

WILEY



A • M • E • R • I • C • A • N
A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L
A S S O C I A T I O N

Specialization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labor Mobility of Rural Young Women in Post-Mao China

Author(s): Yan Hairong

Source: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Nov., 2003), pp. 578-596

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of the [American Anthropological Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3805250>

Accessed: 02/06/2014 14:22

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Wiley and American Anthropological Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Ethnologist*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Spectralization of the rural:

Reinterpreting the labor mobility of rural young women in post-Mao China

ABSTRACT

In this article I examine rural Chinese women's migration to the cities before and after the post-Mao reform. I argue that rural young women's pursuit of a modern identity during the more recent migration has to be understood in the context of a changed rural-urban relationship resulting from China's postsocialist development in an era of flexible accumulation. I analyze how a contradiction between freedom and violence dialectically constitutes the search for a new, modern subjectivity by rural young women in China today. [*gender, labor migration, modernity, subjectivity, rural-urban relations*]

It's like going through a reincarnation and you still choose to be *ren* [human].

—A young, rural migrant woman from Hubei working in Shenzhen, quoted in Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle*, 1998

If I had to live the life that my mother has lived, I would choose suicide.

—Xiazi, a young, rural migrant woman interviewed in Beijing in the documentary film *Returning to Phoenix Bridge*, 1997

Tomorrow, I will be more like a *ren*.

—Xu Xue, *China's Youth*, 1995

The young woman from Hubei who is quoted above expresses her determination to be *ren* (human) when asked why she returned to Shenzhen after surviving a blaze that took the lives of 68 of her co-workers in a factory there in 1991. The blaze has not diminished her determination to continue her migratory search for a new subjectivity. The second woman quoted, Xiazi, adamantly rejects her mother's way of life in the countryside, as it seems to Xiazi a life so lacking in meaning that it annuls livability altogether.¹ The third young migrant, Xu Xue, expresses determination and hope that she will soon achieve a new subjectivity. In the discursive context of postsocialist development in China, these statements register a dramatic rejection of the countryside as a field of death for the modern personhood desired by young women, who imagine the spaces of hope for such personhood to be somewhere else, in the city.² What may appear in these statements to be desperate articulations of desire for a new, modern personhood encapsulates the ethos of the widespread desire among rural youth to "see the world" (*jian jian shi mian*), their migrancy to the city both enabled by and enabling China's post-Mao reform effort at modernization and accumulation.

Yet one cannot help noting in the women's comments that the imaginary of a new, modern personhood is coupled with the idea of death, expressed here by the use of the terms *reincarnation* and *suicide*, as if violence were its necessary double. Marx long ago revealed the contradiction inherent

American Ethnologist 30(4):578–596. Copyright © 2003, American Anthropological Association.

in primitive accumulation, simultaneously a process of emancipation and freedom for laborers from serfdom and the guilds and a violent history of expropriation and violence “written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire” (1977:875). But the unprecedented rural–urban migration involving roughly 100 million free laborers, whose labor power has fed the engine of China’s postsocialist accumulation since the early 1980s, is not based on the forced expropriation of land, as described by Marx more than 100 years ago. It is, ironically, based on the distribution of once collectively owned and managed land to individual rural households for production and management. Rural reform—the reapportioning of collective land to individual peasant households as accounting units, which is known as the “household responsibility system” or “decollectivization”—was introduced as the first measure of the postsocialist structural readjustment in China in the early 1980s. This post-Mao rural land reform, a political economy of land seemingly opposed to the classical model of primitive accumulation, provided a necessary condition for unfettering the massive peasant labor to drive the flexible accumulation machine. In this article, I analyze the following questions: How does the political economy in post-Mao China generate the conditions for a new carnival of primitive accumulation, with its attendant contradiction of freedom and violence? Why was the countryside in the 1990s often invoked by rural young women as a symbolic field of death compelling them to seek a modern subjectivity elsewhere? By raising these questions, this essay links the political economy of development and the processes of subjectivity formation. This specific critique of current postsocialist development in China joins the critique of *Development* as a dominant discourse in many Third World countries and beyond.

In what follows, I track the discursive conditions and contradictions embedded in the struggles and agonies of subaltern subjectivity. I argue that labor mobility cannot be singularly celebrated, as many political observers inside and outside China have done, as a new form of freedom to be realized in the transition from a planned to a market economy. What analysts have overlooked—a key focus of this article—is how post-Mao development has robbed the countryside of its ability to serve as a locus for rural youth to construct a meaningful identity. Hence, rural young women’s invocation of the countryside as a field of death. I argue that young migrant women’s pursuit of a modern subjectivity, situated in the culture of modernity produced by post-Mao development, has to be understood in the context of a reconfigured rural–urban relationship in China’s restructured political economy. I further argue that embedded in the post-Mao culture of modernity is an epistemic violence against the countryside that spectralizes the rural in both material and symbolic practices. This essay excavates and foregrounds how the post-Mao shift in urban–rural relationships, the “spectralization of the rural” (Spivak

2000), is constitutive of rural young women’s desire for the city, and it traces such women’s struggles with the impasse posed by the discursive violence of post-Mao modernity itself.³

To capture the epistemic discontinuity in rural women’s migration before and after the post-Mao reform, I compare and analyze women’s migrancy in the 1970s and in the 1980s–90s. Rural women who migrated during these two periods did so in different discursive contexts, their experiences shaped by different modernity projects in the Maoist and post-Mao eras. I examine the experiences of two cohorts for two reasons. First, the experiences of rural young women in the late 1990s and the conundrum they faced cannot be properly captured without examining the radical post-Mao shift in the rural–urban relationship and how this shift has impressed itself on rural young women’s subjectivity. Second, my focus on the two cohorts allows me to situate my analysis in the growing discussion of modernity or modernities in anthropology. My analysis speaks of modernities in the plural, not in terms of essentialized cultures to forward a Chinese brand of modernity, but in terms of historicity to examine the tension and discontinuity in social processes and thus to offer a critique of the teleology of capitalist modernity that is becoming hegemonic in China and elsewhere.⁴

The data are drawn from my fieldwork in rural villages in Wuwei, Anhui Province, and in Beijing in 1998–2000. My interviews in Wuwei included 104 women in 12 villages in three townships. I interviewed 88 women who had migrancy experience; 13 were over 40 years of age and had migrated by themselves before and during the 1970s; and 75 were between their late teens and early thirties and had migrated in the mid-1980s and mostly in the 1990s.⁵ My interviews in Beijing were conducted with women from a number of provinces, including Anhui.

“Rural women,” state, patriarchy: A small exodus of rural women in the 1970s

Wuwei County lies in southeast Anhui Province, north of the Yangtze River, its southern border defined and often threatened by the river. A base for rice and cotton growing, Wuwei has 1.34 million *mu* of agricultural land and a rural population of 1.2 million, about 92 percent of its total population.⁶ Wuwei was once a base in Anhui for the communist New Fourth Army, which resisted the Japanese invasion of China in World War II. Local legend has it that some New Fourth Army officers left their young children in the care of local women during the war. Because of this connection, shortly after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, some of these women were given employment by veterans as domestics in Beijing. This established the link for later migration.⁷ It is estimated that three to four thousand rural women from Wuwei had worked as domestics in the cities up to the 1970s (Wang and Li 1996:23).⁸ In 1993, the number

of rural Wuwei women migrants working as domestics reached 263,000.

In this section I analyze the double burden of gender and rural origins shouldered by women in the countryside in the Maoist era and critique the participation of state and patriarchy in the discursive construction of the subject position *nongcun funü* (rural women). But I also show that rural migrants of the period nevertheless positively claimed a “rural woman” identity through their participation in agricultural labor and asserted that this identity was undiminished by their migration experiences.

Great Aunt was 65 years old when I met her in 1999 in Beijing. Living with her son and daughter-in-law in a single-room house in the suburbs of Beijing, she looked after her one-year-old grandson and cooked for the young couple while they went out everyday to sell processed chicken in the market. A mother of four children, Great Aunt first came to Beijing from Wuwei more than 20 years ago to work as a domestic (*ayi*, lit. auntie, or *baomu*). Sitting in the courtyard, she told me about her experiences of migrancy. In the following excerpt she described her daily labor in the field and at home during the collective period of the Maoist era:

Then we had the production team leader and the accountant leading us. The production leader blew his whistle, calling out, “Hurry up” [to summon us to work]. Our production team leader at that time, how should I say it, was a single stick [unmarried]. After he went home and was done with his eating, he’s all finished. But we had to take care of our children, wash them and then cook. Every morning I got up before dawn: cooking breakfast, washing diapers, feeding the baby, cleaning around the house. I got up before there was any light. After the breakfast was cooked, I ate hurriedly. Then I had to wash rice and fetch water from the river. When I heard the call, I left for the field. Sometimes I hadn’t got a chance to really finish eating myself, because I had to feed the baby first, right? And then during the work break, I would hurry home and cook rice for lunch. I got it boiling and almost done, and then I had to rush back to the field. It’s the same thing when we came back home around noon. We first lit the stove. Then while the children’s father [her husband] cooked dishes, I fed the youngest baby. After lunch, I would wash dishes, the wok, and diapers and feed the baby again before leaving [for the field]. During the busy season like now [summer], we wouldn’t come home until seven or eight o’clock. We worked with no end, yet we didn’t always have enough to eat.

Great Aunt spoke with excitement and sighs of frustration. She also remembered with a hearty smile how her fellow villagers in the production team remarked on her ability to carry full loads of sludge on a shoulder pole balanced above her slender “water snakelike waist.” She drew a certain pride and heroism from this public recognition. She remembered

the days of collective labor as bustling with community-based activities in the field and in the village, with women’s labor contribution publicly recognized and compensated in terms of work points, which gave women some standing in the public arena. In the post-Mao era, when production responsibility was contracted to each individual household, rural women in Great Aunt’s village witnessed a loss of the limited ground they had gained in the public arena. With the demise of the collective communal life, rural women’s status has substantially contracted, and the public sphere now belongs more exclusively to men.

With three small children, Great Aunt’s family experienced food shortages in the collective era. To earn a bit more money, Great Aunt went to work for families in Beijing in the late 1970s. The predicament for rural women like Great Aunt during the Maoist period was that they were subjected to the double postponement deployed in the discursive category of “rural woman” by the party-state, whose political-economic policies were formulated to service national industrialization.⁹ The Maoist state was determined to achieve fast industrialization and nationwide accumulation, a necessary step toward resolving the material and technological difference between the countryside and the city and the “price scissors” (price differential) between industrial products and agricultural products.¹⁰ In the meantime, to maximize the surplus value of industrial output for accumulation and expanding production, the state practiced price control through a unified procurement system. This system established a state monopoly over surplus agricultural products and kept prices for agricultural products at a consistently low level.¹¹ The economic development of the peasantry was put on hold, although the leadership at that time did not imagine that the wait would be long.¹²

For rural women, this postponement was accompanied by the “postponement” of gender equality, which allowed for a persistent, albeit sometimes restrained, patriarchy in the domestic division of labor and in the organization and rewarding of collective labor.¹³ Thus, for peasant women like Great Aunt, the subject position of rural woman in the postliberation period was, on the one hand, highlighted by active participation in collective labor and surplus production for the industrialization of the socialist state and, on the other hand, marked by a continuation, although constrained, of the patriarchal structure that defined the kind and value of women’s labor. Certainly the gender politics in the Maoist era that based gender liberation and equality on women’s participation in public labor enabled women like Great Aunt to draw a new sense of pride from their active performance in collective labor.¹⁴ The liberation of women from the burden of housework, however, was expected to be realized through the eventual socialization and mechanization of domestic labor rather than by challenging the gendered division of labor. One may argue that the surplus labor performed by a woman—on top of her own participation in public la-

bor—to put food on the table to enable her husband's full participation in production, mirrored the peasantry's contribution of surplus labor to enable the nation's accumulation and industrialization. The final liberation of rural women from their burdens was presumed to be contingent on further industrialization, which was to make the expansion of urban-based industrialization all the more compelling in the national agenda and women's labor contribution all the more necessary. Postponement was thus a matter of awaiting improvement of technology and socialization rather than recognized as a discursive practice.¹⁵

Writing of the genealogy of *funü* (women) as the principal subject position available to women in Chinese socialism, Tani Barlow states that “the Revolution restituted *funü*/women inside *guojia*/state (and thus by synechdochic logic, inside *jia*ting/family) under Maoist inscription” (1991b:132). Although the discourse of *funü* was briefly open to a range of heterogeneous subject positions in the early communist base—the Jiangxi Soviet (1930–34)—and it taught and mobilized women to constitute their interest with the state rather than with the family, the gender praxis of the party in the 1940s and in the socialist period at times restituted women in reformed familial relations (Barlow 1991b:145). Reflecting on the critiques of feminist researchers that China's revolution did not deliver gender equality, Ann Anagnost questions the relationship between the state and women in socialist gender discourse:

This is not to say that the state's concern for women is not genuine, but the relationship between the ideologies of kinship and the state as they have emerged over the several centuries are so interwoven that their disarticulation was perhaps never a conscious goal of China's revolution. [1989:317]

Although their participation in collective labor and the recognition of their labor contribution in the form of work points accorded rural women a visibility for their work and a limited degree of equality (cf. Davin 1975), the continued presence of the patriarchal structure defined the work performed by women as *nei* (inside) and hence categorically worth fewer work points than the work performed by men, which was deemed *wai* (outside; see Harrell 2000; Jacka 1997). During the time of collective labor in Wuwei villages, as elsewhere, the highest number of work points for a male laborer was ten per day, whereas the highest possible number of work points for a female laborer was typically eight, even when she performed the same task as a man. Besides taking part in collective labor, a married woman still shouldered most domestic labor in a family whose head (*jia*zhang) was most often her husband.

It was, then, perhaps no coincidence that in the radical years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the protoimage of women's liberation through enthusiastic participation in public labor was found in female youth groups, the *Iron Girl*

teams.¹⁶ The sprouting across the nation of Iron Girl groups, which were modeled after a group of rural adolescent girls of the Dazhai production brigade, became a sign of the liberated productivity of Chinese women outside the domestic closure, on whose base gender equality was claimed (Honig and Hershatter 1988). The rise of the Iron Girls to legendary national honor and prominence displaced and obliterated the *funü*, who was situated in reformed patriarchal domestic relations, who was working under a double burden, and whose contribution to collective labor was less valued than that of a man.¹⁷ Aunt Lu, who is related to Great Aunt and who also went to Beijing in the late 1970s, came of age during the Cultural Revolution, when she was an activist in the youth performance troupe organized in her village to heighten and cheer on villagers' participation in politics and production. She went to Beijing several years after she was married, after her first child was born. In her narrative she portrayed herself as a spirited activist, dynamic and mobile in her community during her teens, and as a burdened woman after she was married and became a mother. “You could not have guessed that I was once very active in the village performance troupe, could you?” she asked me, with a trace of nostalgia in her voice. Aunt Lu's question cannot be reduced to a personal nostalgia for her youth. The phrase “you could not have guessed” alerted me to the disjuncture between her life as an activist young woman and her life as a burdened married woman, a disjuncture that was discursive.

It was in the context of this disjuncture between rural youth and married women and of the double burden borne by married women that there occurred a small exodus of women out of Wuwei to big cities. There they worked as domestics and sought redress by their own means of the problems posed for rural women by the discursive and material practices of the socialist period. Great Aunt left the village for Beijing to get more return for her doubly undervalued agricultural labor, undervalued once by the state as peasant labor and again by the patriarchal social structure as woman's labor. Almost all of the rural Wuwei women who went to work as domestics in the cities in the 1970s, the late period of the Maoist era, were already married and had children. Most of them were illiterate or semi-illiterate. In the 1970s the monthly wage for a domestic was between 18 and 25 yuan, or roughly \$10–\$14.¹⁸ At a time when the annual household income for a peasant family was about one to two hundred yuan a year, migrant women's earnings were an important subsidy to the family economy.¹⁹

Yet the income contribution of these women was socially circumscribed, as it was vaguely but palpably associated with the socially transgressive meanings of this particular form of labor. The phrase used to refer to working for a wage as a domestic is *zai ren jia bang gong* (working as a helper in another home) and is sometimes uttered with a slightly detectable tinge of embarrassment by such workers

themselves. They use these words only when they have to. When they do, their voices seem to lose their usual substantiality and become a bit uncertain. Once the context is established, they tend to use *na* (that) to substitute for the phrase.

Where is the source of the shame that makes these women somewhat embarrassed to speak of their labor? If this shame circumscribed the articulation of the migration experiences of married women, it made it almost unthinkable for unmarried women to migrate before the early 1980s. It is in contemplating the "unthinkable" that one gets close to understanding the construction of shame. When I asked the head of women's work in a township government in Wuwei why no young women "went out" in the 1970s and why the small number who did were all married, she replied, "Then people's minds were closed (*fenbi*) and feudal (*fengjian*). If girls had gone out, they would have had problems in getting married." When I posed a similar question to a male intellectual based in the provincial capital, who is himself from rural Anhui, he responded, "Men would find it a problem because they would think, 'How can you serve others before you serve me first?' " The "others" he referred to were non-kin men outside the patrilineal descent group and patrilocal residence-based community. A young woman's chastity was not just a matter of sexual purity but was also expressed by the bounded location of her labor performance within the local patriarchy.²⁰ If a woman performed labor by herself away from kin and her home, the sphere of local patriarchy, her chastity could not be locally controlled and defined and could be called into question. By performing her paid domestic labor for other people, particularly other men, it was as if she had "prostituted" her labor, challenging her husband's first-order claim to her domestic labor.

On the urban front where these women worked, they embodied a trace of the past in the socialist present. Although the state approved the employment of domestic service for the high-ranking cadres and intellectual elite throughout much of the Maoist period, such employment could potentially signify a specter of class associated with the old society. The specter of the old society embodied in such employment was the very point of attack by radical Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution against the bourgeois lifestyle of high-rank officials. Although the state indirectly paid domestics by allocating an allowance for such employment in high-ranking cadres' salaries, it never attempted to incorporate this service openly into the socialist relations of production and to make domestics into state or collective employees. Domestics were also seen by the state and urban society as attached to the employer family and were not integrated into neighborhood life. Instead, hiring and firing were carried out in the private domestic sphere of employers, invisible from the public relations of production. In the context of urban women's unprecedented participation in public labor in factories, schools, hospitals, department

stores, and so on, enabled by the power of socialist discourse of women's liberation, the small number of rural women in the city working as domestics, who appeared and disappeared now and then around the corners of the residential alleys, could not fit into the new subject position for women produced by such discourse. They were fragments of socialism, whose presence was somewhat incongruent with the grand view of socialism and women's liberation and whose discursive value was their awkward connection with the old society through domestic service.

In both the city and the countryside, these rural migrant women were transgressors: In the countryside they had transgressed the sphere of local patriarchy and thus raised anxiety about their gendered personhood; in the city they were transgressors of the proper subject position of rural woman as defined by ideologically espoused heroic agricultural labor, and they reinvoked the specter of the past through domestic service. This notion of transgression and contamination thus constitutes a vague source of shame for these women—vague because it is caught uneasily between the state ideology of women's liberation and the continued presence of patriarchal power that defines what a proper woman is through the spatial circumscription of her labor. In attempting to get a higher return for their labor through migration, these women found themselves in the cornered space produced by a triangulation of discourses: the undervaluation of rural women's agricultural labor, the circumscriptive power of local patriarchy to define the propriety of their labor, and the invisibility of domestic service in state discourse.

In this cornered space, the silence of the state discourse where domestic service was concerned failed to grant these women a subject position from which they could speak back to the local patriarchy about their labor. Thus, the state was complicit with the power of the local patriarchy in marking the position of rural migrant women as unclear and unclear, or *bu qingshuang*, as one village man put it. The money a woman earned and brought home could be denigrated by her husband or others as *bu qingshuang*, ambiguous and vague, beyond visionary or interpretive certainty and clarity. Women's domestic labor performed outside the proper locus and the field of gaze of the local patriarchy therefore seemed to lack discursive accountability, rendering these women ambiguous in personhood.²¹ And women could not speak for themselves in this discourse. On the one hand, within the state discourse, rural women could not "speak bitterness" about the double burden piled on their backs and about the double undervaluation of their labor.²² On the other hand, within the discourse of local patriarchy, these women found it shameful to speak bitterness about their paid domestic service in the cities. The women I interviewed often sighed when reminiscing about their migration: "If it had not been so hard at home, who would have wanted to take the suffering outside?" One woman in her late forties

ended her narrative red-eyed, “It’s bitter to be outside. Yet with the bitterness we ate outside, it is also embarrassing [lit. it also makes me look ugly] to speak of it at home” [*zai wai mian shou de ku, hui lai jiang hai chou*]. The embarrassment in their narratives was counterbalanced by assertions of their contributions to the family economy and by detailed and sometimes sobbing descriptions of how lonely it was to be in the city and how much they worried about their young children at home. Through such recitations, they assertively located the place of their belonging and their identity in the family and the community.

Great Aunt continued to work in Beijing after land distribution to her household in the early 1980s because her family needed her income to purchase agricultural tools and, later, fertilizer and pesticide to carry out production and to pay for increased tuition for her children’s education. She later went back to Wuwei and stayed at home for three or four years. Six or seven years ago, she once again migrated to Beijing with her son and daughter-in-law, to help them with their domestic work and to look after her grandson. Unlike Great Aunt, most of the early migrant women returned home after decollectivization, when their labor was needed to farm the responsibility land distributed to their households. When I was in Wuwei, 76-year-old Grandmother Four, who found employment for a number of Wuwei women in Beijing as domestics in the 1970s, including Great Aunt and Aunt Lu, returned to her village for good after working as a domestic in Beijing herself since 1951. When I asked Grandmother Four and several women whether they found it easy to get back to rural life after working in the cities, they replied, “We did not have a comfortable time [*xiangfu*] when working outside. Why would we not be used to being back?” Grandmother Four described returning to her village as a homecoming. The woman in her late forties who was embarrassed at having spoken bitterness about working as a domestic replied to my question as she picked up her shoulder pole, preparing to leave for the field, “I’m farming 20 mu of land with my husband. Had I changed, how could I have done this?”²³ By giving rhetorical answers to my question, these women subtly contested its legitimacy and affirmed their continued identity as rural women—undiminished by their migrancy—proudly demonstrating their linkage with rural life and agricultural labor and production. In fact I was made to feel that my question was quite misplaced. Perhaps by affirming and positively claiming their “rural woman” subject position so forcefully, they tried to render any questioning about their identity and personhood illegitimate and irrelevant, including questioning from the circumscriptive power of local patriarchy.

The rise of the city and the spectralization of the countryside in post-Mao modernity

In Wuwei it is generally acknowledged that young rural women in the 1980s were the pathbreakers for a migration in the 1990s that involved an army of over 200,000 men and women from the county, making Wuwei one of the most active labor-exporting counties in Anhui. Rural young women in Wuwei are credited with inspiring the migration of their menfolk, who saw work opportunities through the information that young women circulated home. The intensification of the work pace and the emphasis on increasing productivity brought on by the urban reform increased urban demand for paid domestic service. A rhyme circulating in Beijing in the 1980s highlighted Wuwei as the single most important source of domestics in the capital: *Beijing baomu chu Anhui, Anhui baomu chu Wuwei* (Baomu in Beijing are from Anhui, baomu from Anhui are from Wuwei).²⁴ The media in Anhui are fond of contrasting the motivations of those migrating before and after the post-Mao reforms: The older generation sought “survival”; those in the younger generation seek “wealth and knowledge” because their minds are enlivened and activated by the reform (*sixiang huoyue*; e.g., Jin and Xu 1994). Released as part of the surplus labor by the breakup of collective farming, young women can now respond to the urban labor market through the push–pull mechanism. This interpretation by the media and mainstream scholarship celebrates an epistemic shift from the Maoist to the post-Mao era, with the post-Mao development an ontological rectification finally steering the nation on the correct path to *Progress*. Just as primitive accumulation was perceived by Marx’s bourgeois economist contemporaries only as a form of freedom, the current labor migration is frequently and predominantly perceived by the liberal media and mainstream scholarship as a process in which the “individual comes into his or her own” in post-Mao modernity.

Although the post-Mao cities have a tremendous appetite for cheap migrant youth labor, the presence of large numbers of “low-quality strangers” in big cities also has ignited tremendous anxiety among residents there about the ambiguity and excess of migrants’ movements; migrants are viewed as blind drifters (*mang liu*) and “errant waters” (Solinger 1999:1) that require social control.²⁵ The figure of the migrant thus functions as a sign of a renewed need for governmentality and order in the post-Mao market economy. Another discursive dimension, however, developed in the mid- to late 1990s, with a significant contribution by some liberal scholars, toward a view of the movement of migrants as a desirable form of labor flexibility and of the migrants as the foremost flexible individual agents of the expanding, ascending, but capricious market economy. This positive perception was offset by the new angst over the lack of such flexibility among the growing number of unemployed urban

workers shed by the restructured state-owned enterprises during the reforms of the 1990s. Thus, new social value has been invested in the sign of the migrant compared with its new negative double, the laid-off urban worker, just as the “dynamic” market economy, growing in volume and volatility, is positively paired against the “inflexible” planned economy.

Rather than framing migration as individuals responding to push–pull forces, I interpret it as a troubled process of subject formation for rural youth, particularly rural young women, in the reconfigured rural–urban relationship of post-Mao development discourse. The discursive context that rural young women found themselves in during the 1980s and 1990s was radically different from that of their forerunners. Migrant young women from time to time opened their stories to me with a despondent perception of this epistemic shift, “There is no way out in the countryside” [*zai nongcun meiyou chulu*]. In this section, I analyze how the post-Mao development has reconfigured the rural–urban relationship in its imaginary of modernity.

The rural–urban relationship has figured much differently in the Maoist and post-Mao modernity projects, with Maoist modernity conceived of as improved national auto-sufficiency and post-Mao modernity defined as reinsertion of the nation into the global capitalist market. In Maoist policy, which has been characterized by some scholars as anti-urban, the cities, especially existing coastal cities, did not occupy an ideological high ground as the privileged locus of production and industrialization. Shortly after the Chinese Communist Party took over the cities from its rural bases, the Maoist development strategy was implemented to integrate the cities into the national agenda of accumulation and industrialization and to quickly transform decadent, squandering, colonial consumer cities (*xiaofei chengshi*) into hardworking, purposeful production cities (*shengchan chengshi*; Kirkby 1985:14–15). The investment and planning policies de-emphasized the growth of the cities and avoided focusing resources in the existing cities, especially large coastal cities (Naughton 1995:61). The Great Leap Forward (1958–60) was a shift away from Soviet-style central planning to reliance on populist enthusiasm in the cities and countryside to realize communism, with the rural commune carrying the vital agency (Kirkby 1985:5). During that period, small-scale industries in the rural communes took precedence over large-scale Soviet-style urban factories (Buck 1984:5). The Third Front construction (1965–71) saw a massive relocation and construction of defense industries in remote interior provinces for national security reasons, allowing a more balanced distribution of industry in the country (Ma and Wei 1997:219–221). The new oil city of Daqing was touted by the government as a socialist utopian city: a ruralized city or urbanized village, integrating rural, industrial, and residential sectors within its bounds (Lo 1986: 446–447). In the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76),

the countryside figured as the ideological high ground, functioning as a vast classroom where sent-down urban youth could be reacquainted with the revolutionary spirit of the peasantry. In those radical years, the Dazhai Brigade was promoted as the national model and, as Kirkby observes, “It was the farms rather than the factories that dominated the self-advertisements of Cultural Revolution China” (1985:5). Although scholars debate whether the development policies of the socialist period carried an antiurbanism (e.g., Chan 1994; Kirkby 1985; Naughton 1995), there seems to be agreement that the development policies at that time unlinked the symbiotic connection between industrialization and the privilege of the city assumed in the liberal market economy; both the cities and the countryside were enveloped in “hard struggle, plain living” (*jianku pusu*).

The rural population perceived the difference between the countryside and the city as that between peasants and workers (Potter 1983), which was expressed in their different sources of rice. Workers in the state-owned industries ate state rice: They were guaranteed food rations and other essentials by the state; peasants, on the other hand, had to work for their own rice and had limited medical care and educational facilities supported by the production collective.²⁶ Note the equation of the city with workers during the Maoist period. The city signified a secure and desired welfare in the arms of the state; it was also a site of modern industrial production.²⁷ I argue later that, in the post-Mao development strategy that reorganized the relationship between city and countryside, the city commands a different signifying power for rural young women.

In the post-Mao period, the hallmark of modernity engineered for the national imaginary through policies of “reform and opening” (*gaige kaifang*) is the insertion of the nation into the global market economy. The remarkable increase of foreign direct investment in China, the growth of exports from China to the world market, and the rapid expansion of the domestic service sector are underpinned by China’s access to cheap migrant labor. This epistemic reorientation and restructuring has ushered in the process by which the rural is spectralized for the urban center telos.²⁸ In what follows, I examine this dual process—the spectralization of the rural and the rise of the city—in economic, ideological, and cultural dimensions.

Beginning with the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Chinese Communist Central Committee in 1978, the cities began to emerge as the engines of economic growth, occupying the high center in the post-Mao development discourse of constructing a commodity economy (*shangpin jingji*), marking a radical departure from the policy line in the Maoist era. This switch from “production” city to “entrepreneurial” city in China’s development strategy (Solinger 1993) paralleled what David Harvey (1989) has described as the transformation in the advanced capitalism of the 1970s and 1980s of “managerial” cities (managing social

services) into “entrepreneurial” cities (fostering investment and development), as the changed mode of city governance in the logic of flexible accumulation and circulation. Four Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were established in 1980 along the coast to attract foreign investment, thereby completing an ironic and dialectical return of the colonial “treaty ports”—a return with a difference in the era of flexible accumulation. In 1984, an additional 14 coastal cities were promoted to SEZ status. The system of key cities (*zhongdian chengshi*) was reconstituted to allow a special class of 15 cities in 1981 (17 in 1982) access to a concentration of resources and more autonomy in decision making, to expand as nexuses of a commodity economy and to maximize the advantages of economies of scale. In a speech in December 1982, Premier Zhao Ziyang made one of “ten great principles for the development of the economy” reliance on big cities to construct economic centers (Solinger 1993:208). As Kirkby observed about this tendency toward agglomeration, “There is no reluctance to admit that the chief purpose of this arrangement would be to strengthen the hierarchy of cities and regions. The prevailing view amongst China’s economists today is that the institutionalising of such inequalities will accelerate national economic growth” (1985:225). Beginning in 1983, a restructuring of administrative hierarchy through the program of “city administering counties” (*shiguanxian*) freed the city from the administrative constrictions of prefecture (*qu*) to organize agricultural and peasant labor resources from surrounding counties formerly administered by prefecture to meet urban needs (Chan 1994:105).

With the economic and administrative restructuring that has privileged it, the city has also been renewed as the privileged space of modern civilization and civility (*xiandai wenming*), gesturing toward elusive capital and development.²⁹ In this discourse, it appears that *Modernity* and Progress, which themselves are the ideological effects of post-Mao modernist imaginary, are given their permanent residency in the city. As Schein observes, “The city, however conceived, has become an object of increasingly intense desire in the era of reform” (2001:225).³⁰ A directive was issued in 1978 channeling five percent of the total profits of all industrial and commercial enterprises in an urban area to housing, roads, and other urban infrastructure projects (Buck 1984:9). Whereas previously all of the funds were distributed to state-owned factories for reinvestment, this new tax money given to the city fueled an urban construction boom beginning in the early 1980s. At the same time, the cities also saw a campaign for urban beautification (*meihua chengshi*), with special attention to parks, landscaping, and cleanliness (Buck 1984). Planning of key cities received unprecedented attention. The urban planning of Beijing was attended by four directives from the CCP Central Committee in early 1980. C. P. Lo compares urban planning before and after 1978: “Obviously, a strong emphasis is now placed

on the individual character of the city, modernity and the improved livelihood of the people, which contrasts consciously with the uniformity, frugality, and anti-consumerism objectives of the 1950s and 1960s” (1986:448–449). The urban beautification campaign paralleled the “five advances and four beautifications” (*wujiang simei*) campaign by targeting urban citizens as subjects of modern civility. It did so through what Foucault termed *biopower*, operating on each citizen’s language (*yuyan mei*), behavior (*xingwei mei*), heart (*xinling mei*), and agency in improving the [urban] environment (*huanjing mei*) through the citizen’s advancement in levels of civility (*jiang wenming*), etiquette (*jiang limao*), hygiene consciousness (*jiang weisheng*), scientific outlook (*jiang kexue*), and morality (*jiang daode*).

At the same time that the city occupied the high ground in the state’s development strategy, agriculture’s share in state capital investment plunged.³¹ State capital investment in agriculture was 7.1 percent in 1953–57, 11.3 percent in 1958–60, 17.6 percent in 1963–65, 10.7 percent in 1966–70, 9.8 percent in 1971–75, and 10.5 percent in 1976–80. It plummeted to 5 percent in 1981–85 and dropped further to 3.3 percent in 1985–90 (Chan 1994:61). Over a period of 11 years in the post-Mao reform era, between 1979 and 1990, total state capital investment increased from 50.1 billion to 107.3 billion yuan, a 240 percent increase. But investment in agriculture only increased from 5.33 billion to 7.04 billion yuan, a 34 percent increase. In the overall picture, agriculture’s share of capital investment dropped from 10.6 percent in 1979 to 4.1 percent in 1990. It further decreased to 2.8 percent in 1992, to 1.7 percent in 1994 (Li 2000:41), and remained below two percent throughout the 1990s. For a brief period between 1979 and 1984, there was a significant increase in agricultural production and rural income, inspired by the rural reform, particularly the raising of procurement prices for agricultural goods and the relaxed state monopoly on agricultural products.³² But rural income has stagnated since the mid-1980s. The prices for fertilizers and pesticides grew by 43 percent and 82.3 percent, respectively, in 1985 over 1983 prices because of the marketization of fertilizer and pesticide production. The state also lowered procurement prices in 1985 by 28 percent, below those of 1984. In 1998, the income from growing one mu of rice was only around two to three hundred yuan and from one mu of cotton around five hundred yuan.³³ According to internal government statistics, the Gini coefficient for rural and urban incomes had reached 0.59, surpassing the signaling danger level of 0.4 (Ma 2002). A township party secretary in Wuwei admitted openly that agricultural production has stagnated since the mid-1980s. Although the urban–rural income disparity narrowed between 1978 and 1985, the gap began to widen again after 1985 and was larger in the 1990s than before 1978 (Li 2000:32–33; World Bank 1997:15–17). In the meantime, the limited welfare and insured medical care supported by the production collectives (production team

and brigade) were dismantled when production became privatized with the rural reform.³⁴

The material production of the countryside as wasteland in the economic strategy of state investment is symbiotic with the ideological construction of the countryside as a wasteland of "backwardness" and "tradition." To borrow from Benjamin, one might say that "tradition," used in negative opposition to modernization and development, is a signifier whose signified cannot be fixed but grows like the "piling of wreckage upon wreckage" that the storm of Progress keeps blowing and hurling back as its antithesis (1992:249). The opening of China toward the West and to overseas investment as part of the post-Mao development not only opened a new vision of modernity but also furnished a new frame of referentiality that has reorganized narratives and interpretations of history. The euphoric meaning of the present, previously derived from the present's juxtaposition with the preliberation past, vanishes and is now displaced by an urgent sense of crisis when the elite and educated youth refract the gaze of the West to see peasant China as "backward and poor."³⁵ As a mother commented in the 1980s on how urban young people look at the present, "Instead of comparing China with what it was like before liberation, they contrast it with Japan and the West. They don't appreciate how much better things are now than they were in the old society" (Hooper 1985:35).

The telos of the city appropriates the rural into its system of representations by spectralizing the rural as the moribund Other. The discourse of enlightenment in the 1980s, epitomized in the iconoclastic TV series *Heshang* (River Elegy), links China's backwardness with its agrarian roots and the "peasant" mentality of its population (Bodman 1991). In the post-Mao cities, it has become an epithet or a crude joke to call someone peasant (*nongmin*), a sign most potently suggesting ignorance (*yumei*), backwardness (*luohou*), and a dire lack of civility (*bu wenming*). The rural base, previously a revolutionary site transforming the petit bourgeois intellectuals in both the Yan'an period (1936–47) and the period of the Cultural Revolution, is now the death-bed of Chinese tradition and civilization.³⁶ *Heshang* urges intellectuals to fulfill their historical agency in the task of national regeneration. Critiquing *Heshang*, Jing Wang observes that "tradition" and, synonymously, the countryside, are not treated as "an autonomous system of representations" but become "derivative" when they are evaluated in a new epistemology in which a hostile modernity has appeared as dominating and unmarked (1996:130). The discourse of enlightenment reconstructing the countryside as the wasteland of tradition while development policies opened up the coastal cities as special portals for overseas connection and investment harks back to the parallel discursive practice of the early decades of the 20th century that similarly produced the city and the countryside as the primary contradictions within its project of colonial moder-

nity. Tani Barlow (1991a) points out that both nationalist enlightenment projects borrowed the authority and power of an imagined Western (read: universal) modernity and produced remarkably similar representations of "Chinese tradition."

The spectralization of the rural is much more deeply articulated in the relationship between peasants and land in many rural areas—the land of production is turned into the last welfare land. Labor migration from the countryside to the cities is termed by scholars and the Chinese government "the transfer of surplus rural labor power" [*nongcun shengyu laodong li zhuanyi*], but the irony is that the migrants, rather than "surplus" labor, consist mostly of better educated rural youth who are most needed for innovative agricultural production. Those who stay behind to continue farming constitute what is often called the 773861 army—"77" refers to the old (i.e., 77 year olds), "38" refers to women, typically married women ("38" is March 8, International Women's Day), and "61" refers to children (June 1, International Children's Day).³⁷ In rural areas of Anhui and other provinces, the exodus has caused the de facto abandonment of land (*paohuang*), which has raised alarms.³⁸ In Wuwei it is common for peasant households to plant only once a year instead of twice a year, for which the local term is "half abandoning" (*ban paohuang*) or "covert abandoning" (*yinxing paohuang*). Unlike it did in the early 1980s, grain production has stopped bringing income growth. Most people I interviewed said that they farm just for basic subsistence (*bao kouliang*). Private enterprises, domestic and transnational, draw millions of able-bodied migrants to work in sweatshop conditions with no insurance protection. The injured, the debilitated, the ill, and the unemployed are thrown back to the countryside each year in the tens of thousands.³⁹ The countryside has become a reservoir releasing and absorbing labor according to the capricious needs of the market and supplies a flexible army of migrant laborers for a postsocialist carnival of accumulation in which national and transnational businesses share in the banquet of profits.⁴⁰ When and where the migrant worker wage cannot sustain reproduction of the next generation in the city, such reproduction is carried out in the countryside. The land distributed to each household by the rural reform in the early 1980s was designed to spur agricultural productivity through privatizing production. Yet in the 1990s, production land has become welfare land absorbing ill, injured, and unemployed bodies and enabling a cheap reproduction of the next generation of migrant workers. "Household responsibility land" thus becomes the last means of welfare and labor reproduction. The process of spectralization is a process of violence that appropriates economic, cultural, and ideological values from the countryside. The problem for rural youth is that they cannot find a path to the future in the withering countryside.

The domestication of youth and the conundrum of “having a personhood” (*zuoren*)

People [*dajia*, referring to migrants, including the speaker herself] don't understand, but people escape from the countryside like fleeing from death. This really is worth analysis. Why is it like this to such an extent? Even if we die, we want to die outside! It's not that we don't miss home. We miss home. Time and again, we return home, but time and again we come back out. Not a single person doing this, but a whole generation. Coming out is to meet suffering [*zao zu*], but [we] still want to come out, knowing that there is almost no hope [outside].

—A veteran migrant woman from Jiangsu
(author interview, April 21, 2001)

The discourse of modernity in the post-Mao era thus produces the countryside both materially and ideologically as a wasteland stripped of state investment and inhabited by moribund tradition, with the two dimensions mutually reinforcing each other. If Modernity and Progress reside in the city and the city monopolizes the culture of modernity, then the countryside is the city's spectral Other. It is in this discursive context that the countryside cannot function as the locus of a modern identity for rural young women and that I interpret the despondent remark “There is no way out in the countryside” to mean “There is no path to modernity in the countryside.” As Anthony J. Cascardi (1992:179) argues, “The culture of modernity is given shape as a divided whole that can only be unified through the powers of an abstract subject, or its political analogue, the autonomous state. Indeed . . . the state . . . provides the means through which the divided subjects of modernity can be made whole” (Liu 1993:171). Yet, we also need to be attentive to what happens in the post-Mao era if the discursive linkage between rural-youth subjects and the state snaps—especially to rural young women, whose discursive linkage with the state used to be the ideological icon of Iron Girls.

What is at issue here is not simply how bad rural life is for young women and how much better urban life is. What is critical is how the ideological and material rise of the city and the spectralization of the rural in post-Mao modernity reorganize the imaginary of the future and modernity for the rural young. In this section, I analyze the experiences of two young women who went to Beijing, one from Henan Province and one from Shandong Province. The narrative of one woman is drawn from my own interview data, whereas the story of the other was published in the magazine *Rural Women Knowing All* (*Nongjianü Baishitong*; Xie 1995), a forum where many rural young women have submitted first-person narratives about their experiences in the city. I choose these two cases for three reasons: First, I find that their narratives reinforce the data I have collected from my interviews in Wuwei; second, their narratives demonstrate common problems facing many rural young women today,

despite the women's different provincial origins; third, these two young women are very reflective and articulate of the problems shared by many.⁴¹ In addition, I selected the narrative published in *Nongjianü Baishitong* as a sample of migrant women's self-documentation.

Liu Li's narrative: Leaving home

I remember that day to be the 13th. My elder cousin would accompany me to the county bus station. My younger brother stood by the door of our house. I felt so bad that I felt crying. Tears flew out, but I didn't turn my head around. My parents were weeping too. They didn't approve of my leaving home. I'm one of the two junior high graduates among the girls of my age cohort in the village and I'm the first one in my village to be a migrant. I came with four other girls from other villages. My family economy is not good and I want to help out. People in my village do not allow their daughters to come out. They say that girls who go out will become bad, just like those women on TV. My aunt, my mother's younger sister, who lives near the county seat, helped me persuade my mother, “What era are we in now? Still so old feudal?” But people in my village just think that after daughters grow up, parents should find them each a mother-in-law's family [*po jia*]. So the parents would save money and prepare new clothes and things like that [for a wedding]. Then there is the marriage and childbirth and raising the family. Just like that. They just think this way. Very feudal. But I don't think this way. I don't want to get married this early. I don't want to be like my parents—their life is going nowhere. . . . What matters to me is that I want to have some achievement. I want to live like a human [*huo de xiang ge ren yang*].⁴²

—author interview, June 16, 1999

Rural youth live awkwardly and uncomfortably in the post-Mao era, trapped as modern subjects in the space outside the culture of modernity. Almost all of the 59 young women I interviewed in Wuwei left home on their own initiative, and almost half of them (26) did not have their parents' approval for their migrancy, at least initially.⁴³ Although some of them were able to change their parents' minds, a fair portion of them simply fled home, often with friends (*tou pao*). Since the educational reform emphasizing professionalization after the Cultural Revolution, schooling provides, in conjunction with mass media, a routinization that rehearses rural youth for a resplendent future of urban modern subjectivity. Thus, for young women, everyday life at home in the countryside entails what might be termed the *domestication of youth*. Whatever their educational attainments, the young women of Wuwei overwhelmingly cited as their reason for migrating the fact that everyday life at home was inert (*mei-jin*) and “meaningless or boring” (*meiyisi*). They usually did not elaborate on this assessment, suggesting that rural life is so devoid of content and meaning that it can offer nothing for description and its emptiness can best be signified by the void suffusing the words *inert* and *meaningless*.

The description “inert and meaningless” was also given to me as self-evident reality, which automatically makes sense to me in the discursive context of rural–urban relations—the city is where everything happens, whereas the rural constitutes only the lack. In his study of urban Japanese life in the 1920s and 1930s, Harry Harootunian argues that “rather than being an inert experience of facts, everyday life was increasingly seen as the site that revealed symptoms of societies’ deepest conflicts and aspirations” (2000:69).

The aspirations of Liu Li and many other young Wuwei women conflict with their experience of everyday life in the post-Mao countryside as a site of inertness—*inert experience* should not be taken as a natural, given fact but as a product of the discourse of modernity itself, which has redefined the meaning of “peasant” and rural life in both material and ideological aspects. That rural life was experienced as inert and lacking in meaning was expressed by Liu Li as a series of activities that predictably sets a woman on her destiny of reproduction: “Then there is marriage and childbirth and raising the family.” A published letter authored by a young rural woman in 1980 (*Qingnian Xinxiang* 1980:1–2) articulated her strong sense of incredulity that life holds no more for her than reproduction: “My friends tell me not to think about it—this is life in the countryside. It’s simply a matter of eating and sleeping, getting married, establishing a household, having children. Is this really how I must pass my life?” (Hooper 1985:28) Her questions were also a grievance, as she hoped for a reply that would denounce the reality she described. The question was not posed to any individual but to “the abstract subject or its political analogue, the autonomous state” in Anthony Cascardi’s terms. I interpret the question, implicitly, as follows: Where are modernity and the future located in rural young women’s imaginations? Where is their position in and connection to modernity? Liu Li, in the late 1990s, still struggled with the same question and was determined not to live the rural life of simple reproduction.

In post-Mao decollectivization, rural youth are marginalized in the relations of production in the countryside. Apart from the 3–11 years they spend in school, young Wuwei women are confined within the sphere of home, typically helping with household chores but not working in the field, their parents taking care of the household responsibility land. Most of the young women I interviewed have never had firsthand experiences in farming.⁴⁴ Whereas rural youth, including rural young women, actively participated in collective agricultural production in the Mao period and were mobilized for collective projects such as building dikes along the Yangtze River, repairing water control and irrigation systems, and taking part in performance troupes, they have been domesticated and subjected to parental authority in the wake of post-Mao land distribution to households, which has taken over the authority of the production team

in labor management. There is no longer communal labor to engage young people on a daily basis, and the discursive connection between rural youth and the state embodied in the heroic agency of Iron Girls has snapped. The “inert and meaningless” life in rural young women’s narratives today contrasts with narratives of older migrants about their dynamic and bustling lives as young unmarried women in the Maoist collective era.

“Life is just so boring,” commented one young man in Henan Province through the magazine Youth Letterbox in 1982 (*Qingnian Xinxiang* 1982: 30). “There’s hardly ever a film. There is just no entertainment. There’s nothing to do but wander round the village. What can be done about it?” (Hooper 1985:28). The only village cinema that I saw in my field site, once the best-looking public building in the village, now stands in desolation from long disuse. The villager who had served as the production team’s film projectionist has become a migrant himself along with his wife. My observation in rural Wuwei coincides with that of Mobo Gao in rural Jiangxi that “there is no longer any focal point for public life in the village” (1999:174). The migrancy of young women is an escape from or resistance to domestication, by which they embark on an adventurous journey into the space of modernity to fashion a new identity for themselves.

Domestication for many rural young women forebodes an imminent snare that threatens to seal them off from the possibility for a modern identity. Their domestication in their natal homes delivers them into their future households through engagement and marriage, trapping them in a snare in which a married woman’s place and activity of identity is typically described as “moving around the stove” (*weizhe guotai zhuan*). Domestication in the natal home amounts to an “erasure of youth,” with youth being the only possible crevice in the life cycle through which rural women might make a leap to create a modern identity and self and rearrange their life. Rural young women often say that “everything is finished once a woman is married.” “Youth” is therefore a strategic site for action. The better educated young women experienced this domestication with greater shock and angst. Liu Li left home not only to help her parents but also because she felt she was in danger of losing the possibility of having a (modern) personhood (*huo de xiang ge ren yang*). Some, echoing the Wuwei girl Xiazi quoted at the beginning of this article, articulate the problem as a life–death question.

“Rural youth” is itself a modern notion. As Lefebvre states, “The young man, as a stage in man’s youth, is a creation of modern times” (1995:157). The term *qingnian* (youth) emerged in the late imperial period to refer to boys of gentry and merchant families who enjoyed relative freedom from conventional social obligations and could pursue an emergent modern middle-class life (Levy 1968). In the early decades of the last century, it was through rebellion against the authority of the family, as in Pa Chin’s (Ba Jin’s) *Jia* (*Family*)

(1972), that elite youth produced by modern education and social movements (e.g., the May Fourth Movement in 1919) came to consciousness of the new social agency of youth. Qingnian, like funü (woman) and nongmin (peasant), belongs to what Tani Barlow (1991b) suggests is “a discursive constellation” of modern categories by which the Maoist party-state sought to bring particular political subjects into existence and reorganize social relationships. Displacing the authority of the family, the Maoist party-state became the source of the referentiality by which youth could produce and realize their agency. In the communist movement in the 1940s, *qingnian* was no longer monopolized by elite boys but was circulated to the liberated rural areas to include young men and young women. Being the slave of the slave, the subaltern of the subaltern, the figure of the poor, young peasant woman has been a particularly important site for party mobilization through her liberation—a process of her transformation from the subaltern in the patriarchal family and old class society into an elated new subject for the party-state.⁴⁵ The revolutionary classic play *White-Haired Girl*, a drama originating in the liberated communist bases of the 1940s, plays on this transformation: The White-Haired Girl was turned from a human into a ghostlike wretch in the old society, whereas she was turned from a ghostlike wretch into a human by the new society (*jiu shehui ba ren biancheng gui, xin shehui ba gui biancheng ren*). The chasm between the field of life and the field of death is not physical death but a discursive boundary that defines “livability.” Being *ren* for a poor, rural young woman was enabled by a social-political project that created a subject position for her, from which she found the meaning of her life in connection with the party-state. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the political subject of rural young women was reincarnated in the Iron Girls of Dazhai Brigade, who became not only the model encouraging rural young women’s participation in public labor outside the familial space but also the national icon of women’s liberation through public labor and political activism.

In the post-Mao reform context, the image of Iron Girls was thoroughly discredited, ridiculed, and negated, together with the negation of the Cultural Revolution. In 1979, a comic cross talk—typically a performance of two male speakers carrying out comic dialogues to entertain an audience—ridiculed Iron Girls as impossible wives, and a young woman computer scientist commented in 1985 on the lack of domesticity and femininity of the Iron Girls, “I do not hope that all women will bare their fangs, brandish their claws and become short-tempered ‘Iron Girls’ ” (Honig and Hershatter 1988:25). The proud display of their productivity, which had marked them as socialist “new women,” is now associated with unnatural physicality that only marks their bodies as freakish. The Iron Girl, compared with the urban-educated woman of post-Mao gender discourse, is not woman enough.⁴⁶ The gender discourse in the 1980s sought

to rectify the gender order by restoring women to their biological destiny: femininity.

Similar discursive shifts took place with “youth.” Once hailed as the revolutionary agent wrenched out of the family for social transformation by the Maoist party-state, “youth” was returned to the guidance of parental authority (Hooper 1985:34) and came to be seen as the unstable object demanding the investigative gaze of “youth studies” after the negation of the Cultural Revolution. With the 1980 establishment of the Research Institute for Youth and Juvenile Affairs within the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “youth” was opened up as a site for social normativization and management through the newly restored social scientific power of physiologists, psychologists, sociologists, educators, and lawyers.

Recalling the words of Liu Li, Xiazi, and the Hubei girl seeking “reincarnation” in Shenzhen, how to have a modern subjectivity becomes an issue of whether life is worth living at all in the countryside, where “there is no path to the future.” After the new society rescued the White-Haired Girl, a subaltern, from the field of death and enabled her rebirth as a modern subject (*ren*), the problem of having personhood (*zuoren*) has again become a grave issue for rural young women in the present historical moment. As in the case of the Hubei girl, who was almost killed in the factory blaze in Shenzhen, yet who returned in search of reincarnation—to be *ren*—the countryside is invoked as a field of death where a woman’s modern subjectivity is smothered when she “always moves around the stove.” Whereas the White-Haired Girl achieved her modern subjectivity in the liberated rural base, the site for realizing a modern subjectivity for rural young women in the post-Mao development era has decidedly shifted to the city. This epistemic shift, an ideological and material effect that draws on all the power of the development strategy that has spectralized the rural, is a discursive violence that forces the rural-urban split on these young women’s conception of personhood and modern subjectivity.

A Shandong girl’s grievance letter

I feel sadness all the way through my bones and I cannot resolve it. After bearing a huge toll on my heart, I came to Beijing stubbornly to look for something. I looked for something and what did I find? . . . When I first saw the wife of that [employer] family and met up with the gaze (*yan-guang*) she laid upon me, I felt that her gaze was just not the kind for a human being at all: at best she was buying a piece of high-class commodity. . . . Perhaps I’m being too bookish. Human dignity means nothing for this kind of job. But I just want to sell my sweat, but not my dignity and soul. Enough, I really have had enough and can not bear it any longer. What kind of role am I playing?! Overwhelming sadness. . . . I cannot tolerate it any longer. . . . Dignity and time, the two major elements in my life, are both now broken to pieces. I have stepped from one lowland to

another lowland, from one kind of despair to another despair. . . . I have just learned that one room will be taken away from this family and they can no longer employ me. Perhaps I will have to be on the street at dawn.

—letter from a young girl to the editor of
Nongjianu Baishitong, Xie 1995⁴⁷

This girl from rural Shandong Province was caught in a conundrum in her pursuit of a modern personhood in the city. She despondently asked, "I came to Beijing stubbornly to look for something. I looked for something and what did I find?" She found that the gaze of her employer stripped her of humanity and dignity to make her "at best . . . a piece of high-class commodity." The sadness that seeped into her bones and that she could not resolve came from her realization of the overdetermined contradiction existing at the core of her pursuit of a modern personhood. In the context of post-Mao development, the very condition enabling such women's entrance to the city, the center of commodity economy, is that they themselves be disposable commodities of migrant labor power. Thus, the very condition enabling their entry and existence in the city fundamentally disables the possibility of attaining the modern personhood for which they have struggled. The girl from Shandong realized that she only stepped from the lowland of home into the lowland of the city. The city proved not to be a high place of hope; it merely displaced her old despair with a new despair. The conundrum persists: Between the country and the city, these young women have no place to pursue a modern personhood. The conditions and contradictions that have enabled and are constitutive of young migrant women's search for modernity also overdetermine their inability to become subjects of modernity and development.

Conclusion

In this article, I treat narratives of two generations of rural women migrants as "cultural poetics of political desire" (Rofel 1999:14), constituted in different modernity projects of the Maoist and post-Mao eras. By examining problems of two modernity projects from the experiences of two generations of rural women, my essay treats modernity as plural in terms of the dynamics of historicity. I also hold different modern projects in tension to forestall both a Manichean position of either-or with regard to China's transition and a cultural relativist position with regard to the plurality of modernity. The Maoist and post-Mao modernities are competing visions that cannot be unified in the multiculturalist notion of culture.⁴⁸ By supplanting and negating Maoist modernity as its abject Other, post-Mao development has authorized its own vision and practices of modernity as the emancipatory and normalizing process that will earn China a rightful position on the playing field of global capitalism. My focus, therefore, is on examining the epistemological

violence embedded in such a modernity project and on unpacking the discursive configuration of tensions, disjuncture, and despair. In highlighting the historicity of modernity projects, my essay contributes to what Dirlik calls "the identification of alternative modernities, not in terms of reified cultures, but in terms of alternative historical trajectories that have been suppressed by the hegemony of capitalist modernity" (1997:123).

Notes

Acknowledgments. I wish to thank Joel Andreas, Ann Anagnost, Alana Boland, Stevan Harrell, Barry Sautman, Wang Danyu, and anonymous *AE* reviewers for reading my manuscript and giving me very constructive comments. A version of the article was presented at the 2000 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco. I thank panel organizer Robert Moore and my fellow panelists for their interest in my work. My dissertation fieldwork, from which I drew the data for this essay, was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the International Dissertation Research Fellowship provided by the Social Science Research Council.

1. One may argue that Xiazi is drawing on traditional Chinese women's rhetoric in using a death threat as an expression of grievances. As Anne E. McLaren observes, "Death is a common metaphor in female grievance genres and threats of suicide not uncommon" (2000:11). Yet recent statistics show that suicide as an expression of grievance or protest is more than metaphorical. On the basis of World Health Organization reports, a New York-based human rights group criticized China for having 21 percent of the world's women but 56 percent of the world's female suicides (Agence France Presse 1999). Among rural women aged 15–34, suicide is the leading form of death, accounting for nearly one-third of all deaths in this age group (Agence France Presse 2002). See Wang 2000 for an analysis of rural female suicide in China.

2. I use the term *postsocialist* here not to celebrate China's transition toward a market economy that is increasingly integrated with global capitalism, but to critique the reform regime's restructuring of society, which has trodden down the welfare of the peasants and the workers who were formerly ideological subjects of Maoist socialism.

3. Spivak's ghastly phrase helps me capture the process in which rural people lead a reduced, derivative, desolate, antithetical existence in relation to urban dwellers in the post-Mao culture of modernity and capitalist accumulation.

4. I use *historicity* as differentiated from *historicism*. My use of *historicity* follows a historical materialist approach as described by Benjamin: "Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad" (1992:254). Benjamin criticized historicism as a narrative historiography that "culminates in universal history" (1992:254). Historicism and historicity differ radically in terms of their implications for culture. Historicity defies historicism's assumption of holistic culture, to focus on practices, on discontinuities across time and space, and on tensions within and between histories. Benjamin continued, "[A historical materialist] takes cognizance of . . . a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to ballast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history" (1992:254).

5. Among the younger cohort of 88 women, 59 migrated by themselves and 16 became migrants after they were married, usually

migrating together with their husbands or in-laws. I analyze parental attitudes toward migrancy of unmarried young women later in the essay.

6. One mu equals 0.165 acre.

7. According to Wuwei Xianzhi Bangongshi (1993), before 1949 frequent floods often caused men and women to seek livelihood as hired hands in cities like Shanghai. Women often worked as maids. Zhu Xiaoyang (1987) states that there was already a tradition of Wuwei women going to Beijing to work as maids in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. I have not been able to verify this statement in Beijing or Wuwei.

8. Migration between the cities and the countryside had been very strictly planned by the government until the early to mid-1980s. The number of migrants going to the cities on their own was very small. Rural women migrants, whose migration was mostly outside the state plan, worked almost exclusively as domestics before and during the 1970s, as this was the only employment they could find in the cities.

9. To seriously call the double postponement into question, it is necessary to link the specific practices of political economy with the discursive trajectory of the categories “peasant” and “woman.” See Cohen 1994 for an analysis of the Chinese term for peasant (*nongmin*) as a loanword from Meiji Japan’s pool of neologisms and as a recent political invention. The notion of peasants emerged in the context of an epistemic shift in the rural–urban relationship in the early decades of the 20th century, shown in Fei Hsiao-tung’s (1968) study as a relationship of opposition between the countryside and colonial treaty-port cities. It was in this historical shift, which reorganized the flow of goods, wealth, talents, and power between the country and the city, between China and the outside world, that the notion of peasants emerged in the discourse of the modern intelligentsia (Barlow 1991a), who looked to the countryside and the “peasants” as a repository of China’s age-old backwardness and stagnation, as well as of untapped potential for enlightenment. This emergent notion of Chinese “peasant” found its way into the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its peasant base. It enabled CCP thinkers, who themselves were part of the modern intelligentsia, to leave their rural roots to spend their formative years in the cities, to share with Marx, Lenin, and other modernist thinkers an essential suspicion of the peasantry as a class of small producers prone to backward beliefs. The party developed a theory of the “dual nature” (*liang chong xing*) of the peasants (Kelliher 1994): On the one hand, the severe oppression piled on the backs of the peasants drives them to revolution; on the other hand, their peasant economy engenders “small peasant consciousness” (*xiaonong yishi*), that is, a set of backward beliefs and a petty bourgeois tendency to “absolute egalitarianism,” found in their desire for an equal share of land as the ultimate goal of historical peasant rebellions. Daniel Kelliher’s 1994 study traces how the theory of the dual nature of peasants has been sustained through the history of the party and has positioned the peasants as junior partners in the hierarchical worker–peasant alliance in which the party identifies itself with the proletariat. The peasant protest in the mid-1950s that “the state loves workers, but not peasants” (Kelliher 1994:395) and the demand to change “worker–peasant alliance” to “peasant–worker alliance” contested what the peasantry seemed to signify to the party-state in the new political economy. But that contestation was suppressed by the party-state as a manifestation of the peasants’ petty bourgeois “absolute egalitarianism.” Such suppression enacted a political closure of what and how “peasant” should be as a proper class subject, with “class” not conceived as a relationship but reified as a thinglike “it,” with a “should-be” essence and agency in the linear progression of *History* (Thompson 1963). Similarly, articulations of “gender” not subordinated to “class” were viewed as expressions of

politically aberrant bourgeois liberalism (Young 1989), mirroring the peasants’ challenge of their subject position in the worker–peasant alliance as redolent of the petty bourgeois tendency toward “absolute egalitarianism.”

The dual character of the sign “peasant” is split and distributed onto images represented by two kinds of peasants: the poor peasant that embodies the progressive rural proletariat and the rich peasant that epitomizes the backward small producer. In the socialist period, the state hailed the newly liberated poor peasant subject as an enthusiastic producer contributing to the industrialization of the new nation-state and to the ultimate industrialization of agricultural production. Industrialization in turn would transform the peasant class itself into a rural proletariat with advanced means of production and diminish the difference between workers and peasants (Potter and Potter 1990:300–301). Later, in the late 1970s, it was the individualistic “small producer” character of the peasantry that was given ideological ascendancy by the post-Mao regime as the real and rational nature of peasantry and that was seized on as the *raison d’être* for economic liberalization, including the breakup of collective farming.

10. See Kirkby 1985 for the context in which industrialization took precedence in the national economy.

11. Although the unified procurement system that enforced a low price for grain is responsible for the near stagnation of the rural sector, Tim Oakes (2000) notes that up to one-third of the state’s procurement of grain was transferred to grain-deficient rural areas at subsidized prices to alleviate the threat of hunger. Oakes argues that “China’s remarkable success in reducing its mortality rate by more than half in less than two decades—three times as fast as comparable countries—can largely be attributed to the success of its egalitarian grain redistribution policies” (2000:308). Such policies disappeared with the dismantling of the planned economy in 1985.

12. Perkins and Yusuf (1984) show that in the late 1970s, value inflow into the countryside exceeded outflow, thereby beginning to reverse the trend in the previous decades of agriculture heavily subsidizing urban industrialization.

13. See Margery Wolf 1985 for more on this thesis. See Ann Anagnost 1989 and Tani Barlow 1991b for critiques that call into question the assumption in Western feminist scholarship of such “postponement.” The relationship between women’s liberation and Chinese revolution and socialism has been the subject of ongoing debate. Recently, in a roundtable on “Globalization, Postsocialism, and the People’s Republic of China,” organized by the journal *Signs*, Lin Chun criticized “a recent revisionist trend in scholarship and politics that makes ‘women’s liberation’ under socialism seem nothing more than an ideological metanarrative of the past, to be ridiculed, discarded, and replaced” (2001:1282). Tani Barlow took issue with “international feminism” and posed the question “Is it possible that, in the minds of some, any Chinese feminism would prove to be too statist or too socialist to qualify legitimately as a ‘feminism?’” (2001:1288). My analysis here supports Lin Chun’s and Tani Barlow’s arguments.

14. Phyllis Andors 1983, Kay Ann Johnson 1983, and Norma Diamond 1975 examine in detail gender ideologies and politics in the Maoist era. See Marilyn Young for a concise review of gender politics in the Maoist decades as what she terms “an intimate variable of the overall revolutionary process” (1989:254). For a more recent work that links gender with collective labor and public heroism in 1950s China, see Hershatter 2000.

15. It is noteworthy that Mao spoke of a more profound transformation of Chinese women in an episteme yet to be created that specifically unlinks gender equality from mechanization. In his conversation with Andre Malraux, Mao reflected on the revolution of women as part of the general meaning of revolution:

It isn't simply a question of replacing the Tsar with Khrushchev, one bourgeoisie with another, even if it's called communist. It's the same as with women. Of course it was necessary to give them legal equality to begin with. But from there on, everything still remains to be done. The thought, culture, and customs which brought China to where we found her must disappear, and the thought, culture, and customs of proletarian China, which does not yet exist either, must appear. The Chinese woman doesn't exist yet either, among the masses; but she is beginning to want to exist. And then, to liberate women is not to manufacture washing machines. [Malraux 1968:373–374]

16. Phyllis Andors (1983:125) credited the party-state's campaign against Lin Biao and Confucius in 1973 with inspiring more explicit and concerted efforts to campaign for women's equality, including efforts by rural women to gain parity in work points with men.

17. See Honig 2000 for a critique that, even at the height of the Cultural Revolution when the Iron Girls were national heroes, the question of gender was still marginalized in ideological discussions and practices.

18. During 1975–82, the Chinese–U.S. currency exchange rate was about 1.97 yuan = \$1.15.

19. Drawn from my own field notes and Mobo C. F. Gao's 1999 data.

20. In the collective period, even though the traditional stricture of "women–men: inside–outside" was loosened and women generally participated in collective labor, labor assignment often incorporated gender segregation and women often worked in women's groups.

21. See Lisa Rofel's 1999 ethnography showing how, before the socialist liberation, the labor of factory women performed under male gaze marked such women on a par with prostitutes ("broken shoes").

22. On the political performance of subalterns speaking bitterness, see Ann Anagnost 1997a and Lisa Rofel 1999.

23. Migrants who find that farming does not pay often rent the use right of their land to others in or outside of the village. Therefore, it is possible now for this woman and her husband to farm land for several families—their relatives or fellow villagers. The current practice in Wuwei, however, is that the "tenants" do not need to pay rent but can keep the harvest for themselves or are even compensated by the "landlords" for taking care of their land. I place *tenants* and *landlords* in quotation marks, because these are problematic terms insofar as no household, in theory, actually owns its responsibility land and the rental transaction is viewed only in terms of use right.

24. Despite the reputation of Wuwei as a source of domestics, there was an almost equally large presence of young domestics from Jiangsu and Zhejiang during the 1980s. For a time there were 20,000 baomu from Liyang County of Jiangsu Province, according to my Liyang informants.

25. David B. Clarke speaks of the contradiction posed by the "stranger" for modernity: "The entry of the stranger into the spaces of modernity was on the one hand entirely necessary, yet on the other necessarily fraught with anxiety" (1997:223). Rural migrants are perhaps more alarming than Clarke's abstract "stranger" in that, in the context of post-Mao anxiety over the quality of the Chinese population and its negative consequences for national competitiveness in the global economy, they are seen by urban Chinese as the embodiment of "low quality" (Anagnost 1997b).

26. Although limited, efforts were made by the state to introduce medical care to villagers in the 1960s and 1970s, especially through the collective-funded barefoot doctor system, which resulted in significant improvements in rural health (Gao 1999:72–91; Knight and

Song 1999:157–158). Access to basic education was also improved through the barefoot teacher system (Gao 1999:92–122).

27. To maximize the surplus value of industrial output for speedy accumulation, the party-state attempted to reduce the cost of reproduction of the urban worker population by greatly reducing commercial activities in the cities and minimizing the prices for and limiting consumption of agricultural products through the *hukou* (household registration)-based system of rationing.

28. Rural and suburban industry in the coastal areas was the most important engine of growth in the 1980s. Rural enterprises, mostly collectively owned, could effectively compete with state-owned enterprises in the 1980s for a number of reasons. There was a massive investment in rural small industry (fertilizer, farm machinery and tools, steel and iron, cement) to support agriculture in the Maoist era, especially during the Cultural Revolution period (for the connection between Maoist legacies and post-Mao rural enterprises, see Gao 1999:203–206; Granick 1990; Perkins 1977; Perry and Wong 1985; Riskin 1971, 1987). Unlike state-owned enterprises, rural enterprises were not held responsible for establishing welfare systems for their employees, who were flexibly recruited and dismissed; and, unlike state-owned enterprises, rural enterprises enjoyed significant tax breaks. Yet the post-Mao state provided little direct investment support for rural enterprises and did not undertake long-term planning with regard to rural industry. As I argue in this section, the focus of the state's development strategy has been on the city since the late 1970s. The 1990s saw a visible general decline of rural industry in coastal areas and recognition of the environmental damage that such industry has caused. Even in the 1980s, most interior provinces, including Anhui, did not see much development of rural industry.

29. See Ann Anagnost 1997b for an insightful analysis of the relationship between the discourse of civility, governmentality, and flexible accumulation.

30. Louisa Schein's analysis links post-Mao urbanity with a culture of consumption as commodity desire. How consumption presents a mirage of modernity to rural young women in the post-Mao era and incites their desire for the city is a question I have analyzed elsewhere (Yan Hairong 2002).

31. It is difficult to compare policies for rural development in the Maoist and post-Mao periods simply in financial terms. As I indicate in N. 28, there was massive investment during the Maoist period in small rural industry to support agriculture as well as urban industry designed to support agriculture. The rural communes and collectives financed much of the rural industry, but the state subsidized and facilitated this semipublic investment. The massive land reclamation, water control, and irrigation projects were also state-backed projects, even if they were based on peasant labor that was not compensated by the state. The massive investment in schools and clinics also facilitated rural and agricultural development. None of these investments can be captured in financial terms. My comparison of the two periods in terms of state capital investment is only indicative of changes in support for rural and agricultural development but should not be taken as a comprehensive evaluation of the two periods in terms of support for the rural. I owe thanks to Joel Andreas for this point.

32. See Mobo Gao 1999:177–179 for a detailed discussion of how the reform has impacted rural income. Gao particularly argues that the increase in agricultural production and rural income should be attributed to the government's raising of agricultural prices and the relaxation of the procurement system rather than to the much-hailed "household responsibility system." When the government lowered the procurement prices and tightened the monopoly of state procurement in 1985, production significantly dropped.

33. The rough Chinese–U.S. currency exchange rate in the late 1990s was 8.3 yuan = \$1.00. The following is a typical calculation

that I was given in Wuwei's rice-growing villages: 1,200 *jin* rice/mu x 60 yuan/100 *jin* = 720 yuan/mu (1 *jin* = 1.1 pound). Production costs: 70 yuan to borrow ox for plowing, 100 yuan for pesticide and fertilizer per mu, 15 yuan for water pump, 270 yuan for taxes and fees. Net income: 265 yuan/mu. A yield of 1,200 *jin*/mu is considered a bumper harvest. Harvests usually hover around 1,000 *jin*/mu. I was given slightly different figures for harvest yields, production costs, and fees in different villages. But the net income of 200–300 yuan/mu for rice growing is widely confirmed.

For cotton growing, I was given the following figures by a township accountant: 500–600 *jin* unginned cotton/mu – 300 yuan/100 *jin* unginned cotton = 1,500–1,800 yuan. Production costs (seeds, fertilizer, and pesticide): 300–400 yuan/mu; taxes and fees: 200 yuan/mu. Net income: 1,000–1,200 yuan/mu. A village accountant provided a much lower estimate: 160 *jin* ginned cotton/mu – 670 yuan/100 *jin* = 1,072 yuan/mu. Estimates of production costs, taxes, and fees remained the same. Net income: 472–572 yuan/mu. The cotton price was lowered ten percent in 1998. Although there is a set of criteria for measuring the quality of cotton and each grade of cotton is given a fixed price, local cotton collection stations vary in their assessment of the quality of the fiber turned in by peasants. That directly affects the prices peasants get for their cotton and may account for the different estimates. Villagers tend to support the second estimate, especially because they were hit hard by a widespread pest attack on their cotton in 1998. Cotton growing is much more labor intensive than rice farming. In Wuwei, townships that are located near the Yangtzi River and that have sandy land typically grow cotton, whereas inland townships grow rice. Cotton-growing townships have generally been better off than rice-growing townships.

34. See Potter and Potter 1990:132–134 and Mobo C. F. Gao 1999:72–79 on the function of the village-level medical care system before the rural reform. Gao's work also makes a comparison of rural health before and after the rural reform.

35. See Charles Hayford 1998 for a good analysis of the orientalist discourse of "peasant China."

36. Yan'an, a poor rural area in northwest China, was the base from which the Chinese Communist Party fought against the Japanese invasion in World War II and against the Nationalist Party led by Chiang Kai-shek. In what later became known as the Yan'an period, the CCP reformed policies that began in the Jiangxi Soviet and experimented with many new policies. During that period, many left-wing young urban intellectuals went to Yan'an to join the revolution.

37. The term 773861 is not limited to Wuwei or Anhui Province but has a very wide circulation in rural China. The reality it reflects is found in rural areas in a number of provinces, such as Sichuan, Anhui, Shandong, and Hubei.

38. De facto land abandonment reached peaks in 1984 and 1992. In 1984, the total amount of agricultural land left unfarmed reached 50,000 mu in Chaohu Prefecture, Anhui Province, 1.2 percent of the total arable land in the prefecture (Chen Sanle 1984; Wang et al. 1993). This statistic still understated the problem, as it did not include the land that was underfarmed and underused (Zhonggong Hexian Xianwei Zhengce Yanjiushi 1998).

39. According to *Nanfang Zhoumo* (Southern Weekend; 1999), 12,189 persons were injured in 1998 in Shenzhen, the capital of overseas investment and migrant labor. Ninety percent of the injured lost their fingers, hands, or even arms. The work-related death toll in 1998 numbered more than 80. This means that there were 31 persons injured every day and one death every four and a half days in the city. A survey in Beijing reveals that 70 percent of migrant women working in the city are not covered by any insurance (Zhiye Daokan 1999).

40. Foreign direct investment in China in 1999 totaled \$40 billion. China's share of the total capital flowing into Asia has gone up from 18 percent in the early 1990s to 42 percent in 1999 (Agence France Presse 2000).

41. This is not to say that the specifics of their local cultural and gender dynamics do not matter in shaping their experiences of migration. From my interviews in Beijing, I found that women from Anhui, Sichuan, Henan, Shandong, Gansu, and so on, face important common problems as migrants. It is the connection and commonality of migrant women that I am interested in exploring here.

42. Liu Li is the eldest in the family and has two younger, teen-aged brothers. She is from a mountainous county in Henan, where the main product is wheat. Because of deterioration in the management of water controls and the irrigation system, a not uncommon problem after post-Mao decollectivization, they are visited by alternating drought and flood, which reduces wheat productivity by half. To subsidize their meager agricultural income, her father and one younger brother who had quit school engage in the back-breaking labor of loading and transporting rocks to a construction site.

According to Liu Li, villagers stereotype migrant women on the basis of representations in government campaigns against pornographic activities and through soap operas on TV involving migrant women and their rich male patrons.

"Feudal" or "old feudal" are phrases that attained common currency in the countryside in the Maoist era to label certain thoughts or people who constituted obstacles to establishing gender equality or a more democratic familial relationship in which women and the younger generation are supposed to have some say.

To find a woman a "mother-in-law's house" is to plan to marry her off. This expression, which is often used in rural areas, manifests a patrilineal principle that is mediated by the senior figure of mother-in-law.

43. Of 104 women I interviewed, 16 are married women in their twenties and thirties who have never being migrants. Although some of them have family reasons, most of them cited illiteracy as the major obstacle to their migration. The attitudes of the parents of two of the women who had migrated on their own were not clear, and one young woman's parents had passed away before she migrated by herself at age 17.

44. During my entire stay in rural Wuwei, I only saw one young woman working in the fields.

45. Mao's analysis of the layers of oppression experienced by peasants in semicolonial Chinese society is well-known. Mao pointed out that rural women, in addition to bearing the mountains of oppression also experienced by their menfolk, were subjugated to the power of their husbands (*fuquan*).

46. This gendering practice bears resemblance to the gender discourse in 19th-century England that marked working-class women as insufficiently gendered (Armstrong 1987; McClintock 1995:100–104).

47. The editor, Xie Lihua, recalled her encounter with this girl:

It is not because of poverty that she fled home. Her native place is not poor and may even be said to be well-off. But material wealth does not suggest spiritual enrichment. She came to Beijing because she was hungry but could not find food for her spirit [*jingshen*]. She said that her failure at the entrance exam for college was a fatal blow to her. She could no longer mingle together with those girls and married women of her own age. She felt that if she had to repeat the old path of her parents', she would rather choose death itself. [1995:5]

The girl expected to lose her job because of housing difficulties. The house or apartment in which her employers lived was provided

to them by their work unit. Work units sometimes readjust housing distribution among their employees by increasing or reducing the sizes of accommodations provided.

48. This Manichean logic, constitutive of the rise of the post-Mao regime, which based its legitimacy on totally negating the Cultural Revolution, often plagues discussion and debates in China about problems of Maoist social projects and of the post-Mao reform. Affirmation of certain socialist values of the Maoist era is immediately taken and criticized as a total endorsement of everything in that era. The 1980s New Enlightenment trend within the intelligentsia supported the post-Mao regime's claim to modernity and represented the Maoist era, especially the Cultural Revolution, as a feudal dark age, to be negated by post-Mao modernity. By assuming a notion of universal capitalist modernity (albeit inflected by Chinese characteristics), such a logic today prevents the emergence within post-Mao Chinese society of detailed, nuanced, and multivalenced reflections on socialist experiments. Such reflections, critiques, and negotiations with the past are much needed for imagining alternative visions of social justice. The strategy employed by left-leaning intellectuals in China is to examine the contradictions and disjunctures of modernity within itself and to argue that Maoist socialism was both an ideology of modernization and a critique of Euro-American capitalist modernity (Wang 1998).

Standing in apparent opposition to this Manichean logic is a multiculturalist argument of modernity. I agree with Fredric Jameson's scathing criticism of the latter position:

How then can the ideologues of "modernity" in its current sense manage to distinguish their product—the information revolution, and globalized, free-market modernity—from the detestable older kind, without getting themselves involved in asking the kinds of serious political and economic, systemic questions that the concept of a postmodernity makes unavoidable? The answer is simple: you talk about "alternate" or "alternative" modernities. Everyone knows the formula by now: this means that there can be a modernity for everybody which is different from the standard or hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model. Whatever you dislike about the latter, including the subaltern position it leaves you in, can be effaced by the reassuring and "cultural" notion that you can fashion your own modernity differently. [2002:12]

The competing social visions of Maoist and post-Mao modernities challenge such a pluralist vision of modernity based on cultural relativism. The relationship between socialism and modernity is a question to be further explored rather than ignored or disavowed. Here I beg to disagree with Jameson's statement that "the only satisfactory semantic meaning of modernity lies in its association with capitalism" (2002:13).

References cited

Agence France Presse

- 1999 China's Reforms Hit Women Hardest: US-Based Rights Group. Agence France Presse, January 27. Archived material, Agence France Presse, Paris, France.
- 2000 US Businessmen Tell ASEAN It Risks Losing Out to China and India. Agence France Presse, October 15. Archived material, Agence France Presse, Paris, France.
- 2002 Rural Suicides Show China's Pit of Despair, Says Study. Agence France Presse, March 8. Archived material, Agence France Presse, Paris, France.

Anagnost, Ann

- 1989 Transformations of Gender in Modern China. In *Gender and Anthropology: Critical Reviews for Research and Teaching*. Sandra Morgan, ed. Pp. 313–342. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association.
- 1997a Making History Speak. In *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*. Ann Anagnost. Pp. 17–44. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- 1997b Construction of Civility in the Age of Flexible Accumulation. In *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*. Ann Anagnost. Pp. 75–97. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Andors, Phyllis

- 1983 *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women, 1949–1980*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Armstrong, Nancy

- 1987 *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Barlow, Tani E.

- 1991a *Zhizhifenzi* [Chinese Intellectuals] and Power. *Dialectical Anthropology* 16(3–4):209–232.
- 1991b Theorizing Women: *Funü, Guojia, Jiating* [Chinese Women, Chinese State, Chinese Family]. *Genders* 10:132–160.
- 2001 Globalization, China, and International Feminism. *Signs* 26(4):1286–1291.

Benjamin, Walter

- 1992 Theses on the Philosophy of History. In *Illuminations*. Hannah Arendt, ed. Pp. 245–255. London: Fontana Press.

Bodman, Richard

- 1991 From History to Allegory to Art. In *Deathsong of the River: A Reader's Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*. Su Xiao Kang and Wang Luxiang, eds., Richard W. Bodman and Pin P. Wan, trans. Pp. 1–62. Ithaca, NY: East Asian Program, Cornell University.

Buck, David D.

- 1984 Changes in Chinese Urban Planning since 1976. *Third World Planning Review* 6(1):5–26.

Cascardi, Anthony J.

- 1992 *The Subject of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chan, Kam Wing

- 1994 *Cities with Invisible Walls: Reinterpreting Urbanization in Post-1949 China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chen Sanle

- 1984 Renzhen jie jue geng di paohuang wenti (Seriously handle the problem of farmland abandoning). *Anhui ribao* (Anhui daily), January 31: 2.

Clarke, David B.

- 1997 Consumption and the City, Modern and Postmodern. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 12(2): 219–237.

Cohen, Myron L.

- 1994 The Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: The Case of the Chinese "Peasant." In *China in Transformation*. Tu Wei-ming, ed. Pp. 151–170. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Davin, Delia

- 1975 Women in the Countryside of China. In *Women in Chinese Society*. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke, eds. Pp. 243–273. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Diamond, Norma

- 1975 Collectivization, Kinship, and the Status of Women in Rural China. In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Rayna Reiter, ed. Pp. 372–395. New York: Monthly Review Press.

- Dirlik, Arif
1997 Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism. *In* The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism. Arif Dirlik. Pp. 105–128. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Fei Hsiao-tung
1968 China's Gentry: Essays on Rural-Urban Relations. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gao, Mobo C. F.
1999 Gao Village: A Portrait of Rural Life in Modern China. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Granick, David
1990 Chinese State Enterprises: A Regional Property Rights Analysis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harootunian, Harry
2000 History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Politics, and the Question of Everyday Life. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Harrell, Stevan
2000 Changing Meanings of Work in China. *In* Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China. Barbara Entwisle and Gail E. Henderson, eds. Pp. 67–76. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Harvey, David
1989 From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler* 71B(1):3–17.
- Hayford, Charles
1998 The Storm over the Peasant: Orientalism and Rhetoric in Constructing China. *In* Contesting Master Narrative: Essays in Social History. Jeffrey Cox and Shelton Stromquist, eds. Pp. 150–172. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Hershatter, Gail
2000 Local Meanings of Gender and Work in Rural Shaanxi in the 1950s. *In* Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China. Barbara Entwisle and Gail E. Henderson, eds. Pp. 79–96. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Honig, Emily
2000 Iron Girls Revisited: Gender and Politics of Work in the Cultural Revolution, 1966–76. *In* Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China. Barbara Entwisle and Gail E. Henderson, eds. Pp. 97–110. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Honig, Emily, and Gail Hershatter
1988 Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hooper, Beverley
1985 Youth in China. Victoria, Australia: Penguin Books.
- Jacka, Tamara
1997 Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in an Era of Reform. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jameson, Fredric
2002 A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present. New York: Verso.
- Jin Yuanju and Xu Deyuan
1994 Baomu xiaoying—laizi Wuwei de diaocha baogao (Baomu agency—An investigation report from Wuwei). *Anhui ribao* (Anhui daily), May 15: 2.
- Johnson, Kay Ann
1983 Women, the Family and Peasant Revolution in China. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kelliher, Daniel
1994 Chinese Communist Political Theory and the Rediscovery of the Peasantry. *Modern China* 20(4):387–415.
- Kirkby, Richard
1985 Urbanization in China: Town and Country in a Developing Economy, 1949–2000 AD. London: Croom Helm.
- Knight, John, and Lina Song
1999 The Rural-Urban Divide: Economic Disparities and Interactions in China. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, Ching Kwan
1998 Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri
1995 Renewal, Youth, Repetition. *In* Introduction to Modernity. Henri Lefebvre. John Moore, trans. Pp. 157–167. London: Verso.
- Levy, Marion
1968 The Family Revolution in Modern China. New York: Atheneum.
- Li Zuojun
2000 Zhongguo de genben wenti: Jiuyi nongmin hechuqu (China's fundamental problem: Where would 900 million peasants go). Beijing: Zhongguo Fazhan Chubanshe.
- Lin Chun
2001 Whither Feminism: A Note on China. *Signs* 26(4):1281–1286.
- Liu, Lydia
1993 Translingual Practice: The Discourse of Individualism between China and the West. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 1(1):160–193.
- Lo, C. P.
1986 Socialist Ideology and Urban Strategies in China. *Urban Geography* 8(5):440–458.
- Ma, Josephine
2002 Rural Cash Crunch Taxes Reformers. *South China Morning Post*, January 8: 8.
- Ma, Laurence J. C., and Yehua Dennis Wei
1997 Determinants of State Investment in China, 1953–1990. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 88(3):211–225.
- Malraux, Andre
1968 Anti-Memoirs. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Marx, Karl
1977 The Secret of Primitive Accumulation. *In* Capital. Vol. 1. Karl Marx. Pp. 873–940. New York: Vintage Books.
- McClintock, Anne
1995 Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest. New York: Routledge.
- McLaren, Anne E.
2000 The Grievance Rhetoric of Chinese Women: From Lamentation to Revolution. *Intersections* 4:1–17.
- Nanfang Zhoumo
1999 Zhou Litai dai mingong qixue shangshu, jinbaiqi gongshangan luxu kaiting (Zhou Litai sues on behalf migrants, hundreds of work injury cases gradually make it to the court). *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern weekend), November 26: 1.
- Naughton, Barry
1995 Cities in the Chinese Economic System: Changing Roles and Conditions for Autonomy. *In* Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China. Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds. Pp. 61–89. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
- Oakes, Tim
2000 China's Market Reforms: Whose Human Rights Problem? *In* China Beyond the Headlines. Timothy B. Weston and Lionel M. Jensen, eds. Pp. 295–326. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Pa Chin (Ba Jin)
1972 Jia (Family). New York: Anchor Books.

- Perkins, Dwight
1977 Rural Small-Scale Industry in the People's Republic of China. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Perkins, Dwight, and Shahid S. Yusuf
1984 Rural Development in China. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Perry, Elizabeth, and Christine P. W. Wong
1985 Political Economy of Reform in Post-Mao China. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Potter, Jack, and Sulamith Hein Potter
1990 China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Potter, Sulamith Hein
1983 The Position of Peasants in Modern China's Social Order. *Modern China* 9(4):465-499.
- Qingnian Xinxiang (Youth Letterbox)
1980 Rensheng, xinyang, qiantu (Life, faith, and future). *Qingnian xinxiang* (Youth letterbox) 3: 1-2.
1982 Xingfu zhi lu zai hefang (Where is the road to happiness). *Qingnian xinxiang* (Youth letterbox) 7: 30.
- Returning to Phoenix Bridge
1997 Hui dao fenghuang qiao (Returning to phoenix bridge). Li Hong, prod. and dir. Prerelease version of documentary film in possession of author.
- Riskin, Carl
1971 Small Industry and the Chinese Model of Development. *China Quarterly* 46:245-273.
1987 China's Political Economy. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rofel, Lisa
1999 Other Modernities. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schein, Louisa
2001 Urbanity, Cosmopolitanism, Consumption. In *Ethnographies of Contemporary Culture*. Nancy N. Chen, Constance D. Clark, Suzanne Z. Gottschang, and Lyn Jeffery, eds. Pp. 235-241. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Solinger, Dorothy J.
1993 The Place of the Central City in China's Economic Reform: From Hierarchy to Network? In *China's Transition from Socialism*. Dorothy J. Solinger. Pp. 205-222. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
1999 Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State and the Logic of the Market. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty
2000 From Haverstock Hill Flat to U.S. Classroom, What's Left of Theory? In *What's Left of Theory?: New Works on the Politics of Literary Theory*. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas, eds. Pp. 1-39. New York: Routledge.
- Thompson, E. P.
1963 The Making of the English Working Class. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Wang Danyu
2000 Violence against Themselves: Suicide in Rural China. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, November 15-19.
- Wang Hui
1998 Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity. *Social Text* 16(2):9-36.
- Wang, Jing
1996 Heshang and the Chinese Enlightenment. In *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*. Jing Wang. Pp. 118-136. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wang Shucheng and Li Renhu
1996 Wuwei: Baomu xiaoying (Wuwei: The effect of migrant domestic workers). *Banyuetan* (Half monthly forum) 8:23-25.
- Wang Yanhai, Wang Shixin, and Zhang Chuanfa
1993 Laodongli waichu yu paohuangtian wenti toushi (Labor exodus and the problem of farmland wasting). *Anhui ribao* (Anhui daily), February 15, 18, 21: 1, 2, 3.
- World Bank
1997 Sharing Rising Incomes: Disparities in China. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Wolf, Margery
1985 Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Wuwei Xianzhi Bangongshi (The Office of Wuwei Annals)
1993 Wuwei xianzhi (Wuwei annals). Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe.
- Xie Lihua
1995 Guniang, ni weishenme jincheng (Girl, why do you come to the city?). *Nongjianü baishitong* (Rural women knowing all) 1:4-6.
- Xu Xue
1995 Mingtian, wo hui gen xiang ge ren (Tomorrow, I will be more like a human being). *Zhongguo qingnian* (China's youth) 2:11.
- Yan Hairong
2002 Xiandaihua de huanying—xiaofei he shengchan de shuangrenwu (Mirage of modernity: *Pas de deux* of consumption and production). *Taiwan shehui yanjiu jikan* (Taiwan: A radical quarterly in social studies) 48:95-134.
- Young, Marilyn
1989 Chicken Little in China: Some Reflections on Women. In *Marxism and the Chinese Experience*. Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner, eds. Pp. 253-267. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Zhiye Daokan
1999 "Bohushanxia" nan chengliang (Hard to enjoy the cool under the protective umbrella). *Zhiye daokan* (Professional guide), August 18: 2.
- Zhonggong Hexian Xianwei Zhengce Yanjiushi
1998 Guanyu nongcun laoli shuchu, gengdi paohuang ji tudi liuzhuan qingkuang de diaocha (An investigation on labor migration, land wasting, and land circulation). *Chaohu gongzuo tongxun* (Chaohu work correspondence) 8:11-13.
- Zhu Xiaoyang
1987 Mangliu zhongguo (The blind wanderers of China). *Zhongguo zuojia* (Chinese writer) 4:349-386.

accepted April 5, 2002
final version submitted July 24, 2002

Yan Hairong
Society of Fellows
Princeton University
Joseph Henry House
Princeton, NJ 08544
hairongy@princeton.edu