Neoliberalism, "an economic doctrine that has undergirded the global expansion of advanced capitalism" (Piller and Cho 2013: 24), constitutes an implicit form of language policy, contributing to English's hegemonic construction as "an index of global competitiveness" (Piller and Cho 2013: 31) and naturalising the heated pursuit of standard English in non-English-dominant countries such as China (Pan 2015). In light of capital-centric English's global hegemony and devaluation of other languages (Phillipson 2017; Tupas 2015), sociolinguists have shifted their research attention away from questioning English's benefits as a *lingua franca* and towards an investigation of who benefits from English's spread within neoliberal capitalism and what varieties are recognised as "standard" (Park 2017; Ricento 2015).

More than just standardisation, this article focuses on the successive enregisterment of English as a language of reflexivity or the idea that good reflexivity at work is produced through the specific modes of speaking English. Tracing the shift from Mandarin-mediated to English-mediated reflexivity in the Chinese workplace contributes to scholarly understandings of the links between English, power and the making of neoliberal workers (Martín Rojo 2019; Park 2011; Sunyol and Codó 2019). English policies in Asian global workplaces perpetuate colonial logics of centre-periphery relations (Tupas 2015), with the neoliberal promotion of English asserting an ideology that constructs English as a liberating, emancipatory language (De Costa et al. 2016). Reflexivity is also presented as an emancipative, explanative practice (Glynos and Howarth 2007) permeating "all areas of neoliberal life" (Zienkowski 2017: 8). Thus, reflexivity is highlighted in this article as a valued performance and ritualised template, deployed alongside the ideologies of English to allow for emergent properties of neoliberal working subjects (Park 2021) within entrepreneurial discourses (Da Costa and Saraiva 2012) that underpin and produce these subjects, imposing work orders.

Performing “good” reflexivity is not just speaking “good” English, but a range of qualities and practices that in workplaces are called “soft skills” (e.g., flexibility and creativity) that combine to form an idealised worker type valued in contemporary capitalism (Urciuoli 2008). Together, the personal qualities and practices associated with this worker type perpetuate and naturalise neoliberal images of individualism, agency, freedom and self-responsibility (Gershon 2011). However, as a powerful standard defining and regulating the ways workers are meant to conduct their selves, such neoliberal reflexivity may not necessarily lead to emancipatory changes but the “painful awareness of the lack of choice” (Adams 2006: 525) in their pursuit of desired practices and trajectories. Before exploring how reflexivity ideologies have changed across time at TOS and are now intertwined with ideologies of English as the language of global capitalism and new modes of exerting power and understanding workers, I will first review the data from which my analysis draws, as well as the analytical tools with which my account of these transformations is constructed.

### 3 Context and methods

Data in this article were drawn from a 9-month ethnographic study (2020–2021), part of a 17-month research project investigating the implementation of an English-only policy and the construction of English as a resource at global workplaces in contemporary China. This article focuses on the Shanghai headquarters of TOS, one of the world’s top tire makers. TOS integrates tire design, manufacturing and sales on a global scale. Distributed in more than 170 countries and regions, its business line involves producing tires for diverse types of vehicles. Overseas branches of TOS have been established in North America, Europe, Africa and Southeast Asia. To join the global value chain, TOS has evolved significantly over the past thirty years, from a Chinese state-owned enterprise to a private company in the 1990s, and then to a Sino-American joint venture in the early 2000s.

This study links historical and ethnographic analysis “to capture both the ways in which things unfold in real time, and the ways in which they sediment into constraints that go far beyond the time and place of specific interactions” (Heller 2011: 40). This method can trace how changing ideologies of reflexivity at TOS have accompanied shifts in corporate management practices, which have often been fraught with political and economic formulations advancing idealised workers in the global market. The historiographic and ethnographic analysis draws on four data sets. First, a pilot survey of 117 employees, asking workers of different positions,

**Table 1:** Focal participant list.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Working status</b>	<b>Tenure at TOS</b>
Monica	Current HR director	2011–present
Fang	Retired inspector	1969–2002
Ping	Laid-off engineer	1992–2021

experiences and ranks about what they consider to be good workers, was conducted. Then, with the consent of TOS's CEO, on-site participant observations of one-month recruitment practices, two-week training sessions, weekly review meetings, monthly manager meetings and quarterly performance appraisals were carried out, with field notes taken to serve as significant data sources. Third, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with three focal participants<sup>1</sup> (cf. Table 1) occupying different positions in HR (Monica), management (Fang) and operations (Ping) at various points in TOS's existence. Monica provided essential insights into changing language policies and work management models at TOS, especially regarding its current institutional interest in reflexivity, while Fang offered information on how reflexivity was conducted and regulated in the past. Meanwhile, Ping experienced how changing forms of reflexivity and society have affected workers at TOS. Interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed to probe how reflexivity is negotiated as well as its acts and impacts on labour management, both currently and in the past. Finally, relevant historical and contemporary institutional textual materials (reports, guidelines, minutes, performance evaluation templates and training handouts) were collected, allowing for documentary evidence of the shift from Mandarin- to English-mediated reflexivity at TOS. This evidence demonstrates how English became a marker of reflexive competence, thereby changing TOS's notion of reflexivity.

## 4 Transforming TOS, changing reflexivity

Reflexivity is not a recent development introduced to TOS by Western HR consultants but has been part of TOS's labour management and corporate culture from the company's inauguration, a time when TOS was highly dependent on the Chinese government and its collectivist economic policies (Chow 2015). TOS, whose first office

<sup>1</sup>The company and its participants have all been pseudonymised for this study. Monica insisted on being referred to by her English name to show her position as an English speaker and global businesswoman. Ping and Fang requested that their pseudonyms be Chinese names.

in Shanghai opened in 1968, was a state-owned enterprise developed within the planned economy of Mao's era (1949–1976). In this context, TOS grew to be a professional institution that partnered with national research organisations to produce rubber products, particularly those used in railways. In 1993, the government under Deng Xiaoping (1977–1997) implemented shareholder-system reforms as part of the country's "Reform and Opening-up" economic policies, which resulted in the privatisation and restructuring of TOS into a joint-stock group. It soon turned into a supportive enterprise for the Chinese transportation industry, a comprehensive, large-scale business in tire making, research and exporting. To expand its global reach, TOS accepted the stock purchase plan proposed by the American corporation B.M.F. in 2006. This US partner acquired 34 % of TOS's stock, becoming its second-largest shareholder and making TOS a multinational company at the centre of global capitalism. This shift was accompanied by new approaches to management, evaluation and discipline towards employees, changing their language, self-regulation and engagement with the company and its operations.

#### 4.1 The shifting organisation of reflexivity

According to TOS's archives, while still a state-owned enterprise (1968–1993), TOS held regular review meetings called "consultations of democratic life" (民主生活会). The minutes for these meetings demonstrate that their "democratic" element was an emphasis on employees' collective deferral to their leaders. Employees were forbidden from speaking and were instead required to listen to their employers' directives attentively and silently obey authority. For 2 hours every Wednesday, hundreds of workers would gather in a large hall for speeches delivered by five managers in Mandarin, the official language promoted by the Chinese government to "create a shared linguistic basis" (Shen and Gao 2019: 3) among Chinese citizens and convey an idea of submission to the central power's planned economy (Zhou 2018). The speakers would reflect upon issues at work, criticise workers who made mistakes and propose solutions. According to the interviewee Fang (see Expert 1<sup>2</sup>), a retired inspector at TOS, this collective practice aligned with a broader political genre in Chinese society at that time, when people assembled to listen to

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<sup>2</sup>Interview excerpts in this article were transcribed and translated from Mandarin to English by the author. The transcriptions are simplified by removing irrelevant information (e.g., stutters and repetitions) since the analysis focuses on understanding participants' accounts of their work routines and responses to specific questions.

authorities, follow collective orders and show their affinity with leadership (Zhou 2002):

- Excerpt 1 Interview about Fang's job before retirement, 18-03-2021
- 1 **Author:** What were you doing at the meetings?  
 2 **Fang:** My job was crucial.  
 3 I walked around to ensure everyone was 100 % focused.  
 4 **Author:** What if someone just fell asleep?  
 5 **Fang:** It was morally intolerant!  
 6 Listening carefully and respecting the speakers were  
 7 part of their job!  
 8 I would give them warnings and demerits in public.  
 9 Then they had to hand in a one-thousand-word report,  
 10 which would be put on the noticeboard for a week.  
 11 Shame!
- 1 **作者:** 您在会上做什么呢?  
 2 **方:** 我的工作很重要啊。  
 3 我要绕场走, 确保每个人都百分百专心。  
 4 **作者:** 如果有人睡着了怎么办?  
 5 **方:** 这在道德上就无法容忍!  
 6 认真听讲、尊重发言人是  
 7 他们工作的一部分。  
 8 我会当众给他们警告、记处分。  
 9 然后他们要交一份千字报告,  
 10 再被张贴到布告栏一周。  
 11 丢脸啊!

Fang's description communicates his view of the role as an inspector at TOS and the value he attributes to the company's reflective practice, which may be called "collective reflexivity", as a weekly scripted ritual. First, he constructs workers' participation in this "consultation of democratic life" as a passive practice, connecting listening to respect and obedience towards company leadership as a unified way of thinking on the part of the workers (lines 6-7). Such collective reflexivity is achieved through the assumption that personal duties and problems at work align with collective goals and demands (Triandis 1995), meaning that individuals' self-analysis requires guidance, confirmation and completion by a specific group of others in power. Second, reflexivity is understood by Fang as a moral obligation (line 5). Through surveillance, Fang identifies careless and disinterested listening, then stigmatises it as immoral behaviour (line 11). Disalignment from collective behaviour requires discipline and punishment through public shaming and loss of face (lines 8-10), which, as he explained further in the



interview, constitutes a form of institutional stigma resulting in professional degradation and financial sanctions. Finally, Fang performs pride towards his job (line 2), which, as he describes, is the key to ensuring that review meetings hold employees' full attention (line 3) and that authority, collectivism, discipline and morality order are achieved and reproduced.

Review meetings were not the only way TOS produced and regulated reflexive workers during the planned economy era. In his interview, Fang presented a photo (see Figure 1) taken in 1989 of a piece of Chinese calligraphy that hung on the wall of the conference hall, where review meetings were held. The work, displayed prominently so that all workers could see its words clearly and be interpellated by its meaning, quotes a famous line from Confucius's *Analects*: "Reflecting on myself three times a day" (吾日三省吾身). In Chinese, "three times" is not taken literally but suggests the development of habitual self-management. Fang argued that the quote functioned as a motivational slogan, encouraging workers to conduct reflexivity not just during weekly "consultations of democratic life" but as a daily task. Authority at TOS was created by linking reflexivity back to Confucius, China's most important philosopher, who believed that a moral person must learn self-discipline. The quote therefore alluded to another traditional type of authoritative collective reflexivity which, unlike the receptive review meeting, was actively enacted by collectivist individuals (Triandis 1995) to cultivate society's understanding of a morally good person. Moreover, this Confucian form of collective reflexivity referenced by the quote did not request an external "inspector" but encouraged individuals' own self-regulation and adherence to Confucian ethical principles of self-discipline.

While this piece of calligraphy was removed after TOS's offices were renovated, the company still uses flyers, posters and pictures to inculcate reflexive values into employees. Though in the past Confucianism was the ethical exemplar around which TOS organised its reflexivity and disciplinary practices, today employees are more familiar with the motto of their CEO from Singapore, "Reflect upon the differences you want to make", printed on TOS's 2020 Global Business Brochure. Presented to employees and myself by the CEO at the annual staff meeting, the brochure, as a corporate marketing instrument, showcased information on TOS, its products and services towards potential clients. The slogan indicates shifts in TOS's approaches to

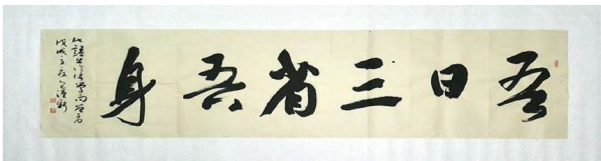


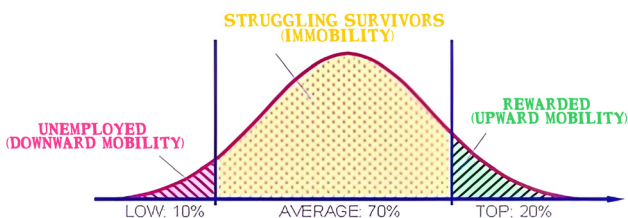
Figure 1: Chinese calligraphy.

regulating and valorising reflexivity, communication and workers. While reflexivity was once done in Mandarin, the motto is in English, also now the language of employee reflexivity practices. Moreover, while company slogans once drew upon Confucianism as a source of corporate authority, at present it refers to the authority of TOS's foreign CEO, signalling how reflexivity is now not only an ethical but managerial principle. While the Chinese calligraphy piece re-instantiated collective ethical principles shared by the Chinese population, the new slogan is individualistic, with the company's reflexive imperative requiring changes both within oneself and one's organisational surroundings.

## 4.2 The “rank-and-yank” policy

TOS managerial policy documents from 2003 to 2022 show that changing meanings of reflexivity have been part of broader shifts in logics initiated at the company around the year 2006, following its overseas acquisition. This change transformed how TOS and its workers were managed: reflexivity no longer concerned conformity to a collective and ethical source of authority but became the property of what managers consider to be “an ideal worker” at TOS. As will be shown, this “ideal” is anchored in neoliberal logics of self-entrepreneurship, thereby implicitly shifting responsibility for TOS's success away from TOS leadership to employees, who are now accountable for cultivating themselves as reflexive agents. While the figure of the inspector at TOS has now disappeared, monitoring, disciplining, controlling and rewarding reflexivity has been replaced by a “rank-and-yank” labour management model introduced by B.M.F., TOS's American partner. “Rank-and-yank” was implemented at TOS in 2015, when Chinese tire products became subject to WTO anti-dumping investigations in a prelude to the ongoing Sino-American trade war. The policy has become even more entrenched at the company in the wake of COVID-19, as an uncertain market demands high degrees of flexibility, adaptability and reflexivity from employees.

The “rank-and-yank” managerial method, pioneered by former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, involves performance appraisals, including reflexivity appraisals, to



**Figure 2:** Bell curve distribution for “rank-and-yank” at TOS.

reward top-tier performers while identifying and cutting off low-tier performers (Shafique 2012). As shown in the bell curve distribution adopted by TOS (see Figure 2), employees are stratified and categorised into three different groups according to work performance. Based on annual performance appraisals, 20 % of employees are designated “top performers” and rewarded with upward career mobility (i.e., job promotion, salary increase) while the bottom 10 % of employees, whose performance is unsatisfactory, fall into a “yank” category to be weeded out of the company. The 70 % of workers between these two groups are described as the “vital average”, but must struggle to make an adequate, reliable performance to maintain their positions.

The HR Director, Monica, has taken the lead on aligning TOS’s employee management system with its corporate culture and market needs. During her interview for this study, Monica stressed that the company’s interest in selecting and managing workers according to the “rank-and-yank” policy was “to cut off the useless and retain the qualified”, suggesting that it was an internal auditing practice conducted across the business. Following “rank-and-yank”, the company reviews employee performance then ranks and re-organises them for a workplace where high performers are differentiated, valued and rewarded. Monica argued that the approach was “cruel but brings instant results”, stating that TOS’s middle-to-low performers were inspired by the method and stimulated to improve their standing at the company. In sum, Monica saw “rank-and-yank” as spurring worker performance.

Before documenting how “rank-and-yank” is entrenched alongside an intensified investment in a new form of reflexivity, one that is significantly different from those historically performed at TOS, the next subsection will review how TOS justifies the need for a new type of worker and explores the desired qualities of this new, idealised worker type.

### 4.3 Contemporary conditions of work and reflexivity

During observations of monthly manager meetings, the phrase “no tolerance for making the same mistakes” was frequently said by TOS leadership, and management demanded that employees prevent such mistakes by reflecting on their daily activities and learning from past errors. Reflexivity was therefore considered by managers to be a technique for workers’ self-improvement, implying a constant updating of one’s skills to keep in line with up-to-date requests from TOS and its market. A typical example of the worker type requested by management is encapsulated in the bilingual slogan (see Excerpt 2) printed on TOS’s 2021 Staff Manual, a collection of documents introducing the employee code of conduct and corporate culture.

Excerpt 2      A new worker, for the new order, in the new era  
 新员工，新秩序，新时代

Monica indicated that she had devised this slogan in her position as the principal designer of the Staff Manual and was proud of its message. She explained that TOS's values and strategies in the post-pandemic market were embedded in the slogan's three "new's": "new worker" refers to TOS's desired and required worker type, i.e., a reflexive English speaker; "new order" means TOS's regimes of labour management (e.g., "rank-and-yank") that regulate and optimise its workforce; and "new era" indicates the current post-pandemic moment, during which English and reflexivity are essential qualities for global competitiveness.

The TOS 2021 Staff Manual constructs an opposition between the old and the new (i.e., old vs new workers, old vs new order, old vs new era), conveying a message of historical rupture with new reflexivity categories that differ from China's previous collective iterations. At the same time, archival materials suggest that such changes are less abrupt than Monica's slogan might suggest. The "new worker" ethos was not a sudden emergence but came with gradually shifting language policies. English was established as a corporate language at TOS in 2006, and when the Shanghai headquarters became TOS's global control centre in 2016, English replaced Mandarin as its only official language for everyday professional tasks. This change applied even to discussions between Chinese workers, from emails and telephone calls to business reports and presentation slides. Already in 2006, therefore, English proficiency was a valued quality at TOS, which now ensures that English is used in its daily operations and is a requisite for opportunities such as joining international business cases, becoming top performers in the "rank-and-yank" system and being promoted. New to the employee requirements, however, is a stress on English-mediated reflexivity, as TOS links English with various ideological associations such as innovation, creativity, freedom of spirit, modernity, self-responsibility, self-initiative and global entrepreneurialism. English-mediated reflexivity is therefore viewed as demonstrating employees' ability to flexibly adapt themselves to market unpredictability, not simply by speaking the language of global capitalism to engage with multilingual stakeholders but also by obtaining the supposedly beneficial qualities that accompany the language.

According to Monica, TOS desires workers in this new era that regularly and actively think and speak about themselves and their work with co-workers, customers and superiors. Reflexivity is not only required during the transition from one activity to the next, or when an important milestone has been achieved. Rather, it must be a constant practice and personal quality for every employee and therefore requires shaping, scripting, on-the-job training, assessment and improvement.

## 5 Producing reflexive workers

A key site for identifying and producing the new worker type outlined in the 2021 Staff Manual is the area of recruitment, training and evaluation. During these procedures, an employee's capacity to enact English-mediated reflexivity is a main evaluation criterion for selection and professional development. Observational data from TOS's 2020 Autumn Recruitment period and subsequent training and evaluation demonstrated a four-step management device used by TOS to produce reflexive workers, namely the selection, training, normalisation and assessment of new recruits. Through these activities, workers' reflexivity is identified, tested, regulated, cultivated and exploited, so a brief overview of these steps indicates how abstract concepts such as TOS's "new worker" for a "new era" are put into practice and have concrete effects on employees.

First, I observed all the English job interviews that took place in September 2020, which were a crucial part of TOS's hiring process to select new employees for maximum efficiency and minimum training costs. The interview is commonly structured into three phases: self-introduction, position-related Q&A and closing. During the final minutes of the Q&A, candidates are asked reflective questions such as, "How did you like your performance today?" or "Which part of the interview do you want to give a second try?" For significant positions, such as core members for transnational business projects, TOS occasionally provides case-study interviews in which candidates review information on business cases and reflect upon the "gains and losses" made in these instances. Satisfactory answers will identify the root causes of a case's success or failure and propose solutions to obtain advantages and avoid mistakes in the future.

Second, TOS sees reflexivity as necessary not only during recruitment but as a constant practice requiring regulated daily enactment, cultivation and improvement. New employees must receive various training modules for two consecutive weeks, including reflexivity coaching, conducted in English, on how to perform

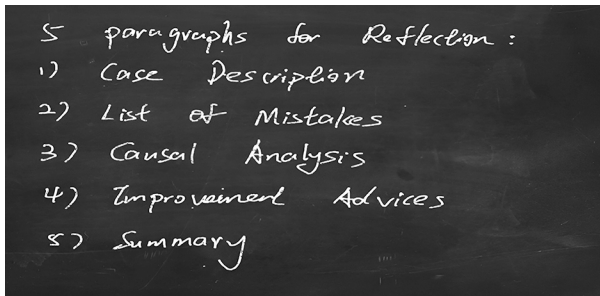


Figure 3: Blackboard at the reflexivity training.

effective and precise self-reflection. A standardised training “script” (Lorente 2017) had been developed by TOS with keywords extracted from hundreds of annual reflective reports by the American employees in B.M.F.; during reflexivity training, this script was written on a blackboard by a training coach (cf. Figure 3) to indicate what TOS’s managers understood as valued English reflection.

While TOS envisions reflexivity as an autonomous, individual and creative practice, “good” reflexivity seems to follow a prescribed structure that can be conceptualised as a linear, logical and therefore presumably rational problem-solving procedure. To shape employees into forward-looking “entrepreneurial agents responsible for company success” (Urciuoli 2008: 213), reflexivity at TOS is goal-oriented in terms of pinpointing issues, explaining causes and developing solutions. Besides a five-paragraph structure whose sections comprise case descriptions, a list of mistakes, causal analysis, improvement advice and a summary, the script provides some standardised sentences for different paragraphs (e.g., “We attribute the failure of this case to both internal and external causes” as an opening sentence of the “causal analysis” section). Employees merely need to add specific details to the cases featured in the script, like filling in the blanks. As a tool for mobilising their linguistic resources to demonstrate their speaking skills, the script structures employees’ modes of reasoning to guide them towards specific conclusions, emphasising their reflective performance. All the managers interviewed for this study expressed positive views on these standardised reflexivity practices, with one B.M.F. workforce administration expert stating, “The scripted reflection is not necessarily of high quality but at least complete, logical, and well structured”. Thus, managers must ensure that workers’ reflexivity, while appearing creative, agentive and independent, remains aligned with the principles of rationality, economic agendas and senior management strategies of TOS.

Third, after recruitment and training, new workers routinise reflexivity through weekly review meetings, scheduled every Monday. Each team member is asked to prepare a two-to-five-minute presentation in English that briefly reflects upon the previous week, including what has been accomplished, why the accomplishment is important, what impact it has had, what can be improved and what lessons can be applied moving forward. These review meetings are predicated on the logics of self-improvement and competition among employees attending the review meetings, with only those employees exhibiting reflexivity that managers perceive as appropriate and useful able to impress team leaders. When observing these review meetings for this study, I noted one particular feature of desired reflexivity, namely, avoiding specific emotions in workers’ reflexive performance, which persisted implicitly in the script outlined during training. The brief reflection speech is expected to be professional and dispassionate, establishing reflexivity as rational and productive as opposed to expressive and affective, which is stigmatised as fragile and

counter-productive to being a valued worker and for TOS's overall development. The stigmatised forms of affect are usually constructed as feminine: irrationality, sensitivity, distractedness and indecisiveness (Bilimoria and Piderit 2007). In one instance, a female budgeting specialist was criticised by her director when she attributed counting errors she had made to concerns about her ill baby. "Take all your emotional bullshit back home", the director reprimanded, "we don't believe in tears". The woman kept her head down in shame as her colleagues nodded in agreement.

Fourth, correction at review meetings is not the only form of assessing reflexivity performance, as reflexivity practices are evaluated formally through performance appraisal templates filled in by division managers, immediate superiors and HR. Routinised reflective practices, along with other work practices in areas such as teamwork, innovation, and leadership, are measured quarterly and quantified on a 1-to-5 scale (see Figure 4) indicating "poor", "fair", "average", "good" and "excellent". If an employee directly uses the scripts provided by coaches for reflexivity, a relatively common practice, they are graded "average". According to the total scores for the four annual quarters, workers are ranked on the "rank-and-yank" bell curve, ending up with new positions (promotion/demotion) or no positions (layoff). TOS has simplified the measuring process, quantifying employees' reflective practices to create distinctions and hierarchies among employees, thereby clarifying where employees stand in meeting the criteria of reflexivity and other necessary qualities (e.g., flexibility, punctuality). TOS is reluctant to provide additional training (i.e., English classes) that might improve employees' English-mediated reflexivity performance at added cost. Failure to meet standardised reflexivity is seen as an indication of unfitness and an inability to complete work of the type stressed by TOS's "new worker" ethos; it will first result in negative assessments, then downgrading or dismissal. Workers are aware of these consequences, with several stating in interviews that they are nervous whenever evaluation results are released. When poor reflexivity performers are marked, workers worry they will fall into the "yank" area of the bell curve next time.

Despite the standardised nature of the script for the reflexivity evaluation process, my fieldwork revealed that workers frequently struggled to identify and reproduce TOS's desired form of reflexivity. I interviewed Ping immediately after he was fired by TOS, where he worked for 29 years. He expressed his ideas about his reflexivity failure in the following terms (See Excerpt 3):

Comment on the following and fill in the appropriate rating into the boxes. 总体评价并打上相应分数				
RATING KEY: 5-EXCELLENT 优    4-GOOD 良好    3-AVERAGE 一般    2-FAIR 较差    1-POOR 差				
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL 表现评估

Figure 4: Rating key for reflexivity performance appraisals.



## Excerpt 3 Interview about “Why reflexivity failed”, 17-07-2021

- 1 **Ping:** Everyone can make reflections if they want.  
 2 The problem here is that they ask me to do this in English!  
 3 I must utilise the 5-paragraph structure for my reflection  
 4 and translate it into English, then memorise it.  
 5 The manager said that I was like reciting  
 6 rather than reflecting in English.  
 7 He said it was not real reflexivity!  
 8 He gave me a bad rating.  
 9 Isn't it for us to follow and recite,  
 10 like what we did for exams at school?
- 1 **平:** 要是愿意的话, 每个人都能反思啊。  
 2 这里面的问题是他们要我用英语做反思!  
 3 我必须用那个5段结构做我的反思,  
 4 翻成英语、再记住。  
 5 经理讲我像是在背诵,  
 6 而不是用英语反思。  
 7 他讲这个不是真的反思诶!  
 8 他给了我一个差分。  
 9 这不就是让我们跟着背嘛,  
 10 像我们在学校考试那样?

Ping's explanation exposes the tensions that reflexivity performance assessments can produce between workers and their assessors. First, there is a tension between what he calls “real” and “fake” reflexivity (line 7): on the one hand, Ping normalises reflexivity, constructing it as a practice that “everyone can make” (line 1), while conversely, Ping accepts that reflexivity must follow a standardised structure he has learnt to reproduce (lines 3–4). “Real” reflexivity is therefore something that people know how to do but also requires rehearsal and standardisation. A related tension is between the employee's ability to follow orders (lines 9–10) and their more individual, innovative and creative qualities. More than simply reproducing the standardised model of English reflection (lines 5–6), good reflexivity is an ability to communicate creative, innovative values. While Ping spoke English and made reflections, he failed his reflexivity assessment due to his inability to unite the features emphasised by TOS: speaking English, following a script and being an independent agent.

The principles contained in Monica's slogan – “a new worker, for a new order, in a new era” – not only legitimise TOS's worker assessment but also request that workers adapt and transform themselves to suit the company's desired workerhood. As Archer (2007) has argued, when a new set of working logics appear, “subjects could not rely upon (inherited patterns of) routine action as guidelines” (82), and agents are forced to adjust



themselves away from their old habitus (Bourdieu 1990). In the case of TOS, this adjustment has involved adapting to new principles of reflexivity, shifting away from collective Mandarin-based reflexivity to one that is standardised, individualised and in English. In contrast to reciting an English script, “real” reflexivity must be communicated in “real” English, meaning that authentic reflexivity not only refers to specific practices TOS appreciates but also acts as a technology of the self (Foucault 1988) for making neoliberal work subjects. In addition to constituting a neoliberal worker persona, English-mediated reflexivity justifies and normalises practices of discipline and self-discipline as well as stigma, devaluation and exclusion, which are thereafter rationalised and internalised by workers themselves. It perpetuates principles of self-discipline and self-growth that TOS strives for both on an organisational (i.e., global expansion, optimisation, process flexibility) and an individual management level. This logic of self-discipline and self-growth seems to be appropriated by the workers themselves, as all interviewees of this study, like Ping, showed a willingness to spend their free time and money on learning English and improving their reflexivity skills to create a new self, suitable for the global workplace.

In sum, English-mediated reflexivity at TOS seems to serve two interrelated goals, in Monica’s words “killing two birds with one stone”, by cultivating a worker type that the company believes will contribute to its success (i.e., attracting new clients, developing innovation, solving problems, improving organisational processes) while rationally differentiating and hierarchising employees. These principles not only legitimise employee selection, recruitment and management, but also normalise logics of promotion, demotion, exclusion and unequal distribution.

## 6 Discontinuity and continuity in reflexivity

After historicising the transformations of TOS’s organisational structures and ways of understanding and scripting reflexivity, this section synthesises the above insights, giving special attention to the changes and continuities in the institutional and individual construction of reflexive workers. The section also addresses the anchoring of reflexivity within practices of institutional organising and value making, and the effects of reflexivity on control, power and inequality.

### 6.1 Changing ideologies of language and reflexivity

The changes documented in TOS’s conceptualisation and organisation of reflexivity are anchored in and have been informed by ideological shifts underpinning China’s transition from political collectivism and a planned economy to neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics (Zhang and Ong 2008). These shifts involved significant

changes in ideologies of language (Gal and Irvine 2019) and reflexivity (Del Percio 2022). Before the 2000s, reflexivity was conceptualised as a collective practice, linked with Confucian values, that reproduced moral principles of authority, self-discipline and obedience. Mandarin was the language of this reflexivity, not only because it was the default language at TOS and Chinese workplaces in general (Zhou 2018), but also because throughout history Mandarin itself exemplified the collective principles that defined reflexivity at TOS. The shift to English-mediated reflexivity has accompanied TOS's increasingly neoliberal, global workplace (Gong forthcoming) as well as changes to moral principles of work and workerhood around which TOS is organised. For TOS's "new worker" ethos, principles of collectivism, authority, self-discipline and obedience are replaced by those of individualism, freedom, self-responsibility and self-entrepreneurship. This change enables TOS's leadership to exert new forms of power through employees' willingness to be free, agentive and responsible subjects. Finally, English, a language representing neoliberal values (Park and Wee 2012), is central to moulding the new corporate identity.

## 6.2 Changing modes of analysing and acting upon the self

Changes to language ideologies not only mean changes to corporate language choices but pinpoint changing modes of analysing and acting upon the self. Reflexivity in Mandarin was organised in a big meeting room, configured spatially and interactionally in a way that allowed leaders to address workers and workers to listen to their leaders. These spatial configurations, therefore, constituted a passive reflexivity very different from what is ideologically embedded in English. Reflexivity in English is decentralised and pertains to all facets of employees' professional lives, not simply during review meetings. Moreover, while the collective practice of Mandarin-mediated reflexivity was common in various social and political domains of TOS prior to the 2000s, English-mediated reflexivity is treated as a personal quality that workers bring with them to TOS upon recruitment and which is further cultivated through professional development activities standardising, regulating, assessing and ranking reflexivity. The reflexivity produced at TOS has thus shifted from a collective to an individualistic orientation and is now in a state of needing constant improvement. The shift indicates a broader cultural transformation in Chinese society, where the shift from a planned to a market economy has transformed citizens' understandings and enactments of agency. This transformation does not promote top-down or central planning, but autonomous, responsible, reflexive individual agents who will develop the ability to act upon themselves and their surrounding society (Martín Rojo and Del Percio 2019).

### 6.3 Changing regimes of power and labour management

Shifting reflexivity must be understood as rooted in and benefiting evolving managerial regimes of workforce regulation. The power system that constituted and was constituted by Mandarin-mediated reflexivity mirrored a hierarchical structure that ensured obedience by aligning workers with leadership as an ethical duty, with an inspector reminding workers of their moral obligation by punishing them in cases of deviant behaviour and ethical dis-alignment. Foucault (1988) views such disciplinary forms as technologies of power, which “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends and domination” (18). The managerial system utilising English-mediated reflexivity appears to be more horizontal, interpellating each worker as a free subject. Obedience is not directed towards organisational leadership but towards a joint goal of company economic development and individual fulfilment. In addition to technologies of power, reflexivity now relates to technologies of the self (Foucault 1988), shaping neoliberal work subjects by regulating their behaviour for TOS to benefit from employees’ pursuit to be free, responsible and innovative thinkers and actors that are valued in “rank-and-yank” and can strive for professional promotion. While in this model workers become their own inspectors, TOS remains in control of workers’ reflexive agency, both through minute regulation and standardisation of reflexivity scripts inculcated to workers during training and through the anchoring of reflexivity in corporate assessment and ranking systems. The new English-mediated reflexivity has therefore substituted the principle of moral duty and ethical commitment to authority with a neoliberal ethos and principle of fear and anxiety of losing one’s job: workers do not choose to be reflexive but are coerced.

### 6.4 Continuity when doing reflexivity

The more things change, the more they stay the same, and questions around reflexivity in labour management are today, as in the past, intertwined with moral and disciplinary repercussions that “come in different historically contingent modes” (Zienkowski 2017: 2). First, reflexivity is always based on scrutiny and stigmatisation, with employees examined by inspectors in the past and by themselves or HR today. In both cases, if employees do not meet specific requirements, they are stigmatised as unqualified and deserving of punishment (previously losing face, but today losing their jobs). Second, changing modes of reflexivity continuously impose “morally marked models of selfhood” (Del Percio 2022: 41) to discipline employees. Previously, moral obligations intimated workers’ unconditional compliance to corporate leadership and societal expectations for moral uprightness, but today it

implies employees' capacity to optimise themselves into English-speaking reflexive labour power to accommodate an unpredictable global market. In a word, certain standardised and regulated communicative practices, whether listening to a Mandarin speech in silence or actively producing reflexivity through a new language, are morally valued modes of analysing and expressing the self. Third, while collective reflexivity has been criticised for high degrees of institutionalisation and limited room for self-analysis, institutional scripts continue to frame a shrinking space for contemporary reflexivity. Finally, reflexivity has kept perpetuating older mechanisms of difference and inequality: while inequality at TOS has always been a matter of whether workers are able and willing to adhere to reflexivity standards, the construction of English-mediated reflexivity now feeds into a larger inequality in China organised around unequal access to standard forms of English (Hu 2005). Understanding reflexivity as a worker's inner personal characteristic means erasing the fact that both English and the capacity to be reflexive are not just acquired, and therefore not a natural personality trait, but a scarce resource which in China is available only to the privileged classes able to access an English-speaking education. This conflation of reflexivity with morality perpetuates meritocracy logics – one succeeds when conforming to social expectations – which is constitutive of both the planned economy and neoliberalism.

## 7 Conclusions

This article explored reflexivity at the intersection of regulated linguistic practices, institutional managerial frameworks and social inequality and difference. Through a historiographically and ethnographically grounded analysis, the process through which reflexivity is understood, organised and regimented to align with the interests and agendas of corporate actors (i.e., “new worker, new order, new era”), shifting moral regimes and changing political economic conditions was unpacked. The paper argued that reflexivity legitimises models (e.g., “rank-and-yank”) of standardisation, differentiation, hierarchisation and exclusion. Additionally, the formation of English-mediated reflexivity was explained by global capitalism, neoliberal values and the development of an ideal reflexive worker type that has been institutionally scripted and imposed.

Fieldwork at TOS demonstrated a significant consensus across generations and positions concerning reflexivity's important managerial function as a technology of discipline. While this seems unsurprising in the case of TOS's previous, Mandarin-mediated reflexivity, where workers were trained not to contest authority, the stigmatisation, devaluation and exclusion inherent in the newer English-mediated reflexivity also seem to have been rationalised and internalised by both managers

and employees without objection. Monica has promoted the controlling, disciplinary and exclusive nature of reflexivity as a core of her daily business, while even the unemployed Ping does not challenge the reflexivity that resulted in his firing. Rather, Ping has naturalised the value of reflexivity for shaping good workers and developing TOS while legitimising his layoff as a linguistic penalty (“I should have learnt English harder”) (Roberts 2010). Such lack of resistance seems to be explained by TOS’s reflexivity script, which socialises employees “into shared moral ideologies and behaviour” (Jacobs-Huey 2003: 294). Workers are convinced that being a moral and valued employee means striving for the neoliberal promise of English-mediated reflexivity that everyone can succeed if they manage to meet the communicative standards set by TOS. Reflexivity is thus seen by workers as an empowering practice that allows them to avoid dismissal and climb the career ladder within their company, while investing in reflexivity is perceived as worthwhile and embedded in logics of merit, freedom, and agency (Martín Rojo and Del Percio 2019).

English-mediated reflexivity remains an unequally distributed resource. While both managers and workers view reflexivity as tied to logics of empowerment and mobility, class background continues to produce classed outcomes and trajectories, as can be seen in sociolinguistic scholarship on contemporary China (Pérez-Milans 2017). Similarly, when TOS uses managerial technologies to steer employees into reflexive qualities, assessments at the recruitment stage indicate HR’s assumption that candidates “have” or embody such qualities. This “ownership”, however, is not natural: employees who have received advantaged, expensive multilingual education in English (e.g., training in English-speaking Western countries where this sort of reflexivity is also practised) have privileged access to reflexivity and can construct their career trajectories in accordance with elite aspirations. Those without these privileges must face the social and economic burden of learning English and adjusting to accord with the particularly scripted reflexive selves demanded by companies like TOS. New forms of reflexivity, therefore, result in familiar forms of class inequality.

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