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**SPECTERS OF THE SUBALTERN :
A CRITIQUE OF REPRESENTATIONS OF RURAL WOMEN
IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA**

SIT TSUI

PHD

LINGNAN UNIVERSITY

2005

**SPECTERS OF THE SUBALTERN :
A CRITIQUE OF REPRESENTATIONS OF RURAL WOMEN
IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA**

**by
SIT Tsui**

**A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

Lingnan University

2005

ABSTRACT

Specters of the Subaltern: A Critique of Representations of Rural Women in Contemporary China

by

SIT Tsui

Doctor of Philosophy

China has speeded up modernization since the reform and open-door policy was introduced in 1978. After accession to the World Trade Organization in 1999, China has been further incorporated into the global track. The national policy of economic development requires a continuing exploitation of natural resources and intensive labor from the rural sector, and over the last few decades, there has been a ceaseless wave of rural women going to the cities and working mainly as assembly-line workers, domestic helpers and sex workers.

Developing a subaltern and feminist perspective, this thesis examines representations of rural women in academic research and literary works, as well as in films, documentaries, TV dramas, photography and popular magazines. The thesis attempts to outline and invoke a spectral figure of the subaltern as the rural woman demonstrably haunting dominant regimes of representations of modernization. In the prevailing mentality of development, a mega-city is portrayed as the ultimate destination; meanwhile, the rural is depicted as residual and as a repository of the past. There is a system of negative equivalences attached to the rural, which is always positioned as the unspoken, invisible or stereotyped other of overwhelming cosmopolitan values.

The thesis reviews how urban intellectuals represent rural women in the contemporary cosmopolitan settings. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's discussion of the two kinds of representation—proxy and portrait—the thesis aims to read how urban intellectuals speak for as well as draw a portrait of rural women.

The thesis also tries to read against the grain of the texts to trace the irreducible figure of the rural woman. As the readings will demonstrate, there are contradictions, paradoxes and ambivalences in narrating and portraying rural women as actors of modernization, victims of industrialization, agents of proletarian struggle, consumers purchasing commodities, and as the residual from agrarian society.

From such incongruities within the texts, one can posit the figure of the rural woman as a symbol of resistance to the predominant discourse of modernization. This is not necessarily to suggest a nostalgic return to the past, that is, to the statist industrialization of Mao Zedong's period and the patriarchal tradition; or an orthodox ruralism that everyone should go back to ancient society; or a romanticization of the primitive. Rather, this figure operates like Stuart Hall's concept of "black", referring to a way of referencing the widespread experience of marginalization in contemporary China, and an organizing category of a new politics of resistance among different groups.

This research not only negotiates but also re-adjusts the notion of urban superiority by exploring the spectral figure of the rural woman. Gendering the rural vision means not only making a difference from the present capitalist and patriarchal values and practices, but also taking the excluded majority into serious consideration. It is hoped that this exercise, in the end, will help us to imagine a communal society in which we can recognize the practice of care of others as care of the self.

I declare that this is an original work based primarily on my own research, and I warrant that all citations of previous research, published or unpublished, have been duly acknowledged.

(Sit Tsui)

Date: 6 July 2005

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL OF THESIS

SPECTERS OF THE SUBALTERN :
A CRITIQUE OF REPRESENTATIONS OF RURAL WOMEN IN
CONTEMPORARY CHINA

by
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Last but not least, without my family's love and support, I will not complete this journey.

Chapter One

Introduction

A Flickering Figure

The world premiere of *Show Your Colors: Chinese Attitude for the Twenty-first Century* took place in February 2001 in Hong Kong. The program introduced the show as “an epic production” of “the most controversial creative team”.¹ It was proclaimed to be China’s first rock and roll dance concert, performed by the popular mainland rock-singer Cui Jian and his band, along with the Hong Kong City Contemporary Dance Company (CCDC); the show also included a screening of the video works of the mainland film-director Zhang Yuan. The drama was written by Lin Kehuan, the president of the China National Youth Theatre. The program schedule announces that the show is divided into three parts *Red*, *Yellow* and *Blue*. Each color is representative of the social phenomena emerging in modern China and would also help reveal how conflicting ideologies would evolve into a Chinese attitude for the twenty-first century. *Red* means a revolutionary China with “the pulse for change”, and the groups of Red Army and Red Guards crossing a thick wall to the city, described as a paradise of opportunity. *Yellow* signifies the gloss and glitter of

the reform era, in which “the desire for *la dolce vita*” is embodied in pop diva Teresa Tang’s songs, karaoke and beauty pageant competitions. *Blue* implies that the Chinese have entered “the digital age of exploring an unknown freedom and defying time, space and gravity”. Amidst the high energy rock and roll music, wondrous visual effects, hundreds of people in the audience were stunned when a six meter high brick wall suddenly crumbled in front of the live band, and CCDC’s dancers kept soaring higher on elastic wires. Some frenzied members jumped onto the stage to join the performance, while others were dancing on the floor. I too was dancing till late that night.

What struck me the most were not the gimmicks or Cui Jian’s performance, but rather the specter of the peasant, a flickering figure suspended in a dark corner on the side. He was naked except for a skirt-like cloth covering his body. His face was obscured but the spotlight shone on his hands, chest and abdomen before the show began. He was repeatedly husking the rice in a wooden bucket with a long pestle under the unsteady spotlight. One strike, two strikes..., the rhythm was continuous, even though it kept fading into the sound of loud background music, but it never stopped. The deafening sound of husking and the image of the naked working peasant haunted me from the beginning to the end of the show. For the male artists of *Show Your Colors*, the peasant is the epitome of a strong and hard-working man, but

his action remains unchanging and this presupposes that the peasant's world is primitive, monotonous, and static. It contrasts strangely to the other images in the colors show where the actors of the revolution are in *Red*, the agents of economic reform in *Yellow*, and the flying subjects in *Blue*. It implies that in the twenty-first century, there will be no new place for the peasant, but it is reserved only for the city, economic growth and information technology. The thread of modernization runs through Red, Yellow or Blue China, which discloses its desire or anxiety of becoming a world power. At the same time, the mismatching image of the ancient peasant is flickering around the dark corner on the stage. It is a specter haunting cosmopolitan China.

Yet, this figure is a HE, not a SHE. Why is a rural woman absent in the male artists' imagination? Where has the rural woman gone? We may find her appearance marked on the tags of different kinds of commodities nearly everywhere: "Made in China". We may also find her living on the land.

From a gender perspective, in the international division of labor, rural women of the Third World countries are largely at the bottom layer of "The Global Village". A term coined by Marshall McLuhan which effectively refers to the electronically informed, closely interrelated global society of the twenty-first century (McLuhan and Powers, 1989), and which heralds the age of "neo-liberal globalization" (Massey,

1997: 7-12), or what the former President of the United States, Harry Truman announced as an era of Development for the improvement and growth of the “underdeveloped areas” after World War II (Escobar, 1995: 3).² This is the context in which today, the figure of the rural women shuttles between patriarchal tradition and imperialist or capitalist development (Spivak, 1999: 304).

The Thread of Modernization

China has speeded up modernization since the reform and open-door policy was introduced in 1978. In the international division of labor, China is equivalent to being a “world factory”, by evolving from a “developing” country to a “developed” country. After being integrated into the World Trade Organization in 1999, China is desperately trying to design its future in a vision of transforming itself from a world industrial base to a world financial center. This national policy of an ever-expanding economy that takes economic growth as an absolute determinant of development requires a continual exploitation of natural resources and intensive labor from the rural sector.

Wen Tiejun, one of the most influential experts on rural China, in his controversial article “Centenary Reflections on the ‘Three Dimensional Problem’ of

Rural China”, originally published in *Dushu*, a well-known intellectual journal in the mainland, argues that rural China is always appropriated and exploited for national modernization: “China’s problem is the tension aroused by an agrarian society, characterized by overpopulation and limited resources, in the process of internal and primitive accumulation of capital for state industrialization (Wen Tiejun, 2001: 287-295). He explains two basic paradoxes of China’s development: the constraint on land reform under the pressure of high population density, and the constraint of an agricultural surplus-distribution system under the binary system dividing the urban from the rural. Wen believes that the essential problem is the means of extracting capital from a highly scattered and low surplus agricultural economy. To put it simply, in Wen’s eyes, China is “a cluster of villages” but not the “world cyber-city” that the artists of *Show Your Colors* depict.

Taking a historical perspective, Wen examines the thread of modernization in China from the middle of nineteenth century to the present. He summarizes China’s development as ‘four industrializations of a peasant state’, with the ultimate aim of becoming a modern powerful state to counter European and Japanese imperialism, and the United States’ embargo during the cold war. First, *Yangwu yundong*, or the Westernization Movement initiated by the Qing dynasty from 1850 to 1895; second, the industrialization policy pursued by the Republican government from 1920s to the

1940s; third, the “State Capitalist Primitive Accumulation” practiced by the Chinese Communist regime from the 1950s to the 1970s; and fourth, Deng Xiaoping’s promotion of the reform and open-door policy starting from the 1970s. Wen not only criticizes the recent policy of market-oriented industry, but also the state policy of industrialization in Mao’s period:

China was forced to carry out an unprecedented self-exploitation led by a highly centralized government: in the villages, they implemented the symbiotic system of people’s communes and state monopoly for purchase and marketing, while, in the cities, they established a system of planned allocation and bureaucratic institution. By controlling all surplus value produced by both rural and urban labor, the central government redistributed resources to expand heavy-industry based production” (Wen Tiejun, 2001: 293).

The desire of erasing the shameful memory of being a defeated semi-colony and the anxiety of lagging behind as a backward peasant country is embedded in the drive for modernization. In that sense, the exploitation of rural areas is rationalized in the vision of building modern China in the world. It is not surprising to note that rural China is being appropriated for and by the market economy in the dominant development discourse and practice, and this is reflected in the recent official Chinese statements made on joining WTO, on *Sanxia gongcheng*, or the Three Gorges Dam Project, on *Xibei da kaifa*, or the Great Development of the Northwest,

and the Beijing Olympics of 2008. These projects are justified as being crucial to development in helping China move from being backward to advanced, from lagging behind to progress, or from being an underdeveloped to a developed nation. As Meaghan Morris points out in the Australian context, “Progress and Development” are invoked as a foundational value, and also as “a myth of origins”:

Today, when appeals to ‘progress’ are as likely to arouse groans as applause in public debates about the purpose of a development, Progress is still invoked as a *foundational* value, whether coded as a spirit to be recaptured or as a loss to lament but accept—that is, as a myth of origins, if no longer of destiny (Morris, 1998: 11).

The thread of China’s modernization can also be perceived in popular slogans such as *Chao ying gan mei*, or “Surpassing Britain and Catching Up With the United States” from the 1950s and 1960s, in *Sige xiandaihua*, or the “Four Elements of Modernization (agriculture, industry, national security, and science and technology)” of the 1970s and 1980s, and in *Yu shijie jiegui*, or “On Track with the World” and *Fazhan shi ying daoli*, or “Development is the absolute principle” from the 1990s.³ In official documents, the United States, Europe and Japan are imagined as symbolizing China’s goal for development policy. The tool of measurement is economic growth, measured in terms of Gross National Product (GNP) or Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁴

After the June-Fourth Democratic Movement of 1989, the political suppression, economic slump and social grievances in China paved the way for Deng's southern visit in 1992. With the slogan "Development is the absolute principle", Deng once again reinforced the policy of western modernization. The market's expansion and privatization reforms were carried out with the aim of achieving access to the transnational capitalist economy. China's accession to the WTO marked the fact that it embraced the neo-liberal world economic system. Being referred to as the world factory, or one of the bases of global manufacturing industry, China looks to the rural areas to provide intensive labor and natural resources, and a market for dumping commodities in the international division of production and distribution.

China's integration with the global economy is accompanied by rapid liberalization and privatization.⁵ In addition, in the Sixteenth Communist Party Congress (CCP) and the Tenth National People's Congress in 2003, the former state president and general secretary of CCP Jiang Zemin's *Sange daibiao lilun*, or "Theory of the Three Representatives" urged the Communist Party to represent advanced production forces and advanced culture as well as the fundamental interests of the majority, which explicitly sanctioned the entry of business elites and professionals into the CCP's ranks. Therefore, peasants and workers are no longer considered the driving forces of society, their role being replaced by the nouveau riche and private entrepreneurs.

Meanwhile, the state president and the general secretary of CCP, Hu Jintao, and the state premier, Wen Jiabao, stated separately that China would continue to undertake free-market reform in order to ensure continued rapid economic growth. This undoubtedly followed Jiang Zemin's idea of setting the target of economic growth, that China would "basically accomplish industrialization", and "accelerate modernization", and also "aim to quadruple the year 2000's GDP by 2020, putting China on a par with that of medium-sized developed countries." The anxiety in becoming a westernized developed country was again visible in his words: "we must move forward, or we will fall behind."⁶

Nonetheless, the figure of the rural constantly interrupts the ruling class' imagination of modernization. When it seemed that the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS, or atypical pneumonia) which seriously attacked the globe, particularly in Hong Kong and mainland China, was under control, Wen Jiabao visited the United States, and delivered a public speech, entitled "Turning Your Eyes to China", at the Institute of Business at Harvard University on 10 December 2003. Wen Jiabao encouraged the young people of the United States and China to turn their eyes to each other. In his speech, Wen reiterated that China had not yet developed like western countries due to a major barrier to modernization, which were the rural areas:

China is still a developing country. There is an obvious gap between its urban and rural areas and between its eastern and western regions. If you travel to the coastal cities in China's southeast, you will see modern sights of skyscrapers, busy traffic and brightly-lit streets. But in rural China, especially in the central and western rural parts, there are still many backward places. In the poor and remote mountain villages, folks still use manual labor and animals to till the land. They live in houses made of sun-dried mud bricks. In times of severe drought, there will be scarcity of drinking water for people and animals. Zheng Banqiao, a Chinese poet-magistrate of the eighteenth century wrote, "The rustling of bamboo outside my door. Sounds like the moaning of the needy poor." [...] Now, China has laid down her three-step strategy toward modernization. From now till 2020, China will complete the building of *xiaokang*, or its well-off society in an all-round way. By 2049, the year the People's Republic of China will celebrate its centenary, and we will have reached the level of a medium-developed country.⁷

Wen Jiabao represents China as a "poor and backward" developing country in front of an audience of the Institute of Business at Harvard University, implying that Wen takes the western mode of development as the yardstick of China's future. By using the figure of "rural China", Wen further expresses the inferior feelings about China's lagging behind the advanced states. Wen's speech admits an appalling disequilibrium between the rural and the coastal cities, but he does not recognize that the policy of rapid modernization, which allocates a large proportion of national resources for building "modern sights of skyscrapers, busy traffic and brightly-lit streets", has led precisely to the condition of the "backward, poor and remote

mountain villages”, “the houses made of sun-dried mud bricks”, and the plight of rural people like “scarcity of drinking water in drought” as it occurs today. To put it simply, the monstrous prosperity of metropolitan China is based on the deterioration of rural areas. Raymond Williams argues that the industrial-agricultural balance is the product of capitalist calculation of profit:

The industrial-agricultural balance, in all its physical forms of town and country relations, is the product, however mediated, of a set of decisions about capital investment made by the minority which controls capital and determines its use by calculations of profit (Williams, 1989: 79).

The figure of the rural is represented as “burden and disgrace” in the dominant discourse of modernization; as Wen Jiabao clearly suggests, he is haunted by “the moaning of the needy poor [particularly in rural China]” outside his door.

Against this historical background, the trajectory of rural China is persistently in tension with the thread of modernization, running through the late Qing Dynasty, the Republican period, the Socialist China and even today, the era of developing market-economy. The figure of the rural is continuously haunting the ruling elite of China.

The Debate of “the Three Dimensional Rural Problem”

Since China has implemented the neo-liberal development policy, which has helped accelerate the pace of economic liberalization and open the market to the west, millions of rural people have rushed to the cities, particularly coastal cities like Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Pearl River Delta region. Most of them find low-paid jobs in factories, restaurants, shops, construction sites, or in vending, rubbish collecting, salons and sex services. The escalating number of *liudong renkou*, or “floating populations” or *mingong*, or “peasant workers” moving from rural to urban has generated discussion among law officials, economists, sociologists, journalists, human rights activists and labor movement organizers.

The phenomenon of the world factory, indicating the exodus of rural people to work in export-oriented industry, reveals such problems of the developmental path as the crisis of rural society. One of the imminent social crises is that the gap between the rural and the urban is getting wider. This has gradually led to an on-going heated debate on *sannong wenti*, or “the three dimensional rural problem: rural people, rural society and rural production”, particularly in central governmental policy studies and intellectual circles.⁸

Official discourses on rural-urban migration are mostly positive when the issue is raised in the age of globalization with an intensive and cheap labor force being an advantage for attracting foreign investments to speed up modernization. Millions of peasants go to work in the cities, which not only solves the problem of surplus rural population, but also alleviates rural poverty by the remittances sent home, and improves peasants' capability through the learning of advanced skills and "knowledge".⁹ This new incorporation of peasant labor into the international division of labor will help China to be "on track with the world". In such a way, peasant workers are represented as beneficiaries of rural-urban migration or as pillars of economic achievement and accelerated urbanization. It is widely assumed that an exodus of peasants or "surplus rural labor" to the cities is a blessing for China's economic development.

On the other hand, the rural migrant population was once called vagrant or *mangliu*, or "blind flow", in a derogatory sense. In some population studies and criminological research, rural migrants are unfairly and in a hostile manner blamed for crime, crowding and filth in the cities. In other words, they are seen as a threat against the social order.¹⁰ They are generally called "surplus labor", and "cheap labor", implying the need for a legitimization, regulation and management of the labor market by the government, for the purpose of training skilled workers, clerical

workers, and managerial professionals, targeted for China's transition to an industrial and financial economy.

Many urban intellectuals who are concerned call for attention to the "three dimensional problem" of rural China. The main themes of the heated debate are around the political and economic structures of the nation like the reduction or cancellation of heavy taxation, boosting farmers' incomes, establishment of peasants' organizations and village governance. This can be seen from some slogans like "Give peasants the status of citizens!" and "Let peasants speak for themselves!" Here, peasants are invoked as a collective entity.

Wen Tiejun, who is amongst these intellectuals participating in the debate on the "three dimensional rural problem", argues that the saying of the twentieth century "China's problem is the peasants' problem, the peasants' problem is that there is no land", should be changed to "China's problem is the peasants' problem and the peasants' problem is *unemployment*." Thus, Wen suggests that policy makers should adopt a "labor intensive development" and direct the labor force into the building of state infrastructure; remove the dual system, and facilitate the transfer of surplus rural labor to other sectors. He further proposes an alternative policy of a 'non-market' system, a local property and an equalized revenue system (Wen Tiejun, 2001: 294).

Wen's argument and proposals have been echoed by other social scientists. For example, Lu Xueyi, a sociologist of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), argues that today's rural crisis in China is the dilemma of the rural-urban divide, or "One Country, Two Systems", here meaning, "diverging rule for urban and rural areas under the policy of one country, two systems". China began to practice the household registration system to separate rural from urban residents in the 1950s. Under this system, urban people enjoyed comparatively better benefits of citizenship, such as guaranteed employment, housing, health care and public education. On the other hand, peasant workers take up the heavy, dirty or dangerous work that urban people are unwilling to do. Without an urban residence permit, peasant workers suffer most from social discrimination. They are treated unfairly in wages, housing, medical care, and unemployment insurance and schooling for their children, and face the risk of being dismissed arbitrarily. Lu therefore calls for changing the dual system to allow peasants to live in the cities as legal citizens (Lu, 2000: 3-9).

Another example is Li Changping, a former secretary of Jianli County in Hubei Province, who in 2000 wrote a complaint letter to Zhu Rongji, the former prime minister of the State Council, crying out *xianzai nongmin zhen ku, nongcun zhen qiong, nongye zhen weixian*, or "now peasants are indeed suffering, villages are indeed poor, and agriculture is indeed in danger". His letter was published on

Southern Weekend, dated 24 August 2000, and led to a controversy throughout the country. Li also calls for legal rights and the interests of peasant workers, in order to help them become legal workers, and gradually adapt to city life and finally obtain citizenship rights. Wen, Lu and Li are all concerned with institutional arrangements, economic policy, and legislative amendment. Lu and Li particularly advocate helping peasants become modern citizens. They mainly depict peasants as a neutral entity, and they do not touch upon the question of sexual difference. Rural women's experiences are hardly mentioned in their writings. Although they are able to think of peasants as the most vulnerable group under the national development policy, they neglect the patriarchal hierarchies in the rural society as complicit with the modernization policy. Thus, the figure of a woman can question the conventional patriarchal construction of relationships either in the city or in the countryside.

In the following, I will invoke the spectral figure of the rural woman in the discussion of the rural problem in three dimensions, taking the recent rural-to-urban migration as my starting point. My theoretical resources are based on Marxism, subaltern theory as well as feminism. The specter of Communism in *The Communist Manifesto* was haunting Europe. In 1847, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were invited to join the Communist League in London and commissioned to write a manifesto. In February 1848, *The Communist Manifesto* was published. In the

opening, they make one of their most well known statements: “A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of Communism”. Marx depicts Communism as a specter haunting the European bourgeoisie, and believes that the proletariat is the agent of revolutionary transformation of society. Here, I would like to adapt this figure to my own argument that the specters are haunting the world in an age of globalization – specters of the subaltern that have rural women’s faces. I believe that a Marxist approach should go hand in hand with feminist resources to explain our complicated reality.

The Subaltern

As I have argued above that the specters of the subaltern are haunting the world in the age of globalization, I will first trace how intellectuals from various countries have used the word “subaltern” for their own political agenda, and then examine the relevant discussions of the subaltern and its significance in the Chinese context.

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “subaltern” means “of inferior status, quality, or importance: (a) of a person or body of persons, subordinate, inferior. (b) hence, of rank, power, authority, action: of or pertaining to a subordinate or inferior.” The meaning of the word more or less is appropriated in various contexts

according to its users' own purposes. In his "Notes on Italian history" in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci proposes a six-point project of writing a history of the subaltern classes. He adopts the military term "subaltern", meaning "of inferior rank", to refer to the subordinated social groups at the opposite end of the spectrum from the ruling class or hegemonic group. With the aim of unification, the former groups come together, even rebel and rise up to break the subordination, but the latter groups continually interrupt their activities:

The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups; it therefore can only be demonstrated when an historical cycle is completed and this cycle culminates in a success. Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only "permanent" victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately (Gramsci, 1998: 54-55).

Writing in prison in Italy in the early 1930s, Gramsci elaborates Marxism theoretically to deal with the conditions of advanced capitalism in Europe. He discerns the subjective dimension of socialist politics as well as being able to place human actors at the centre of the revolutionary process. Believing in the potential and radical power of subaltern groups, he claims that "all men are intellectuals... Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of

intellectual activity, that is, he is a ‘philosopher’...” (Gramsci, 1998: 9). Gramsci’s political agenda requires the adoption of a critical posture towards ‘elitism’ and “avant-gardism”, terms which he uses to refer to dominant values of the ruling class and bourgeoisie; and “subaltern” is largely synonymous with the “proletariat” of industrial society in his writings. Gramsci’s vision of historiography in turn inspired the British Marxist historians who pioneered projects of “history from below”, or “grassroots history” in the 1960s (Hobsbawm, 1988: 13-27; Thompson, 2001: 481-495) and then the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) which launched the series of “writings on South Asian history and society” in the 1980s (Chakrabarty, 1997: 263-293; 2000: 467-485).

Appropriating Gramsci’s notion of “subaltern”, a group of historians in India initiated SSG to rewrite the historiography of Indian nationalism, which was dominated, in their view, by colonialist and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. Ranajit Guha, one of the founders of the group, declared that these two kinds of elitism attribute both the making of the Indian nation-state and its development of nationalism to the ruling class’ achievements. The former point of view belongs to British colonial rulers, administrators, and policy-makers, and the latter to Indian nationalists and the institutions they created (Guha, 1999b: 1-8). In *Subaltern Studies III*, he further affirms that the aim of SSG is to make the subaltern groups the

subjects of their own history, “we are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography and the social sciences for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project” (Guha, 1999c: vii).

Guha argues that “subaltern” is used as a name for “the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this was expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha, 1999: vii). In other words, “subaltern” refers to a class or a group which has no access to social mobility, and this is in contrast to the opportunities available to the elite or ruling class. Guha chooses “subaltern” as a banner of alliance for the subordinated groups in face of an elite-oriented historiography, even though he realizes that there are ambiguities and contradictions within and between the groups. He points out that “the people” and “subaltern class” can be used as synonymous terms as “the social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the ‘elite’” (Guha, 1999b: 8).

Gendered Subaltern

Feminism relates itself to subaltern studies in making a gender difference. The “gendered subaltern” is a concept, which is habitually neglected intentionally or unintentionally by male historians. As Joan Scott famously proposes that gender can be a useful category of historical analysis. Scott argues that gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and a primary way of signifying relationships of power. She further stresses: “the history of feminist thought is a history of the refusal of the hierarchical construction of the relationship between male and female in its specific contexts and an attempt to reverse or displace its operations” (Scott, 2000: 165-166).

In her article “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” in *Subaltern Studies IV*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak first discusses the manner in which the role of women was neglected in the work of the SSG.¹¹ The figure of woman, moving from clan to clan and family to family as daughter/sister and wife/mother, made the continuity of patriarchy possible (Spivak, 1996: 231). Feminist critics joining the debate on subaltern studies have further brought essentialism, or the supposed essentialist identity of “subaltern”, into crisis, by naming as “subaltern” a position without identity. The importance of naming reveals itself in the discussion about the limits of essentialism. For example, an influential source of this discussion in

feminism has been Michel Foucault's use of "power" as a name to map the dynamic force-fields in modern society:

One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power, it is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society (Foucault, 1990: 93).

Among the feminists, most significantly Spivak takes "subaltern" to be both "the name of the social space that is different from the classed social circuit, track of hegemony" (Spivak, 1993: 139), and "the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space" (Spivak, 1999: 310). Echoing Spivak's argument, in her book *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text*, Jenny Sharpe suggests that "subaltern" can mean both "subaltern classes" and "subordinated forms of knowledge", so that "subaltern" is "an unstable category of difference" (Sharpe, 1993: 16-19).

Spivak affirms that the efforts of the SSG in developing a critique of elite historiography included both colonialist and nationalist historical writings. She discerns that the project involves "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak, 1996: 214), and it is also a retrieval of subaltern consciousness.¹² She elaborates that this subaltern consciousness presupposes that a subaltern is an autonomous subject with an inherent essence.

Taking a poststructuralist perspective, Spivak suggests that “all possibility of expression, spoken or written, shares a common distancing from a self so that meaning can arise—not only meaning for others but also the meaning of the self to the self”, and that “the ‘self’ is itself always production rather than ground” (Spivak, 1996: 222). In that sense, she argues that a “subaltern” is a “subject-effect”, meaning that a “subaltern’s” subject position is determined by heterogeneous elements like history, economics, politics, ideology, sexuality and language, or it is otherwise dependent on myriad circumstances, for it is also part of an immense network or a social text (Spivak, 1996: 213). For Spivak, “the heterogeneity that they [SSG] present can be discovered only when the subaltern is seen in the subject-position” (Spivak, 1988: xii). Therefore, “subaltern” does not refer to a class with an inherent essence, but to an embodiment of diverse and dynamic forces or value systems. “Subaltern” as “subject-effect” is a reminder of the need to avoid the danger of essentializing or romanticizing an underclass.

Spivak further argues that “subaltern” acts as an absolute limit of knowing: “the historian must persist in his efforts in this awareness that the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic” (Spivak, 1996: 217). In other words, it is a critique of the authority of the investigating historian who objectifies the subaltern with a triple emphasis on “sovereignty, consistency and

logic". In a similar vein, feminist historians or anthropologists like Veena Das and Kamala Visweswaran are also alert to the danger of essentializing "the subaltern". In her article "Subaltern as Perspective", in *Subaltern Studies VI*, Veena Das remarks that "subaltern" cannot be an autonomous subject: "subalterns are not in my opinion morphological categories, but represent a perspective in the sense in which Nietzsche uses this word. The development of this perspective, I hope, will also mean a new relationship with the chroniclers of the cultures under study" (Das, 1999: 310-324).¹³ On the other hand, in her paper "Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and Its Historiography", in *Subaltern Studies IX*, Kamala Visweswaran further takes us to feel the subject-effect in the moments of "tension and oscillation" in which "subaltern" is situated:

If we agree that the point of retrieval marks the subaltern's silencing in history, and that it is at the point of erasure where the emergence of the subaltern is possible, then this analysis transits the lines of enfranchisement and disenfranchisement, oscillating between nationalist agency and subaltern agency. It is in this tension, this moment of oscillation, I would argue, that we recognize the effect where the gendered 'subaltern' is felt. Women as subaltern; subaltern women (Visweswaran, 1999: 124-125).

Following these feminists' insightful criticisms, I will understand subaltern theory as one that takes both class and gender as useful analytical categories, and use

it to build my argument that subaltern specters with rural women's faces are haunting the world, particularly taking Chinese rural women as my example. Simultaneously, I will remind myself that the term "subaltern" can mean "subordinated class" on the one hand, but "a subject-effect", "a limit of logic", "a form of subjugated knowledge", "a perspective", "tension", "an irreducible difference", or "a position without identity" on the other hand.

Reading "New Subaltern" in China

Gail Hershatter, a U.S.-based feminist historian, helps us to articulate the significance of subaltern theory in the Chinese context. She has studied the history of semi-colonial China, particularly prostitution in twentieth-century Shanghai. In her remarkable work *Dangerous Pleasure: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, she uses substantial sources including guidebooks to the pleasure quarters, anecdotes, poetry, fictions, gossip columns in the tabloid press, municipal regulations, police interrogations, scholarly articles, reform proposals, medical surveys and relief agencies' reports. Hershatter claims that she borrows the term "subaltern" from SSG in order subtly to challenge the official historical accounts of the oppressed:

The dominant historiography of China (indeed, the only historiography generated within China between 1949 and the early 1980s) has taken as its major task the articulation and glorious defense of subaltern interests. [...] I use ‘subaltern,’ rather than the term ‘oppressed classes’ more common in recent Chinese historiography, because its inclusion of gender and other factors more accurately reflects the groups actually targeted for the ‘voicing’ of their stories by officially sponsored history movements in China (Hershatter, 1999: 22).

Hershatter further explains “the complexity of remembering under the aegis of the state is only one aspect of the search for the elusive subaltern voice of prostitutes” (Hershatter, 1999: 24). By taking the “nested subaltern” as her object, namely the Chinese intellectuals who on the one hand have enjoyed more privileges than peasants and workers, but at the same time have been subordinated to foreigners of the imperialist countries as in semi-colonial Shanghai, Hershatter elaborates the definition of “subaltern” as “not a fixed and unitary category”, and “for most groups in China, it is important to keep in mind the possibility of multiple, relational degrees of subalternity ... [The example of the nested subaltern in semi-colonial Shanghai] frees us from the monolithic category of ‘the subaltern’” (Hershatter, 1993: 111; 1999: 29).

Greatly influenced by poststructuralist theory, Hershatter draws our attention to the shifting relations between the contents of historical records, the subject-positions of historians and readers, and the attitude of reading:

Rather, they [prostitutes] entered into the historical record when someone wanted to appreciate, castigate, count, regulate, cure, pathologize, warn about, rescue, eliminate, or deploy them as a symbol in a larger social panorama. [...] In short, they [the sources that document prostitutes' existence] tell us much more about the classificatory strategies of the authors than the experiences of prostitutes" (Hershatter, 1999: 1).

Thus, prostitutes were used as metaphors of pleasures, dangers or social interventions in historical records, and may disclose how the authors both constructed and were related to the subordinated "other". Hershatter repeatedly points out the difficulties involved in reading historical accounts, and she is sensitive to the limits produced by the "many silences and irreducible ambiguities" in historical records:

It is important that we recognize instances of women's agency, resist the desire to magnify or romanticize them, and admit that, finally, our readings of them are limited by the many silences and irreducible ambiguities in the historical record (Hershatter, 1999: 28).

Through reading Spivak's two articles, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and "Deconstructing Historiography", Hershatter concludes that "Spivak is particularly pessimistic about the possibilities of 'hearing' female subalterns". Hershatter is resistant to this:

I want to resist her negative answer to the question “Can the subaltern speak?” In some measure subalterns both literally speak (that is, make utterances that enter the historical record as texts recorded by others) and represent themselves (that is, craft their explanation of their own experiences and activities in particular ways, in order to secure what advantages they can)” (Hershatter, 1999: 25).

Hershatter takes Spivak’s concluding remark “the subaltern cannot speak” as a literally declarative statement. Hershatter thinks that an intellectual should make a tremendous effort to retrieve subaltern voices, as she herself is tracking Shanghai prostitutes’ traces in twentieth century China:

The subject-positions occupied by subalterns in historical records were not simply assigned by the elites who kept these records, but were shaped to some degree by the interventions of subalterns themselves. [...] It is a relationship that we are tracking, one in which we can indeed hope to see “the constitution of the itinerary of the trace of a sexed subject” (Hershatter, 1993: 125; 1999: 26).

At the same time, Hershatter tries to rewrite Spivak’s argument that “the subaltern cannot speak”, as “the subaltern cannot represent herself in discourse”, and then replaces it with “many subalterns making cacophonic noise, some hogging the mike, many speaking intermittently and not exactly as they please, and all aware to some degree of the political uses of their own representation in that historical moment” (Hershatter, 1999: 26). Even though Hershatter provides us with stacks of

evidence from various historical records about prostitutes, in an attempt to search for subversive voices, and recuperating subaltern experiences, Hershatter undoubtedly also claims in her opening sentence that this is an “imaginative” work: “this book is both less and more than an imaginative reconstruction of the lives of Shanghai prostitutes from the late nineteenth century to the present” (Hershatter, 1999: 3). Here, the line between object and subject of historical interrogation has been blurred. In the end, once again, Hershatter concludes that it is a beginning of “reading and listening”: “by reading and listening in multiple registers, perhaps we can begin to understand the voices and actions of prostitutes in relation to those who were more visible and audible” (Hershatter, 1999: 32-33).

Hershatter urges us to remember the importance of “an act of reading/listening” in the terrain of historiography, taking historians out of their own localized preoccupations. This is also what Guha alerts us to when discussing the ambiguity of close reading in his note on *Subaltern Studies I*: “an ambiguity which it is up to the historian to sort out on the basis of a close and judicious reading of his evidence” (Guha, 1999b: 8). To a certain extent, I think Hershatter and Spivak share a similar idea of reading/listening as politics, but Spivak complicates how an intellectual relates to “the subaltern” at different levels.

To Spivak, the subaltern acts as “the absolute limit of logic” in the sense of referring to a space of irreducible difference in logical narration and in a knowing system; or as “misfits in the text” signaling “moments of transgression” (Spivak, 1996: 221). Spivak highlights that the historian should acknowledge that the arena of the subaltern’s persistent emergence into hegemony remains *heterogeneous* to his disciplinary training and knowing system. To acknowledge the “subaltern as the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space” (Spivak, 1999: 310) means to realize that our knowing remains discontinuous with subaltern social practices (Spivak, 1996: 218).

In her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Spivak provides us with two stories of subaltern women. One is the story of the Rani of Sirmur, a king’s wife in the hills who declared her intention to be a *sati*, or self-immolating widow, but it turned out that her death was “normal”, while the second is about Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, a young middle class girl who failed to commit a political assassination during the Indian Independence Struggle and chose to commit suicide during her menstruation (which I will discuss in more detail shortly). Spivak claims that the excavation of the historical individual is a responsibility toward the trace of the other, and this is to acknowledge that any “trace” is written within the double bind “that acknowledgment is as much a recovery as it is a loss of the wholly other” (Spivak, 1999: 198). This means it is impossible to grasp the other, the inaccessible. The impossibility does not refer to a

lack of archives with authentic voices, but rather, to an acknowledgment that the other discloses the limits of the knowing subject. In that sense, Spivak admits: “my account at best marks rupture, fadeout, colonial discontinuity” (Spivak, 1999: 241). She concludes that she mimes responsibility to the other, but she cannot catch the subaltern: “again, a reaching and an un-grasping” (Spivak, 1999: 242). Spivak names the ethical effort of “a reaching and un-grasping” of the subaltern as a one-on-one “secret encounter” in normality. As she further asserts, a history should be aware of the importance of the neglected details of the everyday, seeking “a history that can attend to the details of the putting together of a continuous-seeming self for everyday life” (Spivak, 1999: 238).

In the new version of “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, published in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Spivak represents Bhuvanewari Bhaduri’s story as one of a metropolitan middle-class girl, aged sixteen or seventeen, who committed suicide by hanging herself in 1926. The reason was the failure of an assassination mission; she was involved in the struggle for Indian Independence, and she chose to die during her menstruation. Spivak writes:

Bhubaneswari had known that her death would be diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion. She had therefore waited for the onset of menstruation. While waiting, Bhubaneswari, the *brahmacarini* who was no doubt looking forward to good wifehood, perhaps rewrote the social text of *sati-suicide* in an interventionist way. [...] The displacing gesture—waiting for menstruation—is at first a reversal of the interdict against a menstruating widow’s right to immolate herself; the unclean

widow must wait, publicly, until the cleaning bath of the fourth day, when she is no longer menstruating, in order to claim her dubious privilege. In this reading, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's suicide is an unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati-suicide* as much as the hegemonic account of the blazing, fighting, familiar Durga (Spivak, 1999: 307).

There were two responses to Bhaduri's death among her relatives and friends. One was of suspecting an illicit pregnancy or illegitimate passion, and two, dismissing it as being of no consequence and not worth worrying/thinking about. These responses disclose the idea that a woman is concerned with nothing other than sex, love and marriage. Bhaduri's women relatives are indifferent towards her death even though they are her close family members. Moreover, those women could not recognize Bhaduri's agency of challenging the practice of *sati*, in which a woman was not allowed to commit suicide in her menstrual period. Here, the category "women", once a banner of solidarity, is also in question. The women's indifference makes Spivak draw an anguished conclusion that a gendered subaltern cannot speak.

In an interview, Spivak explains her controversial remark:

So, "the subaltern cannot speak," means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act. That's what it had meant, and anguish marked the spot" (Spivak, 1996: 292).

The subaltern speaks with her body but she is not heard at all. Her suicide is not recognized as “a speech”, or “a complaint”. Spivak works to hear what Bhaduri speaks, and then leads us to understand her “speech and silence”. Bhaduri intervenes in history with her dead body. If “the subaltern cannot represent herself in discourse”, it is because we have not heard or recognized her yet. “The subaltern cannot speak” is not only an anguish but a warning that requires us to pay heed to a single woman’s “speech and silence”. As Spivak explains in the new version of “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: “she [Bhaduri] ‘spoke’, but women did not, do not, ‘hear’ her” (Spivak, 1999: 247), and “all speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception. That is what speaking is” (Spivak, 1999: 309). If the women “hear” Bhaduri, they will not be indifferent or apathetic towards her death, and they will recognize her effort of altering the practice of *sati*, in which a woman was not allowed to kill herself during her menstruation period.

Spivak brings up the question of representation as an intellectual-subaltern relation, or as the self-other relation, at different levels. First, Spivak emphasizes that the intellectual should not refuse to represent (speak for) the subaltern because there is generally a lack of institutional support for the subaltern. Spivak argues that the intellectual should not take identity as origins, so as to privilege the oppressed

subject by saying that ‘let the subaltern speak for herself’. The intellectual speaks for the subaltern in order to change the existing social conditions which maintain her subalternity. The infrastructural support refers to not only a political and a legal system, but also to daily encounters at the ground level. Yet, the intellectual should be aware that when she represents the subaltern, she speaks for the subaltern in the portrait sense. This means the intellectual does not recover a pure and authentic voice, but rather depicts her relation to the subaltern.

Second, Spivak indicates that representation of the subaltern involves the recognition of subaltern knowledge, or, in Foucault’s phrase, “subjugated knowledge”, referring to “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated; native knowledge, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault, 1980: 82). Yet, the issue is not only to question why and how such knowledge is subjugated, but also to *recognize* it. Spivak criticizes the tendency to identify the academic institution too quickly with a “speaking” of the subaltern:

Yet the moot decipherment by another in an academic institution (willy-nilly a knowledge-production factory) many years later must not be too quickly identified with the “speaking” of the subaltern. It is not a mere tautology to say that the colonial or postcolonial subaltern is defined as the being on the other side of difference, or an epistemic fracture, even from other groupings among the colonized. What is at stake when we insist that the subaltern speaks? (Spivak, 1999: 309).

To Spivak, both speaking and listening compose a complete act. And, listening to the subaltern implies not only the questioning of knowledge, which suppresses differences, but also recognizing and learning heterogeneous knowledge systems and logics. In other words, the intellectual should listen carefully to subaltern silences and speeches, implying that the intellectual has to recognize, learn and protect subaltern knowledge and practices; as Spivak remarks, the intellectual has “to learn to learn from below”.

Third, Spivak remarks that the subaltern is to be understood as the absolute limit of logic, or the heterogeneity of space. An intellectual makes a great effort to trace the subaltern, but she still cannot know and control the subaltern. In that sense, the subaltern is radical alterity, the undecidable. It is impossible to grasp the subaltern, the wholly other. Spivak names the effort of reaching out and touching the other as “secret encounter”:

We all know that when we engage profoundly with one person, the responses come from both sides: this is responsibility and accountability. We also know that in such engagements we want to reveal and reveal, conceal nothing. Yet on both sides there is always a sense that something has not got across. This we call the ‘secret’, not something that one wants to conceal, but something one wants to reveal. In this sense the effort of ‘ethical singularity’ may be called a ‘secret encounter’ [...] This encounter can only happen when the respondents inhabit something like normality (Spivak, 1995b: xxv).

Spivak defines “secret encounter” as the effort of establishing “ethical singularity” with the subaltern, which means to engage profoundly with one person in the daily living. It is a question of quality of contact. She further explains that if “you really want to touch the other person ... [y]ou try and try, but it remains unavailable. That’s a secret encounter. It makes us realize that just passing good laws and fighting on the political front is never enough”; and then “to remember that, and to know that, and to practice that, it’s an ethical practice. It is to know the limit of the law, the limit of politics, the limit of every rational public behavior, because the public has the other secret dimension.”¹⁴

Based on Hershatte’s politics of reading and Spivak’s subaltern theory, I will explore the significance of reading the new subaltern in today’s China. Like Hershatte, taking subaltern theory as a set of theoretical tools, Dai Jinhua, a feminist critic from mainland China, uses analytical categories of class and gender in problematizing contemporary Chinese society. In her article on “Class and Gender”, Dai argues that China has undergone a drastic process of class differentiation with the restructuring of social institutions and the intervention of globalization. Women have been sacrificed in this process. But the rewriting of women’s social status and identity has become a way of displacing social crises and contradictions. Dai criticizes the popular writing strategy of women as “me-my self-my monster-my

body” and being exclusively confined to urban middle class women. She points out that male intellectuals, on the other hand, always tend to neglect the issue of gender especially when they become preoccupied by the universal theme of class. Dai suggests that the existing discourses on class and gender have some limitations:

When we draw on Marxist theoretical resources and turn our eyes to the exploitation of the lower classes and the sufferings of the lower classes who are becoming increasingly invisible; when we, in the name of class, engage ourselves in practice to depict anew the process of social integration, we might be turning away from the factor of gender as we look at the social processes that make selections about who will be making sacrifices. We might also be neglecting the fact that the reconstitution of the gender order has an ideological function in legitimizing the reality of class. On the other hand, when, we, in the name of gender, attempt to unveil the dramatic regression, in the process of so-called progress, in terms of survival and the reality of culture as it has been experienced by women as a social group, we might have allowed the highly contrasting realities of different classes to remain hidden (Dai, 2003: 141-142).

Dai argues that mainstream media and mass culture have widely adopted a rhetoric form of giving social problems “a woman’s face”, that of the laid-off female worker from state enterprises. She calls for “an unveiling and critique of the cultural construction of new mainstream ideologies in their use of women, as vehicled by the mass media”. Moreover, a re-examination of historical legacies and debts of Mao’s Era, or Chinese Socialism, and of the dilemma facing feminism in its critical practice in China’s context is desperately needed.

In parallel to Hershalter's borrowing of the concept of "subaltern" from SSG to make a difference from official Chinese historiography in the name of the oppressed, I would like to supplement Dai's argument that class differentiation and the reconstitution of gender order are both the most prominent and cruel reality of the Chinese society in the 1990s, by using Spivak's more recent idea of the "New Subaltern", which goes from the Marxist idea of "agent of production", that is, the working class or the proletariat of industrial society, to the rural/indigenous people. This requires intellectuals to "revisit the subaltern in the new Empire" (Didur and Heffernan, 2003: 1-15).

Basing her argument on Gramsci and Guha's appropriation of the word "subaltern", Spivak has recently redefined the concept of subaltern. "The New Subaltern" is no longer the proletariat or colonial subjects in historical accounts, but the rural/indigenous people in the Third World countries. The subaltern class has become the focus of all kinds of mobility and mobilizations in the age of globalization, but they in fact have no access to the lines of upward mobility. Spivak locates the new subaltern within the global order:

Today the 'subaltern' must be rethought. S/he is no longer cut off from lines of access to the center. The center, as represented by the Bretton Woods agencies and the World Trade Organization, is altogether interested in the rural and indigenous subaltern as source of trade-related intellectual property or TRIPs (Spivak, 2000: 326).

Furthermore, apart from tracing how the Rani surfaced in the official historical record, mainly written by colonizers or indigenous elite, Spivak draws our attention to a group of rural subaltern women in today's India:

On the very first try, in search of the palace, I had walked about in the hills where buses did not go. Shy hardy women gathered leaves and vegetation from the hillside to feed their goats. [...] They were the rural subaltern, the real constituency of feminism, accepting their lot as the norm, quite different from the urban female sub-proletarian in crisis and resistance. If I wanted to touch their everyday without the epistemic transcoding of anthropological field work, the effort would be a much greater undoing, indeed, of life's goals, than the effort to catch the Rani in vain, in history. These are the familiar limits of knowing; why do we resist it when deconstruction points at them?" (Spivak, 1999: 242).

The Figure of the Rural Woman

Rural-urban migration is my starting point of discursive engagement in the debate on the subaltern. Using a method of textual analysis based on close reading and borrowing from Spivak's subaltern theory, my study will examine representations of rural migrant women in written materials such as academic research, autobiography, fiction, literary reports, and popular magazines, as well as visual images in feature films, documentaries, TV series, music videos, and photography. I will also articulate my experiences and reflections of working with

the women in a remote village of Jiangxi Province in south China, in support of my argument.

Working on Marx's sense of representation ("they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented"; Marx, 1998b: 123-124), Spivak argues that the term "representation" contains two senses of proxy (in political economy), and portrait (in arts and literature). In an interview with Sarah Harasym, Spivak elaborates:

Treading in your shoes, wearing your shoes, that's *Vertretung*. Representation in that sense: political representation. *Darstellung*—Dar, there, same cognate. *Stellen*, is to place, so 'placing there.' *Representing*: proxy and portrait, as I said, these are two ways of representing (Spivak, 1990: 108).

Spivak further claims "in the act of representing politically, you actually represent yourself and your constituency in the portrait sense, as well" (Spivak, 1990: 108). This means that when you are representing the other, you are at the same time speaking for and drawing a picture of the other. This discloses your position, or your *relation* to the other, so you cannot say you are absent.

As a feminist intellectual, Spivak represents (speaks for and portrays) the new subaltern as disenfranchised women, that is, "unorganized or permanently casual female labor" and "the poorest women of the South" in contemporary globalization: "to confront this group is not only to represent (*vertreten*) them globally in the

absence of infrastructural support, but also to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves” (Spivak, 1999: 276). To Spivak, the disenfranchised women of Third World countries should be put on the world political agenda, in order to make them visible and audible, which requires intellectuals to provide them “infrastructural support” both in the judicial system and everyday life at the ground level. On the other hand, Spivak asks us to be alert to the danger of essentialism, and she particularly challenges the implicit preference of intellectuals to choose “the natural subject of oppression”. She argues that although no representation, *Vertretung*, can take place without essentialism, the “essence” that is represented is a portrait, *Darstellung* (Spivak, 1990: 109). In that sense, “to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves” means that intellectuals should be alert to how they posit themselves, in other words, a practice of representation is a practice of learning to represent the relation between the self and the other, and neither of them are self-evident, inherent or transparent.

I argue that the figure of the rural woman is haunting dominant regimes of representations of modernization in contemporary China. In the prevailing mentality of development, a mega-city is portrayed as the ultimate destination; meanwhile, the rural is depicted as the past and the residual. There is a system of negative equivalences to the rural, which is always positioned as the unspoken, invisible or

stereotyped ‘other’ of overwhelming cosmopolitan values. The journey of country-to-city has become a universal and standardized formula of linear development, which embraces unquestioned modernization, urbanization and industrialization. A kind of megalomania is embedded in extensions of factories, tremendous exploitation of natural resources, luxurious metropolitan lifestyles and mass worship of the jungle rule. To put it simply, the city is decorated as the spectacle but the rural is despised as the obstacle.

Invoking “the rural” as a symbol of resistance to the predominant discourse of modernization does not mean performing a nostalgic return to the past, that is, the statist industrialization of Mao’s period and the patriarchal tradition; or an orthodox ruralism that everyone should go back to ancient society and do the same farming; or a romanticization of the primitive that “the city is all bad and the rural is all good’. How I use the term “the rural” is indebted to Stuart Hall’s argument about the burden of representation and his concept of “black”.

In his article “New Ethnicities”, which is based on a speech delivered to the conference on *Black Film, British Cinema* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1988, Hall argues that there is a shift from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation as “the *burden* of representation” (my emphasis). Hall’s term “black” here refers to a way of referencing the common

experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and an organizing category of a new politics of resistance, amongst groups and communities with different histories, traditions and ethnicities (Hall, 1993: 252). Hall elaborates that the notion of “black” cannot be grounded on any natural skin-color:

The recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category ‘black’; that is, the recognition that ‘black’ is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature (Hall, 1993: 253).

Hall proposes that politics can “make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities”, which “entails the movement in black politics, from what Gramsci called the ‘war of manoeuvre’ to the ‘war of position’ – the struggle around positionalities” (Hall, 1993: 254). This struggle around the position of representation is closer to Derrida’s notion of difference “which is positional, conditional and conjunctural”, which means to avoid a politics which is defined exclusively in terms of an infinite of the signifier (Hall, 1993: 257). To Hall, the notion of “black” is used situationally and contingently to set against the hegemonic conception of ‘Englishness’ sponsored by Thatcherism:

We are beginning to think about how to represent a non-coercive and a more diverse conception of ethnicity, to set against the embattled, hegemonic conception of ‘Englishness’ which, under Thatcherism, stabilizes so much of the dominant political and cultural discourses, and which, because it is hegemonic, does not represent itself as an ethnicity at all (Hall, 1993: 257).

Hall, nonetheless, cautions that “the black experience” is not a simple return to the ancient African past but a creative enunciation of the present:

There can, therefore, be no simple ‘return’ or ‘recovery’ of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and the identities of the present (Hall, 1993: 258).

Furthermore, Hall points out that a politics of representations is a discursive formation subject to “its specific conditions, limits and modalities”, and it is also a process, or a contested site, of constructing meaning. The regimes of representations can be transformed in the formation of social and political life:

[...] how things are represented and the ‘machineries’ and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation—subjectivity, identity, politics—a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life (Hall, 1993: 253-254).

Drawing on Hall's theory of representation, I argue that in China today, "the rural", like the 'black' in Thatcher's Britain, is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, and one which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed categories or the literal (Hall, 1993: 253). For my own purpose, "the rural" is neither a geographical concept of landscape, nor an administrative unit of village. Rather, it is a temporal name set against the embattled and hegemonic conception of the "cosmopolitan-ness" of modernization in present-day China. Further, it is a haunting "specter" which resists the hierarchical relation between the city and the countryside, the hegemonic ideology of exploiting the nature for profit making, and the transcendental claims of competition and individualism.

"The rural" is a frame for the common experiences of marginalization, and of the resistances of various groups such as indigenous minorities, women, the elderly, children, laid-off workers or the handicapped. Yet, I specifically invoke the figure of the rural *woman* because the figure of a woman significantly reminds us to disrupt the patriarchal tradition, which is an accomplice of the destructive modernization. Therefore, the figure of the rural woman connotes that it is not a matter of simple return or recovery of the patriarchal traditional village or people's communes under Mao's policy of industrialization, but rather a *name* altering the hierarchical relations between city and country, men and women, or Han and other minorities.

Gendering the rural vision means not only making a difference from the present capitalist and patriarchal values and practices, but also taking the excluded majority of the people and their ecology into serious consideration. This vision may help us to imagine a communal society in which we can recognize the practice of care-of-the self as care-of-the others: living with others and with nature.

I will suggest that in the chosen significant works of urban intellectuals, they make the rural women more visible and even provide a positive portrayal of them out of a sense of sympathy, justice and benevolence. These urban intellectuals try to bridge the gap between the urban and the rural by fighting for the subaltern's access to circuits of social upward mobility, or to "citizenship". I will argue, that *how* they depict the figure of a rural woman is dependent on their attitudes towards the dominant discourse of development in China. Since there is no representation that will take place without essentialism, I agree with them that we should put the subaltern class on the political agenda while making "a strategic use of positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak, 1996: 214).

However, this is just a starting point. As I mentioned before, feminist critics shed new light on the discussion in subaltern studies by redefining the subaltern as simultaneously "a subordinated class", and "a subject-effect", as well as "a limit of logic", "a form of subjugated knowledge", "a perspective", "tension", or "an

irreducible difference”. In other words, this thesis is an act of reading the figure of the subaltern from “a subject position without identity”, which means that we should look at how value systems are exercised on and in a subject. In that sense, it is also an act of “brushing history against the grain”, as Walter Benjamin argues: “a historical materialist regards it as his task to brush history against the grain” (Benjamin, 1992: 248). Therefore, I will first examine how urban intellectuals represent rural women migrants, and then I will put their presuppositions into question. This reading method is indebted to Derrida’s extraordinary emphasis on the “the minute particulars”:

Derrida has reminded us that a certain view of the world, of consciousness, and of language has been accepted as the correct one, and, if the minute particulars of that view are examined, a rather different picture emerges. That examination involves an enquiry into the ‘operation’ of our most familiar gestures (Spivak, 1998: xiii).

Outline of the Chapters

In Chapter Two, “Rural Specters in Academic Discourses: Literature Review”, I will examine how social scientists represent rural-urban migration in terms of different agendas. For example, in her book *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market*, Dorothy J. Solinger depicts

the rural migrants as the marginal groups in the cities and then supports them to get their rights of citizenship. In his book *In Search for Survival: a Sociological Study of Rural-Urban Migration*, Huang Ping describes the plight of peasants and emphasizes the issues of ecology derived from modernization. Pun Ngai's anthropological studies construct the rural women as the new working class. I will argue that most of the social scientists portray the "real" rural women from the foundation of citizenship, urbanity and industrialization.

In Chapter Three, "Questioning the Self", I will discuss how particular women peasant workers are represented as a model of the imperative to "develop the self", as a marker of social upward mobility, in the dominant discourse of development, but I also argue that the self is haunted by the other, as exemplified by rural kinship, a strike, the women "left-over" in the job market, or the painful memory of exploitation. The models include Zhao Xiaoyun and Anzi. Zhao Xiaoyun is the fictional protagonist of the TV series *Girls from Outside* (1992), directed by Cheng Hao and Xie Lihong. Anzi, the most significant writer of migrant working class literature, was named one of the top ten of the most outstanding youth of Shenzhen in 1991. Her books such as *Stopovers in Youth*, *Looking for Dreams in the City* will be closely examined.

In Chapter Four, “More on Her Pain”, I will concentrate on the representations of Xiaoying, a seriously injured survivor of the Zhili Toys Factory Fire of 1993 in Shenzhen. Visual materials like a music video by the Hong Kong band Noise Cooperative, TV documentaries by Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) and Phoenix TV, and written literary reports by academic researchers, will be analyzed. Xiaoying’s crippled body and traumatic experiences become “proofs of exploitation” in sociological research, social movements and campaigns for compensation. She is constructed as both “a victim/witness of violence” and “an agent of proletarian struggle”. I will also argue that activists, researchers, and media workers have neither acknowledged women’s internalized gendering together with patriarchal/capitalist exploitation, nor taken the rural society into consideration when fighting for the proletarian movement.

In Chapter Five, “The Residual from Below”, borrowing from Raymond William’s idea of “the residual”, I will explore how two male urban intellectuals portray two rural women who negotiate with their lives in the rural communities. I will also argue that these intellectuals depict their lives in terms of residual experiences and practices. Zhou Xiaowen’s film *Ermo* (1994) and the photos of Xiao Liu in Zhao Tielin’s book, *Alternative Life: The Real World in the Eyes of a Photographer* (2000), will be examined. Ermo, a fictional twisted-noodle maker,

brings back the biggest TV set to her village but she ultimately alienates herself from the TV, family honor and community recognition. Xiao Liu, a sex worker in Hainan Province, supports her family but she cannot disclose her identity and even marks a distance from her mother wearing Liberation Shoes. These women are represented as caught in patriarchal tradition and capitalist globalization.

In Chapter Six, “What Makes a Collectivity?”, I will discuss the formative elements of collectivity by narrating two rural communities: Xingrenzhuang Village, Hebei Province, North China, which maintains some “residual” socialist practices; and the collective work of the Luxia-Wanli Women’s Mutual Aid Credit Union in a mountain village, Jiangxi Province, South China. I will argue what makes a collectivity is an ethical question.

In Chapter Seven, my conclusion, I will summarize the significance of gendering the rural vision in reading representations of rural women in the Chinese context, and then explore the idea of thinking of the “non-contemporaneous” with itself, that is, thinking of the other.

Hopefully, by reading different kinds of representations of rural migrant women in both written and visual texts, I will make some contribution to a critique of dominant developmental discourse in China, which privileges urban-centered and export-oriented development while entrenching the marginalization of the rural

society politically, economically, socially and culturally. The figures of the rural women are the incongruities and incomprehensibilities of the texts. They are like the specters haunting the current coercive desire that privileges “advanced” metropolitan values and marginalizes the “backward” rural. This research not only negotiates but also re-adjusts this superior urbanist notion by invoking the irreducible spectral figures of “the rural women”.

¹ *Show Your Colors: Chinese Attitude for the Twenty-first Century* was shown from 16-18 February 2001 in Kwai Tsing Theatre Auditorium, New Territories, Hong Kong. I attended the show on 16 February.

² For critiques of development, see Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America* which gives us a detailed account of the five centuries of the pillage of Latin America. Galeano points out that the privileges of developed countries were based on the exploitation of the underdeveloped countries (Galeano, 1997). Dependency Theory, which emerged after the Cold War, formulates the term of "the globe" as premise of analysis. For example, Samir Amin's *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* criticizes "the tribute-paying mode", that the peripheral societies give birth to capitalism and he calls for de-linking from capitalist system of market and trade (Amin, 1976). Another example is Andre Gunder Frank's *Dependent Accumulation and Underdevelopment*, which examines how the force of capital accumulation has differentiated "developed" and "underdeveloped" regions within the world economic system (Frank, 1978). Both Galeano's analysis and dependency theory are Marxist in their approach towards primitive accumulation. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx explains how America, East Indies and Africa are exploited for the First World's primitive accumulation of capital (Marx, 1990: 915). This line of analysis in the Marxist tradition is further developed in Lenin's *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism: a Popular Outline*, which stresses the global unequal relations at the early twentieth century and foresees some essential characteristics of the epoch of imperialism, such as the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation of "finance capital", the formation of international capitalist monopolies which divide the world among themselves (Lenin, 1944).

³ <http://web.peopledaily.com.cn/english/dengxp/vol13/text/d1200.html> Originally printed in "Excerpts from Talks Given in Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Shanghai", January 18 – February 21, 1992, in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Volume 3, 2001. Beijing: People's Publisher. 370-383.

⁴ For example, in 1978, Deng Xiaoping took power and started to adopt a reform and open-door policy. In a discussion with Masayoshi Ohira, Prime Minister of Japan, Deng expressed the anxiety of being "backward", and declared the direction of China's future: the goal of "four modernizations", or comparative prosperity, that is, "a per capita GNP of US \$1,000". For the details, see <http://web.peopledaily.com.cn/english/dengxp/vol12/text/b1200.html>. Originally printed in "China's Goal is to Achieve Comparative Prosperity by the End of the Century" (Excerpt from a discussion with Masayoshi Ohira, Prime Minister of Japan), December 6, 1979. *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Volume 2, 2001. Beijing: People's Publisher. 237-238. Furthermore, in 1987, Deng reiterated the future goal in talks with Premier Lubomir Strougal of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic: "to quadruple our GNP and achieve comparative prosperity, with an annual per capita GNP of US\$800 to \$1000. [...] and try to quadruple it again, so as to reach a per capita GNP of \$4000 in another 50 years". See: <http://web.peopledaily.com.cn/english/dengxp/vol12/text/c1720.html>. Originally

printed in “To Uphold Socialism We Must Eliminate Poverty” (Excerpt from a talk with Premier Lubomir Strougal of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic), April 26, 1987. *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Volume 3, 2001. Beijing: People’s Publisher. 223-225.

⁵ In 2003, in the Tenth National People’s Congress, the State Asset Management Commission and the China Banking Regulatory Commission were set up to implement the policy of “catching up with the world”. The former deals with questions of closing-down or restructuring of state enterprises and sell-offs of state-owned assets. The latter is to build a modern financial supervisory framework of banking, insurance and securities, for the purpose of meeting capitalization requirements and credit measures. By the end of 2006, foreign banks will be given full access as part of China’s World Trade Organization commitments.

⁶ *South China Morning Post*, 9 November 2002.

⁷ *People’s Daily Online*, 12 December 2003.
http://english.people.com.cn/200312/12/eng20031212_130267.shtml.

⁸ According to Wen Tiejun, an expert on China’s rural problems, “rural problems cannot be simply treated as agricultural issue, but are interrelated with rural people (income/migration), society (social capital development and multiple socioeconomic and political issues), and production (agricultural vertical integration/township and village enterprises development)” (Wen Tiejun, 2001: 295).

⁹ For example, Zhongdong Ma argues that rural-urban migration is an upward migration; young migrants earn more in the fast growing coastal provinces, contributing remittances to rural prosperity: “individuals (or families) have replaced the government as the main decision-maker of their migration” (Ma, 1993). Zhang Kangqing argues that the exodus of the manual and wage-learning laborers should have “occupational training”, namely, industrial skills to improve occupational quality and to meet the demands of economic development in major coastal cities. His research is based on a large-scale survey of urban migration in 1986, with the support of State Statistical Bureau, National Population Census Office, and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (Zhang Kangqing, 1994).

¹⁰ For example, Wang Shan speculates that if the Chinese government loses control over the flow of migrant laborers, they would lead the country to chaos. The author asserts that “all Chinese dynasties without exception were destroyed by migrants—those who lost or abandoned farmland” (Wang Shan, 1996).

¹¹ Afterwards, there is a remarkable change in SSG’s works, with a number of papers addressing the problem of women. For example, Ranajit Guha, “Chandra’s Death” in *Subaltern Studies V*; Julie Stephens, “A Critique of the Category ‘Non-Western Woman’ in Feminist Writings on India”, and Veena Das, “Subaltern as Perspective” in *Subaltern Studies VI*; Ranajit Guha, “The Small Voice of History”, and Kamala Visweswaran, “Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and Its Historiography”, Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender”, in *Subaltern Studies IX*.

¹² On the question of consciousness, Derrida's interpretation of Heidegger may help us question the presuppositions of metaphysics and ontology:

If Heidegger uses the expressions *Dasein* and analysis of *Dasein*, it is because he does not yet allow himself any philosophical knowledge concerning what man is as *animal rationale*, or concerning the ego, consciousness, the soul, the subject, the person, and so forth, which are all presuppositions of metaphysics or of ontical knowledge, such as anthropo-thanatology or biology (Derrida, 1993: 29).

¹³ Nietzsche challenges the prevalent concept of a "pure, will-less, painless, timeless, subject of knowledge", and reminds his contemporaries to be wary of the concepts of "pure reason", "absolute spirituality", "knowledge as such", "objectivity" and "contemplation without interest". He then calls for "more eyes", and "difference in perspectives and affective interpretations for knowledge" (Nietzsche, 2002: 92). In his introduction, "Nietzsche's Overcoming of Morality", Ansell-Pearson explains Nietzsche's concept of genealogy:

The history of a thing can 'to this extent be a continuous chain of signs, continually revealing new interpretations and adaptations'. By uncovering a will to power behind the positing of moral values, and by tracing the origin and descent of values in such terms, it is the aim of a genealogy of morality to undermine the universalist and humanist pretensions of moral values and judgments (Ansell-Pearson, 2002: xii).

Furthermore, he elaborates:

What a 'genealogy' shows is that moral values are subject to change, appropriation, and manipulation. The writing of history, according to Nietzsche, ought to be practiced in a way which shows that everything in human life is the product of contingent circumstances and, as such, is subject to perpetual change and contestation (Ansell-Pearson, 2002: xxi).

¹⁴ This is quoted from an interview which I conducted with Professor Gayatri Spivak in Hong Kong on 15 June 2002.

Chapter Two

Rural Specters in Academic Discourses:

Literature Review

In his influential article “Culture is Ordinary” (1958), Raymond Williams argues, “there are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses” (Williams, 2001: 18). That means the ways of seeing people as masses depend on your position and perspective. The image of the “masses” discloses how you relate to them. In Williams’ eyes, masses are not “ignorant” and culture is not “dying”. Rather, culture is a dynamic process that is continuously re-made and re-created by ordinary people. For my own purposes, I would alter Williams’ argument to say, “there are in fact no rural women, but only ways of seeing people as rural women”. The way you draw rural women discloses your *relation* to them.

Stuart Hall highlights the importance of the historical determinants of discursive formation in the practices of representation by saying that “representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time” (Hall, 1993: 257). This means that the practices of representation are the positions of enunciation,

and how we speak and write depends on where we are, and in what specific time and place (Hall, 2000: 704). Ella Shohat elaborates similar idea that representation is about the questions of location and strategy: “representation must be analyzed not only in terms of who represents but also in terms of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address” (Shohat, 1995: 173).

Feminist critiques of migration and globalization offer us a critical picture of how the world operates. In her insightful book *Globalization and Its Discontents*, Saskia Sassen, a feminist economist, argues for stressing a systemic relation between globalization and the feminization of wage labor, from which it follows that it is necessary for us to gender global economy: “...export-oriented manufacturing is a strategic dynamic, by no means accounting for most manufacturing jobs; gender is a strategic nexus in this development” (Sassen, 1998: 85). We can also find gender concern in other feminist works on global economy and geopolitics. For example, Cynthia Enloe’s *Bananas, Beaches & Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, in which she provides us with a feminist critique of sexism, tourism, domestic services and factory production from a global perspective, claiming that “gender makes the world go round” (Enloe, 1989: 1-18). In Aihwa Ong’s *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*, she captures the

disruptions, conflicts, and ambivalences in the lives of Malay women in the transition from peasant society to industrial production (Ong, 1987). Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* illustrates the relation between women workers and capitalism, and a politics of solidarity among working women (Mohanty, 2003). Katherine Gibson, Lisa Law and Deirdre McKay's article "Beyond Heroes and Victims: Filipina Contract Migrants, Economic Activism and Class Transformations" draws our attention to "the limitations of dominant representations of these women [Filipina] as 'heroes' of national development or 'victims' of a global capitalist economy" (Gibson, et al, 2001: 365-386) and they analyze the migrant workers multiple economic identities as exemplified in the activities of the Asian Migrant Center, a non-governmental organization, in a rural-urban framework.

With insights from these feminists, this chapter will review how some social scientists represent rural-urban migration in contemporary China in their academic research. On the one hand I will highlight the significance of their ways of addressing issues of peasants' citizenship, ecology, and women workers' subjectivities; on the other hand, I will supplement their argument by invoking a spectral figure of a rural woman.

Citizenship

In China, social science research is systematic and significant. Many of the studies focus on the pull and push factors of rural-urban migration, the effects on the rural family structure, the relation between rural productivity and market economy, the possible solutions to the ever increasing gap between the rural and urban , and the citizenship of migrant workers. They portray a “real” China of rural-urban migration with convincing figures and tables, giving authoritative data about age, population, family size, labor distribution, gender distribution, education level, arable land and household income. As a general rule, they assume that the peasants will benefit once they become modern citizens and legal workers, so the acquisition of citizenship is their central theme. Two representative examples are Dorothy J. Solinger’s *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (1999) and Huang Ping’s *In search of Survival: a Sociological Study of Rural-urban Migration* (1997).

Dorothy J. Solinger depicts peasants as being on the margins as compared to other social groups, and she speaks for them in order to fight for their citizenship. Solinger mentions that the June-Fourth Democratic Movement of 1989 led her to look for an economic transition concomitant with the political transformation. She argues that state-managed migration policies, bolstered by the household registration

system, state bureaucracies in the cities and the urban planning regime, exclude the peasantry from the cities. She also emphasizes that peasants are obliged by a decree that has been issued and enforced by the bureaucracy to deliver their quota of grain to the government so that the industrialized and urban population is fed. This makes the peasantry an ascribed underclass (Solinger, 1999: 11). The strict permanent residence registration system has prevented a “floating population” from becoming legal migrants. Peasant migrants, or inferior citizens, who are bereft of welfare and social services, are “denied basic civil and even human rights”; “what all such outcasts have in common is that they all bore the brunt of a form of institutionalized discrimination so stringent that it barred them from becoming full citizens in their own home countries” (Solinger, 1999: 5). She then supports the need for peasant migrants to fight for citizenship, which she defines as a social membership, a mode of belonging to a community in city and entailing an allocation of resources.

To Solinger, migrants and market can work together since “the migrants—in conjunction with markets—were forging proto-citizens of themselves against the design of the state” (Solinger, 1999: 289). Solinger thinks that the new market economy is in transition from a bureaucratic mode of allocating, distributing, and exchanging factors of production and economic goods to market-based modes of so doing. In order to solve the associated social ills and resentments, the new market

economy could alter institutions and change the shape of the urban community. “But what, I wanted to know, did markets do to peasants’ membership in the city?” (Solinger, 1999: xiii).

On the one hand, Solinger depicts peasant migrants as victims of the existing communist regime, suffering from “policies promulgated by officialdom, the cumbersome and well-entrenched bureaucracy, and the urban rationing regime”, which has stymied peasants’ acquisition of actual, normal citizenship in municipalities since the 1950s. On the other hand, interestingly, she portrays peasant workers as dangerous and powerful specters, confronting the state:

For migration throws up a specter of an overwhelmed state, of assaulted citizenry, and of rampant social turmoil: the vision of the optimists—that it can simply deposit docile toilers who will become assimilated settlers, acquiescent and conforming to the mode, enriching the nation—seems to many to be just a mirage. Put starkly, the immigration of ‘foreigners’ whether internal farmers or truly ‘other’ folks from afar, frequently entails confrontation. That confrontation, while not without its benign dimensions, is often fraught, surely at first, with dangers and hostility for both parties. I present this encounter in the urban areas of China at the end of the century as a contest over citizenship (and its changing content) waged primarily between the state—with its socialist system disappearing—and an enormous set of seemingly interloping peasant migrants who jostled uneasily with it, in a context of accelerating market transition (Solinger, 1999: 3)

Furthermore, she stresses the potential power of “the specters of rebellion and upheaval or nightmares” in her conclusion:

Given this obstinacy, plus the continuing clout in the capital to back it up, what may ultimately press the political elite to drop the official barriers against peasants’ full and legitimate assimilation into the formal urban world? It will be more the specters of rebellion and upheaval or nightmares of an overwhelming of the structural foundations of the cities than it will be these actual events themselves (Solinger, 1999: 289).

In Solinger’s eyes, poor/powerful peasant migrants should obtain citizenship while China is undergoing the economic transition. She expects that markets can make possible new forms of association, new rules, and unprecedented modes of city life (Solinger, 1999: 52). Solinger’s proposal for rural migration is based on markets and urbanization. At last, she draws us “awful images of specters”, i.e., peasants haunting “the urbanites and politicians”:

Specters and nightmares owe their force to the confusion caused when migrants entered the cities along with markets. Their joint arrival encouraged the construction of awful images, as urbanites and politicians succumbed to the seduction of a metaphor linking migrants with markets, with everyone conflating the reality of the migrants with all the ills that markets were perceived as delivering. In the event, the mixture of migrants with markets, or of citizenship with capitalism, became a highly problematic one at best (Solinger, 1999: 289).

To a certain extent, I support Solinger's proposal that peasant migrants, or assimilated settlers, must get legal citizenship. However, I would argue that the bestowal of peasant's citizenship confronts not only "the design of the state", but also "the logic of the market". The logic of statist or capitalist modernization is that the country is forced to keep the city fed. Cheap labor from the rural sector is one of the basic elements of the world factory. Neither statist nor capitalist industrialization wants expensive labor. As Marx and Engels criticize the exploitative relations between the city and the country in *The Communist Manifesto*, "the bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country" (Marx, 1998: 6), and "the bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities ... it has made the country dependent on the towns ..." (Marx, 1998: 7). Investigating the obscurity of the rural in Marxist thought in his insightful book, *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams further criticizes the capitalist and imperialist system in which the absolute urban and industrial priority sees the land and its properties as available only for profitable exploitation. This causes multiple negative effects: the destruction of local communities, the constant threat of competition and alienation, the different needs of local settlements being overridden, a simultaneous crisis of overcrowded cities and a depopulating countryside, and the widening gap between

the rich and the poor. Apart from challenging the capitalist and imperialist system, Williams points out that both orthodox communism and orthodox social democracy embrace the absolute urban and industrial priority as well: “look at socialism or communism: historically the enemies of capitalism, but in detail and often in principle, in matters of the country and the city, continuing and even intensifying some of the same fundamental processes” (Williams, 1975: 302).

Following Williams’ argument, I argue that, in China’s context, both the planned economy in Mao’s period and the market economy after the reform policy have continued the same fundamental processes: the rural is subjected to the rule of the metropolis. As Wen Tiejun argues, the recent policy of market-oriented industry and the state policy of industrialization in Mao’s period are based on the exploitation of the rural (Wen Tiejun, 2001: 293). From Solinger’s descriptions about the politicians’ fear, I would elaborate that the politicians feel threatened because the state cannot afford to provide all peasant migrants’ social benefits and security, especially if China continues to be the world factory. In the new economy, there are two major groups of the urban poor who cannot obtain social security or “full citizenship”: the unemployed urbanites and the peasant workers. There is an increase in the number of people being laid off, especially the former state factory workers from Mao’s period. Meanwhile, once a peasant migrant loses her/his labor-power,

s/he will probably be sent back to the rural areas, or the “dumping” place. Thus, the images of peasants/workers as being in “turmoil, rebellion, upheaval or nightmares” not only show that the ruling class is in fear and trembling, but also disclose the unexamined logic of statist or capitalist modernization in the hierarchical relation observed between the city and the country. In that sense, peasants/workers are haunting the metropolis. As Solinger remarks, it is indeed “highly problematic”. On the other hand, in parallel to Solinger’s spectral image of peasant as a homogeneous group, I invoke in the following chapters the imaginary figure of a rural woman to keep the questions of traditional patriarchal and the values of singularities alive.

Another significant sociological research output is Huang Ping’s *In search of Survival: a Sociological Study of Rural-urban Migration* (1997), which also criticizes the marginalization of peasants, but he particularly raises the question of ecology and the negative impacts of modernization on rural society from a social-economic perspective.

Ecology

In October 1994, the State Council of China held the first national conference on social development. The Institute of Social Development of the State Planning

Committee commissioned national and international scholars to publish a set of social development studies, about the theory, practice, and strategy of socio-economic development that would help lay the ground for a national policy. Meanwhile, the United Nations Agricultural Office invited many organizations to conduct a series of studies on rural-urban migration in China. *In search of Survival: A Sociological Study of Rural-Urban Migration* (1997) edited by Huang Ping is one of the publications stemming from this research.

The research was based on household interviews conducted with two hundred and eighty families of eight villages in four provinces of Jiangsu, Anhui, Sichuan, and Gansu, two villages from each province, and thirty-five households from each village. The research team spent forty-five days discussing the research outline and designing the questionnaires. The members were from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the Department of Social Sciences of Beijing University, and Research Department of Women's Studies of the Women's Federation of Sichuan Province, the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences of Sichuan University, and the National Studies Center of Social Sciences Academy of Gansu Province.

The book explains that rural-urban migration has become a widespread socio-economic phenomenon, one that is not only transforming the structures of cities and towns, but also influencing agricultural development and reshaping the

rural-urban structure. Thus, migration is both a component and a significant consequence of that socio-economic transformation. The researchers state that the first-hand materials that they collected focused on the nature and motivation of migrants, on the relevant national policy, and on the significance of migration to China's modernization and development policy. The authors also pay attention to the relation between non-agricultural activities and agricultural development, the factors of non-agricultural activities in economic, social and cultural aspects, and the unexpected consequences for rural development.

According to the authors, the problem of the surplus rural labor force, or high unemployment in rural areas, because of the overpopulation/land scarcity phenomenon that is the main limiting factor of rural development, has not yet been resolved. Even worse, since the mid 1990s, problems such as poor returns from agriculture, inefficient labor allocation, abusive utilization of natural resources, environmental pollution, and bankruptcy of Township-Village Enterprises (TVEs) have led to increased tension between the per capita ratio of arable land and the population. The authors argue that the massive migration to the cities is mainly out of "subsistence and survival rationality" rather than "economic rationality" (the pursuit of maximum profit). A formula of migration has also been devised. China has surplus labor because of its large population and little cultivated land. Peasants earn nothing

from farming, and out of a survival rationale they migrate to the city to work. Hence, as the following extract explains, the main reason for migration is an economic driving force:

In this way, they went from the household responsibility system to TVEs, and then from local TVEs to migrating for work. The Chinese peasants achieved their goal, step-by-step and all along it was propelled by their search for subsistence, and in the process they gradually, half-consciously, transformed behavioral norms and systemic constraints, and altered the comprehensive pattern of resources. If we wished to say that peasants do indeed act “rationally”, by carefully calculating investments and outputs, then while making choices, their prime concern is not profit, but subsistence. Moreover, it is only when the infrastructures permit (or at least are flexible) that peasants, especially the youth, are able to act in this manner (Huang, 1997: 90; my translation).

Huang Ping specifically stresses that the identity of the [male] peasant, with his emphasis on survival, draws on the idea of sustainable development as he questions the gap between the country and the city from a socio-economic perspective. He acknowledges the negative effects of modernization and industrialization, and then questions the ecology and the future of village society. The research shows that China has limited arable land, but now a large portion of it is being used for non-agricultural purposes, such as widening roads for development projects, setting up factories or commercial stores, and constructing new houses and buildings by peasants themselves:

In 1994, in Village 1, the production of grain sharply decreased. Many villagers believed that it was the fault of the pulp factory which they deemed as the devil. Even worse, the local government planned a development area there, which would lead to the occupation of the best 40 *mu* of fertile land in the village, and that in turn, it would destroy the irrigation system provided for the whole village, and ultimately cost the local government 200 thousand yuan! (Huang, 1997: 58; my translation).

Another paragraph discloses a similar situation:

Since 1993, arable land in Village 1 had decreased by a third. The same problem exists for Village 2 where, since 1990, 25% of the village's best farmland had been used for building factories and houses and repairing roads. Arable land per capita in Villages 3 and 4 is not much more than in Villages 1 and 2, but in these two villages the problem lies not only in the quantity of land but in its quality (Huang, 1997: 77; my translation).

The authors finally express concern about the tensions between urbanization and industrialization, population explosion and resource control, economic interests and social justice, and the possibility of sustainable development of agriculture. By taking a macro perspective, the book implicitly provides information for developing a state policy to address rural poverty and agricultural problems, encountering the discourse of modernization and capitalist globalization. On the question of the rural-urban migration, Huang Ping attempts to put the importance of ecology and the rural society on the national agenda of development.

In October 1999, *Frontier*, one of the influential journals in China, held a conference in Hainan province on ecology and literature, reflecting on development. Huang Ping was one of the participants, most of whom were literary critics and social scientists. Later, the article “Why Must We Talk about the Environment? A Summary of Nanshan Seminar”, based on the discussion in the conference, was published in *Positions* in 2004. The article was a declaration signed by Huang Ping and other conference participants. The signatories criticized the current dominant discourse on development in China, which upholds development as an indisputable logic, implying destroying environment and ecology; and the stage theory of development, referring to the idea of “polluting first and redressing later. They first dwelt upon polluted China:

In a developing country like China, which has a relative scarcity of per capita resources (ranked lower than 160th in the world), the contradictions between resources and development and between the environment and economic growth have rapidly surfaced and intensified. In recent years the drying up of the Yellow River, the flooding of the Yangtze River, the “blackening” of the Hui River, rapid desertification in the northwest, air and water pollution in the east and south of China and so on threaten the basic survival of many people; garbage control and food contamination in many cities is endangering the health and quality of life of many (especially wage laborers and the poor) (*Positions*: 12:1, 2004: 237-238).

Finally, they declared “protecting the environment has become an urgent social task and an important gateway to rebuilding the public quality of society”.

Huang Ping’s organized, logical and quantitative study presents a “real and big” China, but what interest me are the “small” stories beyond the figures and data, which manifests itself to us as contradictions, ambiguities and complexities in culture and society. As Naomi Schor argues, “reading in detail” is a feminist practice of disturbing the phallogentric cultural hierarchy: “the detail does not occupy a conceptual space beyond the laws of sexual difference: the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine” (Schor, 1987: 4).

Huang Ping argues that peasants have one primary consideration in migration, “how realistically to preserve and maintain the existence of the entire family”, but there are some nuances in his research which not only challenge the presupposition that reality can be quantified and stabilized, but also question the survival rationality which takes economy to be the totality of life. For example, peasants spend money mainly not on food but building a “new fashion” style house, which becomes for them a kind of coercive desire:

By the end of the eighties and early nineties, building a house has become a “new fashion” among the competitors in villages, and it is especially attractive to the youth. If the parents do not build their children a new house or renovate the old one, they prefer to postpone marriage. This

“fashion” brings pressure to the peasants who prepare for the sons going to get married. If the sons can work in cities to earn money, they can be relieved from this pressure (Huang, 1997: 54; my translation).

Apart from building a new modern house, TV sets are also popular consumer goods that peasant workers like to purchase. In the discourse of Huang’s study, the TV is represented as a medium of promoting urban values, a luxury commodity, or a basic appliance to be included in a dowry. In this way, it serves to illustrate that the main driving force of rural-urban migration is economic factors. However, the cultural dimension of media power, particularly TV, cannot be dismissed. TV, being a mediator between the rural and the outside world and conveying urban values, offers rural people an opportunity of comparing the unfair treatment meted out to the rural with the privileged status of the urban. Many young peasants are attracted by the charming city life shown on the TV:

The reforms of the eighties marked the gradual opening up of the entire society. Today the majority of rural youth have at least an elementary education. Modern culture and its various manifestations are spreading daily through mass media technologies, and TV sets have slowly penetrated into villages and even in the homes of the peasants. Hence, for today’s youth the horizon of vision and thought is already very unlike that of their parents. Through the values they have selected and rejected they have fashioned a distinct culture. This cultural background is essential to understanding the rural population’s massive migration in search of new ways of life (Huang, 1997: 10; my translation).

Later, Huang describes the powerful consumer culture as the “urban magic” of the city: “what is more, the life-styles in the cities, the ‘urban magic’ of the city’s powerful consumer culture which reaches directly into the rural regions through TV is also an extremely powerful influence attracting rural workers, especially seductive of rural youths” (Huang, 1997: 382).

Since the attraction of the “charming city life” shown on TV is treated as a minor reason for migration, as it is not easy to gauge what the peasants feel about the various TV programs, how they make comparisons between the rural and urban life, and how they deal with expectations and frustrations derived from the rural-urban discrepancies shown on TV. The survey is mainly interested in the percentages of peasant households having either black and white TV sets or color ones, and the numbers of watching hours.

The concern of overpopulation/land scarcity that accounts for “survival rationality” is dominant in the whole book and the basic unit of research is the family household. Nonetheless, the research shows that the manner in which the migrants from the rural areas particularly the younger generation see themselves, may indicate that their self-images are dependent not merely on an economic discrepancy, but also on cultural differences between the country and the city. There is a changing concept of beauty as Huang discovered when “in the interviews, many parents said that the

clothing and hairstyle of the children changed when they came back. They wore western suits, ties, and made the hair shiny by putting on some gel and mousse” (Huang, 1997: 281). What struck me the most was not the mention of hair gel, but the description of wearing a pair of high-heel shoes while working in the paddy field, which creates an uncanny twist in the account of the relation between a female peasant and the land. How can a rural woman wear a pair of high-heel shoes and do heavy farmwork at the same time? The researcher tells us the story through a father’s complaint:

In the interviews, a lot of peasants told us that their children basically did not know how to do farming and they will not choose to earn a living from the land in future. One peasant of Village 1 in Jiangsu Province said that the only relationship between his daughter and land was ‘wearing a pair of high-heel shoes in the paddy field just to take a look’ (Huang, 1997: 107; my translation).

The story simply ends with “just take a look”. How does the father see his “changed” daughter? How does she look at herself? How does she see her village? How do the village people see her or other working girls? There is no mention of these things. The study does show us that a rural woman’s migration is closely related to her reputation as demonstrated by the worrying villagers: “and as for the female labor force, young women in particular are considered not suitable to go out

to work, because ‘nowadays the society is deteriorating and nobody is good, girls’ outgoing will make the family worry’” (Huang Ping, 1997: 221). If a rural girl is already engaged to someone, there will be three parties who are worried. On the one hand, the parents of the rural girl worry that their daughter may give up her fiancé after going out to the cities, then they will lose face for having a bad daughter and they may have to return the wedding gifts. On the other hand, the fiancé and his parents are afraid of losing a wife/daughter-in-law and the money they have invested.

The book repeatedly warns us that there may be no more female peasants in the future, but the image of wearing a pair of high heel shoes and walking around the paddy field may perhaps give us a glimpse of how the rural women are trying to escape from or resist traditional values, such as chastity, compulsory farming, heavy housework, domestic disputes, the constraints of marriage and motherhood, and how they may even accentuated their beauty and desires by using a urbanized medium namely, a pair of high heel shoes. The researcher and the father alike direct our attention to a young rural woman’s changing concept of cosmopolitan beauty, starting from her shoes upwards. Yet, the unknown girl shifts our focus back to the land. She cannot forget the paddy field and her family in the village. In other words, “the rural” is somehow haunting both her and the researcher.

This sociological study presents rural-urban migration as an introduction to the seriousness of rural poverty, the rationale of peasant's survival, the unfair relationship between the rural and the city, and the possibility of sustainable development. It also tries to design a policy of regulating the migration that is treated as a major burden, in order to prevent it from getting out of control.

On the other hand, the small stories of “fashionable houses”, “TV sets”, and “high-heel shoes” that are embedded in the narration of the calculation of consequences, or figures, tables and structures lead us to the spaces where peasants negotiate with traditional and cosmopolitan values, and also allow us to problematize the discourse of modernization. This kind of reading small stories from a cultural perspective may challenge the presupposition that the reality can be quantified and stabilized, and also the “survival rationality” which takes economy as its absolute totality. Worries, expectations, frustrations, happiness, anxieties, desires and anger expressed in the small stories also remind us of how the researchers relate themselves to the complexity and diversity in social reality.

A (Gendered) Worker-Subject

There are other social scientists making a significant contribution to the question of gender differences in rural-urban migration. For example, *Rural Migration and Gender* (2000) by the research team on “Migration of Women Peasants” from the Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) articulate individual rural women workers’ experiences; Lee Ching Kwan’s *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women* (1998) recognizes rural women workers’ resistances in the workplaces; Pun Ngai’s *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (2005) constructs a rural women worker as an agent of a new working class movement in China. Generally, they center on urbanity, proletariat struggles, and women’s identities and subjectivities.

Exploring the gender issue, the CASS research team on “Migration of Women Peasants” has particularly analyzed the experiences of rural women migrants. The team conducted a series of interviews between 1993 and 1996. Two migrant groups were interviewed, one migrating from Hunan province to the Pearl River Delta, and one from Anhui province to Beijing. The interviews and reports were compiled to form a book, *Rural Migration and Gender*. It is divided into two parts, one of which includes about forty interviews with women peasant workers engaged in diverse jobs

such as domestic help, cleaning, waitressing, hawking, or manufacturing work. The second half of the book is a collection of analytical papers based on these interviews. It includes reports from both the “receiving” or host communities to which the migrants go and the “sending” communities from which they come, as well as a section on rural migrant labor and gender issues, including problems of love, marriage and family, changing pattern of the migrants’ family, and sexual harassment.

The book points out that those young women peasants seek jobs in the cities because of different reasons, such as economic need, personal development, widened horizons, or expectations of better living. However, through the interviews, we find that they have to confront many problems, such as labor exploitation, lack of urban residence status, discrimination, alienation, marriage difficulties, and sexual harassment. Moving from inland to coastal areas, changing status from peasant to temporary worker, they have experiences quite different from their parents, which affect them culturally and socially. The in-depth interviews offer us a glimpse into the living experiences of some women peasants, which are full of desires, frustrations and struggles in their everyday life. For example, Xu Ling, a 22-year-old cleaner from Sichuan province, mentions her unpleasant experience when she attempted to sneak into Shenzhen from Nantou:

A man came out and seized me. I thought he was a plainclothes police, but he said he could help me. He dragged me into a house near Nantou. I was confined there for three days and forced to have sex with him. I had no choice but to submit to my terrible and inevitable fate. Then I followed him back to his village in Lufeng, a notorious place for trafficking women. At that time, I could not find a job, my family was poor, and I felt hopeless” (ARENA, 1999: 55).

Another example is Yuhua, a 27-year-old hairdresser from Anhui province, who tells us how the problem of citizenship affects her marriage and career:

I have a boy friend but we have not decided to get married yet. I told him, ‘I do not have any resident status in Beijing, you need to consider this.’ ... You are treated unfairly if you do not have urban resident status. For example, several big hotels had invited me to open a salon there, but they withdrew when they found that I had no resident status” (ARENA, 1999: 58).

The research team represents the rural women workers’ stories largely from an urban-centered perspective. Yuhua’s story as narrated by Feng Xiaoshuang, one of the female team members, shows that “Putonghua” is used to be a standard of classifying an “educated” citizen from a peasant with “odd” dialect. Yuhua, the hairdresser, is the most successful working girl in Feng’s eyes. Yuhua recalls her struggling story with Feng in a hair salon in Beijing. She came to Beijing when she was nineteen. She worked very hard to learn hairdressing, and she owns two salons now. After the interview, Feng writes down her comments:

She is elegant, skilled, self-confident, and independent. She does not look like a girl coming from the rural area. She can speak beautiful Putonghua and dresses well. She has professional training and natural “cultivation”, so one cannot look down on her. She is the most successful and brightest peasant worker among my interviewees. She has never lost her sense of direction, and she does not feel puzzled about her career or marriage. Although she concentrates on her career, she is not a workaholic or a fierce “iron lady”. She is beautiful and has a good shape. She is very feminine. As a matter of fact, she is more capable than Beijing girls. In the summer of 1995, Yuhua phoned me that she got married to a Beijing boy friend. She said she lived with her husband and his parents, and everything was alright. She was satisfied with her marriage for her husband loved her and took care of her. Her family was all satisfied with him. Later, I was told that Yuhua went abroad to develop her career. I tried to contact her but failed (ARENA, 1999: 59).

According to Feng’s narration, a model of female peasant worker should be an educated city girl, without any trace of “the rural”, for example, dialect, which is considered as inferior when compared to the standard national language, Putonghua. Through entrepreneurship and marriage, Yuhua affirms her self-esteem and earns respect from the researcher. This nonetheless implies that she puts great effort into wiping off “her accent/dialect” and then becoming a Beijing girl with fluent Putonghua. In other words, the CASS research team portrays a successful peasant worker as a “cultivated” modern urban person.

Lee Ching Kwan’s *Gender and the South China Miracle* explores “how diverse patterns of production politics emerge as conjunctural outcomes of the state, the labor market, and the differentiated deployment of gender power”. She proposes that

there are two kinds of gendered factory regime in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. The regime in the Hong Kong plant is called “familial hegemony”, in which there is a construction of women as veteran; domineering matron workers. Meanwhile, the one in the Shenzhen plant involves “localistic despotism”, in which a coercive regime constructs women as “maiden workers”: the ignorant, docile, quiescent, or the oppressed. By examining the diverse shop floor politics and cultures, and recasting women as subjects, she argues that women workers could resist coercion by the state, multinational corporations, and the patriarchal family. Social structural domination in this account coexists with the processes of collective apprehension, compliance, and resistance. From her observations, she finds that women are gendered social actors in pursuing fragmentary and opportunistic clever tricks and maneuvers; thus being “‘maiden workers’ to them means a relatively independent, modern, and romantic lifestyle in anticipation of marriage and adulthood. Hence the forged telegram to escape from heavy workload, the recommendations of locals as new recruits, and the hiding of boyfriends in the dormitory” (Lee, 1998: 136).

Pun Ngai’s *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* announces her position as one of not only identifying herself with but also speaking for *dagongmei*, working sisters:

My urge to work in a factory and to act as a dagongmei is definitely subjective and loaded with ideological burdens. The search for identification with female workers helps to prop up my intellectual and ‘radical’ fantasy of resisting the irresistible advent of global capitalism. The workplace, I believe, is the ‘right’ space in which the female bodies of dagongmei, this project, and myself will be properly situated (Pun, 2005: 16).

Pun further claims that “the formation of the new worker-subject, dagongmei, is the central theme of this book (Pun, 2005: 19). Claiming the emerging group of dagongmei as the new Chinese worker-subject, Pun asks how a dagongmei confronts the triple oppressions of “global capitalism, state socialism, familial patriarchy”. Pun explains that an unbelievably heavy workload, and chronic pains in dagongmei’s bodies such as headache, sore throat, flu and cough, stomach problems, back ache, nausea, eye strains, dizziness and weakness and menstrual pain are the physical resistances to extreme exploitation in factory life. Pun then offers us a painful story of a working sister, Yan, confronting the triple oppression. Yan has strange experiences: regular midnight screams from a nightmare and a dream of losing the chance to cross a river. Yan’s story is depicted by Pun as “the odyssey of human freedom and praxis”:

When the projection of the future was again blocked, she broke out in a scream, that most authentic resistance, and woke herself up at the dream’s end. In between conscious and unconscious, the scream declared the very

existence of her struggle. Crossing the realms between language and non-language, between the imaginary and the real, between the self and the world, the scream was a final means of self-extension, beyond the boundaries of any personal and cultural limits, to occupy a deterritorialized space much larger than the world of Yan's life. Yan was on the odyssey of human freedom and praxis, opening up a minor genre of resistance (Pun, 2005: 187).

Moreover, Pun is haunted by another dagongmei, Xiaoming, who is the only rural woman worker from Hubei Province to survive a toys factory fire in Shenzhen in 1993: "my sensitivity, if any, to the changes in Chinese society was first of all brought out by meeting Xiaoming in 1993 and the pain that maintained a ghostly hold on me" (Pun, 2005: 192). By construing dagongmei as resistant bodies in Shenzhen factories, Pun recognizes the various forms of resistances at the ground level, not dismissing any single dagongmei issue:

Dream, scream, fainting, menstrual pain, inner splitting of self, workplace defiance, slowdowns, fighting, running away, and even petition and strike are all points and lines of resistant behaviors, forming a cartography of resistance that will inevitably direct a challenge to power and control (Pun, 2005: 195).

The "Migration of Women Peasants" research team, Lee Ching Kwan, and Pun Ngai, are all concerned with gender differences in rural-urban migration and take great pains to recognize rural women workers' subjectivities and resistances in urban

areas. The foundations of their argument are urbanization and industrialization. They believe that the rural women workers' agencies are embodied in industrial labor, and, they construct them as actors in an emerging working class movement against capitalist exploitation, state bureaucracy, and traditional patriarchy. As Pun specifically asserts, a dagongmei is becoming the agent of the new proletariat revolution:

Dagongmei is a specific cultural-symbolic artifact as well as a worker-subject, constituted at the particular moment when transnational capital came to China in the postsocialist period. Dagongmei thus is a newly embodied social identity emerging in contemporary China to meet and resist the changing socio-economic relations of the country and the needs of capital. As a condensed identity, it tells the story of how a state socialist system gave way to the capitalist world economy and of how capitalist practices depended on the regulation of class and sexual relations. As a worker-subject, it foretells the new configurations of social resistance and the coming of a silent 'social revolution' from below" (Pun, 2005: 19).

Furthermore, Pun describes the new working class as the specter where "the new working class is this spectral other, gazing at itself but expecting no one else to see it" (Pun, 2005: 28).

I would argue that the trajectory of the specter is evidently from farmland to workplace or from the country to the city. In other words, the specter's destination is certainly the city, a symbol of progress and future, as the hegemonic discourse of

development promises. However, the specter of the worker-subject carries the irreducible mark of “the rural”, as the author also suggests that the “dagongmei, as half peasants and half proletariat, are the displaced subjects produced by the hybrid conjugation of state and market machines” (Pun, 2005: 193). The mark of “the rural” becomes particularly obvious when a dagongmei has no more labor-power for sale in the market economy: Xiaoming, the crippled survivor, is finally sent back to her village hometown. So will Yan collapse one day due to “traumatic neurosis” and then return to her village? What will be the future of Yan, Xiaoming and other physically/mentally handicapped dagongmei? In that sense, I would read Yan’s traumatic story as a scream from “the rural”, and Xiaoming’s painful story as “the rural” in pain.

On the other hand, Pun looks forward to “a resistance agenda that can transgress and rearticulate both individuality and communality”:

If we see that individualism is the evil product of Western neoliberal capitalism, and collectivism is the peril of Chinese socialism, then we have no choice but to look for a resistance agenda that can transgress and rearticulate both individuality and communality without privileging the former, which serves the logic of capital, and the latter, which would easily fall prey to a political strategy put forward in its name. (Pun, 2005: 196).

I agree with Pun's suggestion that the new resistance agenda should redefine individuality and communality. However, by distancing the dominant urbanist mentality, I try to open up the discussion from a different perspective. Both the coercive capitalism at present and the forcible collectivism in the past embrace "the absolute urban and industrial priority" which marginalizes and subjugates the country. A new resistance agenda should shake that "kind of confidence in the singular values of modernization and civilization" (Williams, 1975: 303). By exploring the ambiguity of the country in Marxist thinking, Williams argues that Marx and Engels depict socialism as practices of 'abolishing the contrast between town and country, which has been brought to its extreme point by present day capitalist society', and then of restoring "the intimate connection between industrial and agricultural production' (Williams, 1975: 302-304; 1989: 87). Yet, orthodox communism and orthodox social democracy always negate the intimate cooperation between the country and the city, or label this as "an old, impractical, childish dream" (Williams, 1975: 302-304). Williams then urges for the development of new forms of cooperative effort between the city and the country to deal with the crisis. Williams suggests that the city and the country should work together for a collectively responsible society: "neither the city will save the country nor the

country city. Rather, the long struggle within both will become a general struggle, as in a sense it has always been” (Williams, 1989: 84).

On the other hand, Williams reminds us that there are inter-dynamic relations between and among dominant, residual and emergent cultures (Williams, 1977: 121-127). He suggests that we should look not only into the residual but also for an alternative culture in the rural communities, and then observe a “pre-emergence”, something “active and pressing, but not yet fully articulated” (Williams, 1977: 126). In China’s context today, there are mixed cultures: the dominant urban consumer culture, the residual “compulsory/voluntary” collective practices, and the emergent working class culture and also the rural reconstruction movement. Hence, the dualist mode of individualist capitalism/authoritarian communism cannot grasp these mixed and dynamic cultures. What will happen if we go beyond the resistant (gendered) bodies in the metropolis? Will there be any new possibilities arising if we reverse what seems to be the irresistible flow of migrants, which is from the city to the country? Under these circumstances, I will observe and theorize a “pre-emergence” through staging the rural communities, recognizing the values of singularities and also exploring the ethical dimension of collectivities in the following chapters.

Following Solinger’s metaphor of specters as peasant workers and Pun’s version of these as women peasant workers, I specifically invoke a figure of a rural

woman. For my own purpose, the concept of “the rural” is a temporal name set against the hegemonic idea of the “cosmopolitan-ness” of modernization in present-day China. It is also a haunting specter, which resists the hierarchical relation between the city and the countryside, and reminds us to take the disadvantaged majority into consideration.

In the following chapters, I will continue to discuss how some urban intellectuals from other areas, such as TV producers, film directors, media workers, photographers and writers, portray the rural women in their visual or written works: as Montaigne remarks, “we need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things” (quoted in Derrida, 2001: 351). By invoking a spectral figure of a rural woman, I will paint a portrait of a “different” China through narrating the rural women’s singularities and collectivities, but also work to complicate the picture by unsettling the dualist mentality that insists on such oppositions as reality/fiction, urbanity/rurality, and destructive capitalism/authoritarian communism.

Chapter Three

Questioning the Self

“Develop the Self”

I have been a volunteer with a Hong Kong non-governmental organization, China Social Services and Development Research Centre (CSD) for the past ten years.¹ In July 2001, we conducted a two-year gynecological checkup program with two working partners, that is, Luxia-Wanli Women’s Mutual Aid Credit Union (LWCUC) of the Yongxin Village, and the Women and Children’s Health Unit of Wanzai County in Jiangxi Province. Since we were promoting health care, we showed video tapes on health education for members in the conference hall of the three-storey centre of LWCUC. We also played different entertainment programs like cartoons, comedies, romance, and action films. The screenings on a 29’ color TV attracted the local people, and it transformed the conference hall into a mini-cinema for social-cultural events. Graeme Turner observes that, “film is a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself” (Turner, 1999: 3).

As a student of cultural studies looking into “a society’s way of life and system of values” (Turner, 1999: 48), I chose to screen *Girls from Outside* (1992), a TV melodrama series about rural women migrants. I had bought the ten-episode serial on VCD at the Beijing International Airport. The audience of approximately fifty people included mainly middle-aged men and women, with some old people and children. The young people had all gone away to work in the cities. We showed the serial at eight o’clock every night. On the first night we finished three episodes, the second three more but, on the third night, they all desperately wanted to watch the ending. In the end we stayed up watching until midnight in order to finish the series.

Some of the women who were in their thirties and forties told me that they liked the protagonist, Zhao Xiaoyun, very much as “she is smart and intelligent. One person can do two persons’ work”. A scene in the second episode particularly caught their attention, in which the female workers were sitting on either side of the conveyor belts, assembling products, when one of Zhao Xiaoyun’s colleague, but more like a sister as they were from the same village, Zhao Lingmei went to the bathroom without asking for permission from the leader of the production line. Xiaoyun immediately pitched in for Lingmei. She would oscillate between Zhao Lingmei’s seat and her own coming and going, coming and going. As a result, the production line never suffered. Lingmei was penalized for violating the factory law. In contrast, Xiaoyun had not only finished

her task but had also helped in maintaining the production from flowing smoothly. Her crisis management ability and her sympathy for village sisters were highly appreciated by the rural audience.

One morning while she was washing clothes for her family, an executive member of the LWCU, thirty-five year old Huaying, told me what she felt about the *Girls from Outside*.² She said she really wanted to go out to work, in order to earn money to meet her daily expenses. However, she had given up the idea because she had to take care of her children. After complaining about the hardships of living, heavy taxation and expensive school fees Huaying suddenly shifted her attention to a fifteen-year-old girl who was passing by. The girl had finished her primary education but then dropped out. Now she loitered around the village or did some housework every day. Huaying criticized the girl: “you loiter the whole day, and do not study. You see, someone like Xiaoyun, she has got high school education, and gets recognized by the boss. Now even if you want to go out to work, you should be educated. *Mei wenhua, mei zhishi*, or No culture, no knowledge, no one wants you”. The girl began smiling with embarrassment and then quickly left.

To Huaying, “culture and knowledge” not only meant qualification from the formal school system, which these days increasingly stresses industrial skills training, economic development, business experience and profit-making, but also meant that

the prevailing value system of negating the rural, fostered inequality between the city and the countryside and perpetuated rural subordination. In a seminar on “Displacement: Contradictions Between Peasant’s Needs and Institutional Arrangements”, held in December 2001 by the Universities Service Centre for China Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, a group of sociologists, economists, rural experts, and development workers discussed a diverse range of problems related to rural life.³ Some sociologists criticized the explicitly urban-centered national education which promoted the notion of “a piece of bread and a glass of milk for breakfast” as a normal city lifestyle in a primary school textbook. This ignores the diversities of food and living patterns in different rural areas. For example, we have congee and steamed buns for breakfast in the village. Chen Xin, associate professor of the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), points out that one of the negative effects of the existing education system is that “our textbooks make rural children feel that there is no dignity in rural living, so they have to leave the ‘backward’ place.”

Huaying’s identification with the desirable Xiaoyun contradictorily reveals her frustration about the reality as subsistence farming and domestic work such as washing clothes are considered trivial jobs which do not allow her to earn money and gain dignity. Huaying realizes that the social status of a peasant is considered to be very low

and that manual farm work cannot be counted as real “knowledge”, but what Foucault refers to as “disqualified or subjugated knowledge” (Foucault, 1980: 81-82). Huaying’s experience highlights the fact that in contemporary China a farmer earns practically nothing from subsistence farming and he/she has to pay a lot to meet all the expenses. The only possible way of earning money is to migrate to the city to work, but the requirement is then that you should have “culture” and “knowledge”, and not just a supply of physical labor; otherwise, you will not be successful. There is no doubt that this value system embedded in formal education is very urban-centered and it makes rural people as ignorant objects because of their lack of urban culture and knowledge. Thus, when a rural subaltern has access to lines of social upward mobility, s/he is forced first of all to accept that s/he is inferior, and has to “develop the self”.

Zhuazhu shiji fazhan ziji guanjian shi fazhan jingji, or “Grasp opportunity, develop the self, and above all develop the economy” is a famous remark made by Deng Xiaoping when he visited southern China in the spring of 1992. Since that time, “develop the self” has become a popular slogan.⁴ Deng made his visit to the southern coastal areas to reinforce the national policy of rapid modernization, elaborated under “market socialism with Chinese characteristics”. The slogan intended to invigorate the economy and open China to the western world, in order to shake off the shame of “poverty and backwardness”. Thus, the principle of “developing the self” is supposed

to be understood as a means of referring to “the modern self”, that is, a subject of modernization, or an economic [wo]man.

In what follows, I examine two significant models of “developing the self”, that is, Zhao Xiaoyun, the protagonist of the *Girls from Outside* TV serial, and the real life example of Anzi, a famous writer. Both are publicly recognized as successful models of rural women migrants. Since fiction and fact are not opposites of each other, both the fictional and the actual characters (Anzi, through her literary works and autobiography) have something to tell us about those systems and processes of “culture” that Raymond Williams designates the “whole way of life” of a social group in his article “Culture is Ordinary” (1958):

We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life—the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes, yet also questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind (Williams, 2001: 11).

In that sense, making sense of the world is the constitutive element of culture understood as a network of practices and representations shaping our society. As Graeme Turner argues, our access to reality is also through representation:

Representations of the real world are like any other language system, saturated with ideology. However, this “real” which culture constructs for us to know and live with is no less material in its effects on our lives and our consciousness. Just because we cannot stand outside our way of seeing the world (to “see” that way of seeing) does not mean that our relation to the world is in some way false or provisional (Turner, 1999: 183-185).

Both the portrayal of Zhao Xiaoyun in *Girls from Outside* and Anzi’s self-representation disclose aspect of the mainstream “way of seeing” in present-day China. The success stories of “developing the self” are not just about access to the real world and I will demonstrate how the two models are represented. Further, I want to argue that there are incongruities in the construction of the modern self, as Derrida puts it of such reading: “to raise or set the tone higher ... is to ... make the inner voice delirious, the inner voice of the other in us” (Derrida, 1982: 63-97).

Zhao Xiaoyun: On the Path to Success

Girls from Outside was a very popular TV series from the early 1990s which was produced by the Production Centre of TV Series of Guangzhou Television Station. There were ten episodes, and the production cost of the series amounted to five hundred thousand yuan, a big budget at that time. The program was first screened on

China Central Television (CCTV) and by Guangzhou Television Station. It generated a tremendous response and was then shown on other local TV stations (Wen Yi, 2000: 757-770). *Girls from Outside* was very popular among audiences in big cities and even in small towns, winning the Golden Eagle Award by popular vote. It also won official honors like the First Honor of the Flying Award, and the Five-One Achievement Award given by Central Department of Propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party. Members of the Flying Award panel, such as the Chief of Department of Broadcasting, Film and Television, and the General Secretary of the Association of Television, all recommended it highly. They considered that it would:

[...] let people understand the message of reform, and raise awareness of the open door policy and reform, particularly after Deng Xiaoping's visit to the South in 1992 to reaffirm the speedy modernization of China. The media should advocate 'the main melody' of intensifying the policy of reform and modernization (my translation).⁵

According to Ruan Ruolin, the director of CCTV's Production Center for Chinese TV Drama, among two thousand TV series shown in CCTV from 1978 to 1992, over 60% were about the reform (Ruan, 1992: 1-8). Yin Hong, a professor of Communication at Qinghua University in Beijing, highlighted the complicity between state ideology and mass culture in the "main melody" TV series, *Girls from Outside* as "only those melodramatic TV series which adopt a negotiated 'political stance'

between forces of market and state, interests and accountability have produced widespread social effects” (Yin, 2001: 20-27).

Girls from Outside was directed by Cheng Hao who was also one of the screenwriters along with his female classmate Xie Lihong. Both graduated from the China Central Arts and Performance Academy. Cheng later worked at the Guangzhou TV Station, and Xie became the director of the editorial board of *China TV* magazine. They spent three years preparing for *Girls from Outside* by doing extensive research, writing scripts and even asking the performers to live and work with factory workers in Shenzhen. Discussing the idea of the serial, they clearly embraced “the main melody” that the reform policy has contributed towards China modernization.

The reform and open-door policy has allowed us to distance ourselves from a homogenous kind of life-style in which the whole country learns only one model and wears clothes in a three colors (blue, grey and military green), and it has made our lives colorful. People are suddenly discovering that everyone has a lot of potential and so many desires; and life has disclosed tremendous possibilities. [...] Only by paying respect to that life and by writing in a realist way can our work reflect the overall trend of social life, and accompany the progress of human history, that is, by approaching modern civilization (Cheng and Xie 1993: 282-285; my translation).

Girls from Outside narrates a story of struggle and how a village girl becomes an entrepreneur in South China. This modern day fairy tale dramatizes a new kind of self-transformation in the age of globalization. The girls in the TV serial come from

the valley of Zhao, in Hunan Province and they go to Shenzhen together as factory workers. The main character, Zhao Xiaoyun, successfully climbs up the social ladder and later becomes head of the factory. Another girl, Zhao Fengzhen, refuses to marry a village man and goes off to Shenzhen again with a new group of girls. Zhao Yulan marries the owner of a small restaurant near the factory. Zhao Xiuying becomes a prostitute and is later sent to jail. Zhao Lingmei suffers a serious injury; her left arm is broken and she returns to her village home. A Fang becomes pregnant and is abandoned, and unfortunately she has a miscarriage and cannot bear a child again.

The New Modern Self

Girls from Outside won high praise from newspapers and magazines (Ge, 1993: 336-351). Many urban intellectuals praised *Girls from Outside* for expressing a new, modern mode of self-transformation, echoing the national reform and open-door policy's slogan of "develop(ing) the self". "A new self" transforms an ignorant and backward rural person into a favored subject of modernization, civilization, autonomy, citizenship and entrepreneurship. For example, Liu Yangti, a male researcher of China Academy of Social Sciences, claimed that this new "self" was "autonomous, independent, and creative, liberated" from the passive [rural] elements:

What the reform message of *Girls from Outside* describes cannot be confined to one enterprise of a particular area, but rather refers to the new construction of the human environment and to the quality of personality and the positive adjustment of the characters' attitudes. Knowing the "self", reevaluating the "self", recognizing the standpoint of the "self". [...] The wave of reform and the open policy is precisely allowing ordinary female workers, declassified intellectuals, and also peasant women workers, to pass from being passive elements of historical development to achieving the creative force of being autonomous, independent and liberated (Liu, 1992: 53-57; my translation).

Song Lumang, a male TV and film critic, shared this point of view, arguing that this linear process meant giving up the old "self" and reconstructing a new one:

It [the TV series] does not describe her as a superhuman. The series begins by describing Xiaoyun's childhood in the closed mountains and leading a simple economic life. The story continues to describe how she confronts her new environment, her psychological development from lacking confidence to being independent and from not being self-conscious to self-consciousness. That means it is a process of giving up the old self and reconstructing a new one in the great atmosphere of the wave of reform (Song, 1992: 33-36; my translation).

Jie Xizhang, the chief-editor of *Arts and Literature Magazine* of *Beijing Daily* similarly opined that the coastal area could provide more chances of developing one's potential and releasing one's desire than the closed mountainous area:

Obviously, the directors fully emphasize the figure of Zhao Xiaoyun in order to affirm a kind of value: when compared with the closed, backward, poor and ignorant mountain area, the open coastal area can provide more opportunities and possibilities of developing one's potential and releasing one's desire (Jie, 1992: 32-37; my translation).

In addition, Cui Li, a professor of Liaoning University stresses that Xiaoyun took the initiative to move out of the mountain, breaking through a kind of living state of oppression, backwardness, enclosure and passivity, which is synonymous in village societies:

When *Girls from Outside* concludes, a group of sisters once again begins the journey of leaving the village for the city. It is not a coincidence that this is the same as the first episode. It delivers a message, that only by moving out of the mountain, can you find happiness. This serial gives us an affirmation of 'women leaving' (Cui, 1992: 22-27; my translation).

From the above comments, published in newspapers and magazines, we can see that *Girls from Outside* was highly recommended by officials, TV drama critics and urban audiences. The binding factor for the series' popularity with the urban people was the reinforcement of the assumed inferiority of rural people. In other words, the TV series symbolically appropriated rural women's bodies to make capitalist modernization legitimate and reasonable, based on the marginalization of the rural by

such images as “closed mountains”, “closed and backward”, “poor and ignorant inland mountain areas”, “only by moving out of the mountain, can you find happiness”, in all of which the urban critics recognized unquestioned nature but not contested culture, a site of confronting systems of values.

Workers and peasants do not enjoy a high social status in contemporary China. After the introduction of the reform policy, the entrepreneur has gradually become the favored subject for the dominant social groups—someone like Xiaoyun, who metamorphoses from an ordinary assembly line worker to an assistant supervisor of the assembly line, then supervisor, then head of the production department, and finally the head of the factory. As feminist critic Dai Jinhua explains:

From the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, migrant workers, particularly female workers, represented as “a new thing” and as a trademark of “social progress”, have, to a certain extent, become the focus of the media: the film *The Girl from Huangshan* (1983), the prize-winning one-off episode *Erzi* (1988), and the TV series *Girls from Outside*. The narration of these texts is mostly based on a dualism of “City/Village”, and “Civilization/Ignorance”, in that the girls from the countryside are represented as brave people, as a special kind of winner who combats bad customs and prejudices (Dai, 1999: 21).

Xiaoyun’s self-transformation from an ignorant rural girl to a modern businesswoman is not a smooth one. By going through struggles and contradictions, she fulfills her goal of becoming the favored subject of modernization with “taste”; for

example, discarding her pigtail, wearing a dark blue suit and black high heel shoes, carrying a black briefcase, and having a knowledge of English, karaoke, and popular songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan like *Unspeakable Ending* or *It Is Just Like Your Tenderness*. In addition, she gradually becomes an indifferent and calculating person, abandoning her *nongmin yishi* or “peasant consciousness” in the process of self-change.

The Gloomy Ancestral Temple

The foundation of Xiaoyun’s self-transformation is a violent cutting off of the umbilical cord of the poor, backward and oppressive rural. In *Girls from Outside*, the scene of the valley of Zhao appears only twice, that is, in the first episode and the last one. The rural scenes are similar, associated with layers of grey mountains covered in clouds, a secluded ancestral temple, a domineering father with a big chopper, an ex-convict with a cow in the paddy field,⁶ and a furious man beating a woman in public as he suspects her of infidelity. The rural settings seem to justify why the young people have to go to the city in search of work as the rural world is “hopeless” and it is not worth staying there and the city is a beacon of hope. The gloom of the ancestral temple is a sign of the rural decay. Le Zuwang, the director of cinematography for the series, explains how they deliberately constructed an “oppressive” ancestral temple:

For example, the scene of the ancestral temple in Zhao's Valley was originally planned to be shot from outdoors, but Cheng Hao (the director) changed his mind to fix the camera inside the temple itself. I understood that this would create a feeling of enclosure. In the serial Zhao's Valley is a miniature small-scale rural economy and society of poverty, ignorance, conservative tradition and seclusion, which is in such striking contrast with the dynamic and energetic world of South China. When we shot the scene within Zhao's ancestral temple, its sense of enclosure was created by visual effects. The day we shot this scene, it was a cloudy day and the only source of light came from the temple gate, and since the walls were relatively dark, the light was poor, [...] except for one small reflector in the background, we did not add any extra lighting (Le, 1993: 291-292; my translation).

In the last episode, the drama ends with the crippled Lingmei walking back to the "secluded" village to create a mood of sadness:

Stretching mountains makes one feel claustrophobic and stresses associate with the difficulty of trying to escape this isolated world. The thick layers of clouds also give the feeling of suppression, which is matched by the sad mood of the story. [...] At the end of the story, the same framing device is used again, in which Lingmei is silently walking into the far distance and then vanishes from the earth ... (Le, 1993: 295; my translation).

The assembly line actively reinforces Xiaoyun's determination to cut off her ties with the "oppressive rural world". Xiaoyun rearranges the positions in the assembly line but some workers complain that she offers the good seats to her sisters. Mr. Jiang, the head of the factory from Hong Kong, is represented as an ambitious entrepreneur and a family man who wears a fine suit and tie, and carries his mobile phone almost

throughout the whole drama.⁷ In the third episode, there is a close-up of Mr. Jiang who is scolding Xiaoyun, who still has pigtails and is in her blue factory uniform, as she bows her head slightly:

A factory consists of the head, the manager, the supervisor of assembly line and ordinary workers. There is no longer any such criterion as “township”. If you talk about *laoxiang* or township fellows, well, we are all Chinese township fellows. Miss Zhao Xiaoyun, I am very disappointed that even you as a high school graduate have SUCH a strong peasant consciousness! (my translation).

This is the first time that Xiaoyun confronts the conflict over being “a peasant”, a situation in which “peasant consciousness”, here referring to the kinship of the rural community, to mutual help and sisterhood, is depicted adversely, as “a hindrance” to modernization. Xiaoyun then undergoes a process of negating her “old self”, in terms of its rural formation, and then making “a new modern self” adapted to an assembly line of industrial society. However, I will suggest later that Xiaoyun’s “peasant consciousness” keeps disturbing her completion of that modern self.

Fascination for the Assembly Line

Xiaoyun is depicted not only as denying her rural ties, but also as being fascinated by the assembly line of industrial Fordism. An ordinary worker can no longer be the

central subject of dominant discourse in contemporary China. Hence, Xiaoyun should have a spirit of modern managerial enterprise: to increase production and efficiency, that is, everything should happen at speed, accompanying by what the eighteenth century economist James Stuart called “a taste for superfluity” in industrial operation.⁸

Xiaoyun’s taste for superfluity is explicitly embodied in the assembly line. When Xiaoyun is promoted to assistant supervisor of the assembly line, Mr. Jiang encourages her: “spend more time using your brain. I manage a factory, he manages a working floor, and you assist the supervisor and all of us are the same.” Here, “using your brain” implies that you should change your mind-set to adapt to industrial capitalism, and to “develop the self” with a taste for superfluity, or a drive for unstoppable production. Moreover, the logic of capitalist modernization is based upon the hierarchy of a manager, a foreman, a supervisor, and a worker; and upon an operation of continuously manufacturing products at speed. In the third episode, there is a long shot in which Xiaoyun is alone in the factory, but maintains the smooth functioning of the assembly line. She does research on the production by testing every procedure of the assembly line. Her hands are busily making components, while her body is fluidly moving along the line. Off screen, we hear in her voice-over that she is writing a letter to her father. She mentions that she is encouraged by the boss and has started to think about how to further stimulate production. She cannot help going a little crazy about it:

Dear Dad, I am now *zhuli lazhan* an assistant supervisor of an assembly line. “la” comes from the English word, “line”, which means an assembly line. I have been appointed to supervise fifty workers! The factory head trusts me and expects me to think of ways to increase production efficiency. Over the past two weeks, I have investigated every position on the assembly line, and tried to do it all by myself. Now I want to readjust a line, and I believe it will increase production. Am I talking too much? But I really get excited about it (my translation).

Xiaoyun is represented as “excited” about the assembly line, a symbol of the daily operation of industrialization. She is the specific product of the technologies of the self at work in industrial China. Foucault reminds us of the importance of looking into the very specific “truth games” related to the specific techniques by which we understand ourselves. He argues:

[T]echnologies of the self permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1988: 18).

In that sense, Xiaoyun is represented as transforming herself to attain happiness and excitement, actively adapting through her body and soul to the ongoing assembly line, with the implication that she thereby embraces the mainstream idea of rapid modernization.

However, Xiaoyun's self-transformation through her fascination for the assembly line is complicated by the exploitation of women's bodies. In a scene in the first episode, the *mise-en-scène* places Mr Jiang in the center of the frame, surrounded by a group of female workers in the background. Dressed in a bright business suit, Mr Jiang rebukes "a bumpkin", wearing a vest and a dark blue coat, who is angry about being excluded from the recruitment:

Our factory is a professional toy producer, with advanced technology and plenty of autonomous production lines. Every position requires patience and delicacy, but not strength or boldness. In this kind of job, you only need to repeat the same gesture thousands of times every day. Biological experiments have proved that only women possess this characteristic. We, men do not. Understand? We need only a few males to do the heavy and ponderous work, but I regret to inform you that the quota is already full. *Sorry* (in English). (my translation).

The exclusion of the rural man here reveals to us that there is another side of Xiaoyun's fascination for the assembly line, further exposed by Mr. Jiang's casual remark: "you [women] only need to repeat the same gesture thousands of times every day." In the dominant discourse of modernization, the rhetoric of industrialization is gendered in that only women have "patience and delicacy", and are able to manage the precise and intricate assembling work required in toys, plastics and electronics. The rhetoric is packaged by so-called advanced technology and scientific experiments. In

the urban TV producers' imagination, the assembly line symbolizes the possibilities of moving up the social ladder, but if we analyze Mr. Jiang's careless reference to "repeating the same work thousand times a day" against the grain of the text, we find that the assembly line, contradictorily, requires intensive and unbearable [female] labor. In other words, in the pattern of international division of labor, rural women's bodies are appropriated as sites for the production and extraction of surplus value; that is, female labor is commoditized for the capitalist use of exchange. Only a few rural girls like Xiaoyun manage to get promoted, so she is represented as teeming with bright ideas, and getting excited over the process of increasing productivity; meanwhile, the majority is repeating those monotonous tasks every day along the assembly line.

In this series, the reward for letting the process of production run nonstop is to become involved in the circle of mass production and continuous consumption. In the eighth episode, on the wall of the factory, there is a notice written in bright red characters that "If you do not make mistakes, you will be rewarded with a three-day trip to Hong Kong." Mr. Jiang brings five model workers and managers to Hong Kong. Hong Kong is shown as consisting of shops along Nathan Road, and various shopping malls, hotels and restaurants. Xiaoyun is so excited, "it is the first time that I am proud of myself!" She is proud as she works hard to make the production line continue; but

on the other hand, those who hamper progress or modernization have all already been expelled. Thus, Fengzhen is nearly fired for not being able to keep up with the pace, but the “clumsy, lazy, careless and disabled” Lingmei is cruelly abandoned in the village.

The Left-Overs

When Xiaoyun achieves access to the circuit of citizenship, there are indeed “delirious voices of the other” in [her] self. Xiaoyun dramatically becomes the head of the toy factory in which she had previously worked. In the last episode, at the international airport of Guangzhou, she meets Mr. Jiang and gives him her business card. Facing the camera, with a confident smile, she says she is flying to Thailand to attend a business conference. A low-angle shot from the bottom of the ladder leading to the airplane makes Xiaoyun appear as a typical administrative manager with her short hair, suit, high heels and brown suitcase. She is looking forward to the distant future. A long take of a flying Boeing 767 ends the story, symbolizing that the protagonist has ultimately overcome all obstacles to achieve the desired goal, to develop herself as a modern economic subject in the transnational economy.

However, Xiaoyun’s success could not be possible without the other rural women’s “failures” like that of the crippled Lingmei, the imprisoned Xiuying, and the

unemployed rural women behind the iron bars of the factory. In the seventh episode, Mr Jiang selects rural women workers for a new factory. He forcibly turns Xiaoyun around by her shoulders and pushes her to look up at the workplace bathed in floodlight, where the selected workers are working. Meanwhile, off screen, we hear the begging voices of the excluded rural women. In a medium shot we can see tears on Xiaoyun's face as it turns out that she agrees with Mr. Jiang's teaching that it is a life-and-death competitive world, and that they should be responsible to their workers first—even though she thinks it is so cruel to choose only two hundred out of a thousand workers who can find no more work in the old factory. Xiaoyun's identification with the rules of the jungle cannot be separated from the suppressed voices of the other women outside the factory gate.

Furthermore, the imprisoned prostitute and the disabled girl in the village are also posited against the successful Xiaoyun. The imprisoned prostitute Xiuying, is described as a greedy girl who always longs for luxurious life but finally gets her punishment. Thus, the figure of Xiaoyun is designed to be in positive contrast to the figures of "failure". In the last episode, a woman police officer stands in the middle of the screen which is split into two parts: Xiaoyun and two other sisters, on one side, and on the other side, Xiuying, in a dark prison uniform, is locked up behind the wire grid. On the other hand, Lingmei is forced to return to the country because her arm is broken.

Sitting on the mountain, she watches Fengzhen gather a new group of girls to go to the city to work, and one of them is Lingmei's younger sister. A close-up of Lingmei, with her hair obscuring her face and her arm in a white bandage, tells us of her sadness. An extremely long shot, in which Lingmei is seen silently receding into the far distance against the stretching mountains under the clouds, adds to the effects of gloom and depression.

The rural is not only represented as a fiendish place through the figures of "cruel father and husband", but also as a dumping place for the weak shunned by the city and the labor market. What will happen to "the left-overs"? The TV drama puts the excluded majority in the remote and isolated rural. Although the reasons for "failure" are given as "personal misconduct" and "personal carelessness", the appearance of "the left-overs" conversely challenges the producers' belief that the reform policy provides people with "a lot of potential" and "tremendous possibilities".

Xiaoyun's upward mobility is intertwined with the irreducible subaltern voices of the unemployed, the imprisoned prostitute and the disabled girl abandoned in the rural, all of whom have no place in the national reports of economic growth. As Marx argues, they are figures of the specters outside the domain of political economy:

Political economy, therefore, does not recognize the unoccupied worker, the working-man, in so far as he happens to be outside this labor relationship. The cheat-thief, swindler, beggar, and unemployed; the starving, wretched and criminal working-man—these are figures who do not exist for political economy but only for other eyes, those of the doctor, the judge, the grave digger, and bum-bailiff, etc.; such figures are specters outside its domain (Marx, 2001: 120-121).

The groups disadvantaged in the drama are vanishing in the picture of the economic boom of South China. Yet, the desirable self cannot be presented *without* the failed others. The favored subjects of the domain of political economy exclude, but also paradoxically are dependent upon, these outside specters. “The left-overs” are the gendered specters haunting the current modernization, which precisely produces the very social conditions making them into “a greedy prostitute and a careless factory worker”. The irreducible marks of the imprisoned, the crippled and the excluded entail the unresolved question of social redistribution. In his book *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International* (1994), Derrida suggests that in the time of neo-capitalism and neo-liberalism, there is no disavowal mechanism capable of getting rid of the ghosts of Marx and Marxism: “hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (Derrida, 1994: 37). Thus, the specters of Marx and Marxism are coming back again and again for social justice.

The Strike

In the last two episodes, a usual strike happens. It is led by Xiaoyun. According to the drama's narration, Xiaoyun is designed to go along with the logic of productivity, efficiency, superfluity, and calculation. She should have played the role of a mediator in a capitalist-laborer conflict rather than as a leader of a strike. Once again, the "peasant's consciousness", referring to rural kinship, sisterhood and mutual help, disturbs her formation of a modern self which can be seen in her relations to Mr. Jiang and Lingmei.

Xiaoyun admires Mr. Jiang who treats her only as an "investment": she can keep the production line going. Mr. Jiang gives Xiaoyun a birthday present, an accessory abandoned by his wife. He builds a superficially close relationship with Xiaoyun as he believes human feelings can be calculated into investment for the purpose of mass production. At last, Xiaoyun recognizes that her love and devotion have been taken advantage of by a dishonest male capitalist from Hong Kong, so she forms an alliance with the other women workers to fight for increased wages. She refuses the capitalist logic of human relations just based on calculations and profits.

On the other hand, Xiaoyun is shown to have sympathy for her township fellow, namely the "careless" Lingmei. After working sixteen hours continuously to earn extra money before Christmas, Lingmei is knocked down by a lorry at the gate of the factory

at mid-night. Her right arm is broken. Xiaoyun has already got promoted as a production manager but she does not forget her sister's sufferings. She intervenes and fights for social justice with her township fellows.

In the last episode, a *mise-en-scène* has Mr. Jiang surrounded by a large group of anguished women workers dressed in pink factory uniforms, with Xiaoyun, in short hair, wearing a white shirt and blue jean, standing determinedly in front of the agitated women as a leader of the strike. The boss finally agrees to make concessions. Then the whole group of women workers lifts up Xiaoyun to celebrate the triumph. A sea of pink color overwhelms the screen together with their laughter. Xiaoyun at this time appears as a leader of the working class, or a militant from an immature trade union, or an avant-garde member of the revolutionary movement, or even a nationalist heroine refusing to cooperate with the capitalist from Hong Kong. The solidarity of the women is based on the feeling of "we are sisters from the village". The Hong Kong boss believes that rural women sell their surplus value for the capitalist, but now they are becoming a radical revolutionary force. Here, a once oppressive factory can become a revolutionary place, and Xiaoyun, once an obedient production manager, can also become the leader of the strike. "Peasant consciousness", elsewhere negated as "a hindrance to modernization", is paradoxically transformed into a tool for collective action against social injustice. Later all the core members of the strike are dismissed by

the Hong Kong capitalist and they disappear, except for their leader, Xiaoyun. The TV drama portrays Xiaoyun as “the fittest of the survival”, who still stays in Shenzhen and even becomes the head of another toys factory. The trace of “the rural” as a practice of mutual support cannot easily be erased in the modern self of Xiaoyun. This so-called “peasant consciousness” again has her writing a letter to ask other village fellows to the city to work once she becomes the head of the factory owned by the Township government.

Dai Jinhua comments that *Girls from Outside* can only be an imaginary social picture of conflictual relations, the reality of which has gradually become invisible in the mass media:

The popular TV series *Girls from Outside*, in fact discloses an important fact of the process of Chinese social reconstruction in the 1990s. On the one hand, a huge number of female workers in the large and medium-sized state-run factories have been laid off and on the other, the foreign and joint venture factories in the coastal economic development areas have employed a huge number of rural women workers (some of whom are less than eighteen years old). Although this is not the theme of the TV series, it touches upon the tension-filled relations between capital and labor, and it also euphemistically presents an early stage of trade union struggle. Nevertheless, the “soap opera” form of the TV series has determined that it could be given an imaginary social picture of these tensions and struggles. Although it is an important fact that this highly plausible social conflict really exists in the process of class differentiation, such conflict is gradually disappearing in the “mass” media (Dai, 1999: 21).

However, I believe that this gradually receding “imaginary social picture” cannot fully vanish from any narration of Chinese society with a heritage of Communism and Socialism. It is presumed that there will be no strikes in a communist or socialist state which is governed by workers and peasants. A strike implies that the uncanny past of “proletarian struggle” is interrupting the dominant discourse of modernization. The series’ narration of a “small” labor movement is indebted to the legacy of the revolutionary period, so that the strike not only takes place but is “also euphemistically presented as an early stage of trade union struggle”—implying that the (in)visible burden of “the past” still produces effects at the present.

“Zhao Xiaoyun” on the business card inscribes how, in the age of globalization, a rural woman enters the logic of patriarchal capitalism and undergoes a process of self-transformation through developing a fascination for the assembly line, acquiring a taste for superfluity and efficiency and then becoming a new subject of modernization. The names of Zhao Xiaoyun’s sisters, like Lingmei, Xiuying and others, are almost invisible, fragmentarily appearing only in the names of victims, fallen women, losers or scum, or [gendered] “specters outside the gates of urban factories”. However, we cannot forget that the legacy of the revolutionary era has made Xiaoyun a strike leader fighting for social justice on behalf of the working class and her rural sisters. Here, the mark of “the rural” remains.

Like the fictional Xiaoyun, Anzi, a migrant workers' representative in the Chinese Communist Party Youth Group, is haunted by the memory of her painful past, or the voice of the other in her-self. I will examine Anzi's self-representation and her literary works more closely. From her story, we discover that like the producers of *Girls from Outside*, Anzi worships Shenzhen city but either denigrates the rural as a worthless and abandoned place or romanticizes it as the nostalgic past. Yet, her memory of unbearable pain repeatedly reminds her of exploitation in factory life.

Anzi: Moving to the Centre

Two Decades and Twenty Celebrities, a 1998 China Central Television (CCTV) special TV feature, was produced to celebrate the achievement of the economic reform policy and to recognize the contributions of the awardees to modernization. Among these awardees, sixteen were male entrepreneurs and professionals in such areas as bio-genetics, industry, law, computer, electronics, finance, sports, and music.⁹ As we will see in greater detail, only four awardees came from the countryside: two male farmers who echoed the government reform policy in the early 1980s, one village schoolmistress and one female migrant worker. Only two out of the twenty were women, both of them were from rural areas and one was a migrant worker. Here the

model of “developing the self” was to become a rich and professional citizen, and the ideal figure of the model was a male businessman. In fact, four years after this program appeared, the Sixteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party announced that private entrepreneurs were to be admitted to its membership, traditionally restricted to peasants and workers.

Examining more closely the four awardees from the countryside, we find Song Guoliang, a villager from Hebei province and economic reform pioneer who signed a thirty-year contract with the village government to take over a forest in 1983; Guo Zhiqing, a villager like Song, who signed a contract to plant trees during the early 1980s, changed a barren valley into a beautiful landscape, and won the Asian Most Outstanding People Award from the Asian Agricultural Development Fund in 1995; Wang Guilan, who was sent to the famous revolutionary area of Yan’an in Shaanxi Province as an educated youth, stayed there after 1968, and is now a village schoolmistress; and Anzi, who was called “a successful rural worker”, “a spiritual leader” (Zhao Bin, 2000: 90-91), and “the most famous rural woman worker, the listener and the representative of city dream seekers”. According to the brief introduction of the program:

Anzi works in Shenzhen and is an amateur writer and an acclaimed author of migrant working class literature. She has hosted a radio program, *Anzi's Sky*, for Shenzhen Radio Broadcasting Station, whose target audience is migrant workers. Anzi is the representative of migrant workers, and now, thousands of millions of migrant workers have their own representative writer in her. She began from nothing to become one of the outstanding youths of Shenzhen, one of the representatives of the thirteenth Congress of Youth Group of Chinese Communist Party, and also one of the nationally most advanced female workers. Her legend is an example of the successes of the twenty years of reform policy (Anzi, 1999: 396; my translation).

Anzi's autobiography *Searching for a Dream in the City: Anzi and Her Companies*, narrates how she struggled from being a factory worker on the assembly line to becoming a political representative participating in meetings held in the Great Hall of the People. Along the way, she wrote stories about her migrant worker friend. She comes from a village in Mei County, Guangdong province. Her father is a cook, her mother a housewife, and she has a brother and a sister. In 1984, seventeen-year-old Anzi through her cousin's connections went to Shenzhen to be an electronics factory worker. In her spare time, she took evening courses in junior and high school education and then entered the Department of Chinese at the University of Shenzhen. She has done different kinds of jobs, like assembly worker, hotel waitress, clerk, secretary, reporter, editor, writer, and also businesswoman. She is now the manager of a job agency company and also runs a restaurant. She married a local Shenzhen man, who is an officer of the Department of Propaganda in the Shenzhen Municipal Government.

Hope and Despair

Chen Xin of CASS argues that “the rural” inherent in the prevailing ideology of contemporary China has become a symbol of “the residual in modernization”, “burdens and tumors”, “food producers”, “the element of riot”, and “the target of birth control”. This system of signification is widely shared by officials, scholars and urban residents:

The dominant ideology of our society (shared by officials and a majority of urban people) is that the rural is merely the residue of the modernization process. The rural is doomed to be eradicated, the rural is backward, the rural should not exist. Nine hundred million peasants are merely burdens and tumors that should be cut off as soon as possible; why should we have to put our energies into its future? No need. Our government officials and some famous scholars have always spoken about poverty alleviation and rural works, but what they think deep inside their hearts is that ‘the village runs its own course of development and delusion’, and the functions of the rural are mere *cailanzi* or ‘baskets of vegetables’, *milanzi* or ‘bags of rice’, and *jihua shengyu* or ‘birth control—don’t produce such inferior people!’. Isn’t there now a debate that the quality of Chinese population has deteriorated because of overpopulation in the rural sector? ‘Keep the rural people under control, avoid riots, and that’s enough.’ Given this, how could the question of how to reconstruct the rural community be possibly posed in a serious way? (Xiong, et al, 2002: 52; my translation).

Following Chen’s argument, I would further argue that this hegemonic signifying system is imposed on and accepted by rural subalterns like Huaying and Anzi. As Turner puts it: “hegemony is the process by which members of society are persuaded

to acquiesce in their own subordination”; “the subordinated are persuaded by the ideologies on offer rather than the particulars of their material conditions” (Turner, 1999: 158). Thus, in Anzi’s eyes, Shenzhen is a city of excitement, hope and opportunity, because there are “cars and tall buildings under construction”, signs of modernization. When she first arrived in Shenzhen in 1984, she recalls:

When the car was passing the Shennan Middle Road, I found one building after another, all under construction, next to each other like pillars supporting the sky. This made me, a Hakka girl, who had never before gone out of the village, scream with awe at its sacredness. My first impression of Shenzhen was of a vivid, dynamic form of life, which gave me, a countryside girl, some hope (Anzi, 1999: 6; my translation).

In contrast to Anzi’s impression of Shenzhen, the rural for her refers to a place of despair. After working in Shenzhen for several years, she went to visit her village home. She muses:

I just walked to the backyard of the old house. The longan fruit trees planted by my mother were still there. In the next years they would become ripe, because the leaves have already grown as tall as the second floor of the house. However, the loquat trees, planted by me several years ago, had not grown much. The leaves were badly bitten by the insects, just like the sick children, which really made me very sad (Anzi, 1999: 32; my translation).

The feeling of despair has deepened after fourteen years. Anzi visits her village again with her daughter. The image of the poor loquat trees emerges again:

We then returned to the backyard of the old house. There were only scattered wild grasses, a crescent-shaped pond, and the poor loquat trees. This left feelings of confusion and emptiness behind. [...] The grass before the temple of ancestors was once the playground of children had now become desolate and bleak. Only the mosses on the walls of the temple could tell us about the old stories and legends of An's family (Anzi, 1999: 373-374; my translation).

With her descriptions of “scattered wild grasses”, “poor loquat trees”, “feelings of confusion and emptiness”, and “desolate and bleak playground”, Anzi draws a picture of her village as a place of hopelessness and depression, or as a nostalgic space of past memory, that consisted of old stories and legends of her family.

“Improve Your-Self”

Anzi reiterates that Shenzhen has provided a lot of opportunities for young people, particularly the rural women, to “develop the self” and to become a new Shenzhen woman. The narrator of *Two Decades Twenty Celebrities* also echoes Anzi's idea:

The brave rural workers use their blood and sweat to water the cities and help them to prosper. This narrows the discrepancy between the country and the city. Leading this kind of rapidly changing life, the rural workers broaden their horizon, enhance their working capability, and ultimately they become mature (Zhao Bin, 2000: 102; my translation).

From the above, we find that the city is depicted as a place of prosperity, a paradise of opportunity, and an opportunity for self-transformation. The backward rural people must learn from the advanced urban citizens to become more mature and capable. For example Anzi encourages one of her readers A Juan, to learn business administration and managerial skills, offering “a package of services for food, accommodation, management, education and leisure” (Anzi, 1999: 133), in order to become more competitive in a commercial society:

I just want to say that you do not know how to be a boss even though you have capital. Your boyfriend and you should learn more and improve yourself. In the age of knowledge and information technology, the more knowledge you gain, the more chances you have of winning. English, computer knowledge, business administrative skills, finance, trading, etc., there is so much to learn! I wish that both of you will become great entrepreneurs in the next century (Anzi, 1999: 349; my translation).

What Anzi means here by “learn more and improve yourself” echoes the slogan of “grasp the opportunity to develop the self”, and accepts that the ultimate goal is to become an economically successful person. The options are to be an entrepreneur, ensuring that the thirst for knowledge such as “English, computer knowledge, business administrative skills, finance, trading” is properly channeled for financial capitalism. In her article on “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks”, Yan Hairong argues that

“*suzhi* is a value articulation of human subjectivity” in present-day China. *Suzhi* refers to “the ephemeral qualities of civility, self-discipline, and modernity”. Yan advances that *suzhi* “marks a sense and sensibility of the self’s value in the market economy. As such, it is often used in the negative by the post-Mao state and educational elites to point to the lack of quality of the Chinese laboring masses” (Yan, 2003: 494).

In Anzi’s imagination, a successful rural woman should be a skilled laborer, a manager, or an administration officer in an industrial and commercial society:

Shenzhen is the cradle of the city dream seekers, and also the place for them to fulfill their own life values. The girls from Hunan Province, whose ancestors used hoes, spent hundreds of days of working and sweating in exchange for knowledge of the production technology of high-class garment manufacture. The girls from Chao-Shan Areas in Guangdong Province with only high school qualifications learn the basics of Total Quality Control through tough training. The wild girls from Jinggang Mountain in Jiangxi Province get accustomed to the rigid discipline and intensive rhythm of industrialization. The humble Hakka girls take evening courses in the universities or distance learning, and obtain knowledge of public affairs, English, computers, secretarial skills, and then become nice white-collar workers. The girls from Sichuan Province look strong but are actually quite weak and can no longer cry or feel depressed. All of them not only go beyond their original subsistence condition, but they also overthrow the primitive idea of simply surviving. Stories of Shenzhen working sisters will never end ... (Anzi, 1999: 202; my translation).

The girls mentioned in this passage basically come from the rural areas of inland provinces like Sichuan, Hunan, Jiangxi, and also the suburbs of Guangdong Province.

In Anzi's narration, those girls are originally wild and ignorant. A rural woman is assumed to give up "the hoe", implying a cutting-off from rural practices such as farming, and then formulate "a modern new self", who is here epitomized as a factory worker, an office girl, or an entrepreneur.

In Anzi's short fiction, *Working Lady*, the protagonist, Kangzhen, the chief manager of the Shenzhen Office of a USA corporation, is a model new woman worker of the kind that Anzi admires so much. This is the picture that Anzi gives us of "working lady" Kangzhen:

Every day she wears an expensive, fashionable suit and carries a delicate bag. Her smile is irresistibly charming. [...] To be an excellent Chinese female employee in the eyes of a foreign boss, the key element is to have the abilities needed to survive in commercial society, like computer knowledge, commercial organizing skills, English translation, typing and networking skills. [...] Everybody says that Kangzhen is not an ordinary rural woman worker, but a "working lady". She has good qualities and dignity. She is confident and smart. A colorful dream becomes true. Her next step is to get an overseas training or a job opportunity. She says: 'it is Shenzhen which makes it possible for me to find my true self, I still want to go to the outside world in order to further fulfill my own values' (Anzi, 1992: 142; my translation).

To Kangzhen, or Xiaoyun in *Girls from Outside*, Shenzhen is a place for self-transformation: an innocent, ignorant, coarse, vulgar rural girl becomes a confident, smart, elegant, "working lady" with refined taste and 'suzhi', wearing an

expensive and fashionable suit, carrying a delicate bag, possessing commercial knowledge and speaking both foreign and local languages. As we have seen, this kind of “self-development” is based on negating the past or the rural experiences. However, the new modern self is still haunted by the other—for example, the pain that remains with Anzi.

Memory of Piercing Pain

Although “hegemony’s aim is to resist social change and maintain the status quo” (Turner, 1999: 158), there are cracks in the track of hegemony. Judging from Anzi’s experience, there is an unbearable and unforgettable pain involved in the mode of self-fulfillment she advocates. Anzi had worked in an electronics factory for four months in Shenzhen, and she describes how the pain is now embedded in every cell and fibre of her being:

Several days later, I found my fingers nervously trembling after work. Even if I slightly moved my shoulder, there was the pain; pain was directly screwed into my organs. [...] After a fortnight, my hands could speedily and mechanically repeat the same movement, just like the other female workers. I thought of chicken eating rice in the village, and also of Charlie Chaplin’s film *Modern Times*, which I learned about from my cousin. Like Chaplin in *Modern Times*, I sat along the assembly line and mechanically assembled electric devices. Also, I was always rushing to the toilet with Chaplin-style quick steps (Anzi, 1999: 14; my translation).

Anzi's cousin recommended Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times*, one of the great early twentieth century Western popular critiques of industrialism. Anzi identifies herself with Chaplin's mechanical industrial life. Fourteen years later, she can still recall her pain when she hears a rural girl talk about the mechanical factory work. Anzi describes once again how her fingers are nervously trembling:

I was once a factory worker and my job was to assemble electric devices. My fingers were always filling with extravasated blood, and the pain was extremely severe. This experience of having my finger nerves tremble was unforgettable. Working on the assembly line for long periods is almost like being a human machine (Anzi, 1999: 98; my translation).

Nonetheless, learning that "eight hours per day is abnormal, twelve hours per day is normal" in factory life (Anzi, 1999: 302), how can a rural woman bear the piercing pain and get into the normality of being an assembly line worker? Mr. Jiang's "peasant's consciousness", referring to township fellowship, kinship, sisterhood, once again appears in Anzi's painful memory:

The leaders of Line A, Line B, and Line D were scrutinizing me, but none of them accepted me. The Line C leader was our township fellow, so she promised to count me in her team. My cousin expressed her gratitude, and at that moment, I was really embarrassed and almost cried out. [...] "This job looks simple, but you have to concentrate and to be absolutely careful." Lili talked to my back. She and I belonged to the same line. She was a skilled laborer. She came to teach me whenever our leader was not there.

[...] I felt I was totally exhausted, I wanted to go home terribly, and I wanted to find a place where I could cry out. [...] But hadn't my cousin gradually adapted to this condition and this life? If she could, why couldn't I? (Anzi, 1999: 14).

Anzi, her cousin and Lili worked together and shared the same shelter and food.

While accepting the factory exploitation as normality, they developed a women's bonding and a network of mutual trust and support. From some rural women workers' responses, we can also find the collective experiences cherished. For example, in her letter to Anzi, Jiang Hong praises *Stopovers in Youth* as it helps them to voice their expectations and worries, "in your book, I can see myself and also our sisters' songs and tears!" Anzi replies to her letter in this encouraging way:

A lot of working sisters are puzzled about their future and seek my help, 'Anzi, will it be good to continue to work in the city?' What I can do is to select the girls who have an uplifting spirit and a strong will to survive. I dare not say that my book will be a panacea to their confusion, but at least it can help give them encouragement and support (Jiang, 2003; my translation).

Moreover, Zhu Huixia, another rural working sister, writes to Anzi:

I often wonder if our whole life belongs to the assembly line. NO. You are our model. So, I will not look down upon myself, but I am determined to work in the city. I believe that only if you can love, respect yourself, and empower yourself, your life will be full of vibrant colors (Zhu, 2003; my translation).

Nevertheless, the women's bonding is temporal and fragile. It has not yet become a collective resistance to change the mode of production and its value-system. Anzi's resistance to the assembly line is by quitting her job, only to become a hotel waitress. Hence, her resistance remains an individual act. This is what Foucault criticizes in the modern form of government as "a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques, and of totalization procedures" (Foucault, 1983: 213). In that sense, Anzi, her cousin, and Lili are all simultaneously individualized and totalized. Anzi's identification with Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, her memory of piercing pain, and her encouragement to other working girls all remind us that within the common experience of exploitation, there is a loose ground for generating the women's bonding.

In Anzi's self-representation, by praising Shenzhen as a city of hope, opportunities, excitement and success she denigrates the rural as a place of despair and desolation. While Anzi is climbing the social ladder, she negates her identity of being a rural girl. She claims that she gets her energy from the painting of sunflowers in the city, but not from the real loquat trees in her village home. Yet, her memory of the trembling fingers and unbearable pain does not vanish. It still haunts Anzi who represses the pain by changing her job, but millions of rural women workers continue to endure the same pain.

Conclusion

The slogan of an industrialized economy of “developing the self” implies that a new modern self must be developed to at the expense of rural ways of being. This has become the dominant belief, in which the officials and urban intellectuals like film critics and the producers of *Girls from Outside*, have been persuaded to espouse. So much so that even the rural subalterns like Huaying of LWCU and Anzi consent to the existing value system.

The stories of Zhao Xiaoyun and Anzi are fables of individualism in a capitalist society, in that they determined in being entrepreneurs. When a rural subaltern gets an opportunity to move into a specific privileged group, she has to reject her ties to the rural. In embarking on the process of “developing the self”, these women are portrayed as ignorant, that is, a rural woman has to improve her *suzhi* or quality because the rural is inevitably equated with backwardness and ignorance before achieving citizenship, which is the rhetoric of dominant discourse of development in contemporary China. The signatories of “Why We must Talk about the Environment? A Summary of Nanshan Seminar” declare that the cultural industries actively promote “the image of success” as the absolute model for the whole society:

Since the 1980s, one of the important tasks of the cultural industries has been to promote the ‘image of success,’ as a myth of the new ideology. This image is intimately related to the trend of ‘searching for the self’ [...] The successful are the embodiment of money, consumption, and elevated status; therefore, they have become the representatives of a popular aesthetic of transnational capital in developing countries (*Positions 12: 1*, 2004: 245).

Yet, there are rifts and ruptures in the hegemonic ideology of “searching for the self”. Huaying’s frustration at having “no culture” is encapsulated in her identification with Xiaoyun, since subsistence farming and rural women’s domestic work are considered as trivial jobs. Anzi describes herself as an industrious business woman, a typical product and a model of commercialized society, who prefers an urban lifestyle and its values, but whose “trembling fingers with extravasated blood” still remind her of “how a rural worker is exploited”. Zhao Xiaoyun is depicted as an agent of transnational industry, but she appears as the leader of the strike on behalf of three marginalized social groups, that is, the working class, peasants and women. Her sudden emergence as the strike leader implies that the residual experiences of a proletarian struggle during the revolutionary period have not yet vanished. Huaying’s complaints, the begging voices of the unemployed, the silence of the disabled in the rural gloom and the trapped prostitute behind the wire are impossibly resolved and rendered reducible in the making of the new modern self like that of Zhao Xiaoyun. “The left-over” or residue is embedded in the sign system of an assembly line, a name

card and a Boeing 767. No matter whether we are dealing with a *real* story, like that of Anzi, or with a fictional character of Zhao Xiaoyun, there are still some misfits in their narration about success.

In the next chapter I will discuss in more detail some of the particular figures of the gendered specters outside the domain of “the new modern self”, that is,, the victims of Zhili Toy Factory Fire of Shenzhen of 1993, real women who are still struggling with the pain. As Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, it is very rewarding, though difficult, for us to think of the other, and to put effort into responding to the echoes of that other: “in Eliot’s phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the ‘other echoes [that] inhabit the garden’. It is more rewarding—and more difficult—to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about ‘us’” (Said, 1993: 336).

¹ China Social Services and Development Research Centre (CSD) is a Hong Kong NGO, formed in 1993 by a group of concerned scholars, community organizers, health care professionals, university lecturers and postgraduates. Through research and long-term community development projects, CSD aims at promoting a sustainable development of Chinese society and an enhanced concern and involvement of the people, especially the young people, for China's future development. Since its inception, CSD has organized the following activities: an experimental project on credit union in the mountain area of Qingyuan, Guangdong Province; a three-year project on women's and children's health in Yushui District, Jiangxi Province; the first women's credit union in two villages in the mountain area in Jiangxi Province; a women's health check-up for the village women of Baishui Township of Wanzai County in Jiangxi Province; a training program for women cadres of Jiangxi Provincial Women's Federation; translation and production of resource books such as *South Asian Rural Women's Living Experiences—Health, Labor, and Status*; an exchange program for China-India scholars and community workers; an alternative trade project, Green Empowerment, in which CSD promotes environmental concern and alternative trade of Mainland China's organic lily bulb products in Hong Kong and Taiwan; partnership with Department of Cultural Studies of Lingnan University on a summer Internship Program; Rural Reconstruction Training Sessions under the School of Sustainability in partnership with the China Rural Reconstruction Center, Asian Regional Exchanges for New Alternatives (ARENA), and Institute of Sociology of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), China.

² All of the names of the rural women of LWCU mentioned in this thesis are pseudo names to protect their privacy.

³ <http://www.cc.org.cn/pingtai/020724300/0207243000.htm>

⁴ <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/5303/20010626/497652.html>

⁵ For the details, see "Uplifting the Quality and Making the Media Blooming—Some Comments on TV's Script Writings by Some Examiners of Flying Awards". Beijing: *Arts Daily*, 1992.9.19.

⁶ An image of a cow plowing the field is always associated with the past, primitiveness, backwardness, and poverty. For example, the famous documentary of *He Shang* (1988), a six-episode of TV program about China's modernization, chooses the color yellow to be the sign of "backward" China: yellow earth, yellow river, and peasants. Whenever the narrator emotionally talks about poverty or backwardness, an image of a cow plowing the field is appearing on the screen.

⁷ The role of Mr. Jiang is played by Tong Cheng Chung, an actor from Hong Kong.

⁸ In his famous *Inquiry to the Principles of Political Economy*, Stuart argues that trade and industry can co-operate well, depending on "a taste for superfluity": "both the one [trade] and the other [industry] however depend upon a third principle; to wit, a taste for superfluity, in those who have an equivalent to give for it. This taste will produce demand, and this again will become the main spring of the whole operation" (Stuart, 1805: 231).

⁹ The personalities featured in *Two Decades and Twenty Celebrities* include Lu Ping, the former Chief of the Office of Hong Kong and Macau Affairs of the State Council; Li Ning, a former Olympics champion and now the director of a sports company; Wu Jinglian, a famous economist and a researcher with the Development Research Center of the State Council; Chan Zhangliang, a scientist specializing in bio-genetic technology, the Vice-President of Beijing University and one of the 100 global pioneers chosen by *Time Magazine* in 1993; Yang Huaiding, a stock market consultant in Shanghai and a professor of the Shenyang Institute of Economics and Finance; Zhang Ruimin, director of the Qingdao Haier Corporation which is one of China's biggest electrical appliance companies; Wang Shi, director of the Shenzhen Wanke Limited Company which is one of the biggest real estate agencies; Zhang Hongwei, an entrepreneur from Heilongjiang province and one of the global millionaires chosen by *Forbes* magazine in 1995; and Xie Heilong, a photographer with *China Youth Daily*, famous for taking a photo of a village girl with a pair of big eyes to promote the national fund-raising campaign for rural education, Project of Hope.

Chapter Four

More on Her Pain

“Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story...” (Scarry, 1985: 3). The telling of pain is a question of politics. If we echo the feminist slogan that the “personal is political”, or Enloe’s phrase “the personal is international” (Enloe, 1989: 195-201), then not one single issue of a woman’s painful experience should be dismissed. Jenny Sharpe reminds us that “the story that cannot be told is the one of a subaltern woman who knows and speaks her exploitation. The story that must be told is the text of her exploitation” (Sharpe, 1993: 18-19). Sharpe invokes the ethical question of how an intellectual relates to a subaltern woman, and of how she narrates the story of exploitation. This chapter is a reading of Xiaoying’s story of pain and it represents her text as a rural woman. The first part will be an analytical assessment of how urban intellectuals help Xiaoying voice out her painful story in visual and written texts, while the second part investigates the text of her pain, by questioning the foundations of the urban intellectuals’ positions. The second part of the study is a supplement to the first.

In the previous chapter, “Questioning the Self”, it was argued that Anzi had climbed the social ladder and become a model of the successful woman, yet she could not forget the memory of the unbearable pain of being an assembly-line rural worker. It was argued that she could see “the pain” on the bodies of other women migrant workers, even if she had interpreted the pain as a sign of the greatness of women’s endurance of hardships, rather than the result of exploitation. “The pain” also occurs in Xiaoying’s body. Xiaoying was critically injured during the Zhili Toy Factory Fire of 1993, which occurred in Shenzhen, southern China.

On 19 November 1993, a horrendous fire broke out at the Zhili Toy Factory, which had been subcontracted to make toys for the Italian multinational, Artsana S.P.A./Chicco. Eighty-seven workers, mainly rural women from Sichuan and Henan provinces, were killed and a further forty-seven were badly burned. Since the dormitory windows were covered with iron bars and the fire escape doors and exits were locked, the charred remains of the victims were found piled up at the exits. After the tragedy, the victims received little compensation from the government, while the factory owners were sentenced to only nine months in prison.

Later that year, a coalition of NGOs in Hong Kong, such as The Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee (CIC) and the Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC), got together to raise public consciousness and concern on the issue of

workers' health and safety. The coalition started an international campaign called, "Our Children Don't Need Blood-Stained Toys", as well as issued a *Charter on the Safe Production of Toys*. Under this pressure from labor and human rights groups, Chicco finally agreed to pay a compensation of just 300 million lira. This compensation fund was temporarily held by Caritas Hong Kong while a full list of victims was being compiled. As none of the official channels were able to provide a complete list of names, activists of the coalition went out in search of the identity of the victims in the relevant rural areas and collected their names and addresses. However, in spite of this hard work, the activists found that resources from the fund were diverted to other projects, including one dealing with artificial limbs and a school building. None of the victims received any money for desperately needed medical treatment until two years later. As for the factory owners, they are now running another toy factory in Dongguan, a manufacturing base in southern China. The factory continues to make products for the Chicco label.¹

The Zhili Inferno was one of the most serious industrial accidents since the economic reform policy, which aroused public attention and controversy. However, in Anzi's autobiography, this is simply mentioned in a few sentences, together with the accident of the explosion of dangerous materials in Qingshui River, along with the flooding in Shenzhen. Anzi writes about Zhili:

In 19 November [1993], there was a big fire in the Zhili Toy Factory of Kuichung Town, Longgang District, Shenzhen. Forty workers were wounded, eighty-one died, and except for two male workers, all were young migrant women workers” (Anzi, 1999: 148; my translation).

Anzi does not mention anything more about the victims, which is in contrast to the detailed stories of successful migrant workers that she presents. The crippled survivors, along with the dead, contradict the myth of Anzi’s belief and value that “anybody can act as the sun”. That is, one can succeed only if one works hard and grasps at every opportunity. In Anzi’s narration, Xiaoying is merely a figure — just an unknown female victim of an industrial disaster, and someone who was a failure of “developing the self” or “being the sun”. Anzi does not express any sympathy for any of the victims of the Zhili Factory Fire which might imply her self-distancing from “failed” rural sisters.

After the Zhili inferno, Hong Kong NGOs, including Christian Industrial Committee (CIC), Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC), Asia Migrant Center (AMC), and Oxfam Hong Kong, launched campaigns to help the victims fight for social justice. Within the publications by these NGOs, Xiaoying is always portrayed as the typical example of an exploited migrant worker in Mainland China because of her serious injuries. Her deformed body is the focus of the stories. For example,

Hands and Feet—Oral Histories of Injured Workers in Shenzhen (Hong Kong: Christian Industrial Committee, 2001), *Fluctuating Lives—the Asian People in Globalization* (Hong Kong: Oxfam, 2002) and Tai Ngai Lung's *Mirror and Mirage: a Photographer's Look at Trade and Responsibility* (Hong Kong: Oxfam, 2003), which raises issues of labor movement and consumer campaign.

Xiaoying (Tai Ngai Lung, 2003).

Anita Chan, a social scientist, also uses Xiaoying's disability in her book entitled, *China's Workers Under Assault: the Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy*, along with Xiaoying's letter, dated 1 August 1997, to Shek Ping Kwan, CIC staff, in which she expresses her gratitude for Shek's concern and encouragement. Xiaoying narrates her pain thus:

After the fire in Shenzhen in 1993, I stayed in the hospital for half a year. The sufferings of those days took away my courage to live. I was in pain the whole day long, and the psychological burden was unbearable. Day in and day out I was covered in tears (Chan, 2001: 134).

Xiaoying's story of pain is also evident in the following chosen texts, three of which are visual and one written. These include a music video, called *Goodbye, Fireflies*, produced by Noise Cooperative, which is a Hong Kong band of four activist members, who made this for social campaigning, demonstration and fund raising purposes. There are also two visual texts which have been produced for the 10th anniversary of the Zhili Fire. The first is *The Story of Xiaoying—Remembering the Zhili Toy Factory Fire 10 Years Ago* of Hong Kong Connections, a well-known documentary TV program by Radio and Television of Hong Kong (RTHK). The Chinese version of the program was screened on 12 October 2003 and the English version, on 18 November 2003 on prime time. The second visual text is called

Xiaoying, the Survivor (Part 1 & 2), from the 4-part series *Funeral of Flowers* made for *Warmth and Cruelty of Life*, a long-running show by Phoenix TV, whose target audiences are overseas Chinese. The whole program of *Funeral of Flowers* was screened in November 2003.² A third text is a literary report called, “Bloody Tracing: a Recent Report on the Victims of the Zhili Toy Factory Fire in Shenzhen on 19 November 1993”, written by Tan Shen, a sociologist of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), together with six postgraduates from universities in Beijing. This literary report, published in 2001 over two issues of *Frontiers*, a magazine of popular literature and literary criticism, is used by *Frontiers* for social research, highlighting the entire list of victims for the purpose of claiming compensation.

All above socio-cultural products represent Xiaoying as a victim of an industrial accident, by focusing on her crippled legs and chronic pain that reproduce a space for moral and public judgment. Questions such as: “could we bear another’s sufferings?”, or, “could we allow another girl such as Xiaoying to appear again?”, or, “who should bear this responsibility?” are distributed to target audiences or readers, who are mainly urban people of different communities.

This chapter will discuss how Xiaoying’s pain is represented in the visual and the written texts. The complex relations between pain, subalternity and subjectivity will also be examined. In her article “The Act of Witnessing: Violence, Poisonous

Knowledge, and Subjectivity”, Veena Das takes Asha, a widow of Indian Partition of 1947, as an example to illustrate a woman’s agency in the complexity of subject positions:

In the process of this decision the subject may have become radically fragmented, and the self may have become a fugitive, but I think what I have described is the formation of the subject, a complex agency made up of divided and fractured subject positions. [...] an exemplary instance of agency seen as a product of different subject positions—transgressor, victim, and witness (Das, 2000: 222).

Out of their political positions, the urban intellectuals of the above texts have attempted to portray Xiaoying as a witness of industrial tragedy, as a victim of global capitalism, and even as a transgressor of the social order. However, this chapter will argue that the aporia, or non-passage, disclosed in the texts, requires a rethink of social movements based merely on accusations of male/capitalist exploitation, collections of visible proof of women’s physical pain, and targets of changing the legal system.

Disturbing Deformity

Monitoring, reporting on, and campaigning on behalf of individuals and causes are first of all a pedagogic task. In identifying sites of distress and making that distress vivid to us, photographic images have come to play a decisive role (Sontag, 2002: 253).

In her lecture on “War and Photography”, a contribution to *Human Rights, Human Wrongs: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 2001*, Susan Sontag articulates the complicated relation between photography and war, and explains how the iconography of human suffering is deemed worthy of representation in anti-war pedagogy. The activists and media workers engaged in the Zhili’s campaign have made Xiaoying’s distress vivid by repeatedly using photographic images of her deformed body. The aim of these images is first to raise public indignation and only then as a curb to injustices.

At the end of the TV series, *Girls from Outside* (1992), the protagonist, Zhao Xiaoyun, gives her former boss her name card just before flying out to Thailand. The name card bears her designation as the head of a township-village enterprise toy factory based in Shenzhen. The symbolism of this act will be familiar to those who know what happened in the next year. In May 1993, the Kader Toy Factory, based in Thailand, experienced a terrible fire, which resulted in the deaths of 289 people and

the injury of 469 more. 1993 also saw a fire break out at the Zhili Toy Factory in Shenzhen later that November. Both factories were owned and run by Hong Kong capitalists.

In contrast to the fictional Zhao Xiaoyun's successful and honorable name card, the real rural woman, Xiaoying, a loser in the hegemonic project of "developing the self", is shown with a totally different name card in another visual representation. In RTHK's thirty-minute documentary, *The Story of Xiaoying—Remembering the Zhili Toy Factory Five Ten Years Ago*, screened in October and November 2003, Xiaoying is portrayed as a labor activist.

Panning over the large array of books about the rights of migrant laborers placed on the desk, we are shown a close-up of Xiaoying's holding up her name card. On it is written, "Especially for Migrant Worker Friends: Dexing Consultation Services Center—Labor Services Unit". This picture is superimposed by the narrator's voice informing the viewer that Xiaoying has formed a Clinic to offer consultations to help other victims of industrial accidents who have been physically handicapped. Xiaoying's suffering is then elaborated upon:

[Xiaoying] sustained severe burns over 75 per cent of her body. In the past ten years, she has had 37 operations. Her left leg has been amputated and there are only two fingers remaining on her left hand. To say she has suffered pain would be a colossal understatement.

The Story of Xiaoying begins with a scene from 30 July 2003, at the Chicco Toys Hong Kong Office, where NGO activists, Xiaoying and her brother are all arguing with Chicco's representative about compensation and safe working conditions. Before the camera, Xiaoying looks angry and determined, as she openly discloses her proof of victim-hood and reasons for demanding compensation. The injury on her abdomen, her amputated left leg, and her remaining fingers are clearly seen on the screen through long takes and close-up shots.

This is similar to *Xiaoying, the Survivor*, a Phoenix TV's two-hour documentary program. In this rendition, the same clips of interview conducted between NGO activists and Xiaoying in November 1999 are complimented by a music video made by *Noise Cooperative*, in which her disturbing deformed body remains the focus. *Noise Cooperative's* 12-minute music video is entitled, *Goodbye, Fireflies: Xiaoying's Story*. The music video is divided into three parts: the first is a song about Xiaoying's story; the second, an interview with Xiaoying conducted in Sichuan on 10 November 1999, in which Xiaoying displays her contorted legs, and the third part, where statements of explanations for the tragedy and an accusation are depicted in Chinese characters. These read, "the complicity of the government and the capitalists, and the lack of fire precautions".³ This music video has circulated among NGOs, community organizations and schools to raise public awareness.

To further arouse public attention to the plight of the victims, the band also visited different communities and universities in Hong Kong, displaying the music video for fund-raising purposes. On 3 November 2000, Noise Cooperative performed at the Wing On Plaza in Lingnan University. The University prides itself as a place promoting liberal arts education, where students are nurtured with a mission of “engaging the world” and a deep sense of serving the community. Organized by the Department of Cultural Studies, this event brought together the band, social movement activists, teachers and students to participate in an arts performance, which was also a social campaign. In front of students and teachers from different disciplines, A Ban, the female composer and singer of the song *Goodbye, Fireflies*, re-told the story of a gendered subaltern.

Xiaoying, a fifteen-year-old village girl, goes to Shenzhen to work in order to support her brother’s schooling. She works 12 hours a day in a toy factory, for a remuneration of only two hundred yuan a month (approximately USD24 in today’s terms). On 19 November 1993, a fire suddenly breaks out and leads to the tragic death of 84 young women. Xiaoying survives, but is crippled and returns home.

The lyrics of *Goodbye, Fireflies* are as follows:

Xiaoying is always happily jumping in the village
Wandering around the mountains and fields
She most loves catching the fireflies
And watching their twinkling tails

One day she hears her brother crying
There is no money to go to school
She packs her bag with some clothes and calls
“Dad, mum, and brother, goodbye!”
The fifteen-year-old baby-faced rural working girl

In a toy factory in Shenzhen
She works 12 hours everyday
The most terrifying thing is being scolded and searched by the guard
“Stand up, don’t move.”
Just for a salary of only two hundred yuan

Xiaoying sews a hairy toy
A toy for European children
Each costs several hundred yuan
She thinks of the fireflies
Work floor and dormitory are her world

On an afternoon in 1993
All were hurriedly sewing Christmas presents for European children
When the cry, “Fire! Escape!”
Running and screaming, but doors and windows are locked
Eighty-four girls gone forever

Lying on a wooden stretcher, Xiaoying comes back to the village
Neck, back and legs are all wounded
Shoulders, hands, and legs can’t work any more
She cries, “I am useless, I am a heavy burden.”

Xiaoying hides at home and does not dare go out
The curious stares hurt her
Her heart suffers most when looking at her parents
Gently smiling but their eyes filling up with tears
Just like the twinkling fireflies (my translation).

According to the lyrics, Xiaoying is depicted as an innocent, sweet, hard working village girl but one who becomes a poor victim. Her pains are constructed by the poverty of village life, exploitation of transnational trade, the fire, a burnt body, permanent handicap, curious stares and finally, her parents' sadness. The singer, on behalf of Xiaoying, tries to translate Xiaoying's personal pain into the public sphere, which then requires the general public to condemn and criticize the circumstances.

Along with their live performances, Noise Cooperative has also appeared on MTV. Their visual and written materials are used as teaching tools to raise public awareness and have been also used as course material, in for example, classes such as, "Narrating Hong Kong" and "Workshop in Cultural Practices", offered by the Department of Cultural Studies of Lingnan University. This is done as a kind of cultural practice in trying to understand the other's world beyond the classroom. In this case, the world of a subaltern rural woman.

Many students, who attended these Cultural Studies classes, including the author, were more than shocked when confronted by a close-up of Xiaoying's red stump, as shown on MTV. Speaking directly to the viewer, she calmly complains that in the past six years, she has repeatedly gotten fevers, and has wound has bled and become infected. The audience is left haunted by a series of disturbing images of a woman's deformity.

This really is an example of what Sontag discusses with regard to the importance of shattering experiences created by the photographic image: “if beautifying bleaches out moral response, showing what is hard to look at invites an active judgment. Shock may be the point of the photograph. For photographs to accuse, they must shock” (Sontag, 2002: 257). Xiaoying herself appears on the screen, sitting on a chair and showing her wounds. The long-takes and close-ups of her distorted legs, along with the swollen and infected wounds, express the torments of a rural woman’s flesh. This has a powerful effect: Xiaoying is a real witness to trauma. She is a victim, but also a survivor. And by her appearance, she provides a visual testimony calling for social justice.

In a similar attempt to get the public to make a judgment, the Phoenix TV invites the audience to comment on its website. One viewer, Wang Zhoubo, writes his comments entitled, “The Stimulation by *The Funeral of Flowers*”, which stresses the impact of “strong stimulation” by the “suffocating” images:

The destruction of these beautiful lives really makes one feel suffocated. However, only with the strong impact of “stimulation”, could we deeply understand how our nation develops, by paying so heavy a cost, and only then can we know what we should do in the future (my translation).⁴

On the screen, Xiaoying talks about her physical suffering and sometimes touches the wound to prove the numbness. She has occupied the subject positions of what Das calls, “victim, witness and transgressor”. She objectifies and transgresses her pain by taking a double role of patient and doctor. Her visible bodily injuries are pictured as a testimony of the exploitation in the global economy. She is shown as part of a cheap labor force, a Third World rural woman, who supports the lifestyle of European children. We are constantly reminded that her pain is not a purely personal pain caused by a natural accident. As Scarry points out: ‘the human attempt to reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing pain itself into avenues of objectification is a project laden with practical and ethical consequence’ (Scarry, 1985: 6). Scarry urges for turning an individual pain into a social issue, implying an ethical and practical task of dealing with the sufferers, or the others, within society.

Therefore, the making of the music video is a project to address the inequality of international trade, as well as objectifying a gendered subaltern’s pain within a global context. It also makes the linkage between a producer of toys in China and the international audience more clear. The visual image of the wound requires an ethical response from the public, as Sontag asks viewers to intervene:

The arousal of conscience is not generally regarded as an end in itself. It is understood as a prelude, the necessary prelude, to embarking on some course of action. An image seems an appeal to do something, not just to feel disturbed. Indignant. The image says: Stops this. Intervene, take action (Sontag, 2002: 272).

The final part of the MTV profile is Xiaoying's strong accusation. She is represented as a subject of both subordination and resistance. Xiaoying is angry and determined when she complains that she and other victims have not yet received enough compensation for medical treatment, to cover the expensive costs for operations, and the purchases of artificial limbs, wheelchairs, and crutches. She claims this as a right of handicapped workers, patients and families. She then continues to accuse the Italian Toy Company, Chicco, along with its Hong Kong owned factory contractor, of only being concerned with profit-making, and of exploitation. The workers work between 15 and 16 hours per day, for a monthly salary of two hundred yuan, while a junior worker would receive only one hundred yuan a month. In a long-take shot, Xiaoying is shown sitting on a bed with a crutch beside her. Looking directly at the camera, she narrates her story of exploitation and severe and prolonged pain:

The Italian boss takes the toys to Italy for sale, while the Hong Kong boss produces the toys on the Mainland in factories that aim only to make a profit. It is us, the workers, who make the toys, before they are exported to Italy for great profit. Thus, the Italian company should compensate us, compensate all their workers who have been injured in industrial accidents. My wound still bleeds and oozes pus, which leads to great swelling, pain and high fevers. It has been like this for the last six years, with no change. I came back home with my entire body full of wounds. All the operations are very expensive. I have only been able to undertake preliminary treatment, but I still need artificial limbs, a wheelchair, or crutches. I need the Italian toy company to compensate me, to help cover my living and medical expenses (my translation).

Xiaoying's complaints and convictions do not merely represent an industrial disaster, but also create a moral domain for public judgment. The visual representation of the pain is embedded with the question: as human beings, should we tolerate this "pain" in our global society? The painful mutilation of Xiaoying's body has become a mark, or an obstacle, to forgetting; thus, her damaged body becomes a haunting memory. The pain is the medium through which the memory is created. Xiaoying's exploitation and victim-hood are fully visible on her broken body, just as her bravery and determination in fighting for social justice is visible on her face, resolute, without any hint of fear or self-pity. Human dignity and the capacity for survival transcend the exploitation and injustice, as Xiaoying's interior sentence is translated into the realm of shared reality.

Ludwig Wittgenstein formulates the questions about the communicability of pain and inalienability of pain. He argues that to say 'I am in pain' is not the end of a language game but the beginning of it. The expression of pain is an invitation to share. It cannot be treated as a purely personal experience. How can one's experience of pain be communicated to another person? Wittgenstein gives us an example that my pain may be located in another's body, and that the pain of the other may be experienced in my body: "someone asks me to touch the painful spot with my right hand. I do so and looking round perceive that I am touching my neighbor's hand ... This would be pain felt in another's body" (Wittgenstein, 1953: 49).

Both the Noise Cooperative's MTV episode and RTHK's *The Story of Xiaoying* share the physical and mental anguish of industrial accident victims with their audiences. So does the literary report "Bloody Tracing: a Recent Report on the Victims of the Fire of Zhili Toy Factory in Shenzhen on 19 November 1993", written by Tan Shen of CASS, with six other postgraduate students. The team of researchers found that the Italian company, Chicco, issued an ultimatum, promising compensation only if a complete name list of the victims, either the dead or injured was produced. As no official institution on Mainland China would take up this responsibility, Tan and her research team from different universities in Beijing, set out to trace the victims. The research team spent up to two years searching for the

victims, who came mostly from villages in inland Sichuan and Henan provinces. The report was then published in the literary studies and criticism magazine, *Frontiers*.⁵

The report is composed of different parts in which there are detailed descriptions about Xiaoying's pain. The authors follow the same formula, by making visible the chronic pains occurring in Xiaoying's body. The report also reasserts the desperate need of compensation from Chicco Company if only for medical treatment. In the "Chongqing: The First Tracing Report" (July 1999), the author describes the unbearable pain of Xiaoying:

We ask Xiaoying if she will allow us to see her wounds. Though we do expect the severity of these wounds, we feel a kind of piercing and shocking attack when we are actually confronted by them. Her shoulders and legs are totally disfigured, and one sole is completely cut off, and replaced by an artificial sole which supports her body. Xiaoying tells us that her wounds frequently break and bleed (we can see some blood taint penetrating through her dress from the wounds). If she catches a cold, she generally also gets a fever and then the wounds get swollen and inflamed, preventing her from even going downstairs to buy some medicine. In the summer, she cannot sweat and her pain is unbearable (Tan, et al., 2001: 12; my translation).

According to the "Chongqing: The Second Tracing Report" (November 1999), the researchers visited Xiaoying again:

Liu Chengfu found that, compared with her last time, Xiaoying's legs had grown more tumors, which were extraordinarily red and swollen, unsightly to the eye. Xiaoying herself complained about her high fevers – of about 41- 42 degrees Celsius – that accompanied the swelling. [...] Xiaoying narrated her pain, sighing that she, “cannot live any longer. I have so many wounds, it is impossible for me to live long” (Tan, et al., 2001: 15; my translation).

In “The Unfinished Afterword”, Tan Shen also writes about Xiaoying's periods of pain:

In August, Xiaoying sent me a letter telling me that she went to Chongqing for surgery, where ‘two pieces of duck-eggs-like flesh are cut off from my foot for skin grafting’. At that time, the surgery was fine, but six months after coming back home, the wound was full of pus, she ran a high fever and was sent to hospital again... Xiaoying said that it was her sixteenth surgery. On the phone, Xiaoying told me how difficult it was becoming to find any good skin from her own body to help with the skin grafts. To avoid the high fevers, the doctor suggested amputation. In spite of her efforts to keep her leg, it does appear that she might have to get it amputated. Xiaoying feels really helpless, and asks for my advice: “What should she do?” She is too scared to undergo radical surgery again. And, while the surgery itself costs ten thousand yuan, an artificial limb is equally expensive. She feels ‘fear and panic’ about her future. On the phone, I can feel Xiaoying's voice quivering, the unexpected quivering of an exceptionally strong woman who has dealt with her extreme condition and pain with so much dignity (Tan, et al., 2001b: 81; my translation).

To Tan Shen, Xiaoying's pain is not just evidence of capitalist exploitation, but also disgracefully illustrates the image of Socialist China in which peasants and workers are supposed to be masters of society. What made this situation more

poignant is that none of the official channels, such as the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the Chinese Embassy, or any local authority has taken the responsibility of providing a complete list of the Zhili victims. This has simply further instigated the anger and sympathy of Tan Shen and others. She writes:

From what the victims of the Zhili fire said, I have become more and more conscious of an unfair and inhuman structure, in which migrant workers lie at the bottom of the pile, totally marginalized. [...] In the conflicts between foreigner capitalists and migrant workers, the local government protects its own interests by all means and does so in the name of “economic development”. This is essentially by ignoring the rights of migrant workers (Tan, et al, 2001: 22; my translation).

In the literary text, one can clearly see how the research team and representatives of the workers, not only disclose the unfair treatment of the victims for the purpose of compensation, but also how they challenge the existing development policy which privileges foreign capitalists and local elites against ordinary workers. This also reactivates the legacy of Marxism and, in rather an ironic way, invokes past memories of the working class struggles in the history of the Chinese Communist Party.

In one classic tale, the epitome of exploitation is *Luchaibang*, literally “skinny firewood”. She is a fictional character in the leftist writer Xia Yan’s famous literary work, *The Bonded Laborer* (1936). This story describes how women peasant workers

in a Japanese spinning factory in Shanghai are exploited in the 1930s.⁶ Similar to Xia Yan's accusations of colonialism and imperialism, the authors of *Bloody Tracing* represent the damaged gendered bodies as proof of exploitative development and the global economy, as they seek public judgment, while implicitly appealing for a new proletarian struggle.

The research team, on behalf of the workers, acts as the plaintiffs in claiming compensation. This is illuminating in terms of the way that Jean-Francois Lyotard differentiates between a victim and a plaintiff: "it is in the nature of a victim not to be able to prove that one has been done a wrong. A plaintiff is someone who has incurred damages and who disposes of the means to prove it. One becomes a victim if one loses these means" (Lyotard, 1988: 8). The report further implies that a new working class may be formed, based on common shared experiences of sufferings and pain among the peasant workers; that this is, to a certain extent, indebted to the past histories of the labor movement in revolutionary China.

Social scientists support the sub-proletariat class to obtain a legal status through detailed depictions of Xiaoying's disturbing deformity which are addressed to mainly urban readers. Yet, I argue that there is something else of her pain: that the shocking images provide a starting point to coming closer to a rural subaltern.

Gendered Constraints

The cultural activists of Noise Cooperative, the directors of RTHK's *The Story of Xiaoying*, Phoenix TV's *Xiaoying, the Survivor* and the authors of the literary report do not deal with the issues of gendered constraints, elite chartered ignorance and the future development of the rural community. Yet, I believe that these questions help in understanding the complexity of women's subalternity, and to challenge the leftist conventional idea of proletariat's struggle, while enlarging the space of debate of social movements. What follows is a reading of the indelible imprints of Xiaoying's pain from the visual and written texts mentioned above.

In order to fight for social justice, the urban intellectuals have constructed Xiaoying as an object of exploitation and use her victim-hood as the incipient spark of labor movement. In other words, the oppressors are depicted either as male capitalists or the local government, while the oppressed are clearly female migrant workers. They argue mainly for a change of the legal system, making calls for a safer working environment and better fire protection. For example, the last part of the Noise Cooperative's *Goodbye, Fireflies* is a consecutive of four shots of four statements, which represent an explanation of the event, an accusation and demands for compensation and social justice, are shown on the black screen in white and red Chinese characters: "in November 1993, the Zhili Toy Factory, heavily invested in by

Hong Kong businessman in Shenzhen, caught fire, killing 87 workers and injuring 47 others. This was a result of a conspiracy between the government and entrepreneurs, compounded by inadequate fire safety facilities and equipment.” This was followed by a promotion for “The Coalition for the Safe Production of Toys”.

Similarly, RTHK’s *The Story of Xiaoying* provides the viewers with black and white photographs of the aftermath of the inferno: the ruins of the factory site and the charred and mutilated bodies covered with white sheets. Along with this scene of a corpse-strewn factory site, the male voice-over informs the audience that: “the cause of the fire was a short circuit in an outdated electrical system. The management claimed, that for security reasons, metal bars had been fixed to all the windows. Thus, many escape routes were blocked, effectively leaving only one exist available”. This scene is then followed by another of Xiaoying and her brother having an argument with a female representative of the Chicco Toy Hong Kong office, who explains that the company has already adopted Codes of Conduct. Meanwhile, Xiaoying, as the plaintiff, shares the same idea: “they should care more about the people and the conditions in which they make the toys”. After attending a workers’ safety conference in Bangkok held to remember Kader fire and visiting a labor museum, Xiaoying organizes a commemoration of the Zhili Fire in her village. She uses this opportunity to remind the villagers, particularly the young and old, that development

has both a positive and negative side to it. And that neglecting the safety of the workers must be seen as a negative. All she wants, she claims, is to “try and increase the public awareness of safety and protection issues in the workplace.” In other words, the presuppositions of the above texts are not only that foreign capitalists and local government are the original perpetrators of industrial disasters and the cause of exploitation, but also that victim-hood is the rationale of the proletariat’s struggle and the only solution to the capitalist exploitation is the development of a social movement, which advocates for workers’ safety through a change in the law.

The public is seen to share a similar feeling as attested by “A Letter to Chen Xiaonan”, posted on 4 December 2003 on the Phoenix TV website. The author of the anonymous letter is impressed by the series of *The Funeral of Flowers*. S/he comes from the same home town as the Zhili victims. S/he was 14 years old in 1993 and is now a white collar worker. The letter blames the accident on the cruelty of local government and foreign investors:

I think that an event like the Zhili fire will happen again. If you go to Dongguan and Shenzhen, you will find that in some factories, the inadequate fire safety facilities continued to be approved due to a blind eye by the local government. The reasons why foreign investors come to China, is not because of a ripe environment of investment, but because our government ‘does a good job’, which violates not only labor laws, but also encourages child labor and tax evasion” (my translation).⁷

As I mentioned, the above texts engage the Zhili issue by displaying a series of disturbing images, including a victim's horrific injury, as a means of addressing the public to an exploited subaltern woman. The unexamined victimhood has become an overwhelming element in their narration about Xiaoying's exploitation. Yet, I argue that we need to have a deeper understanding into such questions: what made Xiaoying endure such working conditions and suffering without a word of complaint until the outbreak of the fire? And how does Xiaoying now make sense of her decision to support her brother's education?

Being a responsible and dutiful daughter and sister, Xiaoying preserves more or less women's subalternity. Here, subalterneity means accepting oppression as a norm, and not willingness to make any change. As the song reminds us, Xiaoying's reason for supporting her brother's education is taken with no thought for herself. It is the only "natural" thing to do:

One day *she heard her brother crying*
For no money to go to school
She then carries a bag with some clothes
"Dad, mum, and brother, goodbye!"
The fifteen-year-old baby faced rural working girl

This is echoed by the first part of the documentary *Xiaoying, the Survivor* made by Phoenix TV, which fully covers how Xiaoying suffers from pain. In this section, there is a scene which highlights how women have internalized constraints work against social transformation. This scene is set in a courtyard in Xiaoying's village located in Sichuan province. The depiction is an interview, composed of alternate shots, between Chen Xiaonan, the hostess from the city, and Xiaoying, a rural victim. Chen, around thirty years old, has slightly curly short hair, wears make-up, and is dressed in blue jeans, blue jacket and sports shoes. Meanwhile, Xiaoying, twenty-five years old, wears dark purple clothes and a pair of black shoes. Talking about the reason of going to the city, Xiaoying discusses issues of literacy among rural women, gender hierarchy, and women's unnatural responsibility:

Chen: are there many cases where boys go to school, while their sisters have to stop?

Xiaoying: there are many cases in our village.

Chen: are there any cases where a girl can continue to go to school?

Xiaoying: very few. It is very rare that a boy will go out to work in order to support his sister's schooling.

Chen: you also wanted to let your brother continue with his studies?

Xiaoying: yes, our family fully supports him.

Chen: so you don't complain about that.

Xiaoying: *I don't blame either my brother or my parents. I think I need to live up to my responsibilities and duties. This is what a girl should do. I was lucky enough to go to junior high school, while some girls only managed to finish primary school or less. Even now, many girls may not know how to even write a simple letter (my translation).*

The hostess presupposes that rural women are suppressed by rural men, thereby making rural women objects of male exploitation. However, Xiaoying's answer provides us a complicated picture that illustrates, not only that she is the object of male exploitation, but that she is also its subject: "I don't blame either my brother or my parents. I think I need to live up to my responsibilities and duties. This is what a girl should do." Xiaoying considered the duty of supporting her brother to enter the educated class as a natural, but not cultural, choice. This type of coercive self-sacrifice is what Jacques Derrida calls (in Greek), "*aporia*", or non-passage. This can be described as "the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the non-passage..." (Derrida, 1993: 8). It is also a feeling of being stuck: "the places of *aporia* in which I have found myself, let us say, regularly tied up, indeed, paralyzed" (Derrida, 1993: 13). To experience *aporia* is a kind of "possibility of impossibility", as if one were at the crossroad of two beautiful, but opposite things. In other words, one has reached the limits of truth. Derrida elaborates the state of living within the *aporia*:

But the question of knowing what it means 'to experience the *aporia*,' indeed to put into operation the *aporia*, remains. It is not necessarily a failure or a simple paralysis, the sterile negativity of the impasse. It is neither stopping at it nor overcoming it (Derrida, 1993: 32).

In Xiaoying's case, her devotion and commitment to her family is of course a good virtue, but the truth is that it coexists with male exploitation and perhaps even hinders social change. Similarly, Tan Shen interprets Xiaoying's unquestioned passion, as "perhaps, women migrant workers have never thought that this is a sacrifice; maybe it a sense of achievement through sharing parents' burdens, which is the same as having a family honor when their brothers can go to university." Tan Shen continues: "behind the family policy and women migrant workers' willingness, what we have found is the trace of conventional gender division of labor" (Tan, 1999: 5-18). Tan problematizes women's self-sacrifice by implying that women act as the subjects of exploitation through a sense of satisfaction. Spivak further argues that it is the women's complicity with patriarchy that separates women from organic intellectuality:

[O]ne of the bases in women's subalternity is internalized constraints seen as responsibility, and therefore the very basis of gender-ethics. Here woman's separation from organic intellectuality is a complicity with gendering that cannot not be perceived by many as sweetness, virtue, innocence, simplicity" (Spivak, 1995b: xxvii).

Xiaoying's acceptance of a gender hierarchy as a natural choice is embodied through sacrifice, but it is also has a sense of dignity and achievement, because it is she who takes up the responsibility of supporting her family. Women always

themselves accept this kind of beautiful sacrifice, willingly or unwillingly. This acknowledgement of women's internalized gendering should be considered if any social movement could successfully move on, in terms of questioning the "taken-for-granted". Paradoxically, the women's bearing on home and social transformation might be positive, but they work against each other. Each decision requires taking risk; yet, one can know it only after making a choice. At that moment, we find that we are not only trapped in a moral dilemma, but also have to defer a moral judgment. This is the site of *aporia*.

Elite Ignorance

Apart from gendered internalized constraints, one other issue not yet acknowledged by urban activists or filmmakers, is elite sanctioned ignorance about unequal rural-urban relations. In Phoenix TV's *Xiaoying, the Survivor*, the hostess's ignorance about rural conditions is emphasized through her questions:

Chen: you were only 15 years old when you went out to work. Was it common in the village?

Xiaoying: *some children had already gone out to work by the time they turned 12 or 13 years old.*

Chen: they are only kids, as were you at that time. Parents are supposed to take care of children at home, so why would parents let their children go such far away?

Xiaoying: *you can't say that parents take care of children. Rural children are independent, who always have some type of labor to carry out around the farm, including rearing pigs or herding cows.* (my translation).

The hostess's questioning of why rural parents allow their children to seek job "far away" discloses her ignorance about the reality of rural life in contemporary China. It also displays an ignorance of the rural-urban imbalance that is present. Her image of the rural is only visible by rural people coming to work in the cities. She has no perception of the widening gap between urban and rural children within the context of international division of labor. As Raymond Williams argues that the rural is always dismissed in the imperialist division of the world: "most countries in the world were still predominantly rural, but within the imperialist division of the world they did not really count, were not in important ways 'there'" (Williams, 1989: 83). He further emphasizes the underlying crisis generated from interrelations of the country and the city:

Since the beginning of the capitalist agrarian mode of production, our powerful images of country and city have been ways of responding to a whole social development. That is why, in the end, we must not limit ourselves to their contrast but go on to see their interrelations, and through these the real shape of the underlying crisis (Williams, 1989: 81).

In contemporary China, particularly after national policies arguing for speedy modernization, rural labor and resources have largely been channeled towards export-oriented industrialization. Under these circumstances, any rural community service is basically self-financed by the rural people themselves, including education,

medical care and even public facilities. Xiaoying's answer not only highlights the hostess's ignorance about the historical of country and city, but also explains how the policy of destructive development directly affects rural children at the ground level. It has become natural that rural children like Xiaoying has the choice to either work on the farm or go out to the city. The latter choice, being more financially lucrative, has become the most visibly common form of understanding rural-urban relations. This is simply because rural workers or child laborers in the city can be easily "seen" by urban people.

Through this television program, it is easy to see the contrast between the urban educated hostess and the rural disabled worker. The unfair and imbalanced relationship between city and countryside is deeply embedded in the hostess's question. Xiaoying and Chen, share the common bond of gender and generation, but their class and cultural difference is far stronger. Elite sanctioned ignorance about rural society needs to be acknowledged as a form of complicity within the existing knowledge production system, which makes the rural invisible. The dialogue between these two different worlds, not only uncovers a great divide between rural and urban, but also raises the issue of how the gap can be bridged. One good starting point is the acknowledgement of the missing linkage between the rural subaltern and the urban elite.

The Coercive Desire

The above mentioned documentaries, the literary report and the MTV program are largely concentrated on compensation, safety production, and the legal status of the migrant workers. However, it is equally important to take seriously the rural-urban relationship when discussing the current proletariat's movement. There is one scene in RTHK's documentary, where Xiaoying is playing with her daughter while her mother-in-law sits quietly beside them. The male narrator's voice-over says: "less than a month after her birth, her father had to go away to Shenzhen for work and has not seen her since". The documentary represents Xiaoying as a strong woman with a survival will to recover from her serious pains and to lead a normal life. Even though her husband is absent, she can manage to support her family. However, the underlying picture remains: with her husband's absence, the disabled female, the girl child, and the old woman are all excluded from the city because they do not have labor for sale and cannot be wage earners. The question of hierarchical rural-urban relationship derived from exploitative modernization policies needs to be addressed within the labor movement. However, the urban media workers have not further explored this point even when Xiaoying's deformity catches their eyes.

In the dominant discourse of development, the coercive desire can be understood through the overwhelming image of city as hope and countryside as

hopeless. In the literary report, *Bloody Tracing*, the effect of the coercive desire still leaves an indelible imprint on Xiaoying's experiences of trauma, which is neglected by the authors:

Xiaoying said that she wanted to open a store, but that it wouldn't make money; Xiaoying still wanted to go to the city to work, but who would employ a handicapped person like her? Xiaoying said that she hated the Hong Kong boss, and the trauma of the fire could not be compensated. 'The boss did not treat the workers as human beings; we always held strikes at that time' (Tan, et al., 2001:13; my translation).

Similarly, the RTHK's documentary does not clearly address Xiaoying's desire of going to the city. Xiaoying's brother, appearing in front of the camera, testifies that his sister is a victim of an industrial accident: "she was just a body of blood and pus", and "skin all blackened, every inch hurt, oozing blood and pus". Yet we also see that when Xiaoying comes back to visit her village, in the heat of sun, she bows her head and plays with the leaves, recalling: "when I left, I was very happy to be going for work. I wanted to see the outside world".

Why cannot all the hatred and the pain inscribed on her body repress her desire of still going to the city? If we contextualize Xiaoying's desire, we can find that on the cultural landscape of contemporary China, the city signifies goodness, opportunities and advancement; while in contrast, the rural epitomizes negativity,

failure, and backwardness. Xiaoying's desire of going to the city is fused with her feelings of being confident and wanting the dignity and respect of being recognized as 'urban'. Therefore, there is no doubt that the rural can only be associated with the past memory of village life, or mourning the Zhili Fire through the images of weeping old women in RTHK's documentary. At the end of the final episode of *Funeral of Flowers*, the viewer is shown the rural as a gloomy place through black-and-white shots of rural old people in slow motion, under the male voice-over:

In this little village, except four newly built houses by the compensation fund of four dead sisters, the life of the poor has not changed. In this beautiful place, it seems that the earth cannot afford to let people live on. After the death of four sisters, their brothers follow the suit to go to the city. To them, maybe leaving for the city is the only way out (my translation).

The idea of leaving for the city and securing a legal status as the ultimate solution for rural people is also shared by the authors of the literary report. Here, no mention is made about the future development of the rural society. The authors have taken on the agenda of fighting for migrant's legal rights. Therefore, the plight of the sub-proletariat, the vulnerability of their families in the countryside and the recurring strikes are described in full details. For example, according to the literary report, some migrant workers are willing to come back to the same factory even after being

injured. Some victims had the mistaken impression that the researchers were the representatives of the Hong Kong boss, and even expressed their great expectation of getting a job in the same factory. Lin Xiaoshun, one of the seriously injured workers, made great effort to rescue the workers from the fire. He explains: “it is difficult to find a job. If you work in a new factory, no one knows you and so the salary may be very low. We have always worked for our boss, perhaps he may take care of us.” After calculating the cost of going to the city, which can be around one thousand yuan, a big sum of money in the village, the author unwillingly draws a conclusion: “I cannot help understanding the hardships of going out to work. To them, it is not a question of “like it or not”, but definitely of no choice”. Moreover, according to Xu Hongyun, a Zhili female victim, recalled her memory of the fragmented strikes, echoed Xiaoying’s complaints about the boss not treating the workers as human beings and of always being on strike. She narrates:

[we are very] tired, so eager to take a rest, and on the assembly line, one section should be immediately followed by the next section. If not, it is impossible to continue. So we went on strike. But the consequences of the strikes were bad, our salary was deducted, and we were “laid off” for our three days-off. Finally, we went back to work again (Tan, et al., 2001: 21; my translation).

The authors of the literary report represent the plight of the sub-proletariat and implicitly call for a new proletarian movement. The author's sigh of working in the city is not a choice, and Hongyun's comment that "finally, we went back to work again", indicates that workers themselves reinforce their subalternity, while also providing a rationale of victim-hood for labor movements in industrialized cities. In the report, the image of the poor and deteriorating rural society acts as the foundation of the urban proletariat's struggles. The future development of the rural society is overshadowed by the authors' vision of the making of new working class.⁸ The homogeneous images of rural areas as bankrupt, full of despair and death underlies the literary text. However, to experience the tension created by the forces of the images of country and city, not only allows us to understand the coercive desire of Xiaoying, but also helps us to experience "the undefined present":

It is significant, for example, that the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future. That leaves, if we isolate them, an undefined present. The pull of the idea of the country is toward old ways, human ways, natural ways. The pull of the idea of the city is toward progress, modernization, development. In what is then a tension, a present experienced as tension, we use the contrast of country and city to ratify an unresolved division and conflict of impulses, which it might be better to face in their own terms (Williams, 1989: 81).

Raymond Williams suggests that the present is “undefined” and unstable, so we can make use of the conflict of impulses which are derived from the contrary images of country and city. To him, the present is not only experienced as tension, but also it is *moving*. In that sense, it is possible to re-arrange the prevalent coercive desire.

Conclusion

The literary reports by the sociologists and postgraduate students, along with the music video by NGO’s artist-activists and two documentaries by RTHK and Phoenix TV, represent Xiaoying’s visible and prolonged pains as a testimony of the exploitative global economy. Her complex agency is a product of different subject positions in the process of negotiating structures of violence: victim, witness, and agent. She is portrayed both as a victim of capitalism, a witness or accuser of a horrendous industrial tragedy and then an agent of the labor movement. The above mentioned texts of Xiaoying’s pain have involved the question of politics and ethics. Fighting against a culture of callousness, Sontag encourages readers/viewers to learn from the photographs that are sometimes too painful to look at: “to see something in the form of an image is an invitation to observe, to learn, to attend to. Photographs can’t do the moral or the intellectual work for us. But they can start us on our way” (Sontag, 2002: 273).

The cultural shock wrought by a photograph of pain can be the starting point of intervention. This is a paper of paying attention to a single exploited rural woman's story of pain and of understanding her constraints: global capitalism, a national policy of destructive modernization, and gender hierarchy. There are some indelible imprints on Xiaoying's story of pain. These include her desire for to return to the city in spite of her accident; the complete acceptance of sacrificing her education and her consent to work after the strike. These interrelated issues ensure that it is not simply enough for any social movement, particularly a conventional proletariat struggle, to concentrate on only the accusation of the oppressor and the victim-hood of the oppressed, with the sole goal of securing adequate laws of protection.

Within this chapter, certain other questions have been raised. These include women's internalized constraints, elite ignorance and the rural-urban mutual development. The issue of a rural woman's unnatural virtues of renunciation, her perceived notions of responsibilities and duties, along with her conception of forgiveness, must be acknowledged in the discourse of patriarchal capitalism. These questions and issues need to be taken up by urban intellectuals. Of course there remains the legal aspect of workers' rights, but the law should not be the end of the equation. As Jacques Derrida explains: "it is just that there should be law, but law is not justice". Can we make a moral judgment on Xiaoying's (un)reasoning self-denial?

There is something more to Xiaoying's pain. Perhaps the *aporia* makes us defer and suspend our moral judgment.

“Let the atrocious images haunt us”, Sontag reminds readers/viewers. For the purpose of this chapter, this can be changed to “Let the appalling image of Xiaoying's deformity haunt us”.

¹ See “Zhili Fire—Wounds are Never Healed”, in *Change*, December 1999, Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee; “The 6th Anniversary of Zhili Factory Fire”, *Dossier* no.6, 1999, Asia Monitor Resource Center; “Missing Money, Missing Lives: Victims of the Zhili Fire Incident”, in *China Rights Forum*, winter 2000.

² Since January 2003, Phoenix TV has produced a new feature program *Warmth and Cruelty of Life*, which claims “to be concerned about the fate of ordinary people and to listen to the breath of the urban marginalized”. As Chen Xiaonan, the hostess, explains: “what we choose are those marginal people, of little concern to the general public, but their stories are so unbelievable, like that of a beggar’s life and homosexual love”. *Funeral of Flowers* is composed of four parts about Zhili factory women workers: *Xiaofang, the Victim*, *Xiaoying, the Survivor (Part 1 & 2)*, and *Four Sisters of Lan’s Family*.

³ The statements of accusation are shown as red Chinese characters on the black screen: “To many people, the Zhili Factory Fire is history, covered in layers of dusts. But to the victims and their families, the traumas are both physical and psychological, just like a bleeding wound. What they need most is the compensation that can support their lives in a practical way, but not fancy excuses. Give their six years of suffering a justice!” Another documentary, *Dongguan Fire of May 30* (1991), also conveys a similar idea. The documentary is made by a Hong Kong NGO, which contains some interviews with the survivors or victims of a fire at a raincoat factory in Dongguan. The fire resulted in the death of more than sixty people. The interviews were conducted in July 1992. An organizer from Christian Industrial Committee (CIC), condemned the trade unions, the labor laws and the Ministry of Labor, while calling for reasonable wages and fire precaution facilities.

⁴ <http://www.phoenixtv.com/home/program/wysfh/jmfk/200311/26/153501.html>

⁵ The literary report of *Bloody Tracing* is composed of five parts: “Chongqing: the First Tracing Report” (July 1999), presented by Liu Chengfu, a postgraduate from Beijing University and Li Qiang, a postgraduate from the People’s University; “Chongqing: the Second Tracing Report” (November 1999), by Tan Shen and Liu Chengfu; “Chongqing: the Third Tracing Report” (January 2000) by Jia Yunzhu and Chen Yufu, postgraduates from the People’s University; “Henan: the First Tracing Report” (January 2001), by Ma Yan, a postgraduate from the People’s University and Li Xiaotong, a postgraduate from the Hydraulic Engineering Institute of North China; and “The Unfinished Afterword”, by Tan Shen.

⁶ Xia Yan cries out that every spinning jenny of a Japanese factory has a haunting specter of a Chinese slave. He portrays a vivid image of Skinny Firewood. There is an incredible strength in this exploited woman from the countryside:

People who look strong and healthy are always vulnerable, just like breaking a piece of flax. However, Skinny Firewood is struggling and wrestling with the reality when days are passing. She is still determinedly standing there, even though she is so fragile, as to die at any moment. Each day with two bowls of congee and one bowl of rice, twelve hours of

noise pollution, breathing and working in dust and moisture, she repeats what she does until her last blood remaining in her body is completely extracted (Xia Yan, 1998: 15; my translation).

⁷ <http://www.phoenixtv.com/home/program/wysfh/fczc/200312/04/158335.html>.

⁸ Another example of the urban elite's ignorance about the rural dimension is the famous case of Baoyang's Rural Women Workers in 2001. The struggle of the 56 rural women workers of the Baoyang factory in Shenzhen allows us to look into how a shared pain led to the formation of a collective at a specific time and space. Yet, their stories are depicted in the media as a sentimental labor dispute, rather than a collective struggle of rural women. For example, the cover story of the magazine *China News Weekly*, dated 10 September 2001, is a close-up of a crying middle aged woman, her mouth opening up, with a shining tear drop on her wrinkled and twisted face, her hands on her chaotic hair. At the back, two women also have their hands on their heads which are bowed low. They are look gloomy. They all wear blue uniform. There is nothing more about the cover story of an exploited single woman. Although the preface makes a casual mention about the plight of the rural migrants, "Xia Yan's famous literary work *The Bonded Laborer*, disappears in the recent school textbooks, but the modern bonded laborers repeatedly appear." The whole report does not look into the details about the modern female bonded laborers. Furthermore, some commentators despise the shared experiences of being humiliated and of resisting collectively as a story of "a group of rural women, without culture and who are seen as 'common'", see <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2001-08-27/339826.html>.

Chapter Five

The Residual From Below

In the seminar on “Displacement: Contradictions Between Peasant’s Needs and Institutional Arrangements”, held in December 2001 by the Universities Service Centre for China Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Chen Xin of CASS argued that “the dominant ideology of our society (shared by officials and a majority of urban people) is that the rural is merely the residue of the modernization process. The rural is doomed to be eradicated, the rural is backward, and the rural should not exist.” He suggested that the question of rural reconstruction could be posed in a serious way if we were to resist the dominant representations of the rural such as “the residual in modernization”, “burdens and tumors”, “food producers”, “the riot element”, and “the birth control target”. Chen attempted to alter mainstream representation of the rural from one of as the residue of modernization to one locating the rural as the base of social reconstruction.

Similarly, Raymond Williams’ concept of “residual” considers the rural community as an alternative to urban industrial capitalism. In his book *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Williams introduces the active development of variants of Marxist

thinking and literature in Europe in the 1970s. He claims to develop a position in cultural materialism that is “a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism” (Williams, 1977: 5). In the second part of his book, there is a chapter entitled “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent” in which he proposes that the complexity of culture is to be found not only in the stages and variations but in the internal dynamic relations of any cultural process. According to Williams’ definition, the dominant culture refers to that which is effective or to the hegemonic; the emergent culture, new meanings and values, new practices and new relationships; while the residual culture, an element of the past, is still active in the cultural process of the present. He explains:

Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. (Williams, 1977: 122).

Williams suggests that the idea of “rural community” is predominantly residual, but it is also in some respects “alternative or oppositional to urban industrial capitalism”. It is nonetheless most probably incorporated as idealization, fantasy, or an exotic leisure function of the dominant order. Moreover, Williams elaborates the tension between residual practices and the dominant culture:

Moreover, at certain points the dominant culture cannot allow too much residual experience and practice outside itself, at least without risk. It is in the incorporation of the actively residual—by reinterpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating inclusion and exclusion—that the work of the selective tradition is especially evident (Williams, 1977: 122).

Both Chen and Williams draw our attention to the rural community which is regarded as residual, but which is also the active element within the dominant culture of modernization. They envision the residual rural practices and experiences as an alternative to urban capitalist industrialization. While supporting their argument for the residual rural community, I push forward the irreducible question of rural women. This chapter will examine how two urban male intellectuals portray rural women and their rural communities respectively. The relevant texts are Zhou Xiaowen's film *Ermo* (1994) and Zhao Tielin's photographs in *Alternative Life: The Real World in the Eyes of a Photographer*. (2000). I will argue that these texts reveal complex tensions between the dominant cultural order and the actively residual practices and values. And I will demonstrate how the figures of rural women in the texts are being trapped between the forces of urban industrial capitalism and traditional rural patriarchy. What follows is my reading of *representations of* the residual experiences of two women “from below”, that is, two rural subaltern women. One is a fictional twisted noodle-maker, and the other, a “real” sex worker.

Ermo, the Twisted Noodle-Maker

Ermo is adapted from the novel written by Xu Baoqi in 1992 and the film was directed by Zhou Xiaowen in 1994. Zhou was born in Beijing in 1954. He graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982. He is called a “Fifth generation” film director, along with Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. *Ermo* was made two years after Deng Xiaoping visited south China for the purpose of speeding up modernization. Most of the mainland film studios were working on shoestring budgets and *Ermo* was ultimately finished with Hong Kong capital. It is a trans-border cultural product of both the Shanghai Film Studio and the Ocean Film Company of Hong Kong (Cai, 1996: 53-55). *Ermo* was widely screened in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and overseas, obtaining official recognition, praise from film critics, and an overseas professional vote. *Ermo* was the winner of the official Huabiao Prize and Golden Rooster Prize in the mainland in 1994, also winning four major Jury Prizes at the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland in the same year. Today, the story of *Ermo* is circulated world wide in various formats including VHS, LD, and DVD between the major cities of the world. Occasionally, it is shown on the cinema channel of the official China Central Television (CCTV) and the world channel of Asia Television in Hong Kong. Its audience is mainly composed of urban people.

‘Illiterate’ and ‘Ignorant’

The film opens with Ermo’s crying out her wares, her voice blending with the noisy passing trucks. Squatting beside a statue of a lion, on a street in a small town, Ermo cries out to sell her hand-made twisted noodles. She is the breadwinner in her family. Her husband, a former village head, has become impotent and her son is addicted to watching TV cartoons in next-door neighbor. Apart from earning a living as a vendor, Ermo has a determined to buy the biggest TV in her village. Even the town head cannot afford one! She has troubles along the way, for example, an affair with her neighbor, blood sale, and various accidents. Although she completes her mission successfully, she is strangely lost in a moment of suspension and confusion. The end of the story gives the comedy an odd twist, that is, of an unsatisfied consumer sitting beside a 29’ Panasonic color TV.

According to the director, the Film Bureau appreciates *Ermo* as a film that promotes the spirit of modernization:

It [*Ermo*] examines post-reform, how a peasant looks for a new way of living and expresses a wish for upward mobility. Comparatively speaking, the government welcomes this kind of stuff. After reading the script, the Film Bureau considers purchasing a TV is really a tiny thing, which can’t be compared with building a Yang Pu Great Bridge, or launching an aircraft, but to a peasant in the mountain, it is a terribly big thing. Thus, it is meaningful to the reform policy nowadays (Cai, 1996: 313; my translation).

In the dominant ideology of modernization, China can steadily advance and become as powerful to the western industrialized world. 'A new way of living' and 'a wish for upward mobility' basically take the lifestyle of American rich people as an imaginary model. In 1998, *Ermo* was publicly screened at the Film Archive of Harvard University. Among the audience, it was proclaimed that the Chinese director endowed Chinese woman with something like a strong will of the 'American Spirit'.¹

The discourse of modernization regulates China's development as a linear process only, one which proceeds from underdevelopment to full development and as I have argued before that in this logic, rural China is derogated. Modernization is symbolized by an urban civilized rich man. In the film, Ermo and her neighbor and secret lover, Xiazi, are represented as proper models of learning modernization. Xiazi is the nouveau riche in his village because he has a transportation business with a rusty truck. He always dresses in his black leather jacket, in contrast to Ermo's emasculated husband, the ex-village chief, wearing a shabby dark blue cotton jacket nearly throughout the film.

At the beginning of the film, Ermo is represented as illiterate and ignorant, but she soon becomes a fast learner of modern values. She is very scared on top of the truck; ignorant about the lorry's horn-blowing; a policeman's statue at the gate of the

police station; nor is she able to understand what the placard, “stock taking in the afternoon” placed at the entrance of the department store means even though it is written in Chinese. She is fascinated by the bustling city and tries her best to adapt to its values, like drinking a new hawthorn nectar product, wearing a red-and-white checkered lace bra, using anti-wrinkle cream, and mastering the mixing machine. Ermo asks, “Don’t I look like the city people?”

Ermo is depicted as an agent of modernization, changing from a peasant vendor to a skillful worker in a big restaurant, in order to buy the biggest TV, a symbol of modernization. When he is criticized for showing the poverty and backwardness of village life, in order to follow the tradition of Zhang Yimou’s celebrated films, Zhou Xiaowen argues in his defense that “Ermo is not backward, and she can buy her family a 29’ color TV. It is a message of modernization.”² The Fifth Generation film directors have been criticized for marketing “primitive and exotic Third World China” to western film festivals. For example, Zhang Yimou’s film *Raise the Red Lantern* which depicts the mythic foot-massage as a symbol of Chinese ancient ritual (Ciecko and Lu, 1999: 78).³ Xiao Ersi’s Internet film review supports Zhou:

The films of Chan Kaige and Zhang Yimou are imbued with an unknown darkness, which is backward, ignorant, conservative and barbaric. Zhao Xiaowen’s *Ermo* declares war on this and is full of challenging brightness and future openness. The films of Chan Kaige and Zhang Yimou talk

about tragic fates, but *Ermo* is a comedy about a young woman who, in conditions of material poverty, is struggling to become, to a certain extent, a heroine who can control her own fate. [...] Zhao Xiaowen gravitates towards the rural, but he brings along the spirit of a dynamic modern life. [...] What Ermo pursues is a big color TV, which is not only a material product of competitive value, but also an optimistic expression of a new lifestyle replacing an old one (my translation).⁴

A female film critic also shares this urban-centered idea. After watching *Ermo* in a seminar on six rural films, Yu Min comments on Ermo as a typical poor rural woman, “when I saw her [Ermo] taking three bowls of salt water in a breath, I can’t help crying that, ‘Oh, my dear poor rural sister is suffering so much from poverty!’” (Yu, 1995). Although Yu Min notices the great discrepancy between the rural and the urban, but in her own eyes, Ermo is a typically less advanced sister who is wretchedly entangled in poverty. Yu Min’s sympathy of sisterhood embeds a complicity of victimizing the rural and privileging the city. The assumption is that the rural is to be always synonymous with woman, and with poverty.

A Rebel against Tradition

Ermo’s participation in the process of modernization is not out of survival but is a matter of restoring the family’s honor. However, the meaning of the TV changes as the story develops. Gradually, Ermo is portrayed as becoming a rebel against the traditional order of value. For the sake of TV, Ermo grasps an opportunity to travel

across from the rural to the city. Rural women have limited customary permission to move due to the rules of chastity, for women are considered men's "fixed" property. If a rural woman goes wherever she likes, she will be condemned by the others as a "wild and a bad woman" having sex with men. When Ermo's husband visits her in the dormitory, he criticizes working women, including his wife: "Look at these women, they leave their family behind just to earn money!"; "It is better for women to remain as usual, just leading an ordinary life!" Even Xiazi's wife twits Ermo for working in city: "it's so much easier for women to earn money, just open up your legs and money comes in!"

Ermo ignores her husband's traditional belief that "a TV is an egg, but a house is a chicken". Father/son/house is the triple logic of patriarchal society, meaning that blood and property cannot be separated for the purpose of heritage. Ermo makes use of the modern value of earning money in order to violate the traditional rule which constrains a woman's movement. In that sense, modernization opens up a space for Ermo to move, travel and migrate to a new place, where she has a chance to build new social relations with others, to break loose from the restraints of heavy domestic work and also to suspend the role of a wife and mother. In other words, she temporarily leads a life of a single woman. Thus, Ermo regardless of her husband's complaints takes a decision and packs up her belongings and jumping on the truck leaving for the city.

The film portrays Ermo as a sexually liberated modern woman as an adulterous. In the discourse of chastity, a woman will be disgraced if she commits adultery. Ermo, however, is developing a sexual relation with Xiazi in the journey of earning money in the city. Ermo's impotent husband knows that she is having an extramarital affair with Xiazi but he pretends not to know. At the end of the film, Ermo submits to her husband and remains a good wife not because she is overwhelmed by the threat of adultery, but because she finally discovers that her lover is too cowardly to challenge the social norm, of divorcing his wife. In that sense, her lover is impotent too and that is why Ermo takes an initiative to cut off their relation.

The Dilemma

Since Ermo's pallid complexion in the closing scene of the film is loaded with an ambivalence and emptiness brought on by the TV programs, many critics have questioned the meaning of modernization to a rural woman who struggles to change her fate. Both the novel and the film design a similar ending in which Ermo remains as an ordinary rural woman, not a migrant worker or an entrepreneur. Ermo becomes disabled in the novel but, in the film she is seriously ill.⁵ Sitting beside the TV set, Ermo is exhausted, confused and depressed. The director explains:

Actually, this kind of bad American soap opera cannot bring Chinese peasants anything uplifting, and it's meaningless. I want to explain that while, Ermo works hard to buy this stuff, but it's futile. What kind of life you lead is exactly your life, for a small-scale peasant economy decides your living style. You sell twisted noodles to earn a living, and you even want to earn a little more to have a better lifestyle, that's fine. But it's not necessary to buy such a big color TV. It is wrong and unnecessary for peasants in a mountain village to purchase it. For children, you can just buy a cheap TV for around four or five hundred yuan (Cai, 1996: 317; my translation).

From the male director's perspective, Ermo is blamed for her greed. So the serious illness reminds her not to move around and that she should stay in her village, leading an ordinary life like the silent old women taken in long shots, dressed in black clothes and sitting faraway on the stone roller. These old women symbolize the stagnant rural or the unchanged tradition. Zhou expresses through the music this notion of the ultimate futility of changing fate:

For the music in the film, I use only one kind of musical instrument, that is, a transverse flute without any flute membrane, which is not *di*, a typical transverse flute, or *xiao*, a notched flute, or even *xun*, a clay vessel flute. Its sound is raw, primitive and has a sense of slightly sadness. The street-cry of twisted noodles symbolizes an unchanged lifestyle. It obviously attempts to change something but it comes to an end without any change. Ermo's hawking of twisted noodles is heard from the far distance... (Zhang Wei, 1994: 36; my translation).

Dai Jinhua argues that Ermo tries her best to challenge the traditional values, but in the end she gains nothing and everything is back to normal: “it [modernization] makes Ermo achieve a temporary and stubborn life goal: to possess the biggest TV set in the whole county, which is mostly a magic of small ‘personal struggle’; however, it does not change Ermo’s life at all in any sense”:

At the end of *Ermo*, she wakes up, exhausted and then stares listlessly at the TV shedding light on her face. This needs no explanation. Her stubbornness does not win her a bit of recognition or confirmation. The journey has occupied most of Ermo’s life and at the end, her living and life itself are both deeply emptied. [...]White snow covers the orderly rooftops at a peaceful and lonely night in the village. Meanwhile, on the TV screen, World Weather Report is showing a series of big cities around the world. The ‘World’ has already intruded into Chinese village, but it hardly touches the arduous and unbearable existence (Dai, 1999b: 296; my translation).

Finally, Dai concludes that *Ermo* is a film in which the director casts a serious doubt on modernization: “Zhou Xiaowen is writing his fable, his observation on contemporary China, from a position of a filmmaker in crisis, and out of an existential anxiety of being a modern man; he is writing his doubts about modern civilization” (Dai, 1999b: 296).

Wong Yichuan, another film critic, shares the commonly held view that Ermo is a tragic woman. He elaborates that, “to be a conservative traditional woman, she

[Ermo] fails; to be a new woman like the one in the TV program leading a new lifestyle, she lacks capability and courage. Then she can only be trapped and lost in this kind of splitting condition.” He further argues that Ermo is surrendered to the power of tradition, by referring to the old women on the waste roller as a symbol of an unchanging tradition:

It may seem that tradition is disappearing, but it actually exists everywhere, just like old women staring silently at the fate of Ermo. According to this tradition, all that Ermo can do is to preserve the status quo but she cannot conceive of any real change. Thus, when she looks for a change, she will suffer a fatal setback instead. It seems that she can only have this tragic fate. It can be said that the force of tradition is so strong and rooted. If one ignores tradition, one ignores what reality is (Wong, 1995: 226-227; my translation).

Both Dai Jinhua and Wong Yichuan notice that Ermo is trapped in the tension caused by the mingling of traditional and capitalist forces, and they argue that her fate is sealed; she is doomed to be a poor and tragic rural woman. However, I still believe that where there is tension, there is possibility. There are possibilities existing in the most oppressive system. In the film, Ermo’s frustration and disillusion allows us to look into the complexity of cultures in which oppression and possibilities co-exist. In such a way, I would suggest that Ermo is both complicit with and oppressed by a patriarchal system and the market economy. The complicated thing is that Ermo bridges the gap yet she resists the traditional and capitalist systems.

Some critics argue that the comedy, oddly entailing an anti-climactic ending, can be read as an interruption of the story of modernization: “Zhou represents ‘televisuality’ as the ultimate dream and paradox of China’s collective national agenda of modernization and globalization”, and the film offers “a critique of the Deng era national agenda of modernization” (Ciecko and Lu, 1999: 77). Li Leiwei even associates Ermo’s return to the rural with the resurgence of neo-Confucianism:

[Ermo] has decided to say ‘no’ to unfettered market rationality and ‘no’ to unencumbered individual affectivity by embracing once more the ideal of a Confucian mean in the spatial and temporal scheme of the village, with its routinized domestic chores, its demands of making a living, not to mention its mandatory codes of ethics” (Li, 2001: 455-456).

Nonetheless, I would point out that Li Leiwei’s idea of neo-Confucianism largely ignores the question of women. The figure of Ermo is caught in the dilemma between capitalist modernization and the patriarchal tradition. The force of global capitalism has permeated the remote village, seducing Ermo to go on a journey of mixed goals that she hopes will help to restore her family’s honor, and to fulfill her sexual desires, which cannot be satisfied by her impotent husband. Ermo’s return to the village noticeably interrupts the self-evident trajectory of country-to-city assumed by the dominant discourse of modernization. On the one hand, Ermo is designed by the narrative to say ‘no’ to unfettered market rationality, and to unencumbered

individual affectivity as we see in the final marking of a distance from the TV's cosmopolitan programs. On the other hand, Ermo is passively resistant to returning to the Confucian village with its mandatory patriarchal codes of ethics. Her dispirited expression is in striking contrast to her joyful family and neighbors. The figure of the sick rural woman is trapped between capitalist development and patriarchal tradition.

Nonetheless, the whole film works very hard to beautifully visualize Ermo making noodles as a subsistence form of earning a living, but not as a profit-making big business. The image of a rural woman placed as the subject of economic and social activities is somehow contradictory to “the resurgence of neo-Confucianism” which presumes a father as a figurehead from above. The camera pans down to the ground: a rural woman with shining bare feet. She makes noodles from below.

TV and Twisted Noodles

Ermo's fetishism of TV coexists with a fetishism of twisted noodles. Marx repeatedly points out that the use-value or exchange-value of a commodity exists only in social relations, and further discloses the mystical character of fetishism:

It is nothing but the definition social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. [...] I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore

inseparable from the production of commodities. As the foregoing analysis has already demonstrated, this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labor which produces them” (Marx, 1990: 165).

So, fetishism is effective only in a specific social relation. What Marx wants to address is the social relation between the products of labor, not merely the product itself. Ermo’s TV fetishism should be contextualized then, in relation to discourses of modernization, individualism and consumerism in contemporary China.

In his article “Rural Women and Social Change in New China Cinema: From Li Shuangshuang to Ermo”, Tang Xiaobing analyses how representations of rural women in New Chinese Cinema are closely related to social change, and he cites the obvious dissimilarity between *Li Shuangshuang* (dir. Lu Ren, 1962) and *Ermo*, both of which measure “the impact of social change through the focal figure of a rural woman”, that is, the title characters, respectively Li Shuangshuang and Ermo: “if socialist collectivization inspires Shuangshuang to contribute to her rural community, money and desire combine to mobilize and eventually displace Ermo. [...] For what is sorely lacking in Ermo’s life, [...] is the gratification of communal recognition and an empowering political identity” (Tang, 2003: 647-674). One of the famous slogans of Deng Xiaoping’s ruling period was “to get rich is glorious”, privileging individualism and consumer culture; there is hardly any legacy of the rhetoric of Mao

Zedong's period such as "cheerful exuberance and enthusiasm for the collective good" or "the idealization of rural life and celebration of collective farm work" in *Ermo*, where TV is crystallized as an index of an individual's consumption capacity, and the televised fantasies are comprised of overwhelming images of metropolitan lifestyle, like English programs, US sports game and TV soap opera. Therefore, the story of Ermo's TV fetishism is set in the frame of dominant values of individualism, modernization, and consumerism.

Huang Ping analyzes sociologically the effects of consumerism and TV as a popular and fashionable durable consumer good in contemporary China (Huang Ping, 1997; Chen, 2003). He reiterates that the magic of the city's powerful consumer culture, which reaches directly into the rural regions through TV, is an extremely powerful influence attracting and seducing rural youths. Huang explains that TV has become a popular and fashionable durable consumer good since the 1980s in China. In 1985, there were about 17 color TV sets for every 100 households in urban areas; by 1993, there were 80 sets per 100 households. The number of black and white TVs increased from around 12 for every 100 households in 1985 to 70 sets in 1993 (Huang, 1997: 105). Ermo also joins in this trend. She is represented as a subject of commodity obsession. She takes up the mission of restoring her husband/family's honor, getting back his son who frequently goes to the neighbor's house to watch TV,

and also outdoing her neighbor who possesses the only TV in the village. Since her husband is impotent in labor and sex, Ermo has become the master “without a phallus” of the family; thus it is her mission to bring back honor. Ann Ciecko and Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu argue that “the biggest TV set is intended to replace the dysfunctional phallus of her husband, the ex-village chief, in the symbolic order” (Ciecko and Lu, 1999: 79). Yet, Ermo’s fascination for the TV gradually weakens as the story develops. At the end, she even casts doubt on the TV itself. This is a story about obsession and estrangement of modernization, as embodied by the biggest TV.

The kissing scene from a western soap opera shown on the biggest TV attracts Ermo at first sight. She exclaims, “The TV is really big! The hair of the foreigners can be seen very clearly! The color is so beautiful!” The TV is then confirmed as Ermo’s project of restoring the family’s honor. Neither the town head nor Xiazi’s wife can afford it, but Ermo can! Her second encounter with the TV occurs when she is seen looking longingly at a shop window displaying a TV that is placed in the center of the display shelf. She asks the saleswoman to turn the TV off because she is afraid it will wear out quickly. Again, when the TV shows a girl in red swimming suit performing, Ermo orders the saleswoman to turn it off. Afterwards, the TV shows an English teaching program, in which some foreigners and Chinese talk in a restaurant about Chinese cooking. However, in the last scene Ermo’s desire for the TV is

vanishing; she is exhausted beside the TV that has drained her labor and blood. But the TV shows nothing at all; only a picture of “snow”. The close-up of Ermo’s facial expression is a puzzle and then a feeling of estrangement emerges.

In the capitalist economy, one of the basic principles is the fast flow of capital. Ermo is described as being good at counting money. She accepts but refuses to adopt the key value of the market economy that everything has a price. In pursuit of the TV, Ermo travels to the city, takes the risk of adultery, and then breaks her relationship with her lover. Both her husband and lover are impotent, in terms of sex and courage respectively. At that moment, the TV has become her real lover as it is big and attractive. It epitomizes her dignity, her honor, and her life. It is not surprising that Ermo repeatedly tells Xiazi in the hotel that she has no need of his money. At last, in the restaurant, Ermo treats him to a meal, and declares that “I’ve repaid the favor. I’m telling you, I’m not a whore. If I need money, I’ll earn it. You needn’t help me by slipping me money. You can’t afford to buy me with this amount. It’s only enough to pay for a donkey!”

Ermo accepts the capitalist value that everything can be valued in terms of money, so she sells her labor and blood. But she also tells us that “she” has no “price”. Her self-esteem is clearly shown when she does not allow Xiazi to buy her a TV, or T-shirts for her son and husband. Finally she refuses to get on Xiazi’s truck

any more and uses her own wooden trolley. That signifies that she is no longer willing to enter Xiazi's world, that is, a world leading to modernization, capitalist economy, or globalization, in which the peasant will be definitely exploited and surplus values like labor and blood will be used for monotonous industrialization.

Ermo "looks for a new way of living and expresses a wish for upward mobility" but in the end, her response to the TV is a puzzle. Ermo's project of restoring her family's honor is successful. Her husband, acting like the village head as he was before, orders the villagers to bring more benches to watch TV at his house, and he responds with a big smile on his face, "I'm not the village head anymore." He regains his power by affording an expensive TV that he had refused to buy at the beginning. In contrast, for Ermo, the obsession with TV has gradually become an estrangement. Firstly, the TV is too big to put on the wardrobe and water tank. The only choice is the bed. A 29' size Panasonic TV, plus a pale Ermo. The TV is no longer attractive to Ermo, though it displays "a western style of living", like an American football match, *Dynasty*, an American soap opera, in which a man and a woman are taking a shower together and kissing, and finally the world weather report. At that moment, Ermo and her family are falling asleep. The TV is a triumph but also a kind of alienation.

Metropolis

In the film, the TV programs like the swimming performance, the English teaching lesson on Chinese cuisine, the American football match, the episode of *Dynasty* with its images of rich Americans and the world city weather report arranged by the official China Central Television (CCTV), are all attractive to village people. In social reality, both the official institution and the village people join together to embrace the US-dominated cultural product as signs of modernity, progress and civilization. Culture critics such as Lei Guang highlight “the rural-urban distinction as a cultural process and a state-society co-production during the reform” (Lei, 2003: 613-646). Tang Xiaobing even claims that “the city has arrived to occupy the center stage in cultural orientation and the social imaginary” (Tang, 1996: 108). The TV program of the world weather forecast clearly demonstrates this. By taking alternate still photos of iconic buildings or skyscrapers, the global cities appear one by one on the TV screen: Beijing, Tokyo, Bangkok, Sydney, Karachi, Cairo, Moscow, Frankfurt, Paris, London and New York. As Saskia Sassen points out, the metropolises such as New York, London, and Tokyo have come to control the world in the age of financial capitalism.

The world city weather report opens up a world that privileges only industrial and urban development, which is based on the exclusion of the rural community.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's famous remarks, "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin, 1992: 248), I would argue that there is no document privileging metropolitan culture, which is not at the same time a document of the marginalization of rural/indigenous culture. That is why the rural is "absent" in the world city weather report. Ermo's labor in making hand-woven baskets for the whole summer is not rewarded, since there is an unexpected hailstorm that destroys all the fruit trees. The unexpected hailstorm will not be forecast in the weather report. Worse still, neither the government nor urban people share the responsibility, this is reserved for peasants themselves. The world portrayed in TV does not belong to Ermo, a subaltern rural woman. She is allowed to enter it only if capital can extract surplus value, from her ability to make twisted noodles, and later from her blood transformed into a commodity.

At the end, Ermo distances herself from the cosmopolitan TV programs that focus on the gap between rural society and the televised world. A question that often comes up is how does one bridge the gap between the city and the country? How can TV, a medium of science and technology, be used to improve the rural-urban relation? Sun Wanning, a culture critic, reminds us of the powerful pedagogic potential of television: "[television] promises to bring home, on a daily basis, a new and different

way of knowing, thinking about, and imagining the world or, in Morse's phrase, an 'ontology of everyday distraction'" (Sun, 2002: 21-34; see also Meyrowitz, 1985). If this is so, then in what ways can we go beyond a metropolitan ideology? Can we imagine elsewhere, other than the cosmopolitan cities? What will be the next TV program after the electronic snowflakes finish wiping off the still photos of mega-cities? At that uncertain moment, a viewer is invited to fill in the blank. The TV is still "open".

Back to the Rural

The ending that brings Ermo back to the rural with the biggest TV does not merely signify her physical presence in the village, but rather a passive resistance to both global modernization and patriarchal conventions. Her return reasserts her family's honor, particularly her husband's status in the village. Yet, the presence of TV reinforces Ermo's role as a household decision-maker. Ermo has never submitted to her husband's request for a new house. In the name of modernization, Ermo represents its figurehead, somehow altering the patriarchal conventional practice. When she discovers that he is too much of a coward to get a divorce, she refuses to be Xiazhi's mistress. The film recognizes a rural woman's ability, determination and independence, which are manifested in the wooden trolley, noodles-strainer, and twisted noodles.

Ermo refuses to get on Xiazi's battered truck any more, but prefers her own small wooden trolley. In choosing to be the driver of the wooden trolley, rather than the truck or the unknown shiny white car appearing on the dusty ridges of earth, Ermo affirms her reluctance to enter a world leading to a capitalist economy, along with monotonous industrialization and urbanization, "With what shall I dredge up the noodles? My noodles-strainer is used as a television antenna." When Ermo nearly collapses, she does not care about her husband, lover Xiazi, son Huzi, or the TV, but only her future that consists of making twisted noodles.

She twists several bunches of noodles manually instead of mechanically everyday. The noodles are sold on the street and do not have a fixed price unlike the ones sold in the department store. A wooden trolley carries the noodles and not a big truck. The speed of traveling is slow. The flow of money is slow too. Twisted noodles are not sold under any transnational brand name, but in the name of Ermo. This is an implicit attempt at refusing to enter the financial capitalist world, and defending a small and street economy which enables a rural woman to make a living with dignity. The final cry of twisted noodles for sale once again reminds us that a rural woman plays a leading role in family decision making, and a rural woman's capability and creativity are recognized in and by local areas.

Ermo's movement "back to the rural" is neither a simple return to the people's commune as a base for statist industrialization, nor a pure demonstration of support for the dominant idea of an individualistic and self-centered life. It is awkward that in the end the film does not portray Ermo as a typical successful entrepreneur, since from the beginning she is narrated as a quick and competent learner of modernization. Furthermore, Ermo's character is not designed to exemplify the capitalist logic of money begetting money to expand her small business to a translational agricultural industry, nor does she use the TV as a tool for making money in her community.

A characteristic of the Chinese rural lifestyle is of communal work, like watching TV and chatting to each other. This collective sharing is the bases of caring about the self and others. In *Ermo*, there is an obvious contrast between Xiazi's neighbor visiting him when he has been beaten up, and the invisibilization of a woman screaming for help in the city. The woman is off-screen, but the city's indifference to her fills the screen when the women in the dormitory, including Ermo, ignore the sound of her screaming and fall asleep. The screaming woman is a victim of domestic violence, "Fuck, you're kicking me. Come on, beat me to death! You can't do that; you're not a man, are you? Fuck, stop kicking me! I don't want to live! Help! Someone's killing!"

Xiazi's truck carelessly knocks down a donkey whose owner, an old man, shrewdly asks for more compensation since "it is not a matter of money. The donkey can't work any more." The final deal is 500 yuan. This discloses that the capitalist value is gradually intruding into the old system and everything is marketable and has a price. It is particularly ironic when the old man cries that his bleeding hand costs 5 yuan, in contrast to the donkey's compensation. What kind of changing society would make an old peasant think his hands are not valuable and ask for more financial compensation for the donkey? None of the collective activities such as farm work or volunteer work prevalent among villagers during Mao's period are shown in the film. Ermo's twisted noodles are not produced in a collective form, but as a mere individual business. Worse still, the village co-operative is losing its function and cannot protect the peasants' livelihood when natural disaster happens. There is jealousy, suspicion and even hostility among the villagers.

Nonetheless, in the ending, the image of the whole community, except Ermo, joyfully watching TV together creates such a bizarre effect of warm togetherness in the icy sea of individualism and competition. Unlike her neighbor's family watching TV by themselves at home, Ermo has turned TV from a personal commodity into a shared thing among the villagers at a specific time and in a specific space. Her house has suddenly become a center for free entertainment and collective activity. Ermo's

house, her door open and her TV open again and again. The turned-on TV and the rows of empty benches in the last scene give us a glimpse of the “effective” residual or the alternative living pattern in the age of individualist modernization: open your TV, your house, your door in order to let your relatives, friends, neighbors and even enemies to come and share. At that moment, Ermo’s house fully demonstrates watching TV as a social practice.

The Coda

As a coda to a comedy of triumphant individualism, the closing shot of Ermo’s puzzled expression on her face has a very ambiguous effect since it suggests an opposing view of industrial capitalism. Ermo has been puzzling over the stranger, that is, the color TV set. Yet, there is another stranger, that is, the unknown disease from which she suffers. The film does not tell us what it is. We could only name the stranger as “exhaustion, fatigue, or sickness”, which is perhaps caused by intensive laboring or blood-sale or even infection. Will it be anemia? Or AIDS? Will Ermo suffer a similar fate to those millions of HIV positive peasants of Henan Province, infected through the process of blood-sale?⁶ No one knows who or what the stranger is. But we know that the stranger has already arrived because there are bruises, the traces of the unknown other, appearing on Ermo’s arms. The first stranger, TV, uses

up Ermo's capacity for labor, so will the second stranger, as a parasite in her body, follow suit? Will she be like the injured donkey, the old peasant with bleeding hands, the amputated noodles-maker of the restaurant, or other of the multiple losers of global capitalism?

After the close-up of TV with thousands of black and white "electric snowflakes", then up comes Ermo's puzzled look. At this moment, we cut to a peaceful picture in which the whole village is covered with beautiful "natural snowflakes", then a loud and familiar voice is coming up again: "twisted noodles!" Her cry reminds us of Ermo always waking up to make twisted noodles at midnight. She draws all her attention and passion into making twisted noodles. Earlier in the film, with the medium and close-up shots from static angles, the film stylistically constructs Ermo's ability of making twisted noodles; for example, shots of her feet skillfully treading paste in a big basin, or her holding the V-shaped wooden stand, just like a woman opening up her legs to have sex, or pushing down the squeezer to make strips of noodles, or her face shining with drops of sweat, or her body moving with rhythms. All these images suggest that Ermo not only enjoys laboring, but also having sexual pleasure with herself, that is, with every part of her body, and also with the paste, the wooden setup and the noodles. Her movement is full of vigor and vividness. This is the satisfaction that she cannot find either from her impotent

husband or her lover. Some critics such as Li Leiwei interpret these images as erotic, sexually pleasurable and masturbatory, claiming that Ermo directly channels her repressed sexuality into noodles-making (Li, 2001: 447). Even the film director himself admits this intention (Cai, 1996: 314). Ermo preserves her dignity in the noodle making at home in the village, which allows her to have her own space within the oppressive patriarchal and capitalist society.

According to Cai's interview with the director, twisted noodles is a motif "invented" by the film. The director explains that he was inspired by Tianjing city's local crispy twisty snack, and by the local practice of foot-making noodles in rural areas in Hebei Province. So the result is foot-made, half-dried, and twisted noodles, just like instant noodles. Ermo's twisted noodles do not exist in reality but the film "creates" them (Cai, 1996: 314). Ermo's fictional twisted noodles are therefore the embodiment of local creativity, and folk wisdom as well as a gendered peasantry. Ermo's twisted noodles display her skilful hands, shining feet and creative brain, which appear not only as the sites of residual practices but also as irreconcilable with the industrialized assembly line and mechanized mass production in the age of global modernization. Twisted noodles symbolize a rural woman leading a life of self-reliance as well as dignity and creativity, while in the process of negotiating with forces of neo-liberal development and patriarchal tradition.

Ermo's exhausted body and her disappointment disclose the complexity of the reality of the unfair relation between the rural and the urban, and the complicity of patriarchal tradition and market economy; but in the process, Ermo plays with and yet against an active role. Ermo's "twisted noodle" once again cries out how a rural woman confronts the forces of functioning patriarchy and ongoing modernization in the age of China undergoing globalization.

In the next section, through Zhao Tieli's photos, I would like to introduce another rural woman, Xiao Liu, who is a sex worker in south China. Just as in the fictional narrative of *Ermo*, Xiao Liu's story reveals to us how a gendered subaltern is struggling in real life with the traditional patriarchy and financial capitalism.

Xiao Liu, the Sex Worker

In his book *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, Edward W. Said firmly claims "there is no question in my mind that the intellectual belongs on the same side with the weak and unrepresented" (Said, 1994: 22). Then, how do urban intellectuals portray or relate to "the weak and unrepresented" in China such as farmers, fishermen, rural migrants, and laid-off workers? I inevitably remember Said's remarks when reading Zhao Tieli's photographs in *Alternative*

Life: The Real World in the Eyes of a Photographer. (2000), *Focused Existence*----*Photographic Notes on Zhao Tielin's "Alternative Life"* (2002), and *The Society Through the Camera* (2004).

Zhao Tielin was born in 1948. He graduated from the Beijing Air College in 1982, and then he worked in the Beijing Research Institute of Computer Technology. He started a high-tech business in the early 1990s but it went bankrupt. After that he changed his hobby photography, into a career (Zhao, 2002b: 474). Later he worked for an advertising company, and became a photojournalist for the *Photo-News Daily* in Hainan Province. Since 2002, he has been the director of Image Studies Institute of the Center for Contemporary China Studies, Qinghua University, Beijing. Zhao has spent eight years taking photographs of the weak and the unrepresented and making them visible in the Chinese social spotlight. The photos together with his ethnographic-style writings represent the ways of living of grassroots people in Haikou city, Hainan Province.

Zhao acknowledges the dramatic changes in the city and the countryside:

The radical social transformations and the new formation of regional interests are not only happening in the city, but are gradually visible in the surrounding rural areas. The countryside of Hainan Province has quietly undergone changes due to the confrontation between tradition and modernization (Zhao, 2002: 51; my translation).

For example, “Those Days of A-V” and “The Story of Xiao Li” are about sex workers “The Crippled Li”, about a bookseller on the street; “A Yu”, a story of a fisherwoman; “Ji Mingwen and His Buddies”, a group of children living in the slums, whose parents are rubbish collectors. Some of his photos were originally published in the mainstream media outlets, such as *Mass Photography* and *Light and Shadow*, *News Weekly*, *China Youth Daily*, and *Southern Weekend*. CCTV, Phoenix TV, and local TV stations like Hunan TV interviewed him about these activities in 2000. His photos have provoked debates among intellectuals on questions of visibility and marginality in contemporary China (Zhao, 2002: 190-205).

Hainan Province is a remote island at the farthest southern part of China. Through the reform and open door policy, Hainan Island became the Hainan Economic Special Zone in 1988, and began to specialize in promoting property investment and tourism. However, after the mid-nineties, and particularly after the financial crisis of 1997, its economy has no longer been prosperous. Nevertheless, Hainan has occasionally caught media’s attention, for example, during the Hainan spy plane incident of 2001, in which a U.S. military surveillance plane made an emergency landing in Hainan; the activities of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) organization; and the Miss World Beauty Contest of 2003. The dominant media representation of Hainan is that of “China’s Hawaii”, since it is

designed to develop as a tourist spot, where palm trees, golf courses and pristine beaches are preserved for rich tourists.

However, Zhao presents a different picture of “China’s Hawaii”. The protagonists in the photos are not U.S. military crew, APEC officials, or the Miss World candidates. Zhao chooses sex workers, scavengers, children of rickshaw men, fishermen, crab catchers, farmers, a handicapped bookseller, a village doctor, a local opera actress, and so on. He repeatedly claims that what truly interests him are ordinary people, and what he wants to do is not to make a show, but to present the truth based on his vision and experiences. After his business became bankrupt, he began to earn a living by taking photos in Hainan, where he met different kinds of grassroots people. He has lived in Hainan for about ten years, and he claims that his energy and power always come from ordinary lives. Zhao thus teaches his student, Huang Mingfang, about his philosophy of photography:

A photograph is just a means or a tool, and the important thing is how you use it to express your idea. Any good work is always a reflection on social phenomenon. Now our main task is to use the camera to record the lives of marginal people, and to reflect ordinary people’s fate, but we should not waste our time on that called art.” (Zhao, 2004: 596; my translation).

I choose a photo entitled *Xiao Liu Having a Mask* (Black and White, 1999) as an example for closer analysis. In this photo, Zhao shows an urban sex worker having a facial treatment in the courtyard of her village home, and staring at her mother washing clothes. She wears a pair of downy slippers, and her mother a pair of Liberation Shoes. Echoing Said's suggestion of the political and ethical role of an intellectual in supporting the weak and the unrepresented, this section will attempt to reveal the interrelations among downy slippers, Liberation Shoes and urban intellectuals, through a close reading of some tensions represented in the photo.

"Liberation Shoes", are a kind of sports shoe, which the People's Liberation Army of the Chinese Communist Party has used since the 1950s. The shoe is made of rubber and cotton. It is green, flat soled, and has a round toe. In the 1960s and 1970s, particularly during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), it was considered a good and fashionable form of footwear. In 2002, however, Liberation Shoes stopped being used as training shoes for the People's Liberation Army because they invented a new kind of shoe using high-tech material and design. Yet, Liberation Shoes are still very popular in the rural areas because they are durable, cheap (around ten to twelve yuan a pair), and especially suitable for labor.⁷ Peasants, particularly middle-aged and elderly people, and also migrant construction workers, always wear Liberation Shoes nowadays. It is no longer regarded as fashionable and modern, but

as common, simple, raw, rustic, and also old-fashioned, poor and stupid since it symbolizes labor and peasant, and village life. In other words, Liberation Shoes are considered as a residual cultural icon derived from Mao's period. In her article "The Gender of Memory: Rural Chinese Women and the 1950s", Gail Hershatter notes that *jiefang*, "liberation", has itself become a category of narratives about the past by the rural women:

The use of the word 'Liberation' for the change of state authority in 1949, which quickly became part of the daily vocabulary in rural China, itself encoded a particular understanding of events. Citing Liberation as a signpost in one's life meant organizing one's own memories into a personal and collective narrative of emancipatory progress (Hershatter, 2002: 58).

The traces of the green shoes on the cultural landscape in contemporary China keeps the question of liberation always alive.

Politics of the Ordinary Citizen

In *Alternative Life: The Real World in the Eyes of a Photographer* (2000), Zhao represents sex workers like Xiao Liu, Xiao Li and A-V as ordinary urban people, though without legal status or social benefits, living in red light districts or slum

areas. What we see in the photos are glimpses of their daily life, such as dressing up, chatting with friends, cooking a meal, washing clothes, lying on the mat, sleeping in bed, playing cards, watching TV, making phone calls, and playing with cats. Zhao claims that “I am concerned about the ordinary lives of the girls, their smiles and laughter, their happiness, anger, sadness, worries, and their lives and deaths ... in other words, I particularly stress the sociological value of this topic, and not just the images” (Zhao, 2002: 45). He does not pretend that he is producing an objective truth, although the subtitle of his work is, “A Real World”. In his ethnographic writings, he gives the details of how he develops a close relationship with grassroots people. He brings his students to practice their photography whenever he is on fieldwork. From the photos taken by his students, we discover how he makes contact with the marginal people along the river or on the land. While making the lower classes visible he also makes himself visible.

Among his visual works, the sensitive topic of illegal prostitution draws a great deal of attention. Xiao Xushan, professor of Journalism in the People’s University, praises Zhao’s photos in her article “Lighten up the Dark Side”:

The photographer reveals the dark side of society, but not simply in order to entertain people’s curiosity or to pursue simulation. His photos show the painful lives of girls who are living on the margins of the city, and also their tragic existences ruled by subordination to money. It is true that a

photo cannot change the world, but his camera shows their existence in a way that provokes people to know and to feel concern. We can gradually improve our society, but, meanwhile, we can also help these girls who are living in disgraceful and despicable situations to find a new life” (Xiao Xushan, 2002: 190; my translation).

On the other hand, in a conference on the underground sex industry organized by the Sexology and Sociology Institute of the People’s University in 2000, some journalists criticized Zhao’s works for harming the “innocent” sex workers. They argued that the girls could not lead a normal, married or family life in future because of the publicity he brought them (Zhao, 2002: 58-59). An excerpt of a book review entitled “Zhao Tielin: Concern or Harm? Comments on *Alternative Life*”, published in one of the influential newspapers, *China Youth Daily*, makes a similar commentary. Xia Lijuan, the author, seriously criticizes Zhou for doing harm to the girls as “sometimes authenticity is a kind of harm”, while on the other hand, she recommends CCTV’s documentary *The Path of Loyalty* which tells the story of a good policeman who uses his own money to save abducted women and to keep this a secret. The secret later becomes public because dozens of anonymous women phone up CCTV after the policeman’s death.⁸

During that conference, Zhao expressed his sympathy for the girls and his intention of disclosing their lives from what he called “a peaceful and harmless angle”, avoiding any moral criticism. He defended himself by saying that he had

secured the girls' permission to publish the photos, and he shifted the question of visibility to the social and cultural reasons for prostitution:

People live at different levels, and there are variations in the rules of morality that people follow. This is not to say that what the girls have done is right. In this conference, we are not here to judge them, but to find the social and cultural sources producing these social phenomena. Thus, what is of the utmost importance is to find the "starting point of dialogue" with them, but this is also the most difficult thing to do (Zhao, 2002: 59; my translation).

Zhao's articulation of the difficulty of finding the "starting point of dialogue" with a rural sex worker implies that there is a gap between an urban elite and the other world. To transcend this rural-urban divide, we may have to make an effort to get into her subalternity, where there are tensions and violence. What follows is to articulate how Xiao Liu's downy slippers and her mother's Liberation Shoes epitomize the other world that requires us to have a different understanding.

A Mask of Disgrace and Honor

Xiao Liu Having a Mask, Black and White, 1999, appears under the title of "The Old Dragon-Lake Town" in *Alternative Life: The Real World in the Eyes of a Photographer*. The collection of photographs is divided into several themes, among which prostitution defines the first part. It shows us several profiles of sex workers. The photos and writings about Xiao Liu and her rural community are very extensive.

According to Zhao's texts, the photographer met her in Hainan in 1994 and developed a close relation with her. They shared the same house. Xiao Liu even economically supported Zhao to take photos about grassroots people, for example, by providing him with rent, food and film. Zhao attempts to portray Xiao Liu as an ordinary city girl, having meals in a restaurant, dressing up, lying on the bed, playing with her dog, shopping in fashion store, or visiting the Imperial Palace in Beijing. The rest of the photos are taken in Xiao Liu's home village in Longtan Town, Sichuan province. Zhao accompanied Xiao Liu to visit her village during the spring festivals of 1996 and 1999. In his photographs, we have seen Xiao Liu having fun with her cousins and nephews, playing mahjong with relatives, having a banquet, and making fires.

Xiao Liu Having a Mask was shot on a winter's day in 1999. In the courtyard, before the white-brick house, at least two-storey high, Xiao Liu is having a cosmetic face mask, with her hair tied up; meanwhile, her mother is washing clothes. Xiao Liu wears a T-Shirt and trousers, in a bright color, and a pair of downy slippers. She puts her hands inside her thighs and idly sits on a small bench. In contrast, her mother wears dark clothes, and a pair of Liberation Shoes. Xiao Liu is staring at her mother who is concentrating on washing, with two buckets beside her. A pile of logs is placed in front of the doors, and there are shirts and trousers hanging on the long stick on the second floor of the house. Some branches, bricks, bamboo baskets are scattered on the ground.

Xiao Liu Having a Mask (Zhao Tielin, 1999).

Against the background of a white house, which is a symbol of status and honor in rural society, is an idle but urbanized young daughter, and at a short distance away from her is her mother, who is a hard working middle-aged rural woman. The daughter resists doing the heavy domestic workload, which is considered a woman's "natural" duty in rural society. However, she relaxes and has a facial treatment to maintain her beauty, and perhaps also, by extension or association, her vagina (if we notice that her hands are inserted between her thighs), in order to earn a living as a sex worker playing a role in the tourism and entertainment industry in a special economic coastal zone of China in the age of financial globalization.

Marxist feminists such as Lin Lean Lim argue that the other contributing factors for prostitution are the increased gap between rural and urban incomes, relative poverty, and the spread of new forms of consumerism and increasing materialism to remote rural areas (Lim, 1998). Further, the market economy and rural-to-urban migration intensify sex-industrialization, which is an important explanation for a worldwide injustice, constituted as a result of the unequal distribution of world resources and of development under capitalism (Barry, 1995). Alongside the political-economic analyses of the sex industry, I would like to provide a supplementary explanation of Xiao Liu's story. Why does she accept "sexual exploitation" as normality? In the first chapters of *Capital I*, Marx continues to remind us of the social character of the commodity. Hence, any commodity, including Xiao Liu's sex service or the white-bricked house she purchases, should be contextualized and analyzed from social and cultural as well as economic aspects.

Zhao represents Xiao Liu as neither a victim nor an outlawed sex worker. She leaves for the city not for survival but for love. Xiao Liu was born in 1974. After finishing primary school education, she left school because her family could not support her. Both her father and brother have liver diseases, so she, her mother, sister and sister-in-law do all the heavy farm work, such as carrying manure, shouldering firewood, rice transplanting and harvesting. Her ankles were once broken due to her

carrying heavy things, and they still hurt whenever she wears shoes now. Later, she went to a town to learn tailoring, where she met her boyfriend. Her parents disliked the boy, who later went to Hainan to work as a migrant laborer at a construction site. In 1993, Xiao Liu tried her best to raise two hundred dollars to go to Hainan even though it was against her parents' will. She lived with him and worked as a cook at the construction site. Later, she had an affair with his boss, who eventually abandoned her. Afterwards, she did different kinds of jobs and now has become a sex worker.

Xiao Liu has visited her village several times. In 1999, Xiao Liu visited her village with Zhao. She brought home eighty thousand dollars, a big sum of money in the eyes of the rural people. No one questioned Xiao Liu about how she could have earned such huge amounts of money, but nearly everyone envied her. Zhao mentions that the annual income of the village where Xiao Liu comes from is four hundred yuan per head, and 40% of young people go to the city to work. Nowadays, agricultural work is not worth doing. The cost is very high, the prices of seed, fertilizers and pesticides are increasing, but the returns are extremely low. Zhao concludes that the tax burden of farmers is getting more serious. Some peasants tell him that if they cannot afford to pay the tax, they will be detained and beaten by the local government. What the local people are most concerned with now is money,

housing and new electrical appliances. Therefore, Xiao Liu is not an ordinary rural girl in her village, but a decent person, due to her ability of earning money to build a new and modern white-bricked house. According to Zhao, Xiao Liu gains respect from her relatives and friends:

Most of Xiao Liu's childhood friends have paid a lot of respect to her. Whenever talked about this, Xiao Liu's face shone with excitement. In the following days, Xiao Liu took Mr. Z [the photographer] and to follow her parents while they visited their relatives. Many people said that the two daughters of Liu's family were smart, successful, and broad-minded. The relatives expressed that they were willing to let their daughters follow Xiao Liu to go outside, to learn and to earn some money back (Zhao, 2000: 64-65; my translation).

No one asked what kind of work Xiao Liu did because the ability to earn money and become rich predominates popular concerns in spite of prostitution being considered immoral. Her sense of achievement, dignity, and recognition is mixed with a taboo on the invisible word "prostitution". Some feminists argue that rural sex workers are victims of the double standard, women who have been raped, abandoned, or perceived to no longer fit "the chaste wife-mother-sister ideal" and are therefore excluded by nearly all sectors of society (Ryan and Hall, 2001). But from Zhou's representation of Xiao Liu, the word "victim" is not enough to explain the complexity of culture in this respect. *Xiao Liu Having a Mask* tells us that she not

only enjoy a facial treatment, but also “loses her face”. Luo Lin, an editor from the Social Sciences Documentary Publishers, argues that the moral rules of mainstream society do not work among the marginal, and among them, the identification with and resistance to mainstream values co-exist.

But if we think carefully, we can find that the rural people admiring the new rich and privileging some kinds of behavior, is the result of mass media propaganda. Zhao Tielin catches the tension embedded in the people and leads us to think deeply: why can mass culture, marginal culture and mainstream ideology co-exist among them? How can they be like that? What are the connections between these cultures? How do they interact with each other?” (Luo, 2002: 204; my translation).

In other words, Xiao Liu is wearing a mask of honor and “disgrace”, implying that Xiao Liu is a “disgraceful” woman for losing her chastity but also an honorable rich lady building a modern house in her village. This double meaning of “mask” is nonetheless acted upon by discourses of individualism, consumerism, modernization and also gender hierarchy.

Downy Slippers and Liberation Shoes

Zhao’s politics of presenting a sex worker as an ordinary city girl earning a living is somehow supporting the policy of modernization. In his photos, the image of the rural acts as an explanation of the urbanized protagonists’ past history and

family connections, or a supplementary proof of recognizing the girls' contribution to redressing rural poverty. The rural is a transit place, but the city is the destination.

However, the girls cannot completely cut off their ties with the rural kinship. Xiao Liu is annoyed with the issue of money. Her parents always complain about the difficulties of living, and both her sister and brother want to borrow money from her. In addition, her relatives approach her to ask for a loan. Xiao Liu feels embarrassed and is trapped in a dilemma. She feels it is difficult to refuse and she knows that they will not return the money. She sighs:

Money is very important. If you have no money, your relatives will not respect you. Just like my poor little uncle, no girl wants to marry him. If you have no money, your family will keep a distance from you. The society is always like that (Zhao, 2000: 69; my translation).

Nonetheless, the annoying kinship and neighborhood are Xiao Liu's support network and also the ground of recognizing her achievement. Xiao Liu's life is swinging between Haikou city and her village home. It seems that she gains the right of mobility and of rejecting to her mother's fate: staying at home in the village and doing heavy domestic work all day long in a pair of Liberation Shoes, implying her readiness to work at every moment. In Zhao's photography, there are only a few descriptions of Xiao Liu's mother, all of which are associated with household chores:

In the early morning, somebody started to walk around outside the house. It was Xiao Liu's mother, who was just fifty years old. Years of labor had made the corners of her eyes wrinkle. She requested her husband to make a fire, and then she started to prepare breakfast for the whole family (Zhao, 2000: 15; my translation).

Another relevant paragraph about her is as follows:

Walking past the field of vegetables; there was a pond, where the ducks were swimming back and forth. Beside the pond, Xiao Liu's mother was washing clothes for the whole family. Mr Z suddenly thought of one thing: three years ago, it was Xiao Liu who washed the clothes, but not her mother. This time Mr Z has not yet seen Xiao Liu washing clothes (Zhao, 2000: 63-64; my translation).

Does it mean that Xiao Liu can escape from her mother's fate? We know that she has to use her face and vagina to earn a living in the city where the sex industry blooms. While the daughter, in a pair of downy slippers, symbolizing leisure and pleasure, is working for the sex industry of capitalist development, the mother, in a pair of Liberation Shoes, symbolizing labor and hardship, is doing an unpaid domestic job for the whole family. Her work is always exploited but ignored in the economic growth figures and the policies of national industrialization.

The mother accepts heavy domestic work as normal. In the photo, the mother does not make any eye contact with her daughter, but looks at her working hands; she

is totally immersed in her labor. Is it because she gains a sense of satisfaction in her labor, or in running a family? How do we define women's liberation? Xiao Liu's gaze is inevitably upon her mother, whom she cannot leave behind, yet there is a distance between them. A rural mother is supporting her urban daughter by doing the exhausting domestic work. Both the rural women in *Liberation Shoes* and downy slippers are informal workers, or sub-proletariat, who are not recorded in the official labor market and yet they are supporting the structures of world trade.

Conclusion

The film director Zhou Xiaowen and the photographer Zhao Tielin lead us to the residual but still active experiences, practices and values working in arena from below such as the rural women's ordinary lives and labors in making noodles, providing sexual services and washing clothes. The social and cultural factors behind the pursuit of money and commodities such as TV and housing cannot be dismissed in understanding the desires and anxieties provoked by the hegemonic discourses of modernization, individualism, and consumerism. As Williams remarks, the residual practices are frictions or resistances that "the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognize" (Williams, 1977: 124).

Ermo's exhausted body and her gaunt face disclose the unfair relation between the country and the city, and the complicity of patriarchal tradition and the market economy. The image of Ermo squatting in the street and her last cry of twisted noodles recognize a rural woman's ability and dignity; however, her pallid complexion entails another question as to what will happen to the sick, the weak, or the loser in the society promoting competitive values? The figure of the sickly Ermo is haunting the metropolitan cultural landscape, along with the sound of "twisted noodles for sale" coming up from the rural society.

On the other hand, Zhao Tielin's photos portraying the sex workers as ordinary urban people is in some way supporting the policy of urbanization and modernization, though he also explores the human consequences. He associates the image of the rural society with the past history of the sex workers, and with the recognition of their contribution to poverty alleviation. Xiao Liu's "mask" of honor and disgrace, downy slippers and her mother's Liberation Shoes are calling us to get into their subalternity, in which the violence and beauty of self-sacrificing are mixed together. The figures of the rural women in different pairs of shoes are caught between patriarchal tradition and capitalist modernization.

In the following chapter, I would like to further discuss the residual, or the “compulsory/voluntary” collective practices of two village groups: Xingrenzhuang Village Committee in North China, and the Luxia-Wanli Women’s Mutual Aid Credit Union in South China. What will it look like if we cease perceiving the object of study only as the spectacle of migrants in the metropolis? What will it look like if we cease seeing the rural merely as the dormant, poverty-stricken remote landscape?

¹ “Zhao Xiaowen and Chan Zhitao went to USA for Film Show”,
<http://www.7cworld.com/1999a/0117/newfile/14-01-8.htm>.

² “Zhou Xiaowen: I Don’t Have Any Style”,
http://www.bl.nbptt.zj.cn/famous/mrmj_zxw2.htm

³ In 1994, *Ermo* won the Special Jury Prize and other prizes at Locarno Film Festival, Spain.

⁴ Xiao Ersi, “Ermo: An Exception of the Fifth Generation”,
<http://www.c4movie.com/review/xiao/86.asp> .

⁵ At the end of the novel, Ermo’s leg is broken and she cannot move as freely as usual. It is a patriarchal value that a bad woman moving freely and in an adulterous relationship should be punished. The male author punishes Ermo for committing adultery; she loses her mobility because of losing her chastity, meanwhile a bad guy beats up her lover, but he can still move freely. According to the novel, a car from the Forest Department knocks Ermo down when she is resting along the road after collecting branches to make a fire. Although she gets a compensation of four thousand yuan, her left leg is broken:

She [Ermo] stayed at the hospital for a month. Even when she came back home, she still had to lie on the bed. You can imagine how much Ermo has suffered! She kept on dreaming. Once in the food-manufacturing factory, the useless iron horseshoe was suddenly thrown towards her leg and blood began gushing out of the wound on her leg. She immediately collected her blood, because she knew that it was valuable. Another dream that she had was that she was sitting on the wall, and throwing poisoned dumplings to the pigs. Then the wall collapsed and a big stone hit her leg. The last one was that she was in the truck, being hugged tightly by Xiazi. Then she felt that the truck was sliding towards a deep slope. When she turned back, she found Xiazi’s wife and Qipin (literally means a low-ranking officer), her husband, were pushing the truck. Qipin straightened up and suddenly became very powerful in pushing the truck to the slope [...] It’s punishment! It’s punishment! Ermo cried out from the bottom of her heart. Three days later, Qipin got on Xiazi’s truck and went to the city to buy a Hitachi Color TV. That night, he, Ermo and her son Huzi watched TV until it showed the characters of ‘Goodbye, see you tomorrow’ (Cai, 1996: 255-256; my translation).

⁶ In the early 1990s, some biological product companies cooperated with health officials of China to get cheap and clean plasma from peasants of destitute provinces to make medicines. Then, blood collection stations were set up to do business. The price was forty yuan for donating half a liter of blood. This attracted poor peasants

who began to sell blood in order to earn extra money for daily expenditure. However, the stations returned pooled blood to donors after plasma had been removed. Many peasants probably contracted the AIDS from the contaminated blood since there was no HIV screening. This unfortunately led to an AIDS epidemic in the rural areas, and the ground zero were in Henan provinces, like Wenlou Village of Shangcai County. It is estimated that at least one million Chinese are infected with the AIDS now, and most of them are the rural people. See Elisabeth Rosenthal, "Village of the Damned", *South China Morning Post*, 29 May 2001. See also Christopher Bodeen, "AIDS Activist Rises to Prominence", *Ming Pao Daily*, 8 April 2004.

⁷ On 10 April 2004, I visited several villages in Nanjing County of Fujian Province, where I bought several bags of tea from a peasant's family. The peasant's mother carried her granddaughter and they sat together at the gate of the house. She was watching how we bargained with her son. She just kept silent. I found that she wore a pair of Liberation Shoes, and beside her, another pair of Liberation Shoes, dried under the burning sun. Later, I bought one pair of Liberation Shoes in a small shoes-shop, which cost me ten yuan. The shopkeeper told me that Liberation Shoes are very popular in the rural areas, because they are cheap and durable.

Two Pairs of Liberation Shoes (Sit Tsui, 2004).

⁸ Xia Lijuan, "Zhou Tielin: Concern or Harm? Comments on *Alternative Life*." *China Youth Daily*, 19 June 2001.

Chapter Six

What Makes a Collectivity?

In January 2005, James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute¹ organized a three-day seminar in Beijing on rural development. The participants were largely university students, postgraduates, teachers, and NGOs. Two speakers, Chen Xin, a sociologist from Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Wen Tiejun, dean of the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, People's University, stressed the importance of collectivity in rural reconstruction. Chen Xin urged for “rural *re-construction*”, referring to a project to *re-construct* a spirit of collectivity. Taking a politico-economic perspective, he reiterated that common property, communal management and public supervision were important material bases of an emergent rural reconstruction movement. However, he stressed that the new collectivity would not be the same as The People's Commune, which was earlier the highest administrative unit in rural areas from 1958 to 1985.² On the other hand, Wen Tiejun suggested that “cooperative culture” could work against the logic of commodity economy and the dominant mentality of individualism. He recalled the famous story of *Santiao lǐtūi hezuoshe*, or the “Three-Leg Donkey Commune” in

Mao's period to explain the spirit of cooperation in poor conditions.³ He further took as an example a drum-dancing team initiated by a voluntary elderly association in a village of Henan Province to illustrate how social activity and cultural performances were crucial elements in community building.

Wen and Chen represent rural reconstruction not as institutional elections or infrastructural investment, but as a matter of collective projects while dealing with grassroots livelihood. I agree with them that common property, public control and social activity play an important role in rural regeneration. To supplement their approach, I will argue that a collectivity is also a project posing ethical question about the self-other relation: a project negotiating differences yet acknowledging the need for working and living together in daily practices. This presupposes that one should have the ability to think of the other, as Derrida remarks, "to receive, welcome, accept, and admit something other than oneself, the other than oneself" (Derrida, 1993: 10).

Developing a Marxist perspective, I propose "collectivity" as entailing a process of social re-distribution, implying that one lives and shares with the other. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), the specter of Communism urges us to differentiate ourselves from the logic of capitalism, and to think of the possibility of creating a communal world of sharing with others. The powerfulness of the specter

lies in deflecting from the bourgeois mentality of self-interestedness and “the icy water of egotistical calculation”. Marx argues that “capital is a collective product”, and “capital is, therefore, not a personal, but a social power” (Marx, 1998: 19). In other words, the power of capital can be turned around for socialist use. Furthermore, in his unfinished work, *Capital III*, Marx imagines a socialist community which can socialize or collectivize capital, and also can take the disadvantaged members of society into account:

[...] if, finally, both (1) necessary labor and (2) the surplus labor are taken to include the amount of labor that those capable of work must always perform for those members of society not yet capable, or no longer capable of working – i.e. if both wages and surplus-value are stripped of their specifically capitalist character – then nothing of these forms remains, but simply those foundations of the forms that are common to all social modes of production (Marx, 1991: 1015-1016).

According to Marx, a socialist mode of production means “those capable of work must always perform for those members of society not yet capable, or no longer capable of working” A socialist society involves an everlasting re-distribution of common resources including labor-power among group members. In that sense, a pre-condition for social re-distribution and sharing with the losers in a capitalist competition is to imagine the other. As Spivak remarks, it is an ethical practice of taking “care of others as care of the self”:

The need is to turn toward ethical practices—care of others as care of the self—that were “defective for capitalism.” Marx must be turned around to those who lost in the capitalist competition again and again; in order to turn this ferociously powerful form of capital around to the social (Spivak, 2000b: 7).

This chapter will shift focus from the resistant migrant in the metropolis to the remaining majority on the land, or the “losers in the capitalist competition”. In the previous chapters, the urban intellectuals are seen mainly representing the problems of specific women migrant workers, even though all the rural women share common experiences. Yet, there is little attention given to any collective practice or to how the rural communities to which these women belong to deal with the future of the losers. For instance, the handicapped Zhao Lingmei and the unemployed women in *Girls from Outside*; Anzi’s “unsuccessful” fellow sisters; Chen Yuying (Xiaoying) and other victims of Zhili Factory Fire; the sickly Ermo; and also the exploited sex worker Xiao Liu. In urban narratives the rural communities are inevitably depicted as conservative, selfish and indifferent. The urban intellectuals basically think around the question of how an “individual” rural woman struggles in the “city”. In that sense, they do not imagine “the rural” and “a collectivity” as alternatives to exported-oriented industrialization and an individualizing economy.

Rural communities in China are very heterogeneous, but the economic restructuring and dominant market mechanisms from the late 1970s have hit them hard. By narrating the experiences of two rural communities—Xingrenzhuang Village, Hebei Province, northern China and the Luxia-Wanli Women’s Mutual Aid Credit Union, Jiangxi Province, southern China—and describing their collective practices, I will discuss how the rural people have learnt to deal with mixed cultures which are the market-oriented culture and the residual culture of top-down collectivization established in Mao’s period. A collectivity depends on how people act jointly to manage common resources, and how they consider the needs of the vast majority, particularly the poor and marginalized. I hope this approach of portraying today’s China will go beyond understanding China in a simplistic dichotomy of either authoritarian communism or individual capitalism; I hope it will go towards tracing the pre-emergence of an alternative collectivity, in Raymond Williams’ term, that is, one that is not fully articulated yet but of which some elements are already in the making: “again and again what we have to observe is in effect a pre-emergence, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated” (Williams, 1977: 126).

Xingrenzhuang Village Committee

CASS has launched a large-scale research project, “Economic and Social Research on a Hundred Villages” since 1996, with the specific aim of “deepening the knowledge about rural China where 70% population live” (Lu, 2001: 1). The first village selected is Xingrenzhuang Village, Xinji Town, Sanhe City, Hebei Province, located in the suburbs between Beijing City and Tianjin City. The research team spent four years, from 1996 to 1999, on collecting data, conducting interviews and making visits and published their research as a report, *The Endogenous Village* (2001). Developing an “endogenous development” theory, the book defines endogenous development as a compromise mode of rural-urban mutual development:

Endogenous development is a kind of independent development, one that can prevent a village from completely depending on the urban economic system, and avoid the scenario of rural people flooding into the city to cause disorder. Meanwhile, it protects a village from the societal disintegration caused by depopulation and an ageing population, problems that have already occurred in developed countries (Lu, 2001: 10-11; my translation).

The research team represents Xingrenzhuang Village as one of the few cases that can still preserve a certain degree of communal economy under strong leadership from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), particularly in face of market-oriented policy and rapid privatization. When the economic reform was launched in the early

eighties, Xingrenzhuang Village was determined to maintain a collective ownership and management, even though the surrounding villages had already divided up all the public property and allocated it to individual units. At that time, it was generally believed that the more common property you divide up, the more you demonstrate your determination to embrace the reform and open-door policy (Lu, 2001: 62). In that sense, the researchers particularly highlight the significance of Xingrenzhuang Village in today's China:

Today, to Xingrenzhuang Village the most meaningful thing was what happened when the household responsibility policy started in 1982. The Village distributed land and small-scale agricultural tools among households and then carried out the Farming Dual System. The surrounding villages got permission from above to divide up all public property, but Xingrenzhuang kept the communal enterprises, agricultural infrastructure such as irrigation and electricity, and also continued basically collective ownership and management system. [...] Compared to other villages in the country as a whole, Xingrenzhuang's economic development belongs to a middle level standard, which is quite representative in northern rural China (Lu, 2001: 55-56; my translation).

The book emphasizes the figure of Zhang Deyin, the Village Secretary General of the CCP, to narrate the re-activation of a residual collective practice. Zhang is a figure of the Father/Party/State: his portrait is used on the book cover, and he is repeatedly described as a devoted communist:

Under great pressure from above, Zhang Deyin, the Village Secretary General, refused to divide up common property. He explained: “if we divide up common property, the collectivity won’t have any money. If the collectivity does not have money, it cannot serve the people. If it cannot provide public service, it won’t earn good reputation and authority. Then how can it manage local affairs?” (Lu, 2001: 392; my translation).

Within this seemingly authoritarian and patriarchal narration by the researchers and Zhang, there is a pressing call for social re-distribution from the village people. In the following, I will further discuss how Xingrenzhuang Village people negotiate with the dominant market economy and the remnant of cooperative practices by examining three cases: the controversy over the brick factory, the arrangement of voluntary labor, and the fund raising activity for Zhao Qiangfu.

The Brick Factory

The controversy of the brick factory discloses complex and contradictory relationships, arising from different dynamic forces that are a market driven exploitation of natural resources, a social demand for managing common resources, and an oppressive social hierarchy.

Xingrenzhuang Village has preserved a total of six communal enterprises, which include a tools factory, a files factory, a knife factory, a brick factory, a flour factory, and construction team. The brick factory is the controversial enterprise in the village.

The former Ten-Kiln brick factory, which was built in 1976, was the first collective enterprise among the local enterprises. In fact, only the brick factory separates its ownership and management as the Village Committee subcontracts it to individuals, but the factory is obliged to share 50% of its profit with the Village Committee. For the past several years, the communal factories have found it difficult to survive, however, the brick factory has continued to make great profits. Now the profits from the brick factory have become the largest financial source for the Village Committee. Thus, the brick factory not only provides job opportunities to local villagers, but also supports the Village Committee in its task of maintaining major public services such as agricultural facilities, education, telecommunications and transportation.

The brick factory occupies a large portion of farmland, but it has caused an eight-meter hole in the process of digging out clay for making bricks. The brick factory contractors have suddenly become the newly rich, thus exposing the gap between the rich and the poor—particularly evident when they build grand and luxurious houses in the village. Moreover, although the Village Committee turns its profits into social use, the migrant workers from remote provinces do not enjoy any social benefit from this. The managers or supervisors of the brick factory are mainly local villagers, but the migrant workers take up the low-paid, dangerous and heavy jobs. The research explains the differentiation and discrimination within the village:

Now the factory has 350 workers, of which 50 are local villagers, doing non-manual jobs, while others, coming from other poor areas, are taking up the physical labor. In the factory, you can always see women shouldering babies, and transporting bricks with trolleys, and the working conditions are certainly hard. The brick factory has brought the village direct economic gains, and it supports a hundred people doing transportation business, with a total of ninety four-wheeled tractors and five horses. Only local villagers are allowed to do this profitable job, so the differentiation within the village is once again shown here (Lu, 2001: 234; my translation).

The brick factory can yield higher rates of profit through the exploitation of labor from other remote regions such as Inner Mongolia and Guizhou Province. Contradictorily, the Village Committee turns the capital into social use, to meet the needs and purposes of the vast majority. Yet, the minority, or the migrant workers, keeps the question of social re-distribution alive by carrying a mark of gender and sexuality: “the women shouldering babies and transporting bricks with trolleys”.

Arrangement of “Voluntary” Labor

During the People’s Commune period, Mao promoted a mode of socialist modernization which in fact exploited the rural society for the purpose of national primitive accumulation. Under the labor credit system, every villager was obliged to do labor work, i.e., providing “free” labor for national industrialization. This had

been made compulsory through administrative means. Later, the economic reform policy advocated commodity economy and privatization, but Xingrenzhuang Village passed a law to maintain this service as a “voluntary” practice in 1983. However, since then in practice it has become half voluntary and half paid work. According to the regulations, each year everybody must fulfill at least five units of voluntary labor (five labor-tickets). The Village Committee pays for the extra work. Each unit costs around 1.5 yuan. Actually, there is no strict definition of one unit. Normally a male can get about 14 tickets one day, and a female 10 tickets. In other words, everyone generally provides half a day’s “free” labor to the community. Under this system, the villagers do public services such as road construction, drainage system maintenance, school reconstruction, factory building, and helping the elderly (Lu, 2001: 251-252).

This residual social practice illustrates that there are, in fact, two kinds of currencies that function in the community, namely cash and labor-power. This is not only a voluntary labor arrangement, but is also an exchange of labor-power among the villagers, for the purpose of community building. In this is embedded the ethical element that everybody must provide “free” labor for others.

Xingrenzhuang Village in particular put the “elderly” on the list that involves what Marx refers to as the element of a communal society. According to Marx, a communal society should take both necessary labor and surplus labor to make

provision for “those members of society not yet capable, or no longer capable of working”. In this sense, labor-power a commodity for sale is abstracted not for capitalist accumulation, but for social re-distribution. This social practice of evaluating and re-distributing working capability is an ethical practice, which presupposes that members of society work for other members who are not capable of working. To put it simply, to socialize labor-power means to work for others. This “residual” practice is still active in a rural society, but it is generally not recognized as “radical”, in the face of the forces of globalization, and the hegemonic mentality of individualism and entrepreneurship.

Fund-Raising for Zhao Qiangfu

According to Zhang Deyin, because of its tight financial budget the villagers cannot revive the cooperative medical system, which was once popular in the collectivization movement. Therefore, the villagers have to bear all the medical expenses as it is no longer subsidized. Under these circumstances, the village people struggle with re-adjusting common resources for the disadvantaged people as in the case of Zhao Qiangfu.

Zhao Qiangfu is a peasant who is over thirty years old but he suffers from a mental illness. He is not strong enough to do heavy work and his wife too is seriously mentally handicapped. They have a seven-year-old son and a three-year-old daughter. Unfortunately, the daughter too is mentally ill. In 1998, Zhao discovered that he had a liver tumor, but he was too poor to seek medical treatment. Then he and his wife sought the Village Committee's assistance. Zhang Deyin recalls their case:

Zhao Qiangfu and his wife came to my home twice. They asked for help. We all understood his situation. If we do not help him, who will? However, the Village Committee cannot give him money directly. We cannot break the rule. What can we do if other sick villagers also ask us for help? At last, we agreed that the Village Committee would organize a mobilization of the whole village to donate (Lu, 2001: 409; my translation).

Immediately, the Village Committee circulated a letter seeking donations and they set up several mobile donation boxes at different spots. They also brought Zhao's family along to collect donations. Within two days, they had raised 4923.9 yuan. Zhao's medical cost was over 6000 yuan. The Village Committee sponsored 3848.7 yuan, and Zhao himself paid the rest. The Village Committee gave the remaining money, 1405.2 yuan, to other poor and sick people, for example, Shi Yongshen, a blind seventy-year-old man. Since his wife was suffering from a uterine tumor, they decided to give 500 yuan to Shi's wife.

The Village Committee took the initiative to turn Zhao Qiangfu's personal medical problem into a social problem. Although the medical cooperative had gone, Zhao got his medical "insurance" through the community's donation. In the name of donation, this social redistribution takes the vulnerable and the disadvantaged into consideration; as Zhang Deyin remarked, "we all understand his situation. If we do not help him, who will?" Reserving the remaining donation for other sick people further illustrates that a communal society should think of "those members of society not yet capable, or no longer capable of working". This collective practice was not seen in Xiaoying's village, although we know that there are a lot of victims of Zhili Factory Fire in her town.

In the following pages, I will discuss the practice of rural collectivity through another example, that of the Luxia-Wanli Women's Mutual Aid Credit Union in Yongxin Village. They are different to Xingrenzhuang Village, which is struggling to maintain a communal society under CCP's strong leadership, but here the women's credit union is a local women's group, working together with a Hong Kong NGO and searching for alternative rural-urban development.

Luxia-Wanli Women's Mutual Aid Credit Union

Since 1994, I have been a voluntary worker for the China Social Services and Development Research Centre (CSD), a small Hong Kong NGO which promotes rural-urban sustainable development. There are two on-going projects at present: James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute in Zhaicheng, Hebei Province, and Luxia-Wanli Women Mutual Aid Credit Union in Jiangxi Province. For the past ten years, I have been engaged in working with the women's credit union.

In May 1994, CSD and Jiangxi Provincial Women's Federation (JWF) cooperated to facilitate the setting up of the first all-women's credit union in China: Luxia-Wanli Women's Mutual Aid Credit Union (LWCU). All the women at or above sixteen years of age are eligible to be members of the credit union. The membership is approximately of one hundred women who come from the two village groups. A five-member Managing Committee is elected by secret ballot. LWCU runs its own projects, and JWF and CSD endeavor to withhold their assertion of political or monetary influence. Over the last ten years, LWCU has initiated a series of projects on education, community, culture and economic development. For example, conducting an alternative organic lily bulb trade (which I will discuss in detail later); purchasing an electric grinder and thresher for the village; contracting four acres of hill-land to grow fruit trees; building a three-storey activity centre; setting up a

library, running a kindergarten; conducting evening literacy and agricultural skills classes; assisting the local health units to organize seminars on women's health education and to arrange gynecological check-up and treatment⁴; and carrying out a breakfast project providing buns and eggs to children.

As a rural organization, LWCU is affected by globalization. There are the continuous effects of the dominant development path that China takes, such as "alleviating poverty and getting rich", "rural industrialization", and young peasants flooding to the cities to work. There is the existing patriarchal tradition that makes some of the male villagers suspicious of a women's ability. Under the combined forces of capitalist globalization and patriarchal tradition, LWCU while working with the CSD, tries to organize projects that promote the women's solidarity and collective development. But what are the different kinds of problems that surface while working under these different influences? Also what are the possibilities for cross-border collaboration that exist or may be discerned?

As an urban intellectual and an outsider, I try my best to get closer to the other world with which I am not quite familiar. In narrating my relation to the "un-familiar" and even the "un-known" world, I find that there are limitations on my efforts, such as in the multiplicity of languages and the ways of knowing. However, I shall attempt to describe the process by which we work together in order to confront the conditions which maintain their subalternity.

Nowadays, a lot of young credit union members have migrated to the cities leaving behind the middle-aged and the elderly, who are now the backbone of the credit union. The labor that they provide is farming, feeding poultry, cooking, washing clothes and taking care of children. Young women go to the cities while the older women stay at home to support the family. This group of aging women wears Liberation Shoes.

Their mother tongue is the Hakka dialect, but it is quite different from the other Hakka-speaking places such as Mei County in Guangdong province or Mei Nung Town, Kao Hsiung County, southern Taiwan. Some CSD volunteers from the latter places could hardly understand the villagers' Hakka. The rural women are mostly illiterate or have been educated up to the primary level. Very few of them completed their junior secondary education. We spoke Putonghua, the national language, to communicate with the rural women. Even though they could probably understand Putonghua they preferred to speak Hakka. Sometimes we had to rely on women officers from the Women's Federation or village children, as interpreters. I always feel lost while trying to converse with them as, the two languages that I knew, Putonghua and Cantonese could not work well here. Since we could not understand Hakka, it was impossible to conduct a closely personal discussion with the local women. A moment of being lost is also an opportunity of changing a familiar habit.

The rural women are not at all silent or passive. Their voices are loud, and they speak very rapidly. Some of their faces even turn white and red as they speak. All that I could do was to listen and learn from their dialect. Through the use of interpreters, and broken Hakka and Putonghua, all of us worked together to search for a rural-urban cooperative development.

Child Labor

Before I begin discussing how the rural women are able to practice collectivity, by managing common resources and the division of labor, I will highlight the neglected issue of child labor in rural areas that highlights the negative impact of financial globalization on rural children. In the following letter, A Mei reminds us to put rural child labor on the urban intellectual's political agenda. She is a young credit union member who has worked in Guangdong Province for more than ten years, shuttling between the city and the country. Several years ago, A Mei wrote to me:

Dear Sit Tsui, I am so glad to hear that you will be visiting my village soon. [...] I am pregnant and now stay at my mother's place. [...] Two weeks ago, there was a big incident. There was an explosion of firecrackers in a primary school that was situated between our village and the town. Many children have died. It's terrible. Local newspapers and television have reported that a mad man broke into the school by accident with piles of home made explosives. But then we heard the truth that the schoolmaster was using the school as firecrackers workshop and took

advantage of the students as free child labor. As you know, our county is famous for firecrackers. Now everyone is talking about it. *Have you heard of about this incident?* (my translation).⁵

Rural child labor is an open secret. In the face of poverty children are considered as social security. Some of the children and teenagers whom I met were used to visiting Zhejiang Province with their relatives where many of them worked in factories making Christmas light bulbs for export. Meanwhile, some rural women find jobs in the local fireworks enterprise, or opt for sub-contracted work that they can do from home. Wanzai County in Jiangxi Province is the fireworks capital of China and its population of four hundred thousand is geared towards the production and distribution of firecrackers. Though the locals realize that it is dangerous for their children to assemble fireworks, they continue to do so since it is the backbone of their local economy. Chinese law prohibits child labor but the problem is rife in the rural. From rural child labor to unorganized female labor at home, the upward social mobility of the rural subaltern is still in question.

Capitalist globalization even infiltrates the remote and mountainous regions of China. Rural women try and come to terms with this destructive impact and work together to turn their labor-power for communal use. This will be clearer once the rural women are recognized as agents of social transformation. As Helena Norberg-Hodge argues in “Shifting Direction: From Global Dependence to Local

Interdependence”, the majority of the world population is on “the land”. It is necessary to restore self-respect in the rural population and recognize cultural vibrancy in the rural societies, against the standardized monoculture and highly polluting consumer lifestyle promoted by the global economy. She suggests that “[Remaining rural communities and small farmers] are the key to rebuilding a healthy agricultural base for stronger, more diversified economies” (Norberg-Hodge, 2001: 245).

Evaluating Labor-Power

J.K. Gibson-Graham argues for drawing the various economic patterns at work out of the supposedly monolithic formation of capitalism. In “Haunting Capitalism: Ghosts on a Blackboard”, Gibson-Graham uses the metaphor “ghosts on a blackboard” to evoke the heterogeneous economic forms which are capable of haunting capitalism. The authors (Kathine Gibson and Julie Graham) challenge the monolithic idea of capitalist hegemony, and argue for developing the suppressed discourse of economic diversity as “the image of noncapitalist forms of production and exchange, of noncapitalist modes of surplus labor appropriation and distribution, all those unfleshed out feudalisms, slaveries, household economic practices, intrafirm relations” (Gibson-Graham, 1999: 250), thus supplanting the discourse of capitalist

hegemony with a plurality and heterogeneity of economic forms, including commodity production in communal enterprises and barter systems. What they suggest is to make marginalized and suppressed concepts and discourses of economic differences visible and audible: “glimmers and murmurings of noncapitalism might be seen or heard” (Gibson-Graham, 1999: 23). In the following, I will further discuss how the rural women make use of their labor-power and common resources for community building in three cases: lily bulb production, grinder and thresher machine management, and house building. These are plural and heterogeneous economic forms and they are also embedded with ethical elements.

Lily Bulb Production

LWCU’s first project is conducting a lily bulb alternative trade project with Green Empowerment Limited, a CSD partnership organization.⁶ Lily bulbs have been grown in this region for over five centuries. Peasants usually sell their products to the processing factory in the township, which is mainly controlled by the party-cum-government elite. Inspired by the people-to-people banana trade between Japanese consumer networks and Filipino farmers,⁷ since 1994, CSD and LWCU have been developing an alternative organic lily bulb trade relationship. The idea is to develop LWCU’s sustainability through economic cooperative projects, which

would involve all its members and also generate income from agricultural activities. LWCU organizes its members around the production and packaging of lily bulbs. Through the alternative trade network facilitated by CSD, LWCU sells lily bulbs directly to consumers in Hong Kong and Taiwan. All net profits from the trade go back to LWCU, divided into three parts: dividends for members, the collective fund, and the education fund.

There was a significant change in the lily bulb production mode in 1997. In the early years, LWCU collected lily bulbs from members who grew them on their land. In 1997, Hong Kong suffered a serious financial crisis and the lily bulb sales declined drastically. In order to cope with the financial burden, CSD reduced the quantity of lily bulbs and then proposed another mode of production was collective farming. By covering all the production costs such as seeds, rent, and labor CSD was also sharing the risk. Since that time, LWCU has continued promoting collective farming of lily bulbs. However, the rural women are negotiating with the dominant logic of calculating the labor-power embedded in a commodity economy.

For example, there were grievances about favoritism among credit union members. In order to deal with the suspicion of unfair distribution and an insistence on individual benefits, LWCU devised rules for fair practices, such as a meticulous calculation of the amount of voluntary labor contributed by each member as well as a

fair distribution of paid tasks. For example, the managing committee divided labor-force members into five teams and adopted a different way of remunerating labor. The teams would strive for a balance of competence, age and friendliness. Each team elected one leader. Each team was paid 450 yuan for 90 days labor tilling the lily bulb land and they were expected to yield a certain set target (Lau, 2002: 86-87).

On the other hand, the more able rural women reserved their labor-power for other members, which went beyond what money could buy. They were willing to “perform for those members of society not yet capable or no longer capable of working”: the mothers having babies and the elderly members. These two groups are exempted from heavy work such as digging out lily bulbs from the soil under the burning sun, pulling up weeds, and carrying farmyard manure or water. Huaying, a managing committee member, explained that this practice required an understanding that “some members have the newly-born babies or little children, and some are too old and weak to take up heavy work. In that case, other members take up more work. We can understand. No one complains about that.” The capable rural women work for others through providing ‘free’ labor, and then turn their labor-power not for capitalist accumulation but for community building, in the name of motherhood, sisterhood and care of the elderly.

Another example further illustrates that the rural women not only have labor-power, but the capability of thinking about others. In 2004, LWCU received a grant from the township government that encouraged peasants to do farming. The grant was four thousand yuan. LWCU was required to grow lily bulbs on 20 mu. All farm products belonged to LWCU and they did not have to pay tax. Huaying told me how they made use of the grant to re-distribute their common resources, “in order to encourage members to do heavy work, we agreed that 60% went to members who pulled up the weeds in the farm and dug out lily bulbs, and 40% were dividends for all members, including the elderly, and the “absentees”, i.e., those going out to the cities to work.” In this collective farming, the rural women kept the common resources including labor-power for community building. A feeling of community, or a feeling of being a part of the whole, exists in the process of working together and working for others in everyday life.

Grinder and Thresher Machine

The purchase and management of a grinder and thresher machine is another example showing how the rural women deal with common problems and interests. Six months after its foundation, LWCU was faced with a divisive controversy. The issue was how was the collective fund from the lily bulb trading to be utilized. Two-thirds of the members agreed upon purchasing an electric grinder and thresher

as it would serve all households and reduce women's labor, though it would not yield much profit. The others insisted on purchasing a briquette-making machine. The villagers are used to going to the mountains to collect firewood, but in recent years some villagers have changed their traditional habits to using briquettes. A briquette is a small block of compressed coal-dust, which also contains a binding substance such as pitch. The idea was to bring coal-dust from outside for processing and the product would then be sold primarily to urban areas. This business would be contracted to a few families who owned a truck to bring in the coal-dust to the village. The profits could then be divided among shareholders with LWCU being one of them. Some credit union members tried various means to overturn the majority decision and even split the collective fund into two parts according to the numbers in support of the two different options. As a result, LWCU was paralyzed for some time. Later, CSD, JWF and the LWCU's managing committee came together to discuss how to settle the dispute. After long discussion, the three parties reached an agreement that if the collective fund were to be divided among members, it would be against the principles of the credit union namely, voluntarism, collectivism and democracy. Due to this intervention from working partners, the minority of the credit union who were clamoring for the briquette machine eventually gave up and returned their "share" of the collective fund to LWCU (Lau, 1996: 29-43; 2002, 84-87).

The quarrel about the briquette-making machine reveals the strong effect of dominant entrepreneurship in the rural community. Five years later, the briquette crisis re-appeared. In 2000, at a meeting with the LWCU's Managing Committee, it was mentioned that some members were keen to purchase a briquette engine to run a business. They argued that briquettes were becoming popular and that it was the cheapest source of fuel available locally since it cost sixty cents a piece. A family consumed two to four pieces of briquette every day. There were only two small private briquette plants in the village, and they suggested three reasons that the CSD should consider for investing in this potentially lucrative business. First, the LWCU could consume cheaper briquettes and save money. Second, the scheme would provide job opportunities as several of the existing township-village enterprises were either declining or bankrupt. Third, with sufficient capital, LWCU and CSD could dominate the local market.

CSD refused on the grounds that briquette production was highly polluting, along with the clay factory, which also polluted the nearby river, and that biogas could be an alternative. Biogas is a gas fuel obtained by the bacterial decomposition of animal and vegetable waste in the absence of oxygen, in a specially built fermenter. We promoted biogas' advantages: energy saving, organic fertilizer and food, as well as proper sanitation. LWCU agreed that biogas was useful and good, but they also

posed a complicated problem of “no pigs, no biogas”: “how can we have a stable supply of pig waste for producing biogas if the situation arises that the price of pigs sharply goes down because of a market fluctuation? Who will have time and energy to feed pigs since the labor force are all fleeing to the cities? And, how can we afford four thousand yuan [approximately USD 520] to install a whole set of facilities for making biogas?” Again, we persuaded them that CSD’s purpose was not to start any big enterprise. Contradicting us, some of them repeatedly argued that they could get great profits from this business.

Today, neither the proposal for briquette-making machine nor the biogas scheme has been implemented. Instead, the grinder and thresher machine have continued to serve the village for at least ten years. This not only reduces women’s labor, but also saves money for LWCUC. Now the service charge is 1.5 yuan per 100 kg grain, which is cheaper than other villages, who generally charge 2 yuan. In fact, villagers from adjoining regions also use the machine. Initially, the LWCUC members took turns to manage the machine. In the process, they learned how to use and even repair the machine. Some told me that it was the first time that they had operated the machine, so they were very excited.

Later, with the village depleted of its labor force, the LWCUC rearranged the management of the machines by subcontracting it to its members. The criteria were

that the subcontractors should have a good reputation in the village, good management ability, and be relatively poor. Today, a single man, around 40 years old, is in charge of the machines. His mother is a credit union member; some of the fingers of his right hand were severed by machines while working in the local plastics factory. LWCU believed that since he was unable to do any heavy farm work or find another factory job, he was the best candidate, so they allowed him to manage the small business in order to earn a living. Through the purchase and management of grinder and thresher machine, the rural women not only keep the common property under collective control, but also reserve it for the more disadvantaged people. This exemplifies the new productive ethics that Wendy Harcourt proposes in her feminist perspective on sustainable development:

There is a need to shift from an understanding of development as an efficient way to convert natural and human resources into material wealth, to a perspective which de-emphasizes efficiency and growth and respects the interrelationship between people, their communities and their life-support systems (Harcourt, 1994: 4).

Furthermore, the village uses “labor-power as community currency” to maintain the interrelationship between people, communities and life-support systems. Under the market economy, many peasants do not have enough cash to meet daily expenditure. In order to tackle this common problem, i.e. lack of money, they

exchange their labor-power. They re-arrange and adjust their timetables for managing, such work as transplanting rice seedling, harvesting, and building houses. How do they calculate “labor-power as community currency”? What is the exchange rate? Is it done in terms of hours or days? Do they record it in black and white? Huaying gives me an interesting answer, “we calculate and remember by heart”. According to this calculation labor-power is abstracted and calculated as commodity, but it is used not for accumulation and profit, but for exchange and subsistence. Here, labor-power has become not only a commodity but is also its medium of exchange, i.e., money. Yet, this “money” does not beget money. This calculation of “labor-power as commodity and money”, is like a barter system that has been activated in a society in which one can consider the other’s livelihood and maintain a long-term mutual relation. Some eco-feminists think that it is necessary to recognize the hidden work of housewives, subsistence peasants and small producers in the informal sector, particularly in the global South. They explain that this subsistence formation is not only “a kind of hidden underground of the capitalist market economy, it can also show the way out of the many impasses of this destructive system called industrial society, market economy or capitalist patriarchy” (Mies and Shiva, 1993: 298).

The Red Brick House

LWCU's activity center, the striking red brick house, demonstrates how the rural women provide their "free" labor-power in order to create and keep a common property. At the very beginning, a number of male villagers were suspicious of the women's ability and were hostile to the LWCU. Within the patriarchal culture, the LWCU members worked together to create a woman's space. Originally, the LWCU did not have its own place, so activities such as the general assembly, the kindergarten class, and the women's literacy classes were held in the ancestral hall, which is the public property of the Village Committee. LWCU had to pay rent for every activity even though the hall belonged to all villagers, including the rural women. This derelict ancestral hall had not been repaired for years. The LWCU used a piece of cloth and some old tables and chairs to set up a classroom there for the children. Sometimes the women would be embarrassed while conducting the general assembly they would be interrupted by men. These discords with men made the women want to have their own place. Accordingly, they used up the entire collective fund, a total of around sixty thousand yuan [approximately USD 7790], which they had gained from the alternative organic lily bulb trade over the past five years, and in 1999 the women finally built their own two and a half storey house (they did not have enough money to complete construction across the third floor). According to the

minutes and their narrations, many members got involved in achieving the common goal, through discussing the budget, mapping the land resources, dealing with various opinions among the members, negotiating with the township government and the Village Committee, searching for construction workers, designing the building, purchasing and transporting building materials, coordinating the volunteer labor works, and settling any conflict outside and inside LWCU.

CSD recognized that the house signified LWCU's commitment to long-term cooperative development. In order to support our rural sisters, CSD sponsored fifteen thousand yuan [approximately USD 1,923], which were used for a conference hall on the third floor, the installation of a kitchen, toilets and tap-water. Now the total area of the building is four hundred square meters. On the ground, there are three rooms, one housing an electric grinder and thresher, one for a village doctor, and the third for a kitchen. On the second floor, there are also three rooms, one for kindergarten, one for women's cultural education, and the other is reserved for the Family Planning Unit of the township government. On the third floor, there is an office, a library, and a conference room. The rooftop is used for drying lily bulb and lily powder, or children's playground.

The red brick house is not only the rural women's collective property, but also a visible proof of their ability and capability to confront together the adversities of life.

As Wendy Harcourt remarks, it is necessary to recognize the importance of the rural women's role in alternative knowledge production and the grassroots women's resistance to mainstream economic development, which is basically measured only by Gross National Product (Harcourt, 1994: 12).

Swinging from the coerced collectivism of Maoist period to the present-day coerced individualism and competition, it is difficult for the rural to reverse the trend and to generate a culture of sustainability, tolerance, giving and reciprocity. However, the third-storey red brick house remarkably stands on a country crossroad, which symbolizes LWCU's status in the village. The red brick house as the women's space creates a sense of distinctiveness within the rural community since it has made a difference from the patriarchal ancestral hall, and it has also brushed up against the mainstream idea of the self-centered individualism of the market economy.

Conclusion

The LWCU's efforts in fostering a collective response to the global socio-economic situation may not look particularly impressive. They may reveal not so much the achievements of the women, but the matrix of problems that entangle both individuals and communities in today's China. If we see that Xinrenzhuang

Village can provide for the community's social expenses through certain forms of collective property and management, the reason is that the village party committee can mobilize its authority accumulated over the past year to carry out the schemes. As for the LWCU, it has very few forces with influence that it can rely on. Its two main partners, the un-influential Women's Federation, and a small volunteer group from Hong Kong, cannot give it much political support or economic gains. Rather, the support is in the form of moral and ethical encouragement. Furthermore, it has to deal with the village power bloc as well as the patriarchal relationships which permeate every family and affect every LWCU member. The way child labor is exploited also resonates with the way women's cheap labor is exploited in the new domination phase of capitalist development. It is under all these difficult situations that the LWCU struggles to maintain its collective projects. If we put ourselves in the rural women's Liberation Shoes, we may appreciate their courage and innovativeness.

Capitalist globalization has had a hugely destructive impact on rural society. However, Xingrenzhuang Village and the Luxia-Wanli Women's Mutual Aid Credit Union are, in their different way, negotiating with the market-oriented culture, and re-activating the residual collective practices. In order to re-make a culture of collectivity through daily practices, they are dealing with issues of grassroots

livelihood, such as collective management of common resources, arrangement of voluntary labor and re-distribution of profits. A communal society exists only if common resources, such as labor-power, can be abstracted, calculated and re-distributed among members of society including those not capable of working, or the so-called “losers” in competitive market economy who remain on or return to the rural. Everyone can actively take part in managing common resources, not only for personal use but also for public use, which presupposes that one can think other than oneself. Therefore, a collectivity exists in the process of social re-distribution, which involves not only locality and materiality, but also the ethical dimension: thinking of the other. Perhaps, this approach will lead us towards the pre-emergence of an “active, pressing but unknown” form of collectivity.

¹ James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute is jointly organized by six partners: Village Committee of Zhaicheng Village, Hebei Province, China; James Yen Popular Education and Rural Reconstruction Committee; China Reform Journal Agency; China Social Services and Development Research Center (CSD--HK); Action Aid China Office; Committee of Rural-Community-Building; and Society for Promoting Village Development in China. It was officially launched in July 2003 and is registered under the Hebei Province Education Bureau. Its mission is to carry on the ideas and spirit of popular education and rural reconstruction as put forward by James Yen (1890-1990), a Chinese educator and social activist, and others, through community development in rural villages.

² The People's Commune was formerly the largest collective unit in the rural areas in Mao's period. It was divided into production brigades and production teams. The commune had governmental, political, and economic functions. Later, the commune was replaced by the official mode of organization "township".

³ In the 1950s, there was a cooperative movement throughout rural China. In 1952, twenty-three poor families from Xipu Village of Zunhua County in Hebei Province were determined to join the cooperative, even though they only owned a three-leg share of one donkey (one middle peasant owned the rest). Within three years, the cooperative improved the peasants' livelihood. More and more families joined the cooperative and their common property such as land, livestock and farming utensils gradually increased. Mao Zedong highly recommended this cooperative model, and represented it as "the whole nation's image". See Mao Zedong (1977), "Editor's Notes from Socialist Upsurge in China's Countryside" (September and December, 1955) *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. V. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press. 242-276.

⁴ From November 2000 to August 2001, CSD ran a gynecological checkup program with LWCU and the Women and Children Health Unit of Wanzai County. The target population of women covered the whole Baishui Township, a total of twelve villages. The twelve villages are Yongxin, Fengxin, Tanqian, Wenyi, Baishui, Meixin, Caoling, Dazhuang, Luoqiao, Xincao, Yuexing, Laoshan, plus one Household Committee. According to the Women and Children's Health Unit, the report showed that most of the women suffered from cervical erosion and vaginal infection. In order to ensure complete recovery, the doctors advised the rural women from carrying heavy loads or having sex over the next two weeks. This generated a good discussion among the rural women on how to protect their bodies and health through different methods such as refusing husbands' importunate sexual demands, reallocation of household labor and making use of local herbs to get the same treatment while saving money (Lau, 2004: 20).

⁵ On 6 March 2001, an explosion flattened the interior of the two-storey brick school building, at the Fanglin Village Primary School in Jiangxi Province, killing forty-two pupils, mostly children under ten years old, and teachers. The cause of the blast became a controversy. The villagers claimed that the school was a fireworks sweatshop using free child labor, in which the school principal and teachers conspired with the village party secretary, and ordered students to assemble

fireworks in order to subsidize the school's finances, including teachers' salaries. Generally, the salaries of schoolteachers in rural areas are very low. Many earn only two to three hundred yuan a month (approximately USD 25 to 38). As many townships have financial difficulties, salary payments have become increasingly irregular. It is common for schools to engage in business activities to keep the establishment running. Some parents had repeatedly complained to township authorities and the county government about the school illegally requiring pupils to make firecrackers during class or in the lunch hour. Officials have admitted that the local government was so poor that the children were required to make fireworks under a "work-study program" in 1999.

However, officials claimed that the program had stopped before the explosion occurred. In contrast, the former premier Zhu Rongji, and official news sources, claimed a suicide bomber was responsible. But the victims' families refused to accept the government's "mad bomber theory" that a mentally disturbed suicide bomber, thirty-two-year-old Li Chuicai, was said to have left a note threatening to kill people in a suicide attack. He was reported to have broken into a third-grade classroom and detonated two bundles of explosives. The suspect died after he set off the explosion. The explosion made headlines around the world, focusing attention on the problem of inadequate school safety and prompting nationwide calls for stronger action to be taken to protect children from death or injury. The incident eventually led to a public apology by Zhu Rongji and a reshuffle of the provincial leadership. For the details, see Clara Li, "Madman Blamed for Blast", "Delegates Urge Law to Protect Children" and "Teacher Saw Man in Black Set Off Bomb", *South China Morning Post*, 9 March 2001; Tom Mitchell, "Scapegoat or Murderer?", *South China Morning Post*, 15 March 2001; "Zhu Promise to Widen Blast Probe Welcomed", *South China Morning Post*, 17 March 2001; Daniel Kwan, "Disasters Unite Poor and Privileged", *South China Morning Post*, 6 June 2001; Ma Guihua, "Forty Children Every Day", *South China Morning Post*, 22 June 2001.

⁶ For the details, see Lau Kin Chi, "Pedagogical Working on Place: Women's Economic Activism in Rural China." *Development*, Volume 45, No. 1, March 2002. 84-7; and also Sit Tsui, "Rural Women and Collective Development: A Women's Credit Union in Jiangxi, China." Abstracts and Papers of Summer Retreat 2001. Beijing and Hong Kong: Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Partnership for Community Development (PCD), 2001. 50-59.

⁷ In 1986, the fall in international sugar prices led to acute starvation on the island of Negros in southern Philippines. The Japan Committee for Negros Campaign (JCNC) was set up, which later found that the form of aid, such as sending money, food and medicines, would not eradicate the root cause of poverty. After in-depth discussions on the issues of aid and landlessness with the people of Negros, Alter Trade Japan, composed of four major consumers' cooperatives, was formed in 1989 to explore an alternative trade. They chose Balangon, a green banana, as the commodity. It is not consumed by the local people as it is sour, but the Japanese find that it is tastier than the chemically treated multinational bananas. Later, more and more bananas farmers came together and founded the Balangon Growers' Association. As Seiko Ohashi, one of the major coordinators, remarks that there is something more important than

trading: “we have to see how we can utilize these commodities to create different levels of solidarity”, and the alternative trade is used “as a means to benefit the community and for building up the community spirit”.

For the details, see Seiko Ohashi, “Alternative Trade”,

<http://www.cca.org.hk/resources/ctc/ctc94-02/7.seiko.htm>

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

Figuring a Rural Woman

China's accession to the World Trade Organization powerfully symbolizes its re-integration with capitalist globalization. The fundamental value of the reform and open-door policy over the last two decades was "bourgeois liberalization". However, from the continuing rhetoric of "building socialism with Chinese characteristics" and "China is in the primary stage of socialism", we can see that the ruling class struggles to justify China's linear representation as a socialist country. Nowadays the market-oriented culture in China is mixing with the residual compulsory collectivism. Here, therefore, the "subaltern" is understood as a "position without identity" in order to make a difference from the habitually dualistic way of seeing China's alternatives and Chinese reality: coercive capitalism versus authoritarian communism.

In this thesis, I have adapted Marx's famous remark that "a specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism" to my own argument that if specters are haunting the world in the age of globalization, they are the specters of the subaltern, with the figure of a rural woman. I invoke the spectral figure of the subaltern to

render visible the rural woman whose significance lies in troubling both the hegemonic discourse of modernization/development and traditional patriarchy as it functions (and also fails to function) in contemporary China.

In subaltern literature, intellectuals make use of the word according to their own political agendas at specific times and places. Inspired by Gramsci's vision of the subaltern as the proletariat in Europe, Guha redefines the subaltern as a banner of alliance for subordinated groups in the South Asian society in face of an elite-oriented historiography, and he makes them the subject of a history. By gendering the subaltern, Spivak brings the question of women into the debate. Spivak refers to the concept of the subaltern as the group without any access to upward mobility. On the other hand, she takes the word to mean it to be designating and designing a space of difference. Borrowing the concept of the subaltern, Hershatte relates it to a prostitute in the Chinese context. Hershatte explores the relationship between sexuality and modernity through reading prostitutes' speeches and their silences in Colonial Shanghai of the 1930s. Adopting this line of feminist critique, I invoke the subaltern as a rural woman for my own agenda. By using the figure of the rural, I challenge the domineering image of a metropolis in the prevailing discourse of modernization. Meanwhile, I am also responding through the figure of a woman to the current heated debate about the three dimensional rural problem in China.

Basing my argument on Stuart Hall's concept of "black", I construe the figure of a rural woman as a temporal name or category to cover experiences of marginalization and resistance to the global and patriarchal modernization. Using the image of the rural woman is neither a valorization of the country over the city nor an acceptance of a patriarchal village society. It is also certainly not a replica of the People's Commune that was imposed under the statist policy of industrialization, or the top-down model of forced collectivization. Rather, it is the practice of challenging the absolute urban and industrial priority, of improving the hierarchical rural-urban relation, of distancing oneself from the dominant values of privatization and competition, and of imagining a communal society that seriously takes both the subjugated groups and nature into consideration.

Spivak's recent work on "the new subaltern" directs our attention to "the subaltern in the South, the rural landless, the Aboriginal" (Spivak, 2000c: 26). In her speech "The Subaltern and the Popular—Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work", delivered at the University of California in August 2004, Spivak takes the rural/indigenous as modeling the subaltern, referring to those disenfranchised groups without access to the lines of upward mobility, and she asserts that "subalternity does not lie in recounting or reaffirming the detailed practices in the enfranchised groups". To make it possible for subaltern voices to be located and heard is a question of

speaking and listening, as she suggests, “all speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception. That is what speaking is” (Spivak, 1999: 309). The word “another”, in this thesis, refers to an urban intellectual. Thus, a complete act of speaking and listening relies on how an urban intellectual responds to or relates herself to the subaltern speech. To put it simply, this thesis involves an act of reading, and also a politics of representing today’s China.

As I have emphasized, Spivak reminds us of two senses of representation namely, proxy (*vertreten*) and portray (*darstellen*), “to confront this group is not only to represent (*vertreten*) them [the poorest women in the South] globally in the absence of infrastructural support, but also to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves” (Spivak, 1999: 276). In this sense, to ask how urban intellectuals represent rural women implies examining how they speak for, as well as portray, the rural women. In other words, representation is a historical, positional and conditional practice of making sense of your *relation* to the other, a relation that is loaded with meanings and values. There is no purely disinterested subject in any process of representation. With respect to the relation between authenticity and marginality, Trinh T. Minh-Ha cautions us against the danger of essentializing authenticity as “the more the representation leans on verisimilitude, the more it is subject to normative

verification”. Hence, she proposes that we do not judge the verisimilitude value of representation; rather, “to use marginality as a starting point rather than an ending point is also to cross beyond it towards other affirmations and negations” (Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 1991: 19).

On the cultural landscape in present-day China, the figure of the rural always connotes negative associations such as ignorance, backwardness, a burden, and a “tumor”. This figure also tends to be the object of fear, contempt, pity or benevolence. In the visual and written texts analyzed in the previous chapters, we find that the social scientists, writers, TV producers, film directors and photographers primarily depict the rural women as the innocent and poor subaltern, waiting to be rescued. They undertake an act of exposure to urge fellow citizens to lavish a great deal of attention on this social problem and to solve it. In circulation are images of the rural woman as an advocate of modernization, a victim of industrialization, an agent of proletarian movement, and the residual at the bottom layer of society.

Socially concerned urban intellectuals express their sympathy for the rural women, and speak for them to urge for social justice and recognition on their behalf. The aim is to help rural people obtain mobility, legality and citizenship. Yet, as I have argued in this thesis, one of the common assumptions behind their agenda is that the rural people should transform themselves, sooner or later, from being disenfranchised

migrants to legitimate citizens and skilled workers. Those are predominantly stories of the country-to-city model. In this way, urban intellectuals generally support the national scenario of modernization and industrialization, in the process embracing the urbanist ideology of depicting the ideal agent of cosmopolitan society as a modern city worker. Under these circumstances, I have chosen specifically to address the coercive desires and values deriving from the prevailing discourse on development, which privileges “advanced” cosmopolitan values and marginalizes the “backward” rural at the same time. In addition, I have tried to write the international politics back into these representations, and to emphasize the multiplicity of subject-positions at work.

Derrida’s method of bringing out “the minute particulars” helps us question the familiarly known discourse of modernization with its absolute prioritization of the urban and industrial. In my reading, I have established that there are interruptions and indeterminacies working against the grain of the texts. Derrida’s notion of “minute particulars” is quite similar in this respect to Foucault’s metaphor of “a flash of lightning in the dark” in his “Preface to Transgression” (1963), referring to the relationship between transgression and the limit: “transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another ... its role is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that causes the limit to

arise” (Foucault, 1993: 36). To trace “the flashing line” or “the minute particulars” provides us with a different understanding of the texts. My readings demonstrate that there are inner incoherences and discrepancies within the legends of success. The surplus women left behind the factory gate and the strike led by Zhao Xiaoyun in the TV series *Girls from Outside*; and the women workers’ affective but fragile bonding in factory life and the unforgettable pain in Anzi’s body act as mismatching elements in the texts that include them. The image of the successful rural woman is mainly dependent on the excluded majority who stay along the fringes of the metropolitan society or live on the land. The excluded continue to remain the underclass without access to the lines of upward mobility.

There is something uncanny in the victims’ painful stories. After the Inferno, Xiaoying has never expressed any remorse for leaving her village in order to support her brother’s education. The crippled body has embodied an achievement of fulfilling family expectation, a strong will to survive, and a determination to promote workers’ rights. Similarly, in Xiao Liu’s photo, the sex worker’s downy slippers and her mother’s Liberation Shoes reveal that violence and the beauty of self-denial coexist. The figures of the rural women in different pairs of shoes are trapped between patriarchal tradition and capitalist modernization, but their tensions with market culture and patriarchal convention enable a condition for imagining another way.

In addition, I have argued that it is necessary to acknowledge the rural women's internalized process of gendering together with economic exploitation or destructive development, which cannot alone explain why a rural woman willingly accepts violent exploitation. Women can exploit themselves in such a way that they are both the object and the subject of exploitation, so they are able to sustain the operation of exploitation, and treat it as normality. In this thesis, I approach the subaltern women who so negotiate with desires and violence, in order to understand better her conditions and her acts, to recognize her subalternity and her agency. This educative effort perhaps leads us to discover the trace of an aporia, or "non-passage", in Derrida's sense. Derrida describes an aporia as a place where you feel yourself to be stuck and "the places of aporia in which I have found myself, let us say, regularly tied up, indeed, paralyzed" (Derrida, 1993: 13). To experience aporia as the possibility of impossibility is when you are at the crossroad of two beautiful but opposite things, in other words, you are at the limits of truths. In this sense, the rural women's acceptance of gender hierarchy as the natural choice is embodied in their sacrifice, but it is also in their devotion and commitment to their family. So, the aporia discloses the co-existence of oppression and virtue.

On the other hand, Xiaoying's story gives us a glimpse of a different "Thailand" from that of the capitalists' toys conference in *Girls from Outside*. Xiaoying attends

the workers' safety conference in Bangkok and visits the Labor Museum that has been built to commemorate the Kader Toy Factory Fire. According to the male narrator, Xiaoying is impressed by the slogan of "Dignity is not for Sale" used by a small garment cooperative. The media producers narrate Xiaoying's story within the frame of urbanity and the proletarian movement, and they do not explain any further how the cooperative relates itself to rural Thailand. However, the image of a small group of diligent workers sewing the T-shirts in a brightly lit small room in some way makes a difference from the mainstream media representations of Thailand, as a tourist paradise, or as a blooming manufacturing industrial center. To represent Thailand as the brightly lit image of "a small garment cooperative" connotes that the media producers recognize the workers' effort to search for alternative practices.

The twisted-noodle maker, Ermo, with her pallid complexion, keeps her distance in the end not only from the biggest TV set in the village, but also from the restored family honor and community recognition. Ermo's alienation ends the film with a sense of awkwardness, which disrupts the prevailing narration of entrepreneurship with satisfaction. Further, there is a glimpse of how she suspends the capital logic of money begetting money. She turns the thoroughly commodified activity into free entertainment, and initiates a series of social events, for example, her neighbors helping in the installation of the TV set and watching TV together.

Again and again, she turns on her 29" color TV, opens her door to allow her friends, relatives, neighbors, and even enemies to come and enjoy themselves together. At a specific time and space, Ermo re-opens the space of sharing with others in the daily life of the rural community. Significantly, watching TV is represented not as a purely personal entertainment, but as *social* practice. It is necessary to recognize the residual experiences of collectivity, as Williams suggests, to look at and affirm "the experiences of directness, connection, mutuality, sharing" (Williams, 1975: 298).

The complexity of "mixed" cultures in contemporary China cannot be grasped by the dualist conceptual schemas of tradition and modernization, or capitalist privatization and authoritarian collectivization. The dynamic interrelations between and within the dominant market-oriented culture and the residual compulsory collective culture enable us to observe "a pre-emergence", in Raymond Williams' terms: "again and again what we have to observe is in effect a pre-emergence, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named" (Williams, 1977: 126). In today's China, the experiences, meanings, and values generated from the coercive collectivization in Mao's era may have become "remnants" that cannot be substantially verified in terms of the dominant market-oriented culture, but they are nonetheless being lived and practiced in a *new* form at present. Following Williams' way of looking

differently at the residual culture in order to observe “the pre-emergence”, I have narrated and theorized two on-going collective experiments, those of the Xingrenzhuang Village Committee in Hebei Province, North China, and the Luxia-Wanli Women’s Mutual Aid Credit Union in Jiangxi Province, South China.

The Xingrenzhuang Village Committee, under strong leadership from the Chinese Communist Party, and the women’s Credit Union, working together with a small Hong Kong NGO and an official women’s organization, negotiate with the existing “mixed” cultures at work in village life, namely, the now dominant market-oriented culture and the residual “voluntary” practices continuing from Mao’s period. In daily life, they are all struggling to make a “new” collectivity through managing communal resources, re-arranging the division of labor, and re-distributing gains and losses. To a large extent, the two local groups are turning what was previously a “coercive” collectivism into an “un-coercive” collectivity in the making. They are putting social re-distribution into practice by taking the disadvantaged, the vulnerable, or those not capable of working into consideration.

This new collectivity is searching for an “alternative” set of social relations, as Williams suggests in his definition of community as “the warmly persuasive word to describe *an alternative set of relationships*” (Williams, 1988: 76, my emphasis). Here, “alternative” means to make a difference from destructive capitalism or top-down

communism, and also to pose an ethical question. The formative elements of a new collectivity are not only locality and materiality, but also an ethical practice of thinking of the other. A new collectivity takes care of one-on-one relations at the ground level, in a way which recognizes the experiences, feelings and values of every *single* person; as my readings show, the singular issues of each and every rural woman cannot be dismissed. A new uncoercive collective practice *from below* is possible as a process of sharing and living together with the other, or of taking care-of-the-self as care-of-others.

The minute particulars of “the rural woman” fragmentally appear in these stories as residual experiences and practices, as the losers of capitalist globalization or as subjugated knowledges, but also as something active, pressing and unknown: in effect, the “pre-emergence” sensed by Williams. In the closing section, I will move from this notion of “a pre-emergence as something not yet fully articulated” towards Derrida’s idea of “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present” in *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International* (1994), through gendering the peasant’s ghost in the dark corner of *Show Your Colors: Chinese Attitude for the Twenty-first Century* (2001), discussed at the beginning of this thesis.

Living with the Non-Contemporaneous

Since 1989, a series of events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communist states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, as well as the crackdown on the democratic movement in China have been taken to confirm the emergence of a neo-liberalist world order. Heralded by Francis Fukuyama's claim of "the end of history", the global triumph of free market economies has made leftists in general address the questions of the death of communism and the fate of Marxism. Thus, in 1993, the Center for Ideas and Society at the University of California, Riverside organized a conference on "Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective". Under these circumstances, Jacques Derrida gave his lectures, which were later compiled as a book, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. He dedicated his book to Chris Hani, a former general secretary of the South Africa Communist Party, who was assassinated in 1993.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida first makes a connection between "Hamlet's father's spirit" in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the specter of Communism in *The Communist Manifesto*, in order to affirm the importance of Marx(ism) in the new world disorder. Derrida further develops two concepts to illustrate the logic of "the specter(s)" as hauntology and plurality. He argues that in the time of neo-capitalism

and neo-liberalism, no disavowal is able to get rid of the ghosts of Marx and Marxism. The specters carry the implications of both coming-back (*revenant*) and to-come (*arrivant*), that is, of coming back to haunt hegemony and also of looking forward to the future (Derrida, 1994: 11, 28, 39).

According to Derrida's reading, when Hamlet declares that "the time is out of joint", it entails "the excessive or exceeded relation to the other" (Derrida, 1994: 23) and is asking for justice to be done. He elaborates that justice should be put together with the responsibility, and respect for those who are bearers of the "non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present", because of political violence, oppression, and exterminations, such as the victims of war, nationalism, racism, colonialism, sexism, capitalist imperialism or totalitarianism:

Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question "where?" "where tomorrow?" "whither?" (Derrida, 1994: xix).

My research in this thesis echoes Derrida's idea concerning the non-contemporaneity of those who are not there, or who are no longer or who are not yet present and living, in the name of responsibility and respect for justice. Here, for my own argument, the non-contemporaneous is figured as a rural woman. The

specter of the peasant in the dark corner of *Show Your Colors: Chinese Attitude for the Twenty-first Century* (2001) is continually haunting the metropolitan male artists of Red/Yellow/Blue China. However, I invoke an “absent/imaginary” rural woman who acts as a figure of irreducible difference within the dominant urbanist teleology and patriarchal convention, persistently driving us towards gaps and ruptures, and bringing self-evident assumptions into crisis.

Furthermore, I invoke the specters of the rural women in an attempt to establish an ethical relation with the *non-contemporaneous*, just as Virginia Woolf imagines a figure of the silent Shakespeare’s gifted and imaginary sister, and our mission of working for her, “but I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while” (Woolf, 1945: 111-112). Spivak elaborates that “the ghost dance is an attempt to establish the ethical relation with history as such, ancestors real or imagined. The ethical is not a problem of knowledge but a problem of relation”. A ghost dance “must be supplemented by inspired scholarship and a feeling for the limits of ‘identity’” (Spivak, 1995: 70). That means we not only have to be concerned with the sexual difference of the body, but also the spirit, that is, how to build an ethical relation with the bearer of the “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present”, or to work *for* her. The specters of the subaltern women are haunting us to consider singularities and also to

imagine new collectivities. In the names of justice, ethics, and hope, the specters do not just come back but also require us to build an ethical relation with the non-contemporaneous, no matter past or future, real or fictional it maybe. The specters draw our attention to the heterogeneity of suppressed and marginalized practices and patterns.

As a student of cultural studies, I am “studying not how people are in a passively inherited culture but what we do with the cultural commodities that we encounter and use in daily life (‘practice’) and thus what we make as ‘culture’” (Frow and Morris, 2000: 315-346). In the process, I am on the way of learning to re-make a culture of living with the non-contemporaneous.

Glossary of Chinese Names and Terms

- A Ban 亞班
A Fang 阿芳
A Mei 阿美
A Yu 阿鈺
Anhui Province 安徽省
Baishui Township 白水鄉
Baoyang factory 寶洋工廠
cailanzi 菜籃子
Caoling Village 草嶺村
Chan Zhangliang 陳章良
Chao ying gan mei 超英趕美
Chao-Shan Areas 潮汕區
Chen Kaige 陳凱歌
Chen Xiaonan 陳曉楠
Chen Yufu 陳余富
Chongqing 重慶
Cui Jian 崔健
Dagongmei 打工妹
Dazhuang Village 大庄村
Dexing Consultation Services Center 德興諮詢服務部
di 笛
Dongguan Fire of May 30 《東莞五三 O》
Dongguan 東莞
Ermo 《二嫖》
Erzi 《娥子》
Fanglin Village Primary School 芳林小學
Fazhan shi ying daoli 發展是硬道理
Feng Xiaoshuang 馮小雙
Fengxin Village 豐新村
Five—One Achievement Award 五個一工程獎
Flying Award 飛天獎
Fujian Province 福建省
Gansu Province 甘肅省
Girls from Outside 《外來妹》
Golden Eagle Award 金鷹獎

Golden Rooster Prize 金雞獎
Goodbye, Fireflies 《再見螢火蟲》
Guo Zhiqing 郭志清
Haikou city 海口市
Hainan Photo-News Daily 《海南新聞圖片報》
Hainan Province 海南省
Hakka 客家
He Shang 《河殤》
Hebei Province 河北省
Heilongjiang province 黑龍江省
Hu Jintao 胡錦濤
Huabiao Prize 華表獎
Huang Mingfang 黃明芳
Huaying 華英
Hubei Province 湖北省
Hunan Province 湖南省
Huzi 虎子
It Is Just Like Your Tenderness 恰似你的溫柔
James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute 晏陽初鄉村建設學院
Ji Mingwen 紀明文
Jia Yunzhu 賈雲竹
Jiang Zemin 江澤民
Jiang Hong 蔣宏
Jiangsu Province 江蘇省
Jiangxi Province 江西省
Jianli County 監利縣
jiefang 解放
jiefangxie 解放鞋
jihua shengyu 計劃生育
Jinggang Mountain 井崗山
Kader Toy Factory 開達玩具廠
Kangzhen 康珍
Kuichung Town 葵涌鎮
Kwai Tsing Theatre Auditorium 葵青劇院演藝廳
Laoshan Village 老山村
Li Changping 李昌平
Li Chuicai 李垂才
Li Ning 李寧

Li Qiang 李強
Li Shuangshuang 李雙雙
Li Xiaotong 李曉彤
Liaoning University 遼寧大學
Light and Shadow 《光與影》
Lili 麗麗
Lin Kehuan 林克歡
Lin Xiaoshun 林小順
Liu Chengfu 劉成付
liudong renkou 流動人口
Longgang District 龍崗區
Lu Ping 魯平
Lu Ren 魯韜
Luchaibang 蘆柴棒
Lufeng 陸豐
Luoqiao Village 羅橋村
Luxia-Wanli Women's Mutual Aid Credit Union 路下灣里婦女互助儲金會
Ma Yan 馬彥
mangliu 盲流
Mass Photography 《大眾攝影》
Mei County 梅縣
Mei wenhua, mei zhishi 沒文化，沒知識
Meixin Village 梅新村
milanzi 米籃子
mingong 民工
Mr Jiang 江先生
Nanjing County 南靖縣
Nantou 南頭
Noise Cooperative 噪音合作社
Project of Hope 希望工程
Qing dynasty 清朝
Qingdao Haier Corporation 青島海爾集團公司
Qingshui River 清水河
Qingyuan 清遠
Qipin 七品
Sange daibiao lilun 三個代表理論
sannong wenti 三農問題
Santiao lütui hezuoshe 三條驢腿合作社

Sanxia gongcheng 三峽工程
Shaanxi Province 陝西省
Shangcai County 上蔡縣
Shek Ping Kwan 石炳坤
Shennan Middle Road 深南中路
Shenyang Institute of Economics and Finance 瀋陽財經學院
Shenzhen Wanke Limited Company 深圳萬科企業股份有限公司
Shi Yongshen 石永生
Sichuan Province 四川省
Sige xiandaihua 四個現代化
Song Guoliang 宋國良
suzhi 素質
Tanqian Village 潭前村
Teresa Tang 鄧麗君
The Crippled Li 鐵拐李
The Girl from Huangshan 《黃山來的姑娘》
The Imperial Palace 故宮
Tong Cheng Chung 湯鎮宗
Unspeakable Ending 無言的結局
Wang Guilan 汪桂蘭
Wang Shi 王石
Wanzai County 萬載縣
Wen Jiabao 溫家寶
Wenlou Village 文樓村
Wenyi Village 文義村
Wing On Plaza 永安廣場
Wu Jinglian 吳敬璉
Wuchang 武昌
xianzai nongmin zhen ku, nongcun zhen qiong, nongye zhen weixian 現在農民真
苦、農村真窮、農業真危險
Xiao Li 小劉
xiao 蕭
Xiaokang 小康
Xiaoying 小英
Xiazi 瞎子
Xibei da kaifa 西北大開發
Xie Heilong 解海龍
Xincao Village 新槽村

Xingrenzhuang Village 行仁庄
Xipu Village 西鋪村
Xu Hongyun 許紅雲
Xu Ling 許玲
xun 墳
Yan'an 延安
Yang Huaiding 楊懷定
Yang Pu Great Bridge 楊浦大橋
Yangwu yundong 洋務運動
Yongxin Village 永新村
Yu shijie jiegui 與世界接軌
Yuxing Village 月形村
Yuhua 宇華
Yushui District 渝水區
Zhaicheng Village 翟城村
Zhang Deyin 張德印
Zhang Hongwei 張宏偉
Zhang Ruimin 張瑞敏
Zhang Yimou 張藝謀
Zhang Yuan 張元
Zhao Fengzhen 趙鳳珍
Zhao Lingmei 趙玲妹
Zhao Qiangfu 趙強夫
Zhao Xiaoyun 趙小雲
Zhao Xiuying 趙秀英
Zhao Yulan 趙玉蘭
Zheng Banqiao 鄭板橋
Zhili Toy Factory Fire 致麗玩具廠大火
Zhou Xiaowen 周曉文
Zhu Huixia 朱惠霞
Zhu Rongji 朱鎔基
Zhuazhu shiji fazhan ziji guanjian shi fazhan jingji 抓住時機，發展自己，關鍵是發展經濟
Zhuhai 珠海
zhuli lazhan 助理拉長
Zunhua County 遵化縣

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