Lili Lai

Hygiene, Sociality, and Culture in Contemporary Rural China

The Uncanny New Village

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Hygiene, Sociality, and Culture in Contemporary Rural China

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Cover illustration: The Culture Plaza of Shang Village, photo Lili Lai

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 90 8964 846 4

e-ISBN 978 90 4852 700 7 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789089648464

NUR 740

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To Judy

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Acknowledgments

Though I cannot name them here, having promised not to disclose their identities, first and foremost I want to thank all my friends in Shang village for their generous contributions to the stories appearing in this book. In particular, I thank my two host families, who kindly (and perhaps courageously, without really knowing me) took me in as part of their families, a complete stranger, who claimed to be a researcher but apparently was more interested in sitting around and chatting. I also thank my friends in the county's Chinese medicine hospital, especially "Dajie" Kou Rongyu. It was she who took me to the township office and helped to arrange my stay in Shang village. Later, she also secured a room for me in the hospital's clinic building while I was conducting archival research in the county. Thanks are also due to Ms. Li, who not only let me sit in the county archive, day after day, to read through almost every document concerning local medical policy, but also photocopied many materials for me.

I owe my greatest gratitude to Judith Farquhar, a great mentor and a wonderful friend. Her sparkling intellectual inspiration, empathetic understanding, and encouragement toward quality work, as well as her tireless and enthusiastic reading, commenting upon, and laboring over my dissertation and book drafts, have helped me make a "great leap forward" as a non-native English speaker whose undergraduate specialty was Chinese medicine rather than the humanities. Many outstanding scholars and *laoshi* (teachers) of the Department of Anthropology of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill contributed to my intellectual development and transformation into an anthropologist. I especially thank Arturo Escobar, Dorothy Holland, Christopher Nelson, and Peter Redfield, as well as that intrepid ethnographer Gang Yue of the Department of Asian Studies. Professor Gao Bingzhong of the Sociology Department of Peking University has been a strong supporter of my post-doctoral research, and it is he who has led me into the circle of Chinese anthropologists, from whom I have learned a great deal in constant scholarly exchange.

I also want to thank many friends who, in one way or another, sustained me over the years: Kim Allen, Ana Araujo, Mikkel Bunkenborg, Chen Huaiyuan, Lily Chumley, Vinci Daro, Stephan Feuchtwang, James Hevia, Jennifer Holdaway, Huang Ping, Huang Yingying, Jason Ingersoll, Jiang Hongsheng, Eric Karchmer, Teresa Kuan, Ralph Litzinger, Anna Lora-Wainwright, Luo Hongguang, Luo Jun, Kacie Martin, John Osburg, Diane Royle, Priscilla

Song, Tan Tongxue, Wang Dan, Wang Min'an, Wang Xiaoyi, Weng Naiqun, Zhang Hui, and Zhu Xiaoyang, among others.

Some ideas that appear in this book were presented at conferences: two annual meetings of the Association for Asian Studies; a symposium on "Environmental Health in China" at Oxford University; a workshop on "Governmentality in China" at Lund University; the 2012 Kaifeng Deleuze International Conference; and the 2010 annual meeting of the Forum on Health, Environment, and Development, Beijing, China. I thank the people who invited me, the organizers, fellow participants, and audience members for very useful conversations.

I gratefully acknowledge the following agencies and organizations for funding my research and writing. My original dissertation research was generously supported by an International Dissertation Research Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council (2005-2006) and Dissertation Fieldwork Grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (2006). The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill provided me with a dissertation write-up fellowship, administered by the Department of Anthropology. A postdoctoral research grant from the China Postdoctoral Science Foundation, and a Grant for Collaborative Research on Environment and Health in China from the SSRC China Environment and Health Initiative Collaborative Grants Program supported my follow-up research in 2010 and 2011.

Some portions of this book first appeared as articles in *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* (Lai 2012), *Theory & Event* (Lai 2013), and *positions: asia critique* (Lai 2014a, b). I thank the editors and reviewers of these journals and the publishers for permission to use materials for this book.

My heartfelt thanks also go to Lilly Lerer, who generously offered to proofread the first draft of my book manuscript. Two reviewers of the book manuscript, Anna Lora-Wainwright and Judith Farquhar, made careful and constructive comments and suggestions. Diane Royle read the last chapter with a critical eye during the final stage of revision.

Thanks are due to members of the Amsterdam University Press for efficiently and sympathetically bringing this book to publication: series editor Anna Lora-Wainwright, senior editor Saskia Gieling, Kristi Prins, Jaap Wagenaar, and my copyeditor Anna Yeadell.

I dedicate this book to Judy, who has been with me all along, through my graduate study and the making of this book, for these many years, these many drafts. Last, but not least, I thank my parents and my sister for their

unconditional love and the support they have always provided to their demanding daughter and sister.

None of the above-mentioned people or institutions is responsible for the interpretations in the book or any of its shortcomings.

Preface

I started my field research in Shang village¹, Henan Province in October 2005. It was a rainy day, and the road was muddy, but we managed to keep ourselves dry and clean since we were in a car that took us all the way from the county seat to the township office. My friend Yu Jie had traveled together from the county seat to introduce me to officials at the Zhaoying township office. Soon after our arrival in Zhaoying, the township office unexpectedly announced that they had decided I should stay in Shang village, instead of Yu Jie's home village, which was the one I had chosen as a field site in a previous visit to the area. Yu Jie quietly suggested that I agree to whatever the office decided. After a phone call from the Zhaoying office to the Shang village Party Secretary, Zhishu, we returned to the car and drove to the village committee courtyard. Fang, the township official in charge of family planning, had been sent by the township office to introduce me to the village. It was already afternoon, and it was at very short notice that Zhishu quickly figured out a place for me, a complete stranger to Shang village to stay that night. I asked him if he could find me an old-style, one-story house, of the kind that at that time seemed to dominate Shang village, even though I had noticed many newly built two- and three-storey houses visible from the main village road. After Zhishu's careful review of potential hosts – he told me later that his major concern had been the issue of my safety as a woman researcher working alone – we met my first host, whom I called Ayi, in Zhishu's courtyard. Only Ayi and her daughter lived in their house. She initially declined the request to host me, insisting, "My house is awfully dirty." Zhishu urged her to take me over to have a look and let me decide for myself.

Ayi's house looked perfectly "traditional" to me: it was a lovely courtyard with a three-room main house and a two-room side house, a dog, a cat, about twenty chickens, and ten ducks. Zhishu persuaded Ayi to let me stay for the first month, and then we would both decide whether I should move to someone else's house. In fact, I stayed for several months and became friends with Ayi and her daughter, Lihua. In January, when Xiaojun, Ayi's son, was due home for his college winter break, I moved into the village doctor Li Shu's new-style two-storey house.

That, then, is how I spent most of the year of 2005-2006; in a Henan Province village that initially seemed "traditional", but that was actually

1 All the place names and personal names in this book are pseudonyms.

changing rapidly. This was a significant period for Shang villagers. Just before my arrival in October of 2005, the main paved road running through Shang village had been finished, thanks to the central government's newly implemented effort to build more country roads as part of the *cuncun tong* (roads between villages) project; a further project of *huhu tong* (roads between households) had been promised. Also during this time, the villagers were spreading the delightful news that on 1 January 2006, the national implementation of the historic first abolition of the agricultural tax would take effect. In February, the central government issued its Number One Document for the year 2006, in which the policy of "building new socialist villages" was first announced as the government's primary task, and so it remains at time of this writing.

But things have not developed exactly as the policy intended. Since my first arrival in Shang village, many of the old one-storey houses have fallen into disrepair, and some have collapsed, having long been deserted. Along the paved village roads, two- to three-storey *menmian* (shop-front) houses, newly built with remittance money mostly sent by migrant laborers, dominate the village. Modern appliances are installed in these new houses, including LCD televisions, refrigerators, microwaves, electric rice cookers, and washing machines, and they have running water (either from a 100-meter-deep family well or bought from the township water plant at the price of 2.3 RMB per ton) and indoor plumbing. But there is no sewage system in the village and there is no garbage collecting service. That is to say, there is no place for household waste to go but into ditches and canals outside the houses. Walking along the main village road, one sees all kinds of trash scattered along the roadside: plastic bags, food packaging from cookies, snacks and candies, used toilet paper, discarded clothes, and much more refuse. In some places, the same kind of trash clogs the ditch water. Occasionally, one can even see dead domestic animals in the ditches, such as runt piglets or inedible chickens that died of roup.

This book stems, in part, from my own experiences of unfamiliarity, inconvenience, and discomfort as I adjusted to a contemporary village life that I often found disturbingly uncanny. It engages with the Chinese government's continuing effort to "build new socialist villages" from a grassroots perspective, based on materials collected during fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in southwest Henan Province between 2005 and 2011 (twelve months in 2005 and 2006, including two months in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, where Shang villagers were working as migrant factory workers; and short visits in summer of 2008, spring of 2010, and fall of 2011, amounting to three months). By exploring the mundane tactics

and strategies through which Shang villagers maintain particular forms of order in their everyday lives, I aim to challenge three major premises that figure importantly in discourses and policies about rural people in contemporary China: rural villages are naturally dirty (in terms of hygiene and the environment), “peasants” are like “a sheet of loose sand” (unable to organize themselves socially), and “peasants” have little “culture” (and thus require a state pedagogical intervention to raise their “cultural level”). Accordingly, this ethnography attends to three aspects of Henan villagers’ everyday life – hygiene, sociality, and culture – through an examination of the uses of space, embodiment, daily practices, and social relations.

Henan is a province where agriculture has long been the major form of livelihood, a fact that now contributes to the province being thought of as a backward region in today’s China. People from Henan, with their distinctive accent, including those from the large cities of the province, are looked down upon as “peasants” in China, despite the province’s proud history as a seedbed of East Asian civilization in ancient times. This translation of the regional into the “rural” or “peasant” means that these value-laden terms have played a complex role, giving “peasant” status a shifting sense, depending on the specific context of conversation. An informal hierarchy attributes different degrees of backwardness to rural people from other provinces as well, although all villagers tend to be despised or ignored by those who consider themselves “true city people”. Alongside the history of an institutionalized political economic rural-urban divide, a rather fixed disparity in social status has developed between the “rural” and “urban” areas usually designated by these two signifiers, disguising with stereotypes the complexity of life in all the diverse regions of China.

This book shows that the rural-urban distinctions maintained in national and anthropological ideologies are not just symbolic and conceptual; they are *lived* in important ways. Further, the ideological and material divide that is supposed to be separating the rural and the urban is simultaneously keeping them co-dependent in a unity. This necessary linkage is maintained in processes that I will identify as *uncanny* modernization. In other words, rural areas have kept pace with the cities in the process of national modernization, but only on “the other side” of recognized progress: the rural is that which has been contained and concealed within China’s much-vaunted large-scale urbanization. Like other widening inequalities in Chinese society, classification of people and places as either rural or urban is neither natural, nor timeless. The political economic roots and social determinants of “dirty villages”, the strategies of dwelling in “villages with hollow hearts” (i.e. communities from which many younger people have

migrated to work in industrial areas), and particular forms of participation in local and national projects of cultural production all reveal much about class, power, and stigmatizing recognitions in China today. But in the final analysis, I suggest that the stigma of peasant-hood is not so much victimizing as it is productive: it generates unique forms of life and structures of feeling for both villagers and urbanites. Meanwhile, rural life, I will argue, is not solely and ineluctably centered on the State and its categories; villages are not entirely defined by the contemporary government policy mandating the development of “new socialist villages”. This book demonstrates that rural life in villages has its own complex cultural character, which cannot be reduced to the qualities predicted by discourses on “the rural-urban divide”.

Chapter One introduces the social and historical background informing the study, first outlining the impacts of an institutionalized administrative urban-rural distinction that has served to maintain some stubborn regional inequalities in China. Then, I will argue that there is, in addition, a real discrepancy between urban and rural ways of life, based in market practices and conditions. This real difference mainly has to do with an increasing gap in standards of living and access to resources between so-called urban and so-called rural areas. Since at least the beginning of the Reform period (about 1978), an image of the urban has been the standard against which experts judge the value (or disvalue) of any community’s living conditions; cities are seen as the natural source of improvements to rural life. The last section of this chapter situates my study vis-a-vis recent ethnographies of rural China, provides an overview of my research methodology, and explains what I mean by uncanny modernization. It considers my reasons for adopting the Freudian concept of the uncanny, which, following Collins and Jervis, “suggests a fundamental indecision and obscurity or uncertainty at the heart of our ontology, our sense of time, place, and history, both personal and cultural” (2008: 2). The uncanny qualities of village life, repressed or rendered invisible in urban/modern processes, if acknowledged, would offer a challenge to consensual knowledge and experience of the rural-urban divide and urbanization/modernization in China.

Chapter Two ethnographically depicts some of the contours of everyday life in the Henan community I am calling Shang village, in particular exploring people’s practical understandings of hygiene. Consciousness of modern urban norms about personal and household hygiene, and desires to suppress and repress trash and dirt in the immediate environment, are internalized by villagers. The “dirtiness” they perceive and take account of is not really seen as a product of their own actions. For Shang village, as for rural China in general, recent problems stemming from the excessive production of trash

and the inadequacy of garbage disposal systems exposes a fundamental problem of so-called modernization. This chapter shows how attention to everyday hygiene in rural Henan reveals the “spectral reality” of modernization (Yan 2003b), a term that refers to an unsystematic assortment of ideological and material elements that has masqueraded as “advanced” cosmopolitan life in towns and cities. “Modern” everyday life, however, with its perceived cleanliness and order, depends on infrastructures that urbanites can take for granted. Urban infrastructures include technologies that remove dirt (in the broadest sense) from view and send it elsewhere for cleaning, storing, burying, and re-use. Chapter Two will show that, for those rural residents who cannot but participate in the modern economy, but who lack the resources to make its inevitable refuse disappear, dirt can only accumulate on their own “new socialist” doorsteps.

Chapter Three aims to convey a vivid sense of the connections among Shang villagers as they pursue a shared social life on an everyday basis. In this ethnographic treatment, I refute certain discourses prevailing in China that attribute a lack of a collective consciousness or any “moral” capacity to “peasants” to organize themselves as a community. A recent scholarly turn away from recognizing village sociality can be traced to the informality, and thus invisibility, of village ties that, I will argue, tend to exist and even thrive beyond the State’s gaze. Adopting Brian Massumi’s notion of *immanent sociality* (2002), I explore how villagers live collective life together on a daily basis, considering what kind of bonds are formed among relatively young migrant workers as they scatter in search of work, and between migrants and those who remain in their home villages, including continuing engagements between the migrant generation and their stay-at-home parents. Even in a “hollow heart” village, there are practical social goods, subtle but important virtues that rely on and arise from the immanent sociality of neighbors, friends, and kin. These locally valued goods have largely ceased to appear in social scientific accounts of the rural economy. Nor is mundane social action at the village level of any interest to formal regulatory and reporting structures. Village sociality, I suggest, is organized through long-constituted relations and slowly formed habitus, however contingent and changeable these may be. What villagers “lack”, I argue, is only a formal articulation of their actions in a normalized, explicit, and officially accountable discourse.

Chapter Four highlights the complicated local situation of the rural politics within which the notions of *wenhua* (culture), the masses, and *suzhi* (population quality) are constantly invoked and interwoven. Specifically, this chapter recounts the aspirations and tensions involved in the

construction of a “Culture Plaza” for the village. The fact that narratives of “*wenhua*” and “the new socialist village” continue to matter in Chinese national policy evokes a familiar socialist tradition characterized by ideological progressivism. In this chapter, I argue that a monotonous focus on economic development has made a narrowed notion of “*wenhua*” appear irrelevant in rural life. This despite the fact that local culture, filled with history and memory, has a real presence in village life, in particular the habits of maintaining domestic order according to local “cultural” standards. Certain new understandings of culture are emerging in China, representations of culture that are highly commoditized and equate “Chinese culture”, popular culture, and civilization (*wenming*) with urban consumer habits and aesthetics. This is a formation of discourse that is in cahoots with the hegemonic imaginary of China’s urban-rural difference, an economic discourse that denigrates rural society and rural life while paying tribute to the national and international cultural industries and advancing a highly mediated consumerism. A hegemonic discourse that constantly invokes the “low *wenhua*/low *suzhi*” of the peasant population raises fundamental questions about the politics of culture in Chinese socialism. An examination of cultural development work in one Henan village, thus, can reveal some of the political tensions around China’s continuing commitment to “modernization” and “development”.

Chapter Five concludes the book by revisiting “the uncanny” and re-characterizing “spectral modernity”. By referring to “the uncanny new village”, I mean to indicate that undesired by-products of urban hygiene have become a form of dirt in the countryside that uncannily reveals what has been repressed in the urban process of modernization, which at the same time constantly overwhelms all “rural” attempts to avoid being polluted by it. Meanwhile, the immanent sociality of villages can be considered uncanny as well; though village ties are spread through space and, contra what some anthropologists have described for post-Mao China, they are not much attenuated. Instead, immanent village sociality contrastively sheds light on the morality of practices in the urban society of “strangers”, characterized as they are by short-term, instrumental, and functionally differentiated relationships. And *wenhua*, despite becoming a slightly bogus official notion of “culture” that is considered to be lacking in villages, can actually be thought of as a rich cultural world that has always been lived in close juxtaposition with what must be denied. Official “*wenhua*”, though not explicitly defined, is closely intertwined with the State’s vision of what it means to be “modern”; in other words, it is defined in accordance with a social policy committed to modernization and stigmatizing of “the

backward". I hope my story of Shang village, by revealing the spectral reality of modernization in an uncanny new village, will put a question mark on the ubiquitous efforts toward urbanization in contemporary China.

In summary, then, this book, a study of village and small town practice in Henan, brings together questions concerning embodiment, space, and everyday life, so as to go beyond the economistic meta-narrative of "peasant" studies, while remaining committed to a broadly materialist anthropology. The analysis suggests that the rural-urban divide can be better comprehended by taking into consideration both abstract (and standardized) government policy and particular (diverse and concrete) local conditions and tactics.

With its focus on the everyday social practices that give insight into forms of embodiment and local cultural worlds, this book also seeks to surpass the rural-urban divide, both in China and in anthropology. At the very least, substantive ethnographic attention to the specificities of village life in the contemporary context of Henan, central China, can destabilize China's chronic rural-urban divide and attend to the unique and cosmopolitan – perhaps neither rural, nor urban – voices of at least one group of silenced "peasants".

1 The Local Intimacies of China's Rural-Urban Divide

In July 2007, a news report titled “Building new villages: Why are the 900 million peasants collectively mute?” started to circulate in Chinese media networks. According to the report, early in the year, five professors from the China Agricultural University had submitted a report to the central government about problems emerging in the process of “building new socialist villages”. Concerns were expressed that peasants were not able to participate in the necessary policymaking and implementation. As Professor Ye, one of the authors of the report, told the news reporter, “They are collectively mute; they lack the means to express their own opinions. However it should be them playing the leading role on the stage.”¹

This news story exemplifies the wide recognition accorded to a presumed urban-rural divide, and shows how national policy and discourse can be directed toward bridging this divide. The concerns expressed by Professor Ye and his collaborators are not just theirs. Their efforts to clarify and redress the “problem of the rural” (*sannong wenti*, see below) indicate that it would be a mistake to assume a simple antagonistic relationship – such as domination and subordination – between the State and peasants, urban and rural people. However, my discussion both takes thoughtful analysts like these sociologists as allies in setting up the problems of this book, and examines how and why such scholars continue to keep a pernicious urban-rural divide alive in China's urban-dominated discourses.

Instead of trying to answer Ye's question “*why* are the 900 million peasants collectively mute?” I am more interested in the occurrence of the question itself, and what it tells us about the discourse on peasants: *are* peasants “collectively mute”? From what perspective do researchers and news reporters draw on this rhetorical question more or less in unison, and why? This chapter will tackle these questions first with a critical reading of some contemporary Chinese writing so as to pave the road for my ethnographic inquiry into the local intimacies and the lived practices of China's rural-urban divide.

1 See http://www.china.com.cn/city/txt/2007-07/05/content_8484151.htm.

I The rural-urban divide as a mobile and relative dyad

Although experiences of being “rural” are quite diverse, the symbolic “rural (*nong*)” functions in China as a totalizing signifier counterposed to “the urban”. The term connotes much more and much less than the actuality of farming environments outside cities. “The rural” does not just literally signify a fixed area of the countryside, but also functions in a strong relational sense. A provincial city (such as Zhengzhou, the capital city of Henan Province with a population of 6.66 million) is popularly (even if not administratively) held to be “rural” in comparison to large metropolises. Shanghai people tend to think that anywhere outside their giant city is “rural”, including Beijing, the national capital. And many people who live in the suburbs of a county town like Zhaozhou (my field site), even if they themselves engage in some agricultural activities, would consider people from more remote villages to be more clearly “rural”. By the same token, people from the eastern coastal areas think of compatriots from Western China as clearly “rural”. All of these classifications tend to presume that rural people share a quality of being “backward”, occupying a lower position along the upward curve of modernization. The rural is a value-laden term with a shifting sense determined by the specific context of any conversation about the topic. Furthermore, these distinctions are not just symbolic and conceptual; they are lived in important ways. When I was in college in Beijing, for example, whenever I was asked about my hometown in the interior of China, after I had unwillingly “exposed” the location as being in a province that is economically “undeveloped”, I always hastened to add a description of the distinctively sophisticated life of my parents’ work unit due to its special affiliation to the central government. I felt I had to distance myself from the rural. All too often, people would note with surprise my “perfect” Mandarin, which they heard as being without accent, i.e. as having achieved the standard national accent.

To draw a line between urban and rural in contemporary China, therefore, is a contested and dialogical process (Bakhtin 1981[1934]), yet a taken-for-granted sense of hierarchy remains. A chronic rural-urban distinction is by no means unique to modern China, of course. Raymond Williams pointed out that “a contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times” (1973: 1), even though there might be differences between modern times and a more classical era when multiple ways of life, in both rural areas and cities, seem to have been appreciated. But “since the beginning of the capitalist agrarian mode of production, our powerful images of country and city have been ways of

responding to a whole social development" (Williams 1973: 297). In a sense, the rural-urban disparity now found in many developing countries is arguably an artifact of global modernization ideology, as "modernization" and "progress" have been modelled not only historically, but also geographically. (Harriss and Moore 1984; Shanin 1990; Knight and Song 1999; Gupta 1998²). For instance, Eugen Weber observes in his extensive historical study of the modernization of rural France that, in France in the late nineteenth century, the prevailing idea of urban life, especially the life of a Parisian, was the dominant contrastive force in its civilizing process, with the country being considered backward and undeveloped (Weber: 1976). This study suggests that "backward" rural ways of life have been central to the very logic of progress that has characterized modernism.

Thus, the language used about cities and the countryside encodes a set of value judgments consistent with the progressivist language of modernist social theory. This modernist language is also accepted in communist ideology. In the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, Marx and Engels argued that the "development" of the bourgeoisie had "rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life" (cited in Williams 1973: 303). Both in capitalist and socialist regimes, the industrial mode of production, with its technological developments, has dominated our way of seeing and living the world and its distinctions. This dominant epistemology, which locates the spatial difference between country and city on a unilinear time scale of history (Fabian 1983), is marked by notions of progress, rationalism, and the goals of objectivity and universality; it is closely attached to the scientific attitude of modernism (Foucault 1973; Fabian 1983; Escobar 1995).

An etymology of the Chinese word for "peasants", *nongmin*, reveals much of the hegemonic modern bias against the countryside. *Nongmin*, the word used to refer to people who farm and live in agricultural areas, is a modern two-word compound in Chinese. In the late nineteenth- to early twentieth century, the Japanese used Chinese characters to translate European terms, usually as compounds, and the resulting neologisms were then imported back into the Chinese language (Cohen 1993; Liu 1995; Hayford 1998).³ *Nongmin* was in use in China before the Japanese translation of the

2 Gupta's study stands out as a nuanced understanding of agriculture in the making of a modern nation state. Not confined within an economic interpretation, his research is able to connect globalization, postcoloniality, and "local" articulations through ethnographic methods. See *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*, 1998, Duke University Press.

3 Other important loanwords are, for example, *kexue* (science), *wenhua* (culture), *geming* (revolution), *jingji* (economy), etc. According to Lydia Liu's Appendix, *nong min* was originally

concept of “peasant”, but was used alongside terms for many other types of people, including intellectuals, business people, and working people. Also, especially in the context of village life, there were once many words to describe different sorts of rural people.⁴ The old, restricted usage of *nongmin*, however, was completely abandoned when “translingual” terminologies became dominant in the early twentieth century. A capacious and generalizing modern *nongmin* was, in other words, influenced by and modeled on the condescending European use of notion of “peasant”.⁵ A European urban-rural divide can already be found in the etymology of this modern term.⁶

Anthropologist Myron Cohen has usefully explored the historical development of the term and concept *nongmin*. According to him, the negative perception of “peasants” in European historical experience had a great impact in Chinese cities, especially in the major foreign-dominated “treaty ports” (1993: 156). Within an overdetermined socio-historical situation striving “to be modern”, *nongmin* became the generic term that “[put] the full weight of Western heritage to use in the new and sometimes

from *The Stories of Grains: The First Year of King Cheng* (谷梁传: 成公元年): There have been four kinds of people since ancient times, i.e. intellectual people, business people, agrarian people, and working people (“古者有四民。有士民, 有商民, 有农民, 有工民”), with a note by Fan Ning 范宁 that “agrarian people refers to the ones who sow, plant, till and harvest, or the ones who are engaged with agriculture” (“农民, 播种耕稼者”, 指务农的人). Hayford notes that in his research he found no English-language application of the word “peasant” to China before the 1920s (1998: 150).

4 According to Cohen, the definitive *Chinese-English Dictionary* of Herbert A. Giles, representative of late nineteenth-century Mandarin, translates as “labourers; agriculturalists” the terms *nongfu* 农夫, *nongding* 农丁, *nongjia* 农家, *nongren* 农人, *zhuanghu* 庄户, and *zhuangjiahun* 庄稼汉. And Cortenay H. Fenn’s Chinese-English *The Five Thousand Dictionary*, first published in 1926, “likewise has long served as a source of basic vocabulary,” in its fifth and last edition with major revisions in 1940, still has no entry for *nongmin* 农民. See Cohen 1993, pp. 167, note 10.

5 It is important to note that *nongmin* used to be conventionally ranked higher than *shangmin* (business people). It is also interesting that *nongmin* remains *nongmin* today, while *shangmin* and *gongmin* both became “*shangren*” and “*gongren*”, i.e. the terms shifted from min, “people” or population, to “man” or human.

6 The *Declinatio Rustica* of the thirteenth century defined “the six declensions of the word peasant” as “villain, rustic, devil, robber, brigand and looter; and in the plural – wretches, beggars, liars, rogues, trash and infidels” (Cipolla 1976: 71). The usages of other languages tell us much the same. In early Russian, the term peasant was *smerd*, from the verb *smerdet*, “to stink”. The Polish term “*cham*” indicated crudity and was mythically rooted in the different tribal origins from those of the nobles’ “nation”. In eighteenth-century English, a peasant meant a brute and an illiterate, while the verb “to peasant” was still used to mean to subjugate and to enslave. Ref. *The Oxford English Dictionary* vol. Vii, 1933, p. 594. Also see Shanin 1990.

harshly negative representation of China's rural population" (1993: 157). As he describes, once *nongmin* was ideologically connected with the parallel notion of *fengjian* (feudalism) and *mixin* (superstition), "there was invented not only the "old society" that had to be supplanted, but also the basic negative criteria designating a new status group, one held by definition to be incapable of creative and autonomous participation in China's reconstruction" (Cohen 1993: 154).

Nongmin, peasant, then, was not only a generalizing category for people in rural areas, more importantly, it was invented – borrowing the idea of symbolic power from Bourdieu – "[to be] imposed on a whole group, establish meaning [and create] the reality of the unity and the identity of the group" (Bourdieu 1991: 221). Despite being "a reality thus named," *nongmin* is also "the site of the struggle to *define* reality, rather than simply the 'reality' itself" (Liu 1995: 29, emphasis original).⁷ Furthermore, the reality represented by this generic group was "the past", which was in need of being overcome so as to arrive at (an unquestionably desirable) modernity.⁸ This way of perceiving rural populations not only temporalizes rural and urban spatial difference, but also, to a great degree, operates an epistemic violence over people who have been less privileged. This perception remains prevalent among today's urbanites and intelligentsia,⁹ a situation that I will discuss later.

At this point, however, it is important to bear in mind that one salient aspect of peasant realities is the "lived unevenness" that is still evident when one compares rural areas to the relative conformity experienced

7 Also see Mallon 1995.

8 In the 1940s, for example, intellectuals who had studied abroad initiated the famous Rural Reconstruction Movement (*xiangcun jianshe yundong* 乡村建设运动). Despite their well-meaning social work, these elites described the *nongmin* as "ignorant", "poor", "weak", and "selfish" (*yu* 愚, *qiong* 穷, *ruo* 弱, *si* 私) and the main goal of this movement was to bring modern education to the rural areas, to "enlighten" the peasants (Hayford 1990: 113). (Also, Yan Yangchu, a leader of the movement, was a Christian.) Fei Xiaotong responded to this elitist prejudice toward the rural. Speaking of "ignorant", for example, Fei argues "rural people are certainly not too stupid to learn characters. Instead, they have no need for characters to assist them, because a written language does not help them with the necessities of living in rural society" (1948 [1992], 59). Fei noted that spatial differences in living conditions tended to determine people's distinctive conceptions of life. The gentleman initiators of the Rural Reconstruction Movement, however, were entrenched in attitudes that attached value judgments to others' different life styles than their own.

9 There have been many well-meaning "reconstruction" movements oriented toward contemporary rural China, among which the recurrent theme of "educating the rural areas" is prominent. The websites I list below are only two examples among many. See <http://www.fon.org.cn/index.php?id=269>; <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper66/11076/1002921.html>.

by emerging bourgeois urban elites. Instead of being a consequence or by-product of an urbanizing modernization, *nongmin* (peasants) have been the starting point of Chinese modernity. But they have functioned as the contrastive “other side”, that necessary companion to progress that has nevertheless needed to be contained and concealed. Harry Harootunian’s comments on modernism in Japan are relevant:

It was the spectacle of lived unevenness in both the political economic and sociocultural domains that enabled the formation of a modernism capable not only of repressing all of the signs of this experience but of looking forward to the accomplishment of a progressive, modern society where all the remnants, residues of the archaic, even the ‘sense of history,’ have been swept away or effectively effaced (2000: xxii).

Akhil Gupta has made a parallel observation about contemporary India, where, along with the normative narratives of development, “agricultural surpluses, extracted by taxation and savings, form the basis on which industrial expansion takes place” (1998: 38). In a word, agriculture is central to industrialization, but agrarian people are kept on the hidden underside of “civilization”. “Lived unevenness” is not only structured by, but is also structuring of the process of modernization.

As Hayford observed, “The China story was the pageant of the Chinese nation; the peasant danced center stage but did not write the script” (1998: 168). This echoes Professor Ye’s comment on the collective muteness of the Chinese peasants, quoted in the opening of this chapter. Though with different orientations, what both Hayford and Ye take on is the relationship between rural people and the State. A historical review of this relationship will be sketched below.

II Seeing like a state: A sketch of the making of rural-urban divide

My discussion is mainly concerned with the time period after 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was established. Before 1949, as many scholars have noted, the State during the late imperial and Republican era was mainly a tax collector, not achieving much systematic intervention into social, economic, and cultural life in the countryside (Shue 1988; Huang 1990). It was the new revolutionary state that established the complete system of the modern nation state, with its socialist characteristics of collectivization

and a planned economy (Meisner 1998; Huang 1990). Over time, “the reach of the State” came to extend to every single rural household, even to the degree of making decisions for them on what crops to grow (Shue 1988).¹⁰

In the context of this state control, it is also known that the Maoist revolution symbolically invested *nongmin* with a higher status than they had enjoyed in the pre-revolutionary era, though workers (*gongren*) – a kind of urbanite – were still accorded the foremost leadership in the PRC’s state discourse.¹¹ As early as March of 1949, Mao declared in *The Second Plenum of the Seventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party* that “the centre of gravity of the Party’s work has been shifted from the village to the city” and “only when production in the cities is restored and developed, and when consumer-cities are transformed into producer-cities, may the people’s political power be consolidated” (1969: 365). Mao’s words were echoed in the urbanization guidelines for the First Five-Year Plan period, at the First National Urban Construction Conference of August 1954, which stated that priority was to be given to urban construction and that New China’s cities must serve socialist industrialization.¹²

In keeping with the program for industrial modernity, certain “urban bias” policies were put in place (Lipton 1977; Whyte 1995), among which the most fundamental was the *hukou* (household registration) system. An individual’s *hukou* registration, derived from the *hukou* classification of his or her mother at birth, cannot be easily changed, and population movements from rural to urban areas are thus legally restricted.¹³ Since

10 Philip Huang also makes a similar observation that, “the imperial state never arrogated to itself the power [like the socialist state did], even in theory, to control directly the exchange of such staples of peasant life as cloth and grain, to plan for and manage directly all sectors of the economy” (1990: 192).

11 As Raymond Williams points out, “if the forms of bourgeois development contained, with whatever contradiction, values higher than ‘rural idiocy’ or ‘barbarism’, then almost any program, in the name of the urban proletariat, could be justified and imposed” (cited in Shanin 1987 [1971]: 389).

12 A recent monograph by historian Jeremy Brown documents the making and living of China’s rural-urban divide from the 1950s to 1970s. A detailed record of ordinary citizens’ everyday experiences, in Tianjin City, this book provides an urban perspective to the intertwined and lived intimacy of China’s rural-urban divide. See Brown 2012.

13 The purpose of this system has been to restrict the flow of rural migrants into the cities. According to the “Explanatory Notes on the Regulations for Household Registration of the People’s Republic of China”, which was published in 1959, the importance of forbidding immigration to the cities is explained as follows:

Why do we have these regulations? Because in the past few years there has been a serious tendency for the rural population to move into the city. This has aggravated the present unstable conditions, resulting in difficulties with the urban construction plan, the stability of urban life,

then, the urban-rural divide has been further concretized, in law at least, with the *hukou* system remaining in effect, though there have long been rumours that it will be abolished. Also, the “urban bias” policy hinged on the famous “price-scissors” policy that subsidized urban industrialization at the cost of agricultural incomes.¹⁴

However, under Mao’s leadership the Party did try to rectify the unbalanced urban-rural relationship,¹⁵ and the ideological importance of learning from the peasants remains part of the current political morality, as many anthropologists have observed (Potter and Potter 1990; Kipnis 1997; Feuchtwang 2002). Chinese economist Wen Tiejun has also indicated that, although a binary structure of the rural and the urban existed during the Maoist era, “everybody contributed to the betterment of society unselfishly and heroically.” According to him, China during this period finally completed the industrial foundation that “is necessary for the maintenance and protection of the [whole] country’s independence” (Wen 2000: 9).¹⁶

To put it another way, in the Maoist context of development for the whole nation, living conditions for both urban and rural dwellers were at a low level. But urban workers, intellectuals, officials, and cadres, whose lives were mostly organized around state-run work units and residents’ committees, did enjoy more benefits and subsidies from the State, such as free housing and medical care, than their rural counterparts. In rural areas, medical care below the commune level was run by the production brigades

and social order. As a result, problems have occurred in city transportation, housing, market supply, employment, and educational opportunity. [...] (1959, p.212, cited in Potter and Potter 1990: 302).

The tone in this explanation is obviously urban-centered, and the focus of concern is “the stability of urban life”, while rural migrants are considered to be disturbing this secure urban life. As Potter and Potter have observed, “the possession of identification card of an urban resident [becomes] an important mark of status” (1990: 303).

14 The price-scissors policy was embarked upon at the inception of the first five-year plan in 1952; it was basically meant to hold food prices below what would be the market price so that urban wages could remain low and savings could be transferred from agriculture to industry. See Knight and Song 1999; Brown 2012.

15 The most well known examples are Mao’s two campaigns to reduce urban-rural difference: the Great Leap Forward begun in 1958 and the Cultural Revolution begun in 1966.

16 Wang Hui insists that Mao’s socialism was characterized by a revolutionary ideology with a strong dose of nationalism, which produced a critique of the capitalist form or stage of modernization (Wang 2000: 166).

themselves, without any financial support from the State. This was even true of the famed co-operative medical care program.¹⁷

On the other hand, as Whyte points out, with the “urban bias” policies, especially with the combination of household registration requirements and unequal rationing, long-standing networks of patronage and mutual assistance based upon kinship and native place were disrupted, and social integration between urban and rural areas weakened. Accordingly, a growing social and cultural gap emerged from the 1950s, with many rural areas developing different attitudes toward culture and customs, ranging from fertility concerns to arranged marriage, cremation, and sanitation. There are many memoirs written by intellectuals after the Cultural Revolution that recount the bitter or adventurous experiences of these urbanites in the Chinese countryside. At the same time, these accounts reveal how large the urban-rural divide had become. The slogan of the 1950s to the 1970s, “sending expertise *down* to the countryside”, shows the then common understanding of the rural as “low”, “backward”, and undesirable (Whyte 1995; Brown 2012).

Even given the historically specific institutionalization of an urban-rural distinction, however, the Maoist regime did try to reduce “the three great differences”, i.e. distinctions between mental and manual labor, between workers and peasants, and between town and countryside (Meisner 1999: 421).¹⁸ After all, as many scholars have noted, it was on the basis of peasant support that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) achieved power in the first place, and the Party was mainly led by men of peasant origin (Meisner 1999; Knight and Song 1999; Whyte 1995, etc.).

At this point, the three important features of peasant realities in the Maoist era can be classified as economic, social, and material. First, peasants sacrificed their economic interests more than urban-dwellers for the sake

17 Though villagers have benefited from the “barefoot doctor” movement, advocated since the 1960s, rural medical care is run at a low level without substantial support from the State. And villagers still have to go to the county hospitals for more complicated diseases. People sometimes told me of their poignant memories of the 1970s, when occasionally there would be some poor villager who was refused admission by the county hospital and died soon after, because neither their family, nor their production team could afford to pay the fees. Martin King Whyte discusses rural-urban relations during the period of 1949-1978 from five aspects: income gap, migration and kinship bonds, organizational system, rural-urban contacts, and the gap in culture and customs. He thinks the gap between city and countryside grew much larger than in the pre-1949 era, during the Maoist regime. Even though I do not agree with his radical conclusion that “underneath the egalitarian rhetoric,” the institutionalized urban-rural divide “had more in common with feudalism than socialism” (24), I have found his paper somewhat informative. See Whyte 1995.

18 Whyte thinks of this as rhetoric realized only on paper. *Ibid.*

of the State's rapid industrialization. Second, peasants lived (and many still live) a more collectivized life than urban individuals did. Third, compared to their recent past (instead of compared to their urban counterparts), many peasants still enjoyed unprecedented benefits from the new regime, such as improved education and health care (Han 2000; Gao 1999).

The end of the Cultural Revolution marked the end of a Maoist socialism that had been characterized as "perpetual revolution" and had incorporated a serious critique of capitalism (Wang Hui 2000: 168). More recently, diverging radically from Mao's approaches that sought to modernize China through industrialization and national autonomy, the socialist reforms that China is implementing have seen the radical opening of its economy to the global system. This vast change has had a great influence on all aspects of Chinese people's life, in contrast to their recent past. With regard to agriculture, the reform era saw major institutional change. Big collective farms were transformed into "a commercialized capitalist system based on individual peasant proprietorship" (Meisner 1999: 462); individual family farming returned (Hinton 1983; Huang 2002; Wen 2000; H. Yan 2003b, etc.). With decollectivization, the collective village treasuries of the past were quickly depleted, resulting in a decline of welfare services, including both the collective medical care system and the number and quality of local schools (see Hinton 1983; Gao 1999; Huang 1999; Meisner 1999).

At the same time, the rural-urban divide has been further institutionalized within a broad national agenda of urbanization and development. An important institutional factor is taxation. Especially in the reform era, urban development has been significantly financed through taxes on the countryside, but only a small fraction of tax income is spent in those rural areas. Accordingly, many resources have been unequally distributed. Most urban education and infrastructure construction projects are fully sponsored with significant subsidies by the government, while in rural areas they have to be largely financed by additional fees levied on rural households (Sun 2003; Knight and Song 1999). Yan Hairong has labelled this phenomenon the "spectralization of the rural" (H. Yan 2003b).¹⁹

19 Yan Hairong also provides the following facts:

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 RMB, a 240 percent increase. But investment in agriculture only increased from 5.33 billion to 7.04 billion RMB, 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, and remained below two percent throughout the 1990s. (Yan 2003b: 8)

On the other hand, the abolition of the commune system in the 1980s “revealed that nearly half the rural labor force of approximately 400 million was redundant” (Meisner 1999: 468). Since then, the rural population has doubled, expanding its excess of labor power even more. Since the Reform era began, the migration of workers holding agricultural *hukous* to urban areas and Special Economic Zones in search of work has produced a flood of residents living for long periods of time in areas where they have only temporary residence permits. According to state statistics in 2000, under one-third of the Chinese population is officially engaged in agricultural activities, and at current estimates, the number of migrant workers from rural areas, who work and live in the city but are not part of the urban population by law, has reached 166 million in 2013 (Chan 2014).²⁰ The term “floating population” (*liudong renkou*) thus emerged in the Reform Era as a generic term for an emergent major group within the Chinese population, including both migrant workers and their family.²¹ Those who migrate for work, or *dagong*, regardless of where they come from or go to, are essentially defined as rural people (Issabelle 2002; Lei 2003; Solinger 1999; Zhang 2001). This “floating [rural] population”, away from their registered home places, often cannot get any local governmental protection in their work places, and they do not qualify for most social services. They tend to be treated by the local urbanites as “*erdeng gongmin* (second-class citizens)”.²²

Migrant laborers have thus become a “new lumpenproletariat”, forming a stark contrast to the new urban bourgeois elite, who, incidentally, support the world’s most rapidly growing market in luxury goods (Meisner 1999: 468–536). Further, as Zhang Li points out in *Strangers in the City*, the large-scale movement of “agricultural” citizens into towns and cities continues, where they have come to be regarded as a “social problem” despite their enormous economic contributions (Zhang 2001: 23–46; also H. Yan 2003a). Like the stigmatizing term *blind flow* (*mangliu*), first used in the early 1950s to describe the peasants who moved to cities, the *floating population*, despite

20 Leslie T. Chang, a former Washington Post reporter, reported in 2008 that the total number of China’s migrant workers was about 130 million, “three times the number of people who immigrated to America from Europe while the United States industrialized.” See Chang 2008.

21 The current estimation of the size of “floating population” is 245 million according to the National Bureau of Statistics. See Chan 2014.

22 Of course, many elite workers also move. But they are not thought of as “floating”. Furthermore, there are many “white collar” employees of transnational companies in big cities who do not have a local *hukou* either; they have not been grouped as “floating population”. It is also noteworthy that few of them are from rural families due to the unequal education opportunities for rural and urban people, based upon the *hukou* system.

its wide range of applicability in so many parts of China in practice, is little more than a sub-category of the more dominant generic term *nongmin*.

In addition to the legally institutionalized urban-rural divide, there is now a market-oriented urban-rural discrepancy that refers to an increasing gap in standard of living and material resources between urban and rural areas (Zhang 2001; H. Yan 2003b; Lei 2003; Sun 2003). Scholars argue that, though there have been times in China when the countryside was no more impoverished than the city, since the 1990s rural poverty has become even more chronic.²³ The impact of what is now thought of as an increasing cultural and even bodily difference between town and country can run very deep; inadequacies in village life are readily seen by urbanites as characteristic of villagers themselves. Yan Hairong has interviewed young women migrant laborers in Beijing, who overwhelmingly felt that “everyday life at home in the countryside was inert (*meijin*) and ‘meaningless or boring’ (*meiyisi*)” (H. Yan 2003b: 10). This attitude echoes the words of Mei, a girl from Shang village who I visited in Wenzhou city. She told me one reason for her to endure the hardship of working in a shoe factory was because staying in her home village “was not fun (*bu haowan*).” But there is literally no space for young migrants to live a decent life in the cities, due to their being trapped in the *nongmin* category by the *hukou* system. Caught between an unavailable city life and the undesirable agricultural life back home, the new generations of Shang villagers strive to form new patterns of life, a process which, at the same time, has greatly influenced the everyday in Shang village, as I will show in Chapter Three.²⁴

Granted, some form of the urban-rural discrepancy is recognized as a global social phenomenon.²⁵ Moreover, the Chinese government has taken steps to bridge at least the economic gap with a commitment to policies like “industry should promote agriculture and cities should bring along the

23 Professor of Sociology, Sun Liping, based at Tsinghua University, explicitly discusses the “cleavage” in Chinese society since the 1990s, pointing out a perceptible discrepancy between the 1980s and 1990s, the latter being the decade when China saw the formation of “two societies co-existing within one country.” And the solution to this problem, Sun suggests, is to conduct a complete urbanization, especially “big-city-ization” (*da chengshi hua*). See Sun 2003.

24 Also see Chang 2008.

25 Universalization of urbanism is indeed an intriguing topic but has gone beyond my current discussion. For now, I can only add an inspirational comment made by Foucault, introducing his historical examination of modern societies, that “the confrontation between these two [rural and urban] types of society over the constitution of a State will become the basic motor of history” (2003: 234), and “urban society eventually triumphed [with] the fact that all the constituent elements of the State were born of it, were in its hands or had come into its hands” (235). See Foucault 2003 and Osborne and Rose 1998.

countryside (*yi gong cu nong, yi cheng dai xiang*).²⁶ But more at issue is the profound impact of the legal institutionalization of an urban-rural divide in China. Policy reforms notwithstanding, “rural” bodies continue to be deeply inscribed by negatively tinged national and transnational discourses on “the peasant”. These discourses systematically reduce diverse conditions into the essentialized characteristics of generalized objects, at the same time disguising polemical judgments as natural facts.²⁷ In particular, hegemonic elite discourses (those of urbanites, intellectuals, government officials, etc.) tend to produce a generic *nongmin* (peasant) at the level of image and language, contextualized in a condescending representation of life in the countryside. This way of reducing heterogeneous rural lives to a monotone level of “low development” is consistent with the arbitrary state regulatory regime that, in a sense, has no choice but to function on an abstract “national” level and thus, for any given rural situation, always has only a partial view. If one wanted to make an effective intervention in these arbitrary state regulations, which, as we know, can change and are always changing, then a necessary step would be to avoid “seeing like a state” (Scott 1998). But, in contemporary China, discourses on “peasants” still predominantly take a political-economic perspective, one so strong that a hegemonic perception has been formed of “Chinese peasants”. This hegemony is clearly represented by the “three-*nong* question” discourse,²⁸ to which I now turn.

III The discourse of “the three-*nong* question”

Reading through published books, news reports, web logs and forum discussions in China, one finds that most of the well-intentioned discourses that take rural people as their subject are imbued with a sense that “they” are a problem (*wenti*).²⁹ Economist Wen Tiejun first launched the *sannong wenti*

26 See Chinese Government’s Official Web Portal: http://english.gov.cn/2006-02/23/content_208437.htm.

27 A parallel situation can also be found in Stacy Leigh Pigg’s description of “the village” of Nepal. See Pigg 1992.

28 “Three-*nong*” question is now a frequent word used in government policies and documents as well.

29 In her discussion of how Nepal villages are taken as generic, Stacy Leigh Pigg argues that “it only makes sense to identify generic villages when the social scale of reference is the national one” (1992: 505). This is also very much the case for the contemporary Chinese *nongmin*. Rural people identify themselves as *nongmin* only when referring to urbanites. Moreover, the subject

(three *nong* problem three rurals problem) in his 2000 book, in which he referred to “the three dimensions” of “the rural issue.” He was speaking of, first, *nongcun* (rural areas, or villages), second, *nongye* (agricultural production), and third, *nongmin* (rural people). His analysis in particular made the three-*nong* problem a catchphrase that has been widely used in government policies and media treatments since.³⁰ In particular, among the three “*nongs*”, the problem of rural people (*nongmin*) has usually been seen as the most crucial issue. Much of this discussion has certainly expressed a certain concern for the wellbeing of rural people. However, attention to the *nongmin* tends to be focused in statements about national welfare, such as “for a long time peasants have been an important source of products, taxes and cheap labour,” and “the worsening of peasant existence would affect the whole society’s stability” (Guo 2002). When the “lived unevenness” of economic life in most rural areas is compared with the emerging bourgeois conformity of urban elites, the apparently uniformly problematic character of the countryside asks to be interrogated: why is the rural – and especially rural people (*nongmin*) – always a *problem*? And always, apparently, the same kind of problem?

Thus, attention to peasants has not yet strayed from the viewpoints and interests of those in power, the elites and urbanites who gain benefits from the peasants (Cf. Guo 2002). Furthermore, the predominant approach to the peasant question maintains a singularly economic perspective that, I would argue, still depicts peasants as if they were potatoes in a sack, as Marx once called them.³¹ Under the uniform rubric “peasant”, rural people tend to be represented universally through perspectives that conceptually tidy them up, imposing such characteristics as a special relationship to the land,

in hegemonic elite discourses has always been a generalized term *nongmin* without specific reference either to a province or a city, not to say township or village.

30 Wen Tiejun is a widely read economist who, at the time, was a researcher at the Rural Development Research Center of the State Council. Other social scientists published critical accounts in league with Wen’s analysis of the *sannong wenti*. On 8 February 2004, Xinhua News Agency published the *Yihao Wenjian* (Number One Document) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for the year 2004, which directly addressed rural development and the improvement of the income of peasants.

31 This is found in his famous piece “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”. Marx describes the French small peasants in this way: “The small peasants form a vast mass [...] the great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sackful of potatoes. [...] They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them the rain and the sunshine from above” (Marx 1972: 608).

production for auto-consumption, and “[values] centred on land reform and prices, taxes” (Kearney 1996: 61). Ignoring the actual heterogeneity of rural population, dominant discourses presume “the peasant body” as a thing-in-itself. As Lei Guang points out, “the idea of the generic village and villagers erased important regional differences in rural China and the increasing social differentiation within villages by amplifying the socioeconomic distance between rural dwellers and urban residents” (Lei 2003: 627).

But rural conditions have in recent years seen an increasing diversification, or at least increasing socioeconomic stratification. For example, there has been a widening regional disparity especially between the coastal areas and the interior, and there are also great disparities between different rural industries even within one area (Meisner 1999; Wen 2000; Huang 2002). However, the now even more complicated rural population is still referred to by the single name “*nongmin*” (peasant). And the term “floating population”, as Lei Guang argues, denies individuality to migrants and makes it possible for both urban-based officials and researchers “to generalize about their motives, their work conditions, and their lived experience in cities” (2003: 621).³² The logic is the same as with the term *nongmin* (peasant); those within the category of “floating population” do not escape stigmatization as “peasants”.

The vast rural population is taken as a whole, as if they were one body – the mass of the peasants. And this one body appears now to have always been lagging behind. If China is to modernize, according to dominant modernist discourses, it will have to transcend this grotesque peasant body, which is characterized by tropes like “backward”, “unenlightened”, “need-to-catch up”, “like sheep”, and worse. To adopt language from the social history of the body and class in England provided by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, the rural population in China is spoken of in ways that shows they are “symbolically central but practically peripheral” (1986: 20).

Even in some of the most prominent social policy contexts, and certainly in popular urban conversation, villagers tend to be thought of as having no culture, needing contact with urban life to be able to learn to consume wisely and work rationally, and unable to manage their natural and social environment well. Thus, a gap, almost an epistemological one, can be perceived between commonly encountered discourses and imaginations

32 Zhang Li has made a similar point that through official representations, migrants are portrayed as “a powerless, uneducated, and low quality (*suzhi di*)” group, to be “juxtaposed with its antithesis, permanent urban residents, who are held up as sophisticated, modern, and reliable” (2001: 31).

about the countryside and the heterogeneous lives that are going on “over there” on the ground. Reflecting on Professor Ye’s comment at the opening, one can see an ongoing tension or gulf between the “mute” peasants and the various *renao* (hot and noisy) scenes produced by policymakers and implementers of the “new villages”. This divide can be better comprehended by taking into consideration the interaction of abstract and standardized government policy as it articulates (or not) with discordant local conditions, which are particular, concrete, and diverse.

On the other hand, we must also entertain the possibility that rural life is not necessarily organized around state policy, nor is the government policy of “new socialist villages” necessarily at the center of rural politics. It is with these considerations in mind, and having been steeped in the politics of knowledge surrounding research on rural society in China, that I here attempt to make visible the heterogeneity of life in the countryside. Only with much richer forms of social science representation, sensitive to “local conditions”, can we begin to penetrate China’s national and local policies and practices in a way that moves through and beyond the problematic rural-urban divide. And this is exactly what anthropological research can contribute, practically.

IV Situating the research, methodology and theoretical basis

Recent ethnographies of rural China display a notable emphasis on social and cultural forms of village life (Chau 2006; Lora-Wainwright 2013; Oxfeld 2010; Steinmüller 2013; Yan 1996, 2003). In particular, Yan Yunxiang’s 1996 ethnography *The Flow of Gifts* has been widely accepted as “a systematic study” of gift exchange and network cultivation in a north China village that “involves gift giving in daily life” (1996: 20). Yan does not ignore social changes since 1949, referring, for example, to “recycling tradition”³³ in lieu of “revitalization of tradition.” However, he enmeshes Xiajia villagers’ gift-exchange practices within the state social-political transformation process, by maintaining the commonly-held dichotomy between the State and peasants. Thus, he tends to reduce the teeming cultural life of a specific village to an aspect of the field of regulatory activity of the State, inseparable from and subject to state power. Moreover, the social networks described by

33 As Yan has acknowledged, this phrase is from Helen Siu’s “recycling rituals”, which she used to describe the “cultural fragments recycled” in the practices of popular rituals in post-Mao era in Nanxi Village in south China. See Siu 1989.

Yan are mainly among villagers, with little reference to on-going urban-rural exchanges and networks.

Yan Yunxiang's more recent ethnographic research, *Private Life under Socialism*, carries his description further with "a private life approach" and an effort to depict "the increasing importance of emotionality and sentimentality in family life" (Y. Yan 2003: 223). Nevertheless, he upholds a psychological approach to "the [same] local moral world," which he also took for granted in his previous book. Viewing private life as "a moral process [...] in a local moral world" (2003: 10), he insists on the rise of an "uncivil individual" that has been developed in rural villages at the cost of family relations and kinship networks. This observation has been implicitly critiqued by Adam Chau's 2006 ethnographic study of a local temple in Northern rural China, which shows a highly active social and political network woven through the cultural resources of the temple. More explicitly, Lora-Wainwright, Oxfeld, and Steinmüller's most recent ethnographies, based in Sichuan, Guangdong, and Hubei provinces, respectively, by directly adopting topics of moral discourses and everyday ethics, argue for the enduring quality of lived social relationships in rural villages. Thus, rural families strive to make sense of cancer and provide care for sufferers (Lora-Wainwright 2013); everyday discursive practices of *liangxin*/conscience, *guanxi*/relationships, *bao*/reciprocity, and *mianzi*/face tie together moral obligations and collective memories (Oxfeld 2010); and local negotiation between state demands and vernacular practices in the binding of "communities of complicity" creatively face rapid social changes (Steinmüller 2013).

My study joins this group of works in critiquing a rather prominent anthropological discourse of "moral crisis" and "uncivil individuals" in rural China (Liu 2000; Yan 2003). Meanwhile, it seeks a better understanding of "rural" realities in today's mobile Chinese society, with a focus on the dimension of practice. This book brings together questions concerning embodiment, space, and everyday life, so as to challenge the "intellectual contribution [to] the formation of the images of 'peasants' that inform [state] policy" (Kearney 1996: 62). Instead of treating peasants as "passive reactors to and enactors of some 'system' without their own history" (Ortner 1984: 142-143), my research starts from heterogeneity and demands attention for the interplay of power relationships at different levels.

I take anthropology of embodiment as my research methodology. Embodiment, or "embodied, historical life," connotes "the contingency of bodies and the materiality of discourse" (Farquhar 2002: 5, 7). Embodiment is a term that evokes concrete experiences of living the world both materially and ideologically. This project has traced people's ways of working, talking,

and moving around; it has considered embodied relationships of people to their lived space (house, land, market, public spaces); and it has analysed people's practices relative to each other, including those of young migrant workers relating to their parents and villagers to local officials. It began, then, at the level of the everyday body.

This research on collective embodiment proposes to go beyond Cartesian mind/body dichotomies while remaining a materialist approach to *the mindful body*, as Scheper-Hughes and Lock once called it (1987). The approach I adopt takes embodiment as “not just structural but temporal, not just an objective presence but a moment in a process that is thoroughly social and historical” (Farquhar 2007: 6). In a sense, the active subjectivities of rural corporeality – i.e. particular forms of eating, dressing, dwelling, talking, working, remembering the past, and planning for the future – have been interrogated anew through my study of embodiment in the orbit of one Henan village. Taking this approach, I understand bodies not as discrete biological organisms but as “formations of everyday life (temporal, dispersed, shifting)” (Farquhar 2002: 8). Thus, the practice of everyday life is a key domain of my investigation.

In a way, the anthropology of everyday life is a return to “culture as a whole way of life” (Tylor 1871). This concept of Culture, proposed in 1871 and much cited since then, enabled anthropologists and other scholars to bridge diverse fields of anthropology, including all the mental and material elements of human collective life. This notion of culture can resist reductionist and judgmental descriptions of rural life. To attend to material life allows our vision of rural realities to expand beyond rational-economistic accounts of peasants. It also allows us to historicize the local beyond strictly societal questions such as the constitution and dissolution of “moral worlds” (Yan 1996).

Moreover, everyday life, as Ben Highmore articulates, “is not simply the name that is given to a reality readily available for scrutiny; it is also the name for aspects of life that lie hidden. To invoke an ordinary culture from below is *to make the invisible visible*, and as such has clear social and political resonances” (2002: 1-2, emphasis mine). Indeed, one cannot take for granted that everyday life simply lies out there, presenting itself for anthropologists to give a “thick description” of it in the interest of increasing the archive of cultural diversity. Any study of cultural heterogeneity must take seriously the power inequalities of the real world. “Cultures” do not enjoy equal levels of privilege, autonomy, or security (Asad 1986; Marcus 1998).

Williams defines hegemony in part as a situation in which “*one sense of reality* [is] diffused throughout society,” thus making alternative senses of

reality implausible at best (Williams 1961, cited in Taussig 1987: 288). And few concepts are more hegemonic in contemporary China than the idea of the backward *nongmin*. Thus, people in Shang Village do not deny that they are *nongmin*, either in terms of their formal classification (in the household registration system, for example) or in their experiences of agricultural labor, relative deprivation (as with poor quality housing and inadequate schooling). Still, everyday life in villages is lived with many contradictions, and the continuing achievement of a hegemonic understanding of the rural is an ongoing process of negotiation. As such, living as a *nongmin* generates an infinite play of differences (Laclau 1990). As Taussig has perceived, despite the apparent oneness of hegemonic forms, “a sense of reality [is] deliberately vague, implicit, and open-ended – sense as in sense impression, sense as in common-sensical implicit social knowledge” (1987: 288). Implicit social knowledge, according to him, is “an essentially inarticulable and imageric nondiscursive knowing of social relationality” (*Ibid.*: 367). This insight complicates the task of understanding everyday reality, which “is always going to exceed [my] ability to register it” (Highmore 2002: 3).

To make the invisible visible in an anthropological project, therefore, requires that everyday life be taken as the ongoing *lived* space of social relationships, cultural politics, and historical formations of (various) interests and desires that are neither determined, nor captured by the systems to which living, experiencing bodies seem to be subordinated.³⁴ For example, local officials’ re-interpretation of the policy for “building new socialist villages”, and villagers’ resistance to a “developmental” Culture Plaza project (see Chapter Four), as well as other modes of expression of local cultures that are taken up in this book, have more to do with a localized and specific life situation than with the more abstract demands of vertically-organized bureaucratic systems.

To approach the lived space of practices in the everyday, the notion of *habitus* developed by Bourdieu is especially helpful. The *habitus*, according to Bourdieu, “is an infinite capacity for generating products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production” (1990b: 55). That is to say, following Farquhar, *habitus* is “a structure of dispositions” that “must be seen as open to history and many unexpected variations” (Farquhar 2002: 9). More importantly, it leads to a materialist approach through which “the dispositions of people and thing, times and spaces, can be read [with careful attention by participation in people’s everyday life] [...] [since] *habitus* is

34 Cf. De Certeau 1984; Taussig 1987; Farquhar 2002.

made up of the mundane conditions of daily life and the practices of (broadly construed) bodies" (Farquhar 2002: 9). An ethnographic engagement with *habitus*, then, does not imply a return to an ahistorical or quasi-biological individuality. The concept of *habitus* presumes the social and historical contingency of embodied life. Therefore, the collective memory of Maoist-era social experience, existing at the level of a seldom-articulated *habitus* among the villagers, for example, will be one important domain for me to engage with. With *habitus* taken seriously, it can be argued that the body is by no means "untouched by human history" – therefore "naturally" universal – it is, on the contrary, "a site of cultural-historical intersections and formation of everyday practice" (Farquhar 2002: 8, 25).

Body has never existed in a singular form and bodies "as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes [whose] boundaries materialize in social interaction; 'objects' like bodies do not pre-exist as such" (Haraway 1991: 208). To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, one is not born a peasant (or urbanite, for that matter), one becomes one. However, practical boundaries between bodies, individually and in groups, are central to institutionalized discourses. Rural people become peasants in many ways. This book aims to show more clearly how the stigma of peasant-hood works to generate forms of life and structures of feeling for Shang villagers themselves. In this sense, it will resist the social science approaches that unknowingly collude with a continuing production of stigmatized peasant identities in China and elsewhere.

Lastly, weaving together the local qualities of lived life that concern hygiene, sociality, and culture, this ethnography takes the Freudian concept of the *uncanny* as its theoretical basis to come to terms with the local intimacy of China's rural-urban divide. In his famous 1919 essay, Freud sets out the explanation of uncanny, or more precisely, *unheimlich* [unhomely] in German, arguing that "what is *heimlich* comes to be *unheimlich*" (1919: 4), where *heimlich* connotes both "familiar" and "belonging to the home" (1919: 1). Freud argues that what is distinctive about the uncanny is that it is a sense of unfamiliarity that *includes* a sense of familiarity or, a strange familiarity. The concept of uncanniness is useful here exactly because of its "disquieting strangeness" (Ellison 2001: 39) that disrupts the established boundaries, in this context, between the urban and the rural. In other words, the prevalent urban discourses of "lack" regarding the rural, while attempting to disconnect themselves from the stigmatized countryside, implicitly reveal a constitutive other that is contained and concealed in the urban setting. As philosopher David Krell points out in relation to Freud's uncanny "concealment does not wholly conceal; concealment ultimately

gives way to unconcealment; concealment *shows itself* as such" (Krell 1997: 101, emphasis original). By "showing itself as such," this double meaning of the uncanny, as Collins and Jervis have insightfully argued, suggests "a fundamental indecision, and obscurity or uncertainty, at the heart of our ontology, our sense of time, place, and history, both personal and cultural" (2008: 2).³⁵ And this uncertainty, "[far] from being 'abnormal' [seems] to testify to something fundamentally alienated and dislocated that is pervasive within the modern experience" (Collins and Jervis 2008: 2). Indeed, I argue that the prevalent descriptions of "modernization indoors, disorder outdoors" applied to most of China's "new villages" today; the outcry about "moral crisis" across rural China; and the cacophony of charges of *wenhua*-as-lack even in official rural policies – all these *uncannily* testify to what is disconcerting and disquieting in the rapid urbanization/modernization process experienced by all Chinese, not just rural villagers. In other words, the uncanny may be a fundamental, constitutive aspect of our experience of being modern, for both rural and urban people.

In *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*, Katherine Withy provides an insightful discussion: "The un- [in uncanny] both negates (repression) and releases (revelation) [and further], this revelation is disruptive" (2015: 218). The uncanny qualities of everyday life in Shang village, once teased apart, can, I hope, disturb deeply-held, taken-for-granted assumptions generated by China's chronic, institutionalized rural-urban divide, that hegemonic structure in which the "otherness" of rural hygiene, sociality, and culture become alienated and go unrecognized. The uncanny new village can challenge the limits of experience and understanding of what it is to be urban and be modern.

35 As several scholars have indicated, although Heidegger never unambiguously adopts the concept of "uncanny" in his philosophy, the sense of "uncanny" is marked, almost explicitly, in his discussion of *Dasein* (human existence), for whom being-not-at-home is a fundamental structure of existence. For example, Katherine Withy, quoting Derrida, claims that Heidegger has "frequent, decisive, and organizing recourse" "to the value of *Unheimlichkeit* [Uncanny] in Being and Time and elsewhere" (Withy 2015: 11). Other relevant works include Krell 1997, and Collins and Jervis 2008.

An Overview of Shang Village

Administration

Officially, the administrative system of Chinese government is vertically organized, with five levels: the State governs provinces, provinces are divided into prefectures, and prefectures include multiple counties; below the county level are townships and villages. Shang Village belongs to Zhaoying Township of Zhaozhou County, Maoming Prefecture, Henan province. The county is in the southwest of the province, adjacent to Hubei province. The distance from Zhaozhou to Maoming, the prefectural city, is 58 kilometers, and it is 270 kilometers to Zhengzhou, the province's capital city. According to the census, the population of Zhaozhou was 1,761.7 million by the end of 2014,³⁶ the majority of which was the “rural population” (those holding a farmer or *nongye* household registration³⁷), at around 1.4 million. The county occupies 2,294.4 square kilometers and the population density in 2011 was 682 per square kilometer. The total arable land is 2.44 million *mu* and the per capita is 1.56 *mu*.³⁸

Shang Village belongs to Zhaoying Township, which – including its villages and its town – has a population of 83,000, and a total of 160,000 *mu* of arable land. According to the Zhaoying township administrative office, in 2006 there were 36 officials working in the township government and 46 working in four affiliated centers (a family planning services station, the office of village-township planning, a cultural services station, and an agricultural services station), and two institutes (the Institute of Labor and Civil Service Security and the Institute of National Land and Resources). All of these officials are paid a salary by the county Bureau of Finance.

Shang Village has seven village committee “cadres” and ten team leader “cadres”; all, including Zhishu the village leader and Party Secretary, are villagers who do not earn a government salary, though they do earn a small stipend.³⁹ The size of a village is roughly the same as that of a production

36 See the official website of Henan Statistical Office: <http://www.ha.stats.gov.cn/hntj/tjfw/tjgb/szgxgb/webinfo/2015/03/1427259890510732.htm>,

37 See *hukou* system in Chapter One.

38 *Mu* is the basic land measure unit throughout China and it is also the unit for measuring productivity. 1 *mu* equals 0.167 acre, or 1 hectare equals about 15 *mu*.

39 People who are called village cadres (*cun ganbu*) may or may not be members of the Communist Party. Villagers are inclined to call all officials “cadres”, a commonly used term in the Maoist era. *Ganbu* was often juxtaposed with “the masses”, as in the phrase “the relationship between the cadres and the masses” (*ganqun guanxi*), which is still in use today. This category

Figure 1 The location of Zhaozhou County in China

brigade in the Maoist-period commune system, while the township is roughly the same size as the commune was. Historically, brigades and communes were formed based upon some pre-existing units. And the team, now a subdivision of the village, also remains similar in size to the production team, which was administered under the brigade in collectivist times.⁴⁰ While a team is not officially recognized as an administrative unit, villagers still consider it their basic organization, not only because team members usually live in the same neighborhood, or the same sector of a village, but also because most important tasks, such as collecting fees, distributing government subsidies, or redistributing land, are still conducted at the team level. According to Zhishu, the village Party branch secretary, speaking in 2005, Shang village is made up of 13 teams, with 728 households and a total population of 3,240, among which there are 1,300 villagers who have gone

still includes (production) team leaders and accountants, village committee members, and village accountants. Their stipends vary from 100 to 200 RMB per month, depending on their status.

40 At the beginning of the People's Commune era from 1958 to 1961, the Communes claimed most political power, controlling practices such as accounting and planning. It was after the severe famine of 1959 to 1961 that the State retreated on commune organization, shifting accounting down to the level of the production brigade, and decision-making on work to the production team. See Lu 2006, p.101-102; Pye 1984, p.248.

out to work as migrant laborers. The village occupies an area of 2.5 square kilometers with 5,700 *mu* of arable land.

Social Divisions

In local terms, Shang Village is understood to be composed of nine “natural villages”,⁴¹ which originally were formed around different families, distinguished by their surnames and residential areas. Families surnamed Shang compose the two biggest natural villages;⁴² the Wang, Li, and Zhao families compose the other seven natural villages. In terms of the officially recognized 13 teams, seven teams include Shang families⁴³ and are called by numerical names, e.g. Team Seven; while the remaining six teams take the same name as their natural villages, i.e., South Li Manor, West Li Manor, Front Wang Temple, Back Wang Temple, Little Wang Manor, and Zhao Manor. Villagers with the same family name also recognize each other by their lineages, which are called “gates” (*men*). For example, there are five lineages surnamed Shang and three lineages of Li families. People from the same lineage may belong to different teams because they do not necessarily live together; population-wise, the size of lineages varies greatly within one family name.

Despite a common tendency toward village exogamy, people also marry between different-surnamed families within greater Shang Village. For example, my host, the village doctor Li Shu, whose family belongs to South Li Manor, has a daughter-in-law from a Shang family also of Shang village. Women usually retain their surnames after marriage. I will go into detail about social relations in Shang Village in Chapter Two.

Village Economy

Shang villagers have been planting winter wheat for many years. Other crops include corn, peanuts, sesame, soy beans, and cotton. Tobacco-planting was popular before the end of the twentieth century but this has died out since

41 The concept of “natural village” refers to a group of people living together in one location, who usually share the same surname and interact with each other in ways unlike how they interact with people from other villages. I consider this understanding of the natural village to be a common phenomenon in northern rural China. See Gao 1999; Kipnis 1997; Yan 1995.

42 They are called the Eastern Side (*dongtou*) and the Western Side (*xitou*), continuing a custom from the past when two landlords were in charge of the Shang families before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

43 In fact, Team Six includes another natural village, Zhao and Li Manor due to its small size. And the Shangs at Team Six live closer to Zhao and Li Manor.

the year 2000, when a low purchase price made the laborious cultivation of tobacco not worthwhile. There are still many brick or mud sheds, built by villagers to process tobacco leaves, scattered in the village, but these have now fallen into disuse.

Shang villagers do not usually plant vegetables for market or even for household use. Instead, they buy everyday necessities in the adjacent Tonglu Village. Tonglu is historically a market village, and is especially known for its free market (*ji*) held every other day. It is mainly food and clothes that are sold there. Tonglu has long been a vibrant center of economic and social activity, but Shang Village does not have an economic/social center.⁴⁴ In the village proper there are, however, four village stores, three clinics, two brick-making factories, and one flour mill. There are many other smaller-scale village businesses, such as a homemade tofu shop and a food-oil mill. Toward the end of 2006, the Director of Women's Affairs (*funü zhuren*) and her husband built a restaurant on the southwest corner of the intersection of two main village roads, next to the newly built Culture Plaza and across the street from the village elementary school. It was the first restaurant in the history of Shang Village.

Geography

A bird's-eye view of Shang village would show it sprawling along east-west and north-south axes, at the crossing of two country roads, and the natural villages (or residential areas) are mostly clumped together in or near the center of village-controlled cropland, at a spot where level land is easily accessible for construction. Settlements throughout China's plains and river basins are often of this type (Knapp 1992, esp. Chapter 2: "China's Rural Settlement Patterns", 13-34). According to Jin and Li, among the advantages of this pattern of settlement are that people live close to each other, houses and roads are compactly laid out, and the spaces between buildings can serve community uses. In addition, compact villages save land, for example, facilitating the provision of public utilities such as sewage and communications systems (Knapp 1992: 14).

44 This kind of market village serves as a local economic/social center that covers a broader area involving many adjacent villages. This is a common phenomenon in rural China. Historically, as Mark Elvin has noted, over the last millennium the proliferation of local markets in China, was "a consequence as well as a cause of an increasingly specialized and commercialized rural economy" (1973: 169, cited in Knapp 1992: 2). Knapp has also described a similar phenomenon that, "many such local markets have been small in scale and periodic in operation, convening only for a few hours at a fixed site according to a regular schedule. Yet, even though given shape by rural trading, standard market towns and their dependent areas came in time to have important social dimensions, becoming culture-bearing units in Chinese society" (Knapp 1992: 2).

Along the east-west main village road, toward the east end, the First Team of Shang village is situated adjacent to Tonglu village. At the time of my arrival in Shang village, the road had just been paved and, according to villagers, there was suddenly a lot more traffic.⁴⁵ The divide between Shang and Tonglu is clear, however. They are connected by a small bridge, built in the 1970s, over one of the main north-south irrigation ditches of Zhaoying Township. Furthermore, the main east-west market street of Tonglu is paved with cement, and is broader, even boasting recently installed street lamps.

Besides vegetables and meat, villagers can get everything they need in the stores at Tonglu market: daily necessities such as toilet paper, salt, and sugar; all kinds of packaged food, from powdered milk to instant noodles (these are usually bought as gifts for visiting relatives and friends, and offered when attending banquets); sweets and snacks, alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, clothes, shoes, and farm tools. There are also many small service businesses: a tea house, a home-made liquor shop, a food oil mill, a vehicle overhaul service, wedding and funereal services, and restaurants. Many doctors have moved their clinics from their own villages to the Tonglu market street to attract business; these include an orthopaedist, paediatricians, a dentist, and general Chinese and Western medicine storefront clinics, as well as wholesale drug stores.⁴⁶ Other services include a photo shop, several barber shops, a public shower room, two cell phone stores, and a couple of fertilizer and seed stores. During my fieldwork, two recycling stations and a big retailer of bicycles and motorcycles from the county seat opened new businesses at Tonglu market.

Adjacent to Tonglu Village, to the southeast, is Zhaoying, which hosts the township offices. Although there are a number of businesses on the main road of Zhaoying Township, it does not have a periodic street market for food. Nevertheless, because of the presence of township offices, everyone knows that the food tastes better at the restaurants on Zhaoying Street, and they do a better business. There are also quite a few shops and clinics in Zhaoying. The township hospital is across the street from the township Office and the Family Planning Workstation.

45 People felt less safe with the increasing traffic, especially fearing the young motorcyclists who seldom moderated their speed entering the village. In fact, during my stay in Shang village an old woman was killed by a speeding motorcycle when she was walking along the road.

46 There are over ten clinics on Tonglu Street, including the official clinic for Tonglu village, fulfilling the same role as doctor Li Shu's clinic does for Shang village. Today, however, there are no more "collective", or "officially run (*guanban*)" clinics in this area. Even the so-called officially assigned (*zhiding*) clinics are owned and run by the village doctors. There is even one "officially assigned" doctor responsible for a neighboring village's clinic who has moved that village's clinic to the Tonglu market street.

2 Dirt, Hygiene, Habitus

I immediately noticed a certain state of hygiene on arrival in Zhaozhou, the county seat. Trash heaps, complete with odours, were everywhere, occasionally right next to the streetside tables of storefront restaurants. Polluted streams flow through the town – this was obvious from the greenish color of the putrid water. On the streets of the county seat everyone spits indiscriminately. Zhaozhou's new urban character did not include a scrubbed or disciplined urban façade. Despite what seemed to me the relatively chaotic nature of their own semi-urban environment, the people I met in the county seat were amazed by my plan to live in a rural village for nine months; though most of them had grown up in farming villages, they claimed that they could “no longer stand” the dirt in such places. My friend Luo asked, “Do you know they keep cows in the living areas at night? You'll literally sleep with a cow!” Rong, another friend, said, “When it rains, your boots get so heavy walking on the country roads from all the mud stuck on the bottom, you can't move a single step!” I was puzzled by these remarks. When I walked through the back alleys of the county seat where these friends lived, the trash heaps on the street and the dilapidated bungalows looked quite “country” to my eyes, and quite muddy enough. How much worse could it be in a “real” village?

The observations in this chapter stem from my own adjustments to unfamiliar living conditions both in Shang village and its county seat, and from my experiences coming to terms with situated perceptions of hygiene. My own adjustment process productively directed my attention to down-to-earth bodily concerns and everyday details involved in eating, dressing, talking, and manual labor. Here, I take Bourdieu's notion of habitus as a site where bodily dispositions and everyday practices interplay. In this chapter, I aim to depict the contours of everyday life in Shang village: people's lived relationships with space (house, land, market, public space), and their practical understandings of hygiene. This approach emphasizes a materialist understanding that suggests that cultural beliefs and values are embodied in things like construction materials, spatial layout, furnishings, and building forms, and expressed in concrete experiences of “making do” in daily life (De Certeau 1984).

Meanwhile, my discussion adopts a liberal understanding of hygiene that is not restricted to personal practices to ensure cleanliness. Instead, hygiene refers simultaneously to health, environment, and “cleanliness”. It is noteworthy that in conversations with villagers, “environment” and

“hygiene” were often used interchangeably, such as “[in our village] *weisheng* (hygiene) was better before,” meaning that there had once been a cleaner environment in and around the village. Thus, this chapter also employs a broadened understanding of *environment* that is not confined to the natural surroundings of human settlements, but also includes the built environment such as houses, roads, and pieces of land where people interact. As I will show in this chapter, Shang villagers’ understanding of a hygiene crisis is intimately connected with the obvious degradation of their living environment, a perceived dirtiness that is not really of their own making. Ironically, there are environmental costs to improved domestic hygiene; these have come to pose a new and serious problem in the everyday life of villages.

Many historians have pointed out that the term “hygiene”, with its intimate connection to classical dietetics, directly relates the environment and aspects of lifestyle to health (Mikkeli 1999; Wear 1993).¹ Furthermore, *weisheng*, the Chinese translation of hygiene, literally meaning “guarding life”, connotes much concern with the living environment in the maintenance of health and wholesome living.² It often evokes the interplay of health and cleanliness, and it combines public responsibility for common areas and private concerns with personal habits.³

In what follows, I will first introduce the space and arrangement of an ordinary village house, including common cleaning practices for different spaces, and cleaning implements such as water containers, brooms, and wiping cloths. Then, I will discuss the everyday practice of hygiene, especially the labor investment involved in keeping personally clean. The third section discusses *weisheng* in terms of local hygienic principles, and shows how embodiment responds to spatial/architectural divisions that are expressed in hygienic practices. In the fourth section, I will compare and contrast the

1 According to Mikkeli, “Galen divided medicine into hygiene and therapeutics, i.e. into the art of maintaining health and preventing disease, and into the art of treating disease” and the conception of hygiene had “only minor changes in this Galenist framework until the nineteenth century” (1999: 8-9).

2 *Weisheng* is also used to translate “health”. While at times “health” is also translated as *jiankang*, referring to bodily health; *weisheng* is often chosen to translate “health” in a broader sense. It is noteworthy that the state office in charge of the medical profession, hospitals, and public health is called the Ministry of Weisheng. Its branches at the municipal and county level are called Bureaus of Weisheng. Other examples include the Chinese translation of “World Health Organization” and the US “National Institutes of Health”. In both cases, “health” is rendered into *weisheng*: Shijie Weisheng Zuzhi, Guoli Weisheng Yanjiuyuan.

3 The best example is the Committee of Patriotic Hygiene Campaign, a branch under the Ministry of Weisheng [Ministry of Health] that is in charge of environmental sanitation.

new-style multi-floor houses with the old-style courtyard houses, so as to provide a general picture of the ongoing landscape transformation in Shang village. In comparison to Shang village's recent past, the new problem of trash is accompanied by a transformation in the landscape; this will be addressed in the fifth section. The last section takes the issue further into a discussion of uncanny modernization, situating Shang village against the general background of urgent environmental degradation in rural China at large. I argue that the "dirtiness" of the countryside is directly (and literally) contributed to by the dirt cast off by modernization and urbanization, which uncannily "resists any attempts to disconnect from it" (Scanlan 2005: 36). To put it directly, if villagers are considered "dirty", it must be admitted that urbanites are dirty too.

I House, home, and family

In this section, I turn to a description of domestic space, specifically, the house of my hostess, Ayi. In order to understand everyday hygiene one has to first understand the disposition and uses of space. Everyday hygiene, as an aspect of habitus, is closely related to the structuring of space and material life. More specifically, habitus articulates lived relationships to spatial dispositions and to everyday concerns such as eating, dressing, and using domestic space. As theorists of cultural geography have argued, space is not merely a passive locus or "container" of human activities and social relations; rather, it is deeply implicated in all social processes (see Bourdieu 1990b; Harvey 1989; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994; Soja 1989; Watts 1992). At a microscopic level, as I shall show in the following pages, every detail of the setup of Ayi's courtyard house predicts some locally specific practices of everyday hygiene. In addition, an observable spatialization conditions and is conditioned by processes of classification, especially principles of purification, such as the nexus of values that links the high with the clean and the low with the dirty.

The first time I saw Ayi was in the courtyard belonging to the village Party Secretary, Zhishu. She had been fetched to Zhishu's house so he could ask her to host me. When we walked in, she was standing by the hog shed with Saozi, Zhishu's wife, commenting on the piglets. With their pants rolled up, Ayi and Saozi were both sockless, and wearing the same kind of plastic slippers. I was impressed – didn't their feet feel cold on this chilly drizzly day? I was already wearing my winter boots. It was late October 2005.

To my disappointment, Ayi initially declined the request to host me, insisting, "My house is awfully dirty." Zhishu urged her to take me over to

have a look and let me decide for myself. Off we went. Ayi's house is only about 100 yards from Zhishu's, but it is inside the village⁴ instead of by the main road. It was a rainy day. By the time we reached her house my boots were covered with mud and had become heavy, just as my friends in the county seat had predicted. Ayi found a spade behind the gate for us to rub our shoes against, to scrape off the mud. I stomped as well, like everyone else did before entering and walking on the cement path to the house door, over the packed earth of the courtyard.

Ayi's house looked as perfectly "traditional" as I had hoped: a lovely courtyard with a three-room main house and a two-room side house, a dog, a cat, about 20 chickens and ten ducks, but no cows and no pigs. Ayi showed me the spare room in the main house, which looked as if it would work for me. I noted that there was enough empty space in the room to set up the plastic closet I had purchased in the county seat. Zhishu persuaded Ayi to let me stay for the first month, and then we would both decide whether I should move to someone else's house. My life in Shang Village had begun.

There was little furniture in Ayi's house, as was the case in many other villagers' homes, especially the older houses, which have fewer rooms. The old houses are nearly identical throughout the village:⁵ there is usually a rectangular three-room main house facing south and a one- or two-room side house perpendicular to it, facing west or east. In the main house, the middle room, locally called *tangwu* (the hall room), is the most functional and important room in the house. It serves as both a living and dining room. The other two rooms are usually used as bedrooms. In Ayi's house, I had the west room and Ayi and her daughter slept in the east room of the main building. The size of the three rooms is usually the same. A two-door (two doors side by side) gate opens directly from the courtyard into the

4 Being "inside" the village means being away from the main village roads with less traffic, making it more quiet. This way of talking can be found in most northern villages in the great plains areas, which usually spread out along intersecting main roads. Accordingly, houses along the village roads are referred to as "roadside 路边" ones, in contrast to the "inside 里边" ones. While in the past people preferred to live "inside" the village, the situation now has been reversed because of an increasing wish to take advantage of the paved main village roads for more convenient transportation and to avoid the mud of the old pathways "inside".

5 This is not only true of Shang village, it seems most rural houses in Northern China share a similar style, especially in the collectivist era. See Knapp 1992. Yan Yunxiang described similar housing in his ethnography of a northeastern village, including the words for the west and east rooms, though people there call the middle room "outer room 外屋" instead of "hall room 堂屋". See Yan 2003, Chapter 5: Domestic Space and the Quest for Privacy. Andrew Kipnis, on the other hand, notes that the main room in a Shandong village is called the "north room 北房". See Kipnis 1997, Chapter 2: Guest/Host Etiquette and Banquets.

Figure 2 Ayi's side house and main house

hall room of the main house. The entrances to the east and west rooms are inside, facing each other, and situated immediately to the left and right of the main gate. In old-style houses there is no door on these two inside entrances; rather, a cloth curtain usually hangs across them. The curtain can be left down or rolled up, depending on the amount of privacy wanted in the bedroom. Inside doors might be pointless in any case, because the east and west walls that divide the house into three parts do not reach the roof, only rising to three-quarters of the room's height. At night I would always hear Ayi and her daughter talking after we retired to our own rooms.

Despite partial walls and use of curtains rather than doors, people in Shang village are beginning to become more accustomed to a fully enclosed private space (cf. Yan 2003).⁶ Most new houses have inside doors, more rooms and compartments than older homes, and full-height walls. Moreover, during my drop-in visits to several old-style houses of families with two-generation couples, I noticed that many old couples have moved to the detached two-room side house (*pianfang*), which was originally designed for kitchen and storage use. In other words, they have switched the storage function to their own formal bedroom, so as to give more privacy to the young couple who now stay in the three-room house on their own at night. I will discuss these arrangements in greater detail in the next chapter.

In the hall room, the centre of the main (north) wall, facing the entrance, is usually decorated with posters (many feature Mao or his calligraphy). At times, framed family pictures and/or certificates of honor are hung around the edges. Against the wall and beneath the posters there is usually a combination altar table and two cupboards, occupying the entire north wall of the hall room (see Figure 3). In Ayi's hall room, two small statues, the Goddess of Mercy (*Guanyin*) and the God of Wealth (*Caishen*), occupy the center of the long narrow table.⁷

In front of the altar table, a full-sized square table fits right into the space between the cupboards. It is usually used only on special occasions such as banquets, for a wedding or funeral, a new-birth celebration, and other gatherings of guests, such those that take place at Spring Festival or the lunar Chinese New Year season. There is another, much smaller square dining table for everyday use, which fits underneath the big table but is

6 In his ethnography of Xiajia village in Northeast China, Yan Yunxiang describes how family members increasingly prefer their "newly-found" sense of privacy. See Yan 2003.

7 The altar tables I observed in Shang village appeared to have little to do with ancestors. This may signify a radical change since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when the nation-state system exerted some effort to destroy the village lineage system while reducing it into nuclear families. See Knapp 1992; Link *et al.* 1989; and Yan 2003.

Figure 3 Ayi's hall room

usually pulled halfway out when not in use. Three levels of flat space are formed here: altar table, formal table, and the everyday table. On the two side walls that divide the east and west rooms, there are often such things as a calendar, more family pictures, award certificates, and some other poster-type decorations that are less serious than the ones on the main wall, such as scenic prints, or pictures of movie stars. On Ayi's west wall, a black-and-white photography of her late husband hangs in a black frame. Ayi's husband died over two years ago, leaving her with three daughters and one son, the youngest.⁸

8 Obviously, Ayi's family has breached the strict family planning policy in order to get a son. He was born in 1985 and, together with his sister Lihua who was born in 1981, he was considered a "black boy 黑娃", a locally common phrase to describe those born illegally without *hukou* 户口 (a household registration account). Accordingly, a black boy/girl does not count as a family member in land distribution, which takes place whenever the family size changes so as to ensure that everyone can grow enough to eat. However, unlike many other households who had to raise their "black" kids on a smaller portion of land, Ayi's husband bought his youngest children an official *hukou* later on, thanks to the connections he had established during his work as one of the village committee members. Nevertheless, he was dismissed from his position because he had broken the regulation by having a son. I talked once with Ayi about the family planning policy and she said, "What can we do when we get old and have no more strength for working in

There is no couch in Ayi's hall room, but other relatively wealthier households do have one, and/or a pair of armchairs, usually put against the west and/or east walls. In Ayi's hall room there is a long bamboo reclining chair against the west wall, of a kind that can also be found in most hall rooms in Shang village. In addition to the bamboo chair, four to six small chairs (sometimes one or two would be found in the kitchen), low enough to be used with the small dining table, were scattered in the hall room. Almost every household in Shang village has a few small chairs, of the same style and of the same dark-red color as the dining tables. People sit on the small chairs most of the time; they are easy to carry around and are used to sit at the courtyard gate, outside the village store, and on the crossroads; these are popular gathering places in the village.

Most households own a color television, located either in the hall room (set on one end of the long narrow altar table) or in one of the bedrooms. Ayi's TV is in the east room where she and her daughter Lihua sleep. The east room is the one with the most furniture in the house. Entering the room, on the left-hand side against the wall there are two wooden chests stacked on top of each other, with the TV sitting on the top chest. Immediately in front of the doorway, the single bed that Ayi sleeps in takes most of the space beneath the window against the south wall. The dominant piece of furniture in this room, however, is the full-size bed that Lihua sleeps on; despite the fact that it has been pushed against the two walls in the northeast corner of the house there is still not much space between the two beds. There is a sewing machine in the west room, but it was not really in use. Clothes are cheap in the local markets. Despite the presence of sewing machines in almost every household, few make their own clothes in Shang village any more. I used Ayi's sewing machine in the west room as my desk.

Lihua is the only person holding a "non-agricultural" (*fei nongye*) *hukou* (household registration) in her family; all others in this family are registered as "agricultural" (*nongmin*), including the son who is now a college student in the province's capital city.⁹ Having received training at a local professional

the fields? Our life is dependent on the land. You urbanites don't have to worry about it because you will have a retirement pension, but what about us? We have to rely on our sons, they are our retirement pension!" For a general discussion, see Davis and Harell 1993, esp. Introduction: The Impact of Post-Mao Reforms on Family Life.

9 College students also hold a temporary "collective household registration 集体户口" that belongs to their school. In theory, once the students leave college, their *hukou* will automatically revert to their places of origin 原籍, unless they find a state-sponsored job that allows them to transfer their *hukou* to the job location. In the case of Ayi's son, Xiaojun, though he does not live at home, he is being assigned a quota of land.

school, Lihua teaches at Zhaoying Township Kindergarten, a government-sponsored work unit. This entitles her to a non-agricultural or urban *hukou*. Ayi's two other daughters work in cities as migrant workers, one in Fujian province and one in Beijing. With only Ayi and Lihua remaining at home, Ayi takes care of the family's 5.2 mu¹⁰ of land on her own; Lihua says she does not like to work on the land, because she "put in more than enough [hard time doing so]" when she was little.¹¹ Plus, her teaching in the kindergarten keeps her fairly busy for five days of the week.

Lihua watches television every night, Ayi usually falls asleep soon after beginning to watch with her daughter. They watch TV in bed, to stay warm.¹² Ayi says she prefers to sleep on the single bed by the window so she can stay alert to possible thievery. She is concerned about her ducks and chickens. "Nowadays in rural villages *zhian tai cha* (public order has been lost)," she complained. The TV would be moved back to the hall room when Ayi's other children came home for the lunar New Year, Lihua told me. (By then, the west room that I resided in would be used by the family and I would have moved to Lishu's house.)

The floor of the old houses is usually paved with bricks instead of the cement that is commonly used in the new houses. In old houses, after many years of use, there are always layers of dirt on top of the bricks, rendering the individual bricks almost invisible, especially during the rainy season when the floor becomes damp. To clean the floor Ayi usually uses a small spade to scrape at the dirt and then sweep it away.

Sometimes, one or two chickens would wander in and leave feces on the floor. Then, Ayi would get some ashes from the bottom of the stove to sprinkle on top of the feces, and scoop them away using both the spade and a broom. Outside the main house there is a veranda where we hung our laundry in rainy weather. Bicycles are stored outside the west-room window at one end of this veranda. When I arrived, at the other end, underneath the east-side windows in the corner, there was a pile of peanut stems harvested

10 The portion of land distribution in Ayi's team, Team Six (*liuzu*), is 1.3 mu per person. Because Lihua is no longer registered as a "farmer", she cannot have land. By adding up the land of the other four, including Xiaojun the son, this family is entitled to 5.2-mu of land. In general, the size of the land distributed per person varies between teams, even if it remains the same within a team, because the fluctuation of population differs in each team. For example, people in Team Four get 2.2 mu each.

11 See Chapter Three on the impact of the younger generation's unwillingness to do agricultural labor.

12 At times, I would watch TV together with Lihua, sitting on the edge of her bed, though she always invited me to share the covers with her.

Figure 4 Ayi cleaning the hall room

from the field, waiting to be worked on: there were still peanuts needing to be picked off the stems. Whenever Ayi had time, she would move a small chair to the pile and start to pick peanuts. She piled them there on the veranda to keep them out of the rain. Another much bigger pile was in the yard, covered by two or three pieces of plastic sheeting, to protect them both from the rain and from being eaten by the chickens; meanwhile, the small pile on the veranda always got the chickens' attention.

The two-room side house is on the west side of the yard, at a right angle to the main house, facing east. The northern room is the kitchen and the other one is used for storage. The main item in the storage room is a huge iron tank of wheat seeds. Other items include: self-harvested cotton from past years (Ayi no longer plants cotton); another single-bed board, a couple of disused iron stoves; a sack of wheat flour;¹³ and many plastic sacks saved for future use, for example for holding wheat grains in the summer, the harvest season. Many of these sacks had been used for fertilizer, but they had been

13 The mill at Shang village saves villagers much trouble in storing wheat and flour. Every household "pre-stores" their wheat at the mill in the harvest season. Whenever they run out of flour, they simply go to the mill with their record book to get another sack of their own flour.

washed and cleaned. Vegetables bought from the neighboring market town are also stored here. There is a space in the middle of the storage room where Lihua parks her motorcycle at night. Motorcycles have become increasingly desirable among villagers, for youngsters and the middle-aged alike; they are also a common item of dowry in most weddings.¹⁴

The kitchen is the center of daily activities. The arrangement of Ayi's kitchen, again, is almost identical to that of other villagers', including the ones who live in the new-style houses. Usually, a box-shaped stove made of kiln-fired bricks dominates the kitchen space. The size of the stove is about 1.5m long, 0.2m wide, and 1m high, with two ovens, one bigger than the other. Accordingly, there are always a caldron and a smaller wok sitting on the openings on top of the two ovens. The top of the stove is covered with white porcelain tiles, which allows for easy cleaning. Although most households also own a coal stove, people prefer this built-in stove that can use dried stalks, leaves, or wood as fuel. These fuels are all over the countryside, free of charge, while the honeycomb-shaped coal briquettes used by the newer stoves cost money.

Both Ayi and Lihua also told me that the dishes cooked from the big box-shaped stove taste better because the small coal stove cannot produce as hot a fire as the big stove. However, the traditional box-shaped stove is meant to serve an old-time big family with many more people than today's smaller families. The biggest co-resident family I met in Shang village had six members.¹⁵ Of course, during the lunar New Year, when family reunions always happen, the large old stove will work best to cater big banquets.

The big stove almost requires that two people collaborate: one takes care of the fire while the other is cooking. It would keep the cook very busy if she also had to attend the fire. I learned how to keep the fire going so that I could help out when Lihua came home late. But at times, when Ayi was busy with wheat-planting, Lihua would cook dinner on the coal stove, which is easier, and it seems cleaner as it emits less smoke. In front of the box-shaped stove, to the right of the kitchen door, sits a big pile of

14 In the past, at least before the 1980s when the villagers could not afford to brick houses, few had a separate storage room, but rather a one-room kitchen built with mud, the same material used for the main house. A number of housewives also told me they had a kitchen built in the hall room when they separated from their parents-in-law's kitchen.

15 Two major factors contribute to the shrinking family size: one is the almost 30-year policy of family planning, and the other is the tide of rural to urban migration. Most families in Shang village have one to three family members working as migrant laborers in the cities, mostly along the eastern coastal areas such as Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Fujian provinces and in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Zhengzhou. For more detailed discussions, see Chapter Three.

Figure 5 Ayi's kitchen

dried stalks of soy bean, sesame, and peanuts, as well as dried tree leaves and used paper. Except for when the fire is being started, the smoke goes out through the chimney that is built on the outside of the house. Smoke from the chimney at mealtimes is an easy way for villagers to tell whether a house owner is at home.

Usually, a kettle of water sits on the coal stove, another typical scene in Shang village.¹⁶ Ayi's coal stove stands by the kitchen door on the left side. There is a constant supply of boiled water for both drinking and washing. It is normally kept in at least one thermos, a must-have for every household. Along the left-side wall, beside the coal stove is a kneading machine that makes noodles and dumpling skins at the turn of a crank. Underneath the kneading machine is a long, narrow wooden board to hold the machine's products. When it is not in use, Ayi always covers the machine and the

16 It is a rather recent custom to boil water in a kettle on the coal stove, because in collectivist times coal briquettes were rare and expensive. Villagers did not have money to run the coal stoves. Today, if someone forgets to tend the coal stove and lets the fire go out, water is boiled in the caldron on the big stove because the oven cannot accommodate either a kettle or a small pot. People use the same caldron every day for stir-frying or steaming bread. The boiled water in the village tasted strange to me.

Figure 6 The pit latrine in Li Shu's old house

wooden board with a piece of plastic. In the corner of the left-side wall a big wood chopping board stands on two brick posts. Cooking oil, salt, seasonings, and a basket of chopsticks are aligned on the chopping board against the wall. Beside the chopping board a tall water vat stands on the floor. Two rubber buckets near the vat are used to carry water from the well in the yard to the vat. Beside the vat is a wooden cupboard, the only piece of furniture in the kitchen, which stores all the bowls, dishes, spoons, and some canned foods, such as milk powder. Close to the stove, between the wall and the cupboard, there is another rubber bucket for swill. On the walls there are nails for hanging kitchen utensils, bread steamers, etc. The walls have turned dark from years of smoky cooking, and the cement floor looks black.

The side rooms have a flat roof that can be used to spread out corncobs, wheat, sesame stalks, and many other things to dry. Unlike many other households that have also built an animal shed or pen on the other side of the yard, Ayi's courtyard has only these two houses, since she does not raise any cows, pigs, goats, or sheep. Across from the kitchen on the east side of the yard, toward the back and next to the main house, is the latrine, a simple space between the wall of the yard and the main house. The latrine

has no roof, but there is a screening wall in front of the latrine for privacy. Most latrines in Shang village are pit latrines, i.e. a rectangular trench in the ground, with a pit underneath; the trench is straddled and squatted over for use. The pit usually reaches outside the back of the yard, and apart from the open trench is covered with slates. Periodically, Ayi cleans the pit out. The manure is mixed with soil and piled outside behind the house, till there is enough to be spread onto the fields as fertilizer. The form of toilets varies greatly among households in Shang village. Some are simply dirt-floored sheds with a pit, some are part of the pigsty or henhouse, and some well-to-do families have installed indoor plumbing and flushing toilets, of the squatting style. Ayi's pit latrine built with cement belongs to the middle range; the village doctor, Li Shu, even uses an old bicycle basket as a trash can for used toilet paper in his old-style house (see Figure 6).

The parallel space on the left side of the courtyard, between the main house, the yard wall, and the kitchen is the henhouse, which is also hidden from guests and visitors. On the south side between the yard wall and the storage room is the pen for the ducks, which go out in the morning and come back in the evening, usually on their own. Ayi's yard entrance opens at the southwest corner, instead of in the middle of the south wall. This way of avoiding direct exposure to the street of the main house is exceptional in Shang village, though it does accord with *fengshui* principles. Many of the other courtyards in the village do have their main gate in the middle of the south wall, in line with the entrance to the main house. Most houses in Shang village have their own well in the courtyard. The well, with its hand-operated pump, is usually close to the south courtyard wall and next to the gate. Ayi had put a used millstone on the ground in front of her well to keep the water container from getting muddy on the bottom when being filled. The courtyard is mainly packed dirt, except for a cement pathway going from the yard gate to the main house (see Figure 9). There are several trees in the yard. The biggest one is an elm, standing to the south of the screen wall, which hides the latrine; the others are smaller, Yulan trees. Lihua has an aloe plant in a garden pot; she uses the aloe juice for skin care, a habit she learnt from her sister in Beijing, who works there in a kindergarten. The most conspicuous thing in the yard is the big pile of peanut stalks. After the winter wheat is planted, Ayi's main task is peanut-culling. Once the peanuts are removed from the dry, woody plants, piled up in the courtyard, the stalks are available for fuel.

Outside and south of Ayi's courtyard is a rather big space full of weeds (see Figure 8). To the east is a north-south dirt path leading to the east-west main village road that goes to the neighboring market village, Tonglu. On

the other side of the north-south path there are several other households. Behind the courtyard is another dirt path, running parallel to the main road, with more households on the other side of that path (see Figure 15). Living right next to the western courtyard wall are Ayi's next-door neighbors, Shaoli and her father, brother, and niece. Shaoli's father said the space in front of Ayi's and his courtyards used to be a collective drying ground for harvested grain; back then it did not have many weeds at all. After decollectivization, and now that most young people are out working as migrant laborers, the older villagers who remain are unable to take care of the drying ground, and weeds have gradually filled up the space.

II Daily hygiene

Ayi was always concerned that her house would seem dirty ("*meji*" in Shang dialect) to me.¹⁷ The usual phrase she employed while I was staying with her was, "our rural villages are not the same as your cities" – distinguishing herself from me as an urbanite – followed by an explanation like the one quoted below, which she gave me on the morning after I moved in, at breakfast:

It is *meji* (dirty) everywhere in rural villages. [We] have to work every day in the fields. After all, aren't the fields full of dirt? Plus [look at] all these peanuts piled up in my yard, it's always a dirty job to pick peanuts from the stems [due to all the mud dried on them]. In the past two days I have changed my pants three times because of working in the fields. Especially after spreading fertilizer, it stinks.

Ayi's words not only demonstrate that dirt is a very real and unavoidable circumstance in agricultural labor; they also make it clear that people have practical understandings about degrees of cleanliness, which would normally go unstated. Ways of maintaining hygiene vary widely in close relationship to the imperatives of necessary daily activities. Different kinds of work – spreading fertilizer; handling dried leaves, stalks, and wood, or

17 As in many other villages, the number of new-style houses is increasing in Shang village. Before 2000, most new-style houses were one story, when this form of development started to appeal to villagers. Now most new houses have two or even three stories and are built along the road on formerly arable land, signifying a diverging interest from the past when people preferred to live away from the main roads in order to maximize safety and tranquillity and keep their fields free for crops.

Figure 7 The well and the drainage from inside to outside Ayi's yard

sometimes coal for cooking fuel; washing dishes with buckets of water from the well; culling peanuts in the courtyard; and maintaining a chicken pen – all present different hygienic challenges. The fact that Ayi changed her pants three times in two days – and considering that these dirty clothes would need to be washed (see below) – highlights how much labor investment is involved in maintaining hygiene in a rural household.

Ayi's comments, moreover, showed that she was acutely aware of how an urbanite probably imagined country life. On the one hand, she was very concerned about my possibly negative perceptions of her house; on the other, as I began to discover, she seemed to be even more concerned about dirt than I was, on her own local cultural terms. Indeed, the "dirtiness" she spoke of was not only conditioned by the nature of rural life, it also revealed some indelible difference in our attitudes toward and practices of "cleanliness".

In fact, when I was living in Ayi's house I was less concerned with dirtiness than inconvenience. If I had been Ayi, for example, would I have changed my pants three times in two days, knowing the difficulty of pumping water from the well one bucketful at a time to wash clothes? I did not even brush my teeth the first night I moved in. It was freezing cold outside; to pump the water I had to hold the well's iron handle tightly, which made me even colder, not to mention that I was not used to dealing with the awkward handle at that point. I gladly found some mouthwash in my luggage and omitted the rest of my daily dental care, although I did wash my face and feet with hot water from the thermos. Having a supply of boiled water in thermoses also requires significant, not very clean or convenient labor. The water must be pumped, boiled on the stove, and saved in several large thermoses. Ayi and I agreed, however, that this labor is worth it: to soak one's feet in a full basin of hot water is a real treat every night before bedtime; it guarantees a sound sleep without cold feet.¹⁸

On weekends, when Lihua did not have to go to work, her main task was to clean the house and do the laundry. I did my laundry together with Lihua, thinking that their semi-automatic washing machine might save some labor, but in the end it saved little time: the laundry was still tiresome. The practical advantage of this kind of washing machine is that it does not need to be hooked up to plumbing and therefore can be used where there is no running water, as in Ayi's house and Shang village's older housing

18 Actually this is a very "traditional Chinese" custom. According to Chinese medicine, to keep the feet warm is a very important aspect of *yangsheng*, or nurturing life, and even of healthcare in a broader sense. I still do it from time to time during the wintertime, even in warm places.

in general. To do the laundry, however, the washing machine had to be moved toward the front of the courtyard where the well was, and where the only drainage from the house was located (see Figure 7). The drainage channel starts with a groove lined with bricks. This groove connects to a conduit – actually, a re-purposed concrete telegraph pole – that is positioned to carry the used water out of the yard. On the other side of the compound wall there is another conduit that continues to take the water into the ditch that runs north-south through the village. The ditch is quite shallow, and thought it was once dug by villagers, it looks like a natural waterway leading into a central pond. Almost all the drainage water in the village goes into this pond, called *dakeng* (big pit), near the center of Shang village. Ayi said the big pit was already there when she married into Shang Village from a neighboring village more than twenty years before.

Ayi was relatively fortunate. Some households have neither a well in their yard, nor drainage for water. Ayi's neighbor, Shaoli's family, is one of them. Shaoli, three years younger than Lihua, worked at different shops as a shop assistant for several years in Zhengzhou, the capital city of Henan province. In 2005, her mother became very ill and she quit her job, coming home to help her father and brother to look after her mother. At that time, her mother expressed her wish for Shaoli to find a husband and get married. A fellow villager who was also Ayi's good friend introduced Shaoli to a man from the neighboring village, who had come home for the summer harvest. The young man liked Shaoli. Shaoli agreed to this marriage, partly to please her mother. Unfortunately, her mother died at the end of the summer of 2005. After the funeral, Shaoli stayed on, not going back to Zhengzhou, waiting for her marriage to be realized at the end of the year, when her fiancé would get vacation time to come back from Guangdong province where he worked as a welder. Like Lihua, Shaoli also disliked laboring in the fields. Her father, then almost seventy, had lost much of his strength to work on the land, and he had never been a very enthusiastic farmer but good at Plum-Blossom Boxing. Her brother never left to work anywhere else except for the county seat during the fallow seasons, but he too was a lackluster farmer.¹⁹ Since her sister-in-law had left the family a couple of

19 These are various factors that determine the poor financial situation of Shaoli's family. It has been a common phenomenon in many parts of rural China that the more migrant laborers a household has, the better it can do financially. But although Shaoli had been working in Zhengzhou for a while, in Shang village most households do not count on the daughter's income, rather they rely on that of their sons and daughters-in-law. People told me that they were satisfied with their daughters being relatively financially independent because it would reduce the family's burden in general. Moreover, Shaoli's family in particular had long been a

Figure 8 Shaoli doing laundry

years before, Shaoli had been doing the housework for her family, all the cooking and cleaning.

One sunny day I walked over to visit Shaoli while she was doing laundry in front of her courtyard house. Shaoli told me she had just gathered all the clothes that her father and brother had taken off, apparently rather a long time ago. "My brother knows to change, but he never washes his clothes; some of these things may have been sitting there even before I came back from Zhengzhou, because I can smell them," she complained. To do her family's laundry, Shaoli first had to fetch water from Ayi's yard, carry it back and forth in a plastic bucket for several trips, and pour the water into the washing machine tub and fill two big washbasins, one of which she had borrowed from Ayi. She let the machine run the washing cycle without draining the water afterwards, so that the same detergent could be used for subsequent loads. While the machine was agitating some of the wet clothes, Shaoli used the two big washbasins to rinse soap out of the washed clothes, moving each garment through first one and then the other basin of water. I tried to help her but she told me not to bother: "your shoes and pants will get all covered with mud," Shaoli kindly pointed out. It was already mid-November, and on that day Shaoli was sockless in a pair of pink plastic slippers, the same kind as the ones Ayi wore all the time, with her pants rolled up (see Figure 8). I came to understand that this way of dressing reduced the chances of getting dirt on clothing that would need to be washed. After the work was done they would only need to wash their feet, which would be much easier than doing more laundry.

Shaoli poured all the used water onto the ground in front of her, where it ran into the weedy space and formed several small puddles in the uneven ground of the former grain-drying plaza. Some flowed to the south and, soap and all, flowed into the ditch going to the big pit in the center of the village; some made a muddy spot, beside which Shaoli's two-year-old niece, Jiaojiao, was happily playing with the water. Shaoli had tied a clothes line

relatively poor family, even before the surge in migration in the 1990s in this area. Shaoli's father is a fairly sophisticated old man, but he never liked agricultural labor. Unfortunately, Shaoli's brother shared this trait with his father, so he does poorly on their land too. Shaoli once told me a childhood memory of a time when Lihua always wanted to exchange her white wheat flour bread for Shaoli's grey bread made with mixed wheat flour and sweet potato starch, not knowing that white bread was much more desirable for Shaoli; her father's paltry efforts in agriculture meant that the family was unable to afford wheat flour bread. This kind of grey bread was a staple for every household in the 1960s and 1970s, but villagers were glad to eliminate it from their diets later. I have encountered many Shang villagers who make openly derisive comments about those who do poorly in agricultural work, but they show respect to those deemed truly skillful as "hao bashi 好把式".

between two elm trees; among the laundry hanging between the trees, there were quite a few of Jiaojiao's sweaters that Shaoli had knitted for her, in bright colors like yellow, pink, and orange. Nearby, two cows were eating the still-green grass. In the bright noontime sunshine, the former collective grain drying ground did not seem to be wasted, at least at that moment.

To keep one's own body clean, it appears, is not an easy job, especially in resource-poor environments. It requires a concerted effort, as well as an elaborate set of learned techniques. In Shang village, especially with men going out to work as hired laborers, women engage in a lot of "dirty" farm work, and they only have time to attend to their house when they prepare for special occasions, such as hosting banquets or preparing for many returned family members at the lunar New Year. At other times, housekeeping tasks center on doing the laundry and cleaning the work surfaces in the house. Of course, a village house may not *look* as "clean" as an urban apartment, considering the concrete floor, the mud walls, and the muddy road outside. There is also constant movement between the fields – which are, as Ayi said, full of dirt – and the house compound. How could one possibly keep dirt away from living and working areas?

But, as villagers' efficient habits made clear to me, the simple presence of dirt by no means equals "being dirty". Sweeping the courtyard every morning, for example, is a traditional custom that is consistently maintained in Shang village. Every morning, I was awakened by the rhythmic sound of the big bamboo broom Ayi used, right after she made breakfast, to sweep the surface dirt and dead leaves from the yard. It seems she made a strong distinction between the removable surface dirt and the fundamentally earthy materials from which the house was made. The former kind of dirt needed to be kept under daily control; the latter was, after all, not possible to eliminate. This daily ritual is important to every household, with its underlying meanings: a difference is made between pointless, useless dirt that keeps coming into the household and lying around on things, and the basic – still dirty – infrastructural dirt, i.e. the dirt from which the house is made.

People act on their own sense of desired degrees of cleanliness, though it is not often articulated and varies widely. Some particular hygienic sensibility certainly affects the pattern of daily activities for everyone. Keeping clean is a daily concern, woven almost imperceptibly into the round of more directly productive tasks.

Consider the washstand, a negligible yet common piece of furniture found in every household of Shang village. This ubiquitous object speaks to Shang villagers' attention to cleanliness, and serves as a strong indicator of

Figure 9 Ayi's yard and the washstand outside kitchen

local senses of hygiene. The washstand is, for example, a sign of hospitality. When guests come for a meal, once they have been welcomed into the main room, the host will always prepare a basin of warm water, and offer soap and a towel to let them clean their hands, face, and neck while they are standing at the washstand. After they have washed, they are invited to the table to sit down and smoke, or chat, while they wait for the meal. Through this ubiquitous mundane appliance, cleaning up is provided as a gift from the host. Washstands used to be made of wood by local carpenters. Now that readymade low-cost iron washstands have saturated the local market, the wooden ones have gradually disappeared. Whatever its style, though, the washstand itself remains central in villagers' everyday life, and it is still always included on the standard list of bridal gifts.

There are two washstands in Ayi's house, one in the main room and the other in the courtyard outside the kitchen, against the house wall (some people also set one near the well). Underneath the kitchen windowsill, beside the washstand, two big thermoses are kept full, ready for adding boiled hot water to the basin to achieve a certain temperature for washing. Ayi washes her hands at that washstand every time she comes back in from outside, as she also does after going to the latrine. Instead of pouring the

used water onto the ground right beside the kitchen veranda, as Lihua and our neighbor Shaoli often did, Ayi usually sprinkled the wastewater over the yard to settle the dust.

This washstand is also the preferred spot for washing hair. Lihua washed her hair every other day. Shaoli came over often to wash her hair as well, bringing her own shampoo. (Given that her compound had no well or pump in it.) Ayi washed her hair now and then, whenever she felt it was needed. At the beginning of my stay in Ayi's house, after trying several different approaches to hair washing, I turned out to be the dirty one: it felt awkward to wash my hair standing outside with my coat on, yet it was too cold to take it off; plus, it was a pain to go back and forth to the well to get clean water with a head full of dripping wet hair. Others, however, did not seem to mind these discomforts. I constantly saw people washing their hair in courtyards, on doorsteps, or in the sitting room, normally without a coat despite the cold. I heard no complaints about inconvenience or discomfort.

Living with Ayi and Lihua, I had to adjust my habitual expectation of a daily, private shower, which was impossible in Shang village. Instead, I took a shower once a week in the public bathhouse in Zhaoying, in the company of many others. Located in the township near the village, the public showers are only open on weekends. Getting there from Shang Village required a 30-minute bike ride each way. A Saturday shower became the biggest weekly task for me; then there was laundry, which usually took the other half of the day. A weekly cleaning of both body and clothes did not seem to be quite so necessary for my acquaintances in Shang village, especially in the wintertime. Ayi said she would take a shower only after she had finished culling the peanuts, which would be about a month after I moved in. Shaoli thought taking showers in the winter was too cold and she preferred to take them every two weeks or less.²⁰ Plus, she said, you only need to shower often in the warm weather; since you do not sweat much in the winter, there is no great need to go to the bathhouse.

20 To bathe less in winter is consistent with the Chinese *yangsheng* (nurturing life) tradition, which understands that both during and after bathing, the pores become more open, so it is easier to catch "wind" that may do harm to the body. This is especially true for older people, whose pores are looser and who have diminished resistance to "devious wind" 虚邪贼风. In fact, classical Greek dietetics includes a similar understanding, and also includes cautions about bathing the body; see Mikkeli 1999. Several scholars have also pointed out that it was after the installation of indoor private water closets, which made the use of water private and more convenient, that bathing gradually gained significance, but mainly as a sign of privilege instead of personal hygiene (Vigarello 1988: 109-111; Wear 1993: 1301). Obviously, the moral and hygienic benefits of cleanliness are closely associated, both in China and elsewhere.

Looking back, my interest in these situated perceptions of hygiene stemmed from my own experiences – the unfamiliarity, inconvenience, and adjustments of living in a village – under conditions in Shang village to which I was quite unaccustomed. People live a practical understanding of hygiene as part of a local habitus. And habitus, while inarticulate, is a powerful determinant of a sense of comfort and of propriety. The washstand, to be found in every household in Shang village, is a silent yet powerful indication of villagers' attention to cleanliness and concern with *weisheng* (i.e. both hygiene and health), in both a general collective sense and also a personal and, of course, embodied sense. One wonders how I, a so-called urbanite who washed her hair less often than many in the village, was perceived by others, when judged by their different but still rigorous hygienic standards. How could I pass judgment on those senior villagers who, precisely in the interest of protecting their health, took showers only once or twice during the wintertime?

III *Weisheng*

Like many other neologisms in the modern Chinese language, *weisheng* is a Japanese *kanji* translation of the English word “hygiene”, i.e. *eisei*. The term was borrowed back from Japanese usages by Chinese intellectuals engaged in early twentieth-century language reform.²¹ While at times “health” is translated as *jiankang*, referring to bodily health, *weisheng* is often chosen to translate “health” in a broader sense. Literally meaning “guarding (*wei*) life (*sheng*)”, this term encourages a liberal understanding of hygiene, not restricted to personal practices, but referring more widely to collective health, order, and cleanliness. *Weisheng* in the Chinese usage implies concern not only for the personal body, but also for the living environment in the maintenance of social and individual health, and healthy living in general.

Ruth Rogaski has undertaken a richly documented historical study of the modern Chinese concept of *weisheng*.²² She demonstrates that, by the first decades of the twentieth century, when the discourse of *weisheng* had

21 See Lydia Liu's extensive lists in *Translingual Practice* 1995, which classifies over 1,800 loan-words and neologisms introduced into modern Chinese before 1950. For *weisheng* in particular, see Appendix B: Sino-Japanese-European Loanwords in Modern Chinese, page 290. According to Liu, this appendix consists of *kanji* terms coined by the Japanese using Chinese characters to translate European words, especially English words.

22 See Ruth Rogaski 2004. I will elaborate more on her account of “hygienic modernity” in a later part of this chapter.

become inextricably entwined with the violence of imperialism in general, and many Chinese had adopted the very “western” concept of hygiene in particular, the term “[brought] together public and private meanings of health into a powerful model of modernity” (2004: 2). This modernity, which Rogaski calls “hygienic modernity”, was at first foreign (and imperial), and then later became urban (and elite).

In one way or another, all modern nation states have adopted hygienic regimes in their administration of life in general and public health in particular, as is denoted by the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics (Foucault 2003; Rose 1998). Hygienic regimes work to both implement government health policies, and facilitate the internalization of state goals by citizens through public health education. Since the establishment of the Ministry of Health (*Weisheng*) on 1 November 1949, the Communist government has effectively implemented a series of techniques of biopolitical governmentality. Among these, the Patriotic Hygiene Campaign of 1952, undertaken in the name of national defence and the pursuit of modernity, is a salient historical example (See Rogaski 2004: 285-299). Since then, hygienic regimes demanded from above have included, at least in theory, personal cleanliness, environmental sanitation, compulsory vaccinations, eradication of insects, and the control of germs. Although hygiene today often evokes the interplay of “health” and “cleanliness”, “public” and “private”, little has changed from its colonial origins. As Rogaski points out, hygienic modernity carries a strong value component.

Hygiene is, thus, not only a target for governmental intervention and a site for promoting self-discipline, but also a social field in which villagers are subjected to mutual evaluations and surveillance. As I shall show in the pages that follow, in a modern rural consciousness, norms around hygiene and the repression of trash and dirt are internalized by villagers.

Although keeping all dirt away is impractical, villagers commonly share a commitment to keeping clean. This not only stems from a desire for everyday comfort, it is also related to the kind of social evaluation that houses and courtyards are subjected to in the village community. Mang Shen, who lives in a new, one-storey house by the roadside, for example, told me that she swept the floor every day, from her backyard all the way through the front room to the part of the road in front of her house. She said,

I live by the road, you know. If I don't sweep the road, other people would see me as like someone who is really meji [dirty]. Don't you think so? You see my gate is so close to the road, if I don't sweep it, it doesn't look good [*bu sao bu haokan*].

Indeed, in their answers to my question, “do you pay attention to your house’s cleanliness,” everybody answered positively, “of course I do, this is the place where I live, how could I not pay attention?” And, “at least I sweep my house every day, not only to make it a cleaner place for the kids to play, but also so it will look nicer in my neighbors’ eyes.”

On the other hand, people’s lived relationships to space (house, land, market, common space) are woven into their practical understandings of hygiene. Once, when I was new to eating in Shang village, I picked a chilli pepper out of the large, shared dinner dish at Ayi’s dinner table, wondering where to dispose of it. Since my bowl was full of gruel, I put it on the table top as most people do in cities. Then, I noticed others were dropping such waste on the ground. To me, this would make the room dirty; to them it was dirty to put the waste on the table top, thus making it visible to others at the dinner table. Indeed, there is no need to worry about adding waste to the floor, which is always swept right after a meal. Recall Ayi’s (and other good housekeepers’) habit of sweeping the courtyard every day: polluting refuse that *can* be controlled, and moved away from the surfaces where life is lived, *will* be controlled in daily patterns that prevent what Mary Douglas referred to as “matter out of place” (1966).

After dinner, leftovers were dealt with in an orderly manner: leftovers from the dinner dish were saved for breakfast the next morning; the remaining gruel was fed to the dog as his dinner, along with some steamed bread; and the rest of the bread was put back into the basket in the cupboard, covered with a piece of white cloth. I volunteered once to wash dishes, but I gave up soon after Ayi showed me the complicated techniques involved in cleaning the kitchen without running water. This involved not only dishes, but also the caldron, the chopping board, the knife, and the stove top. I decided to sweep the kitchen floor instead, but Ayi did not allow me to do this because that would be her own last task. She always swept the floor just after she made sure everything in the kitchen was in order, closed the window, turned off the light, and locked the door, being especially careful not to let any mice slip in. The floor must be swept last because as everything else is cleaned, various other kinds of trash and dirt fall onto it.

Weisheng in Shang village is full of subtle distinctions between the dirty and the clean. There is a hierarchy of hygiene forms. There are principles of purification that guide all kinds of activity. These can be expressed as spatial contrasts: up equals clean and down equals dirty; interiors are clean and exteriors are dirty; near spaces should be clean and farther away spaces are dirty. These contrasts are particularly marked in the hall room, with its strong ritual connotations as the site of the formal heart of the family: in

this room banquets are held, people eat together commensally, and guests are entertained. Furthermore, the long narrow altar table signifies the symbolic hygiene of the family: The important things on it (*Guanyin* the Goddess of Mercy, for example, in Ayi's house) are kept high and, as if on a temple altar, away from the low floor (which is dirty by definition) and also above the relatively lower table used for everyday eating. The modern style of altar table, with its added-on cupboards, signifies that the family has possessions or wealth, hence the need for cupboards on both sides of the symbolic center of the altar table. It is significant that the relatively high square banquet table is only put into use on important occasions (it is also notable that there are no taller benches or chairs that would fit the banquet table for daily use).

In fact, spatial purifications are evident everywhere in the courtyard house: the kitchen and storage areas are located far from the latrine. A concrete and brick walkway across the dirt courtyard helps to keep mud from being tracked into the house. Porcelain tiles over the cooking surfaces allow easy cleaning. And plastic sheets over the kneading machine keep surfaces that come in contact with food clean. As discussed in connection with the washstand, moreover, the boundaries created between dirt and the self, between clean and dirty spaces, are both complexly practical and notably ritualized. There is a general principle at work: dirt should be kept down and away from the body. Food waste is dropped on the ground instead of on the table, the face basin is not the same as the foot basin, rolled up pants and plastic sandals keep dirt from migrating onto clothes, waste water settles the dust.

As many scholars have noted, in traditional Chinese architecture the north is always considered "up" (or higher), while the south is "down" (or lower).²³ Accordingly, the well and the drainage trench used for washing and cleaning are near the front of the courtyard that is to the south, or down and low, so that the mud they produce will not be too close to the house.

Ayi made me think of my observations at the village food-oil mill, a place I had not considered to be very "hygienic". This is a small and very simple mill with an engine that runs on diesel fuel. Just outside the mill compound there is a huge oven for roasting peanuts and sesame seeds, fuelled by dry wood. It fills the air all around with smoke, since there is no chimney. Villagers go there with their own peanuts and sesame seeds, all carefully hand-culled at home, shells removed, and mouldy nuts and seeds discarded.

23 There are numerous works referring to this perspective. For Chinese rural villages in particular, see Knapp 1992.

They see their own peanuts turned into oil before their eyes. Perhaps this is really cleaner than industrial peanut oil production systems, despite the smoky and ashy environment. Shang villagers seem to feel that life is better guarded (*weisheng*) when food is produced under the users' personal control than it is in the mysterious process that produces the cooking oils on sale at the supermarket, shining on the shelves and looking perfectly clean and attractively packaged. Who knows what kind of process has produced them?

IV New house, new village

As it got colder in the winter, and even as I developed habits adapted to local conditions, living in Ayi's old-style house became increasingly difficult, inconvenient, and uncomfortable. Unlike other northerners who live at higher latitudes,²⁴ people in Zhaozhou in general do not use any heating equipment, not even the coal-burning brass basin commonly used by households in areas to the south of the Yangtze River, where the latitude is lower and the weather is supposedly warmer in winter. There was no sense in my using an electric heater, either, because the insulation is poor in old-style houses, plus people are used to keeping the two-door gate of main house open for most of the day in all seasons, except in the most extreme weather (and except for at bed time, of course). In addition, there was a big crack in the west-end wall of the room I was using in Ayi's house. Ayi was apologetic about the crack in the wall, but she also made it clear to me that it would not help much even if she mended it, since the cold air would get in anyway. She had no money to do anything about the house given that her son was still in college and her daughters were planning their marriages and accumulating dowry payments. At one point, Ayi showed me the layers she was wearing: four sweaters underneath her cotton-padded coat! I did not think I would be able to move wearing so many layers. In January, when Xiaojun, Ayi's son, was about to come home for his college winter break, I moved, with some relief, into the village doctor Li Shu's new-style, two-storey house, where it was easier to achieve indoor warmth in the winter. Li Shu used the big front room, or "shop-front" (*menmian*), as his clinic.

Li Shu's new house faces the main north-south village road close to the intersection of the two major roads. The village committee courtyard is

24 Although Henan people consider themselves northerners, Henan is a large province that covers a rather wide range of latitudes. Zhaozhou County, for example, is located in the southwest of Henan, adjacent to Hubei Province, where people consider themselves southerners.

Figure 10 Li Shu's old house and new house (the one on the left)

close by. The house was built in the spring of 2004, two years after he had purchased the land from the Zhaoying township office through the Shang village committee, just as many other roadside households had.²⁵ Li Shu's old house is located in his own natural village, South Li Manor, where the land of their old courtyard house was inherited from his family as his private property, so the site will be passed on to his offspring. Li Shu has been the village doctor since the 1970s; he was the head of the collective clinic before decollectivization. In fact, the village clinic continued to be collectively run until 1993, according to Li Shu. At that time, the clinic was still located in the old village committee courtyard, established on the site of the Shang ancestral hall, which had been torn down during the Cultural Revolution. After the clinic was privatized in the early 1990s, Li Shu opened his own clinic in his old house, which is rather far from the village's main roads. South Li Manor is on the southern edge of Shang village, and many people complained about the inconvenience of coming to the clinic.

Another reason for Li Shu to build a new house was that his son had got married in 2002. It has become an unwritten rule in the area that the negotiated precondition for a son's marriage is to build a new-style house. Shaoli, for example, only agreed to marry her fiancé after his parents had promised to build a new-style house for them. Li Shu bought the land for his new house in 2002 and started to build in 2003, when his daughter-in-law was already expecting his grandson. The baby was born in the fall of 2004, shortly after the whole family moved into the new house. For a while, Li Shu and his wife were going back and forth, sleeping in the old house at night and coming to the new house to spend the day. One reason was because his wife felt the new house was really for the young couple and she preferred to sleep in "her own" house. She also said that they had stored some corn in the old house, since their land is in South Li Manor, and she preferred to stay in the old house to prevent thievery. However, I later came to think that

25 The land can only be sold with use rights 使用权, because nobody owns the land except for the State (though we do not know what will happen in coming years, since in 2007 the National People's Congress passed a private property law). Even so, price of housing land 宅基地 in villages has increased rapidly, especially after the "reduce-peasant-burden 减负" policies introduced during the regime of Hu Jintao. Many have expressed their suspicion that selling the land for house construction has become a new way for local officials to make profits, not least because they have more difficulty nowadays extracting money from villagers in the name of all kinds of taxes. There was a dispute while I was in Shang village, for example, between the village committee and a villager who was building a three-storey house, about a "high rise fee 升高费" that had been newly established by the township office. The fee was justified as necessary for protecting the electric wires across the village. But most villagers felt this charge was quite unfounded.

there was a deeper reason behind this distancing, which was the tension between Li Shu's wife and her daughter-in-law.

Most of the roadside land in the village had once been part of the arable land that encircled the natural villages. Thus, there are older irrigation ditches, each about three meters wide, along both sides of both main roads. To build a roadside house facing the main road, therefore, requires building a conduit underneath the house's entryway so as not to block the water flow. Usually, the village committee assigns a "*ganbu*" official to enforce rules of this kind, including regulating the distance from the house to the road, the depth limits of the house, and other matters regarding village building codes. In the past, most people preferred to live away from the main roads, preferring safer and more tranquil locations. With the economy becoming increasingly active, however, people's desires appear to have changed. The cost of roadside land for housing is based on the number of the standardized "*menmian fang*" (shop-front rooms) a lot can accommodate, on the assumption that people want to build roadside houses to do business. The local standard size for two "shop-front rooms" is seven meters wide and 17 meters deep. Most people building a new-style house bought a two-room size-, and some even bought a three-room size lot; there are no one room-size lots, according to the villagers.

To build a roadside house has become many villagers' primary goal, and the complexities of this process are a popular topic in everyday conversation. One convenient aspect of the standardization of building codes was that people could easily visualize the size of someone's house. I often heard Shang villagers ask each other "how many rooms?" meaning how large the house would be, instead of asking about the actual number of rooms that the house might actually have. Before 2002, the two-room size lot cost 5,000 RMB; today, the price has reached 8,000 RMB. Li Shu told me that he was the first in Shang village to pay 8,000 RMB for his "two-room" house. "[I did it] to support Zhishu, the village party branch secretary's work", he said to me.²⁶ The price was much cheaper before 2000. A villager told me that his one-storey, four-room house, built in 1991, cost him in total about 10,000 RMB. Of course, many villagers simply converted their own old-style houses into the new style without moving to the roadside and having to

26 As we shall see later, Li Shu was smart to be compliant with Zhishu, one result being that he was able to undertake many small projects on his house that might have slightly violated regulations. For example, when he transformed his backyard into a living room, at the same time he enlarged the whole second floor of his house, which now contains three more bedrooms in addition to the two at the upper front above his clinic. In the next chapter I will discuss social relations and networking in Shang village further.

buy expensive land. While I was staying at Ayi's, Shaoli's brother decided to convert their dilapidated old house into a one-storey, new-style house using a large sum of money that Shaoli's fiancé had presented for the engagement.

Up until 2000, most new-style houses had continued to be only one storey high; this form of development and investment had started to appeal to villagers in the early 1990s due to changes in village collective land management. Now, with more and more two- and even three-storey houses visible, Zhenrang, a Shang villager in his late 60s, reflected,

I was young when Shang village was liberated by the Communist Party. But I remember even then there was a cadre who told me that someday we peasants would enjoy a good life that would have "upstairs and downstairs, electric lights and telephones" (*loushang louxia, diandeng dianhua*); in past years, whenever I went to cities, seeing the urbanites that had [these luxuries], I would wonder when it would be our turn. It didn't take long, though, now we've got them all!

Nevertheless, Zhenrang and his wife still live in an old-style house.²⁷

Except for certain height differences, the new-style houses look very similar, except for some decorative details, such as archaized "Chinese-style" eaves, depending on the owner's interests and finances. As mentioned above, new-style houses are built of concrete and cement blocks, so they have better insulation against the cold. The most obvious contrast to the old-style courtyard houses, however, is the "shop fronts" of the new-style houses, which have the effect of locating the yard (i.e. the domestic outdoor space) in the back instead of the front. In most cases, then, the front room of the new houses functions like the hall room of the old houses. It is the center of the house, where activities such as meeting guests and eating meals take place. Many households moved the ritually important long narrow altar table from their old house into the front room of their new house, only to find that it no longer fit well against the new wall. In many cases, this is no longer the north wall either; the direction of the road decides the

27 Lu Duanfang has also reported the same phrase in her discussion of rural utopian dreams, in which the city, with its electricity, machinery, and modern architecture, which had not yet developed in the countryside in the collectivist era, was always an object of comparison. Quoting Lewis Mumford, Lu goes further to claim that the Chinese leadership certainly held the conviction that "the first utopia was the city itself." See Lu 2006, Chapter 5: Modernity as Utopia: Planning the People's Commune, 1958-1960, esp. pp. 108-110.

Figure 11 The hall room in a new-style house

orientation of the new houses, since they are required to face the roadside.²⁸ Furthermore, in order to reach the back of the house people always have to go through a door in the back of the front room, so there is no room to put the altar table facing the main gate. It is usually put against a sidewall. Kitchen and storage are now in the back as well.

Bedrooms are usually upstairs. In Li Shu's case, his clinic takes the entire first floor of his two-room house, so he added a ceiling on the top of his backyard and installed a back door, transforming the entire back of the lot into a living room. The furniture in the living room is simple: A color television sitting on a cabinet, a long wooden reclining chair, a rectangular glass coffee table that is used as the daily dining table, a long bamboo reclining chair and several small chairs (similar to those in Ayi's house), and a single bed board used as a shelf to hold basins and cooking pots. There is a sink with a running water faucet on the other side of the room from the TV, closer to the clinic room. A two-tub washer stands beside the sink.

²⁸ Most people prefer a house with the "proper 正" orientation, though. Li Shu told me his house is especially cold in winter when the wind blows from the northwest. "It's hard to buy [a house] facing south even if you have the money 有钱难买面朝南," he sighed.

Figure 12 The trash spot and the pit next to Li Shu's house

Li Shu's family, that of a village doctor, is clearly well to do in Shang village. One can tell this from the inside of his house, where the builder has obviously used materials of a better quality than his immediate next-door neighbor's, even though from the outside there seems to be no big difference between these two houses (see Figure 10). For example, all the bedroom floors in Li Shu's house have white and color porcelain tiles laid in decorative patterns. His neighbor's house, on the other hand, along with many other new houses in Shang village, has only cement floors. The most impressive mark of distinction in Li Shu's house is the indoor plumbing. Instead of using the long iron handle to manually pump water out of the well, he installed an electric pump inside the well (the top of which is now completely sealed) to lift the water up into a cement reservoir on the roof. Water flows down through metal pipes to faucets and sinks: one on the second floor, one in the kitchen and one in the living room. He also built an indoor bathroom with a squat-style flush toilet and a bathtub, covering the walls and floor with white porcelain tiles in a style similar to that used in many county-seat households.²⁹

29 I suppose Li Shu learned this "urban style" from his first daughter who works in Zhaozhou county as a bank clerk after she graduated from a local professional school specializing in financing. She is married and lives in the county seat.

Figure 13 A collective latrine by the ditch

Not surprisingly, living at Li Shu's new house was more convenient for me; especially the indoor toilet made my life much easier, since I no longer had to squat in the cold winter wind, as I had when living at Ayi's. In addition, I could use an electric heater to keep me warm at night when I was writing notes. However, soon after I moved in, I started to wonder where the waste water went, since there is no sewage system in the village. Li Shu took me to the front of his house and pointed out a small pit beside the entry pathway between the village road and his house (see Figure 12). The pit was connected to the north-south irrigation ditch alongside the road; this ditch would eventually carry the waste water south into a river.³⁰ But the water standing in the pit was greenish and stagnant, collecting right beside the main road and the clinic.

Unlike the old-style courtyard, many new households choose to build the latrine outside their backyard, in what would seem to be public space (see Figure 13; one neighborhood went further and built a collective latrine by the ditch). At Li Shu's next-door neighbor's house, the well is located in the far back, against the wall of their backyard, next to the kitchen; to go

30 This ditch does not go past the big pit in the center of Shang village, but goes directly south, alongside the main village road.

to the dry latrine, they have to step out of the backyard first and then go into a shed on the outside of the back wall. This shed is where they also kept their chickens. Later, the neighbor installed an indoor toilet for the sake of their new daughter-in-law, who had been working in a factory in Guangdong Province before she got married. Nevertheless, I noted that this family still uses their dry latrine for solid waste, while the indoor toilet is only for liquid waste, because there is no efficient sewage conduit built underneath the house.

Yet, despite the changed design, and alterations in ways of using and living in new-style houses, most people make an effort to maintain some of the older ways of living. Li Shu built his family's kitchen outside the house beside the back door. It was set up to hold a box-shaped stove, the kind fuelled by dried cotton stalks or coal, like those found in old-style courtyard houses. "Can't live without it," he said to me. The ubiquitous altar table, always centered in the sitting room of a courtyard house, is another salient example: no matter how awkwardly it may fit in a new-style house, and even if its central position has been usurped by a television, the ritual altar table remains an important piece of furniture in all village houses.³¹

Getting to know the everyday patterns of dirt management in Li Shu's house, I realized that many of the same habits of purification and control of dirt that I had observed at Ayi's house were in use. Although washing clothes and dishes is easier in new-style houses, dirt becomes more visible on the porcelain-tiled floors of both the bedrooms and the bathroom. In particular, the bathroom was in need of constant care because it was open to whoever was visiting the clinic. Two mops, fashioned from old clothes, each with a long wooden handle, one upstairs and the other downstairs, were frequently put into service at Li Shu's new house, especially when it rained and mud was unavoidable. (There were no such mops at Ayi's, since they would not have been of much use there.) Generally, purification principles similar to those governing hygiene in Ayi's old-fashioned courtyard house are at work in the new-style houses – up is still clean and down is still dirty, and so forth – all in accord with a habitual hierarchy of hygienic configuration. Prominent examples: in the new-style houses, bedrooms are universally built upstairs, and many new households have built the dry latrine outside their backyard, even though some of them, including Li Shu, have an indoor plumbing system.

31 In Li Shu's case, though, the altar table is kept in his old house in South Li Manor, not in the new house.

Reflecting on the differences between Li Shu's modern house and the hygiene management required in an older-style house like Ayi's, it becomes clear that the increasingly prevalent indoor plumbing is seriously incompatible with existing drainage systems: there is no place for waste to go but into open-air ditches and canals just outside the house. The limited modern plumbing moves waste only a short distance from the family's clean space, that is to say, "far", but not very far. This structural mismatch reminds everyone of the unevenness in the "modernization" of the countryside, and has brought to the fore a looming environmental crisis.

V Unavoidable trash

Consider the problem presented in rural areas by the increasing use of plastic bags, paper, and modern construction materials, such as commercially-made plaster and tiles. These products increase the ability of individuals and families to stay clean and comfortable indoors; but modern packaging and construction supplies simultaneously intensify the collective problem of trash outdoors.

No matter how fine the hygienic discriminations may be in both old- and new-style domestic spaces, the trash problem remains acute outside the house in public areas. Trash clutters the entire village, just as it does the county seat. As I pointed out in the Preface, anyone walking along the main village road will see all kinds of trash scattered along the roadside and in the roadside ditches: plastic bags; food packaging from items such as cookies, snacks, and candies; used toilet paper; discarded clothes, and much more.

How did Shang villagers use to manage their trash? According to some, the trash problem in collective or public areas is a recent phenomenon. Shifa, formerly the production team leader of Team Four, now in his sixties, made this clear to me when I asked him about trash:

Trash? In the past there weren't so many kinds of trash; things like packages, cardboard boxes, etc., did not exist [in the village] at all. We didn't even have trash. When you bought things people just gave you the thing, unlike nowadays when you're always given a package. Look at the varieties [of snacks] the kids are eating today; those were nowhere to be found before. Yes, there were cookies, but only cookies, no plastic wrappings. The increasing plastic stuff only became a phenomenon over these last ten to twenty years. Before the 1980s there weren't even plastic

buckets, they were all made of wood. There wasn't any trash in the past; everything we used could be burned in the stove, used as fuel.

Nowadays, plastic bags are constantly brought into houses: everything purchased comes with a plastic bag. Even though villagers always take a basket or a sack when they cycle to the village market to get vegetables and other daily necessities, market vendors have long since led them to expect a plastic bag, however flimsy, in addition. This is also true of all the regular stores. Plastic bags are ubiquitous in all kinds of markets, as they are in the cities. But in the villages, there is no public utility to dispose of the non-biodegradable trash that accumulates.³²

Ayi, like many other careful Shang housekeepers, tried to burn any plastic bags that were not to be re-used. Many plastic packages, such as shampoo and soy sauce bottles, do not burn easily in the stove, not to mention broken plastic basins or buckets. A couple of private businesses on the market street offered a recycling service, receiving plastic and glass items. This service reduced, to a certain degree, the growing amount of trash in public places. Ayi carefully saved most used glass and plastic bottles in a corner of the dry latrine and periodically sold them to these private recycling businesses. Also, there were quite a few repair shops on the market street; villagers often took their broken pots, basins, and buckets to have them mended. Few would consider replacing such utensils before they were completely worn out. In fact, I was often impressed by the many methods people used to recycle what I considered to be waste. A village banqueting business, for example, which rented out tables, benches, and tableware to households hosting large numbers of guests, carried the rented tableware in a huge black rubber basin, which turned out to be made from a used tire. They had simply carved the tire into a wide basin with handles on two sides to make it easy to carry around.

However, despite everyday frugality and careful management, trash remained omnipresent. Besides plastic shopping bags, another form of highly visible trash in the village is, as Shifa noted, food packaging. Snacks for kids always sell fast, according to the owners of village stores. In Shang village, as elsewhere in China, many young children have parents who work as migrant labourers in big cities for most of the year. The grandparents who

32 Although nationwide regulations on limiting the usage of plastic bags have been implemented since 1 June 2008, it seems to have exerted little influence on Chinese daily life. See, for example, a recent article titled "The seven-year itch of 'the restriction of plastic bags'" published on the *People's Daily's* webpage 28 May 2015: <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2015/0528/c159301-27069133.html>.

Figure 14 Trash in the roadside ditch

take care of the kids are reluctant to decline their grandchildren's requests for commercial treats; they said they wanted to spoil them a little, feeling sorry for them because their parents lived so far away. When they buy these cheap snacks, most children immediately tear open the packages and litter the roads wherever they go.

Packaged commodities in village stores have been widely recognized as "junk food" in mass media all over China. For example, in Changzhi County of Shanxi Province, people complained about all kinds of packaged foods oriented toward school-age children, but without any method of quality control.³³ In my own experience, while conducting fieldwork, one thing that surprised me, and reminded me of certain aspects of the rural-urban divide, was my discovery that I was completely unacquainted with a whole range of commodities on sale in the stores below the county level. That is to say, most commodities that I was familiar with in cities, such as the Korean-made Orion chocolate pie – ubiquitous in the cities where I travel, and my favorite kind of junk food – could be found in county-seat supermarkets, but they were nowhere to be found in the village and township stores. Most commodities in the village stores, especially packaged food, carried strange brand names that I did not recognize, and this made me feel that the quality was suspect. Many manufacturers sell their low-quality products to the countryside without worrying about food safety, dumping literally "junk food" in the villages. The victims of this practice are rural kids whose grandparents usually have little idea of the changing world of commodities.³⁴

In addition to the explosion of "junk food" available in the local markets, certain recent agricultural technologies have contributed to the trash problem in the countryside. Despite being commonly viewed as a sign of highly-valued "modernization" by villagers, the widespread use of chemical fertilizer and commercial animal feeds has altered more traditional forms of waste disposal. In particular, the recycling of waste into agricultural production through composting is no longer necessary. In Ayi's household, for example, vegetable trash is no longer composted for use as fertilizer, and kitchen waste is no longer fed to the pigs. Instead, these forms of "garbage" are dumped via the conduit in the front of the yard. Some people pointed out to me that this accumulation of food waste in the roads has produced a problem with rats.

33 See the following article, published on 21 July 2015: <http://news.163.com/15/0721/05/AV194B-FG00014AED.html?f=jsearch>.

34 See a recent report issued on 15 September 2015: http://news.hnr.cn/snxw/201509/t20150915_2106868.html.

Figure 15 The dirt path outside Ayi's yard, and the pit that collects water from her drainage pipe

The new-style houses, especially the ones built beside the road, do not even have a cistern or tank for human waste, and they force residents to flush their toilets into public ditches or small pits, as discussed above. As for Li Shu's house, which is also a clinic, medical waste is a major concern. Sometimes, I was told, there were people from outside coming around to the villages to collect medical waste, especially used ampoules. But I saw no such recyclers during the five months of my stay at Li Shu's. When he needed to dispose of medical waste, he usually divided it into two piles: the flammable items were burned outside the house in a nearby open area; non-flammable ones, empty ampoules and medicine bottles for example, were buried next to the waste pit beside their front yard.³⁵

Because the main roads run alongside arable land, the irrigation ditches for farming run along both sides of these roads. As villagers are now building

35 Medical waste has been an even worse problem in urban hospitals, a situation that has been reported frequently in the news in China of late. See for example the news report on 18 April 2015, about hospitals surrounded by medical waste in Jinan, the capital city of Shandong Province: <http://v.ifeng.com/news/society/201504/0166e781-dee4-453e-910c-e34bb9eeff3e.shtml>.

more houses along the main road, they are finding it necessary to construct a conduit for household waste that feeds into but does not block the water flow through the irrigation ditch. With more and more roadside land being used to build houses, the ditches near the new houses are not only full of all kinds of refuse, but they are also commonly used to mix plaster for house building and renovations. Residents will sometimes dam the irrigation ditch near a new-house construction site so as to make a plaster-mixing pit, a process that leaves permanent concrete residue in the ditch, causing a blockage that then collects even more trash and waste (see Figure 14). But where else could the villagers find to mix the plaster for their low-tech (and inexpensive) construction projects? The land behind these houses is all farmland – it must be kept free of this kind of junk. After all, relatively disadvantaged villagers cannot afford to build a waste management infrastructure on their own.

The waste pollution situation was even worse in the busy Tonglu market village, adjacent to the east end of Shang Village. In a conversation with Doctor Sun, a locally renowned senior doctor who now runs a private clinic on Tonglu Street, he told me that residents on his street have been dumping their trash, including human waste, in plastic bags on the street or in the main north-south township ditch. Doctor Sun was obviously distressed and annoyed by these practices, but, like his neighbors, he had no alternative solution to the trash problem.

As hygienic conditions degrade in the villages, arguably leading to lower health statuses for rural residents, so do public health services. Research has shown a direct connection between the degrading environment and declining rural health. The authors of a 2006 report warned that some epidemics that previously had been eliminated, such as malaria, encephalitis B, cholera, and schistosomiasis, have reappeared in the Chinese countryside.³⁶ According to Doctor Sun, in contrast with much local public health activity in the Maoist era, the township hospital has done nothing about epidemic prevention and control for a long time. “Nowadays the township medical officials only come to ask for [an administrative fee] from us [practicing doctors], so they can protect their own jobs,” he said. In the Maoist era, he emphasized, by contrast, “inspections were conducted every few days. The

36 According to the article, in 2006, regions with schistosomiasis infections included 434 counties of 12 provinces in southern China, with 840,000 patients out of a total population of over 66 million, almost all of whom were farmers. In addition, China now has about five million active tuberculosis patients, 80 per cent of whom are from the countryside. See Wang and Yang 2006.

latrines could not have any maggots, and the dining halls had to be free of flies.” This deliberate contrast of the present with the past is an oversimplification, but there has certainly been a decline in state surveillance of public health. Vaccinations remain the only major task of the township health office in the hospital, but it no longer has staff for public sanitation work. Even the Committee for Patriotic Hygiene Campaigns (*Aiguo Weisheng Yundong Weiyuanhui*), the branch of the county Health Bureau that was supposedly in charge of public sanitation, ceased to function in Zhaoying in the early 1990s due to a shortage of county financing.³⁷ Most doctors agree that the Reform era has brought improvement in diet and living conditions for most people, and, more importantly, with the continuing state emphasis on vaccination, there has not been a serious epidemic of infectious disease for years. Nevertheless, there are an increasing number of patients with tuberculosis and even malaria, a disease once announced as eradicated in 1998 by the County Health Bureau after over thirty years of malaria epidemic control efforts.

Indeed, a growing literature suggests that health issues brought on by environmental pollution run even deeper, intertwined with deprived domestic environments (poor housing), poverty (limited access to medical care), and fluctuations in socioeconomic status, often due to illness.³⁸ According to a document issued by the National Development and Reform Commission in 2006, each year China has about 10 million rural people who fall into or return to poverty due to illness (*yinbing fanpin*).³⁹ Until today, *yinbing fanpin* is still seen as a salient rural issue faced by all levels of government.⁴⁰

37 According to Mr. Li, a previous official of the Committee of Patriotic Hygiene Campaign of Zhaozhou Bureau of Health, interviewed by the author, 30 March 2006.

38 For example, the “cancer villages” along Huai River have long been known to Chinese researchers and government officials. In *Aizhengcun Diaocha* (Investigations of the Cancer Villages), published in 2013, the Chinese sociologist Chen A’jiang makes it clear that although there is no explicit evidence to show the direct connection between cancer and environmental pollution, in most cases of “cancer villages”, local villagers, media reporters, and government officials all share the opinion that the high risk of cancer is closely related to environmental pollution, especially industrial pollution. Anna Lora-Wainwright also illustrates the intertwined relationship between water pollution and the “cancer village” in Langzhong, Sichuan Province, involving the abuse of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and contaminated food. See Lora-Wainwright 2013. In particular Chapter 3: Water, Hard Work, and Farm Chemicals: The Moral Economy of Cancer, pp. 91–116.

39 Ref. http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fzgggz/shfz/200610/t20061009_87784.html.

40 A 2015 report, posted on the central government website, states that on top of the limited resources available for rural healthcare, serious diseases resulting from the degraded environment (which is seen as a direct consequence of the “blind pursuit of economic development”) have pulled many rural residents into the vicious circle of *yinbing fanpin*. See <http://www.>

In Shang Village, for example, there are currently 13 known cancer patients out of 728 households.⁴¹

People understand very clearly that the hygienic condition of their village is declining. As noted above, Shifa insisted that hygiene in Shang village had been better in the 1980s. He said,

Why was weisheng better in the past? When we just started the land distribution [the household responsibility system] there was not much fertilizer available. Everyone had to get up before dawn [to gather waste]. Some would even start the night before, using a flashlight to collect manure from either the pigsty or the cowshed. [During the day] whenever the cow discharged dung on its way to the field, someone would come right away to pick it up. Everything was used for fertilizer: all waste could be transferred to the land. Not to mention the outhouses by the road, everyone tried their best to collect manure [from places like this]. Now the latrines have become a burden: whoever builds it has to take out the manure, but there's nowhere to put it. Waste is piled up everywhere now. In the past, the water was clear everywhere; now it's all been muddied. The water in the ditch beside my house was clean and women used to wash clothes there. Now you see, it's become impossible to wash clothes in such muddy water. Alas, the only good thing [for the environment] in these recent years is that fewer trees are being felled.

I was expecting Shifa complain that people do not care about the public areas any longer, in contrast to the collectivist era. But, as far as he was concerned, the point at issue was chemical fertilizers. Due to the short supply of chemical fertilizers in the past, Shifa and many villagers believed that Shang village's common space had been cleaner, because most trash was put to use. In other words, waste was not trash. This was also true historically. China has a long tradition of recycling organic materials, including human and animal waste, vegetables, and household refuse.⁴² After conducting a study tour to China on the recycling of organic wastes in agriculture in 1977, a FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the

zytzb.gov.cn/tzb2010/jcyjxd/201505/1ed9d194d8744f23ab85e64foa58ed94.shtml and a local government report by Huanggang City, Hubei Province: http://xxgk.hg.gov.cn/xxgk/jcms_files/jcms1/web1/site/art/2015/5/6/art_69_22051.html.

41 The total population of Shang Village was 3,240 in 2006, of whom, 1,300 who left to work as migrant laborers.

42 For example, James Thorp described the waste management system in the Shanghai area in the late 1930s. See Thorp 1936.

United Nations) report observed, “every manurial resource is carefully collected, conserved and used on the land, so eventually helping to maintain soil productivity in a system of intensive cultivation and acting as a ‘buffer’ against shortage of mineral fertilizer” (FAO 1978: 1). Having travelled extensively in the provinces of Jiangsu, Guangdong, Shanxi, Hebei, and the Shanghai area, this study group, including 17 participants from countries in Asia, Africa, and the Near East, showed great enthusiasm for how composted manure (human and animal) was used as fertilizer, and was processed to be less risky to human health than “raw sewage” and actively decomposing food. They noted how manure was confined to composting tanks, pits, and spaces under the control of commune members. It was clear that manure was desirable because chemical and mineral fertilizers were in short supply and relatively costly, while organic manures were constantly available locally at little or no cost except in manpower. As the report marvels, “[t]o the Chinese, there is nothing like waste; waste is only a misplaced resource which can become a valuable material for another product” (FAO 1978: 1).

However Shang villagers have mixed feelings toward the hygienic regimes of the past. What Shifa was referring to at the end of his comment was the time of the Great Leap Forward, starting in 1958, when all the trees in Shang village were felled to fuel the big village furnace that was built for steel making. Judith Shapiro has noted that deforestation was prevalent throughout China during the Great Leap Forward, under the influence of an official urgency to achieve progress toward a utopian socialism (2001). Shang people said that, at that time, the village looked quite bare, without trees to hide the then prevailing thatched-roof mud houses. In other words, the relatively tidy conditions of the time might have had more to do with impoverishment than with a “clean” landscape. And, as is now recognized, the Great Leap Forward was followed by a famine that lasted for three years, from 1959 to 1961 (Zhou 2012). Scarcities intrinsic to the planned economy can be said to have worked against the production of trash. When discussing the village before the 1980s, in fact, few thought that the environment had been better then, because, 1) all the trees had been felled to support industrialization; 2) all the houses were made from thatch and mud. Of course, there was less trash, everyone agreed. But no one wanted to return to a kind of cleanliness that was so strongly associated with poverty.

Despite the often-heard comments that “*weisheng* was better before in our village,” whenever I tried to elicit some yearning for the “clean” Shang village of the past I always failed. To villagers this idea was as ridiculous as

a starving person preferring clothing to food (*siyao mianzi huo shouzui*).⁴³ After all, life in the past had strongly imprinted experiences of hunger and scarcity in most villagers' memories. Even Shaoli, only in her 20s, remembers the grey bread of her childhood. Under pragmatic development policies since Deng Xiaoping's era of the 1980s, in which it has been axiomatic that everything is determined by the economic base, Shang villagers have been encouraged to worry first about their stomachs, and second about the money in their pockets. Only later does the quality of collective life or of public space become important.

When recalling the collectivist era, and despite what Reform Era policy-makers say about "peasants", many villagers do *not* think the lower output of local agriculture at that time was due to "low enthusiasm for labor". This characterization of what is taken to be an earlier rural irrationality is often mentioned in connection with the so-called *daguofan* (one big-pot meal) collectivist system. "Considering that our whole life depended on the land, how could we not have wanted to labour?" one villager asked me.⁴⁴ The low output levels in the past, according to villagers, were due not to peasant laziness and lack of motivation, but to the scarcity of chemical fertilizers. I have been told many times how the production teams strategized to get more fertilizer for the whole team's benefit, and how they went to the county seat to get work transporting the unwanted mud-ash or clay from construction sites, which could then be used as a low-grade fertilizer.⁴⁵

As Li Shu commented once, "at that [collectivist] time the major issue for us was *wenbao* (to dress warmly and eat our fill), [we had so little] due to the shortage of chemical fertilizers. The average output of wheat was only 75 to 100 kg per *mu*,⁴⁶ and most of it we had to hand over to the collective. Now 250-300 kg per *mu* is considered low, and we don't have to hand over any grain to the state."

43 For the collective memory of hunger, see Farquhar 2002, especially Chapters Two and Three; and Yue 1999.

44 Previously a production team leader of Team Four, Shifa proudly told me that thanks to his "selfless" hard work, his team members worked harder than those of other teams. As a result, they always harvested more grain. A popular novel published in 1988, *Pingfan de Shijie* (*An Ordinary World*) by Lu Yao, convincingly depicts village life in northwest China before and after the historic Third Plenum (*Sanzhong Quanhui*) at the end of 1978, which was a watershed demarcating the beginning of Deng's "reform and opening up" policy, and marked the beginning of the end of the collectivist era.

45 On these trips, they reported feeling envious of the county-seat residents' easier life. They referred to this difference when they spoke of eating wheat noodles in the county seat. It was only after the end of collectivist era that villagers were able to eat "real" noodles, made solely with wheat flour rather than mixed with either sweet potato starch or mung bean paste.

46 *Mu* is a unit of area; one *mu* equals 0.0667 hectares.

Soon after the planned economy was liberalized, with transformations to the agricultural sector mainly developing in the 1980s, supplies of chemical fertilizers increased dramatically. Farmers began using them too liberally, in fact. China's use of chemical fertilizers has more than quadrupled during the Reform period, from 8,840,000 tons in 1978 to 42,538,000 tons in 2001 (Economy 2004). From my own observations in Shang village, people would use at least 100kg of chemical fertilizers per *mu* when planting winter wheat.⁴⁷

Painted on the wall of the flourmill in Shang village, in huge characters, is "*Zhifu Guangrong* (To Get Rich is Glorious), *Pinqiong Kechi* (To Be Poor is Shameful)." To produce higher grain yields, people have gradually come to care less than they once did about the sustainability of growth, instead trying to farm their small plots of land more intensively in search of shorter-term profits. I was told that in the collectivist era, each year, the production teams used to leave some land fallow; now, every piece of arable land is in use all year round, further degrading the already depleted fertility of the land.⁴⁸

VI Uncanny modernization

The ramifications of excessive chemical fertilizer use in Shang village agriculture resonate with Akhil Gupta's discussion of Alipur farmers in western Uttar Pradesh, India, who recognized the unprecedented life change brought about by chemical fertilizers and expressed their ambivalence about this change. While Alipur farmers were concerned with the defects that chemical fertilizers had brought to the soil and the grain, they were also pleased with the high yield.⁴⁹ Even the language Shang villagers employed was similar. The Alipur farmers spoke, for example, of

47 There are at least two different kinds involved: one is mainly composed of diammonium phosphate and the other is nitrogenous.

48 Concerning China's overall situation, Ma Zhong, a Chinese environmental economist reports that "the results of China's focus on high grain yields rather than sound farming [include] soil erosion resulting in a loss of five billion tons of topsoil per year, desertification, and pollution from chemical pesticides, which has affected 20 percent of China's farmland" (quoted in Economy 2004: 80). E. Economy has made the incisive point that, "Efforts to maintain high grain yields lead to over-plowing of already degraded lands and a growing threat of desertification, while valuable fertile land is sold off at below market prices to industry, claimed for infrastructure, or incorporated into urbanization priorities" (2004: 89).

49 See Gupta 1998, esp. Chapter Four: "Indigenous" Knowledges: Ecology, pp. 234-290. Gupta's study stands out as a nuanced understanding of the role of agriculture in the making of a modern nation state. It connects globalization, postcoloniality, and local articulations through ethnographic methods.

the greater “heat” brought by chemical fertilizers as compared to organic manure. They said that chemical fertilizer makes the plants grow faster, but also damages the strength of the soil; organic manure, on the other hand, was understood to impart a more lasting strength to the soil (Gupta 1998: 211-212). However, like the Alipur farmers, and despite a few doubts, Shang villagers continued to use chemical fertilizer as much as they could. One reason is that chemical fertilizers and pesticides save significant labour, and this is an important consideration given that Shang village is now, to a certain extent, a “hollow heart village (*kongxincun*)”. Most residents in the village are either elderly or school-aged and below, and since many of the most able-bodied villagers have left to work as migrant laborers in coastal cities, leaving their small children in the village, there are fewer able-bodied workers to perform agricultural labor. But those people, of all ages, who remain in Shang Village, are still farming. People often said that it is *easy* to plant crops now: you do not have to get up early to collect manure for fertilizer as chemical fertilizer comes ready-made and is relatively easy to apply. You do not have to hoe weeds thanks to chemical herbicides, and wheat no longer needs to be harvested by hand, thanks to the combine harvester that comes every year, rented out by private owners at a charge of 20 RMB per *mu*. Every year, I was told, villagers only have to busy themselves with agricultural work for, at most, about five months, roughly from the fifth to the tenth lunar month.⁵⁰

The comforts brought by technology are palpable. Villagers often said to me, approvingly, that “people today live such a life of ease”; invariably, though, they followed this statement with: “they have also become more and more lazy.” This bittersweet response to my questions about the excessive use of chemical fertilizer was common; everyone knows the harm chemical fertilizer does to the soil. Li Shu once told me that the agronomy technician from the township office had jokingly called today’s villagers soil robbers (*difei*). Shang villagers, though they know the soil has been “hardened” and is losing “strength” or fertility (*dili buzhu*), continue to exhaust it with all the chemicals available on the market.

Like Alipur’s farmers, who finally decided that “there’s no loss to us” because “the output is better and the prices are good” (Gupta 1998: 3), Shang villagers’ heavy reliance on chemical fertilizer has much to do with their

50 From approximately late May to early November, when people are engaged with harvesting winter wheat, planting fall crops (*qiu zhuangjia*), such as peanut, soy bean, and sesame, and then with harvesting the fall crops and planting winter wheat for the next year.

deepened dependence on the cash economy.⁵¹ The convertibility of fertilizer into cash, through dramatically heightened short-term yields, is a high stakes game now. When cash accumulation, rather than the long-term viability of the land, is what guarantees a future for the farmer and his/her family, it becomes highly rational to maximize the crops for the next few years in the interest of transforming rural life through consumption. And rural consumption has been uncritically promoted, both in the market and by the government. In particular, the primary feature of the highly-praised policy of “building new socialist villages”, started in 2006, was an unprecedented cancellation of the agricultural tax, intending to promote rural consumption so as to *ladong jingji* (pull along the national economy).⁵² Ironically, the “new socialist villages” have emerged Janus-faced. As the popular phrase used by various news media, government reports, and academic articles to describe the rural Chinese countryside suggests, it now exists in a state of “modernization indoors and disorder outdoors (*shinei xiandaihua, shiwai zangluan*cha).”⁵³ In this phrase, the “disorder outdoors”, which evokes a state of being uncomfortable and unwelcoming, emerges in parallel with improved indoor modern living conditions; I would argue this phrase invokes a sense of *uncanniness*.

Although, to Freud, the uncanny was more a sensation, feeling, or fear, it also refers to experiences where the world we live in suddenly seems strange; or, better put, both familiar and strange. In his famous 1919 essay, Freud sets out to explain the uncanny, or more precisely, *unheimlich* [unhomely] in German, saying that “what is *heimlich* comes to be *unheimlich*” (1919: 4). That is to say, the *un-* both negates (represses) and releases (reveals) the *heimlich* that connotes “familiar” and “belonging to the home” (1919: 1). By paraphrasing Schelling’s definition, Freud makes it clear that the uncanny is “something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light” (1919: 13). The *un-* in uncanny connotes both repression and revelation, and, according to Collins and Jervis, “suggests a fundamental indecision, and obscurity or uncertainty, at the heart of our ontology, our sense of time, place, and history, both personal and cultural”

51 “Everything needs money” was a common phrase among villagers. Interestingly, this was also *the* notion (and deficiency) through which they conceived urban life in contrast to their own.

52 See the official website of the Ministry of Agriculture: http://www.moa.gov.cn/ztl/yhwj2014/wjhg/201301/t20130129_3209958.htm.

53 If you were to key in this phrase in Chinese on google.com, it would come up with 53,400 results, predominantly about the rural environment conditions. Web search conducted in October 2015.

(2008: 2). It is in the specific context of “uncanny modernization” that I think of the contemporary rural Chinese environmental conditions that I witnessed in my fieldwork.

As discussed above, Shang villagers’ everyday life has been transformed by modern technologies, ranging from chemical fertilizers to plastic bags, and including modern packaging and construction practices. Along with the palpable comforts at home, however, this “uncanny modernization” also brings them a degraded environment that is not of their own making. The new-style houses with indoor plumbing, but without any sewage system to support its use, is a salient example. The lack of any infrastructure to dispose of trash is also central to the widely recognized rural environmental problem. An article published in February 2015 quotes the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MoHURD) that,

The number of the rural resident population is 650 million, [a population] that produces about 110 million tons of domestic waste per year, with 70 million tons remaining untreated. By the end of 2013, it was estimated that among China’s 5.88 million of administrative villages, there were only 37% (2.18 million in number) that have started to dispose of domestic waste; in 14 provinces the percentage was lower than 30%, while for a few provinces the percentage was even lower than 10%.⁵⁴

No wonder there is “disorder outdoors”. This article also states that it was only in 2010 that garbage disposal systems started to be established at the county level in some places. Before then, such development had been predominantly centered on urban domestic waste. Meanwhile, it has been reported that, every year, 120 million tons of domestic trash pile up and over 25 million tons of sewage are released directly into open areas of the Chinese countryside.⁵⁵ There is a stark contrast between urban and rural areas in the amount of state investment for environmental protection and management. It is apparent that the urban environment has been improved specifically at the cost of the rural environment. Most of the heavily polluting industries have been moved to the countryside; engineering projects to improve urban water systems re-direct industrial pollution to rural areas; and

54 See Kang Shu, “The Difficult Question of the Rural Garbage Disposal is Urgent and Pressing for an Answer”, *Economics Daily*, 17 February 2015. http://paper.ce.cn/jjrb/html/2015-02/17/content_232231.htm.

55 See a 2006 news report on the 10th National People’s Congress, http://www.gov.cn/ztl/2006-03/08/content_222382.htm.

urban landfills that are predominantly located in the countryside produce secondary pollution for the “socialist countryside”. As the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) once said, an accelerating environmental crisis in rural areas is fundamentally a question of social justice in a nation where the most fundamental inequalities continue to be organized along rural-urban lines.⁵⁶ Most recently, the significant *Shibada* (The Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China), held in November 2012, set “Beautiful China (*meili zhongguo*)” as the goal of “ecological civilization construction (*shengtai wenming jianshe*)”, intending to improve China’s environmental conditions. The “new socialist villages” were meant to be included in this “Beautiful China” project. Nevertheless, “modernization indoors, disorder outdoors” persists as a chronic problem, constantly appearing in media reports.⁵⁷

Dead animals in irrigation ditches and human waste in plastic bags piled beside the market street are uncanny – even if strategically not seen – reminders of the inescapability and intimacy of filth for both urban and rural people, who can never totally succeed in repressing their conscious awareness of it, or its centrality to their own lives. Walking on the Shang village road was far from pleasant, especially in the winter when there was no grass or shrubbery to hide the trash scattered all over the roadside slopes and ditches. Shang villagers recognized this undesirable state of affairs. One villager commented to me, “now our houses are better, but the environment is worse.” Urban or rural trash is being produced all the time, everywhere, whether it is displaced and systematically exported so it will be invisible, or piles up visibly where it can scarcely be ignored. As I have shown earlier, Shang villagers navigate all aspects of everyday life with fine discriminations about hygiene. They are by no means less clean than urbanites, including me. Their fastidiousness demonstrates that it is possible for villagers to identify as urban, partly through their modern hygienic practices, just as Li Shu did in his new house. Thus, even in the village it is possible to try to exist at a distance from village “dirtiness”.

Meanwhile, the trash heaps on the streets of the county seat uncannily display that urban folks “have never been modern” either, if we compare, for example, Zhaozhou with Tianjin, the big Chinese city discussed by Ruth

56 See Pan Yue, “Environmental Protection and Social Justice 环境保护与社会公平”, in *China National Conditions and Strength* 中国国情与国力 2004, 12th issue. <http://www.eedu.org.cn/Article/epedu/greeneyes/200410/2884.html>.

57 See a 2015 journal article posted on the Chinese Environment Network (*zhonghua huanjing wang*): <http://www.zhhjw.org/a/qkzz/zzml/2015nianogyyue/fengmianbaodao/2015/0922/5648.html>.

Rogaski in *Hygienic Modernity*. As Rogaski and others have made clear, to maintain perfect cleanliness in urban public space demands constant efforts, including intensive labor, extensive time, and, of course, large amounts of money. To keep clean is expensive.⁵⁸ While all of these means are currently unavailable in most rural villages, the lack of waste management in the countryside unfairly perpetuates the insistent perception that “peasants are dirty”.

Freud described the concept of the uncanny as “nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old – established in the mind and [...] estranged only by the process of repression” (1919: 13).⁵⁹ In the context of this chapter, we can say that those who are attempting to disconnect themselves from all-too-present forms of filth include self-identified urbanites as well as those who are self-consciously “modern”, like my friends in the Zhaozhou county seat. When they described to me the “unbearable” rural hygienic conditions, they were actively distancing themselves from the stigmatized “dirty” countryside. Yet, they could not avoid – and could only half-successfully attempt to ignore – an increasingly dirty environment in their own town. Despite all their efforts to displace dirtiness to some other place, dirtiness inevitably remained in close proximity with “urban” everyday life. Townspeople try not to see the dirt in their own immediate surroundings. For them, dirtiness always resides somewhere else, with the dirty peasants, a short- or long bike ride, or drive, or bus ride away.

In fact, if one inquires into history, it might be noted that Europe was a dirty place until recently. This was indicated in the seventeenth century by Dutch amazement about the clean habits of the Africans of Guinea (Wear 1993). Spitting is another example. Elias has eloquently indicated in his analysis of the history of manners, that mores about spitting experienced a radical reversal among the nobler classes of Europeans, shifting from a perceived need *for* it to the more or less complete elimination of *the need* itself.⁶⁰

58 Taking the famous Suzhou River in Shanghai for example, Suzhou River had been heavily polluted by both industrial waste water and sewage since the 1920s. Shanghai municipal government started to treat the river in 1988. By 2005, 11 billion RMB had been spent in these 17 years. The third phase of the treatment project started in early 2007 with a budget of 3.4 billion RMB. The length of Suzhou River in Shanghai City is 53.1 km. See <http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/nw2/nw2314/nw2315/nw5827/u21aw189962.html>.

59 Also see *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. XVII, page 241.

60 According to Elias, for example, in 1729, it was recorded in a book on etiquette that “You should not abstain from spitting, and it is very ill-mannered to swallow what should be spat. This can nauseate others” (Elias 1994: 127). And in the Middle Ages, “it was not only a custom but also clearly a generally felt need to spit frequently. It is also entirely commonplace in the

According to Elias, the feeling of revulsion at spitting is more a product of broad socio-historical processes than it is natural; or, in the best analysis, it is both (1994: 125-131). Likewise, hygiene is a field in which fine discriminations are constantly being made in everyday experience. Elias considers spitting “a good example of the malleability of psychic life” (1994: 131). Here, I would argue that not only psychic life but bodily life, too, is malleable. Habits, or better, habitus, are historically contingent for both minds and bodies.

It was in the nineteenth century that strong social, moral, and racial as well as physical aspects of human existence began to be invested in modern hygiene regimes.⁶¹ These changes converged with global-scale colonization in the early twentieth century when, according to Bruno Latour’s examination of the history of French public health, European hygienists teamed up with colonizers, and European standards of hygiene started to be concomitant with progress and civilization on a global scale (1988: 143-145).⁶²

This important ambiguity is heightened in the Chinese translation of hygiene, or *weisheng*, with its origins in early twentieth-century language reform, introduced briefly in the opening of this chapter. Rogaski has argued that there was an overdetermined transformation of the Chinese understanding of hygiene, and she makes it clear that this “hygienic modernity” was, initially, foreign (and imperial), and then urban (and elitist). For example, in her anatomy of Tianjin city when it was a treaty port in the 1910s, Rogaski describes:

[Foreign] concessions laboured mightily to eliminate from their streets any signs of wastes, waters, or the men who carried them. Through the

courts of the feudal lords. The only major restraint imposed is that one should not spit on or over the table but under it” (Elias 1994: 128).

61 John Scanlan, for example, quotes Thomas H. Seiler in his discussion of the analogy between hygiene and Christian morality: “the Edenic, paradisiacal garden with its calm, its flowers, its light, its sweet smells is counterpoised by a chaotic and cacophonous place that is dark, dirty, and offensively smelly” (2005: 18). He goes on to argue that, “In contemporary societies we strive for such a paradisiacal order not only through the agencies of public hygiene, but also through obsession with the health and maintenance of the individual body” (*Ibid*). In this original examination of “garbage” in Western culture, *On Garbage*, Scanlan shows how Western philosophy, science and technology worked together in a prolonged act of cleansing, a practice that he claims has driven so-called Western progress for thousands of years. Scanlan persuasively illustrates that one can understand the condition of contemporary life only by examining the ‘garbage’ – the detached leftovers of *progress*, “a stark reminder of what we really are” (12).

62 Warwick Anderson has also depicted the “civilizing process” in the American colonization of the Philippines from 1898 through the 1930s, especially the bodily and behavioral reforms involved in public hygiene. In particular, Anderson traces the genealogy of development/modernization back to “the medical mobilization of civic potential” in the Philippines in the early twentieth century. See Anderson 2006.

application of hygienic modernity to urban space, some areas of the city made the functions of daily living invisible. Slaughterhouses, dye makers, and pigskin boilers moved out. Water and waste ran silently under the streets. [...] In spite of rhetorical tendencies to proclaim hygiene a product of inherent characteristics, the borders between *weisheng* and *bu* [meaning “not”] *weisheng* required constant patrolling, constant effort, a constant influx of capital and labor. (2004: 223)

And then for the urban elites in the 1930s,

The acquisition of *weisheng* by the elite – manifest in domestic plumbing, flush toilets, foreign underwear, and a knowledge of germs – allowed them both to distinguish themselves from the masses and at times to unify their interests with the foreign presence in China. In the eyes of many elites, the hygienic transformation of the common man and thus of the nation was never complete. Modernizers embraced *weisheng* as the basis for a discourse of Chinese deficiency: it was that which the Chinese lacked, and that which the foreign Other possessed (2004: 301).

In other words, as they embraced hygienic modernity, the urban elites “simultaneously escaped identification with Chinese peasants and evaded the violently imposed stigma of ‘lack’ that the peasantry now bore” (Rogaski 2004: 168). Reducing all the hierarchical social, financial, and colonial components of treaty port society into a hygienic regime, *weisheng* was an ultimate and global good for the urban elites (Rogaski 2004: 252).

Nevertheless, practices and standards of hygiene are local and contextual, highly dependent on particular material conditions. The urban-rural distinction in China, insofar as it invokes essences of modernity or backwardness, is mobile and relative, and, ultimately, imaginary. Trash becomes a problem not because rural people are “peasants” and thus “dirty”, but because households in Shang village have nowhere to put their most unmanageable, unusable waste, except for beside or behind their own or somebody else’s house. Without facilities or personnel to process trash, burning and burying remain the basic strategies to keep the amount of everyday trash at a lower level. As time goes on, these methods are proving unable to keep up with modern forms of trash proliferation.

But Shang villagers’ lifestyle remains simple, despite the fact that there has been a significant increase in household income. Villagers still generate significantly less trash than their urban counterparts. Villagers’ everyday

Figure 16 The village recycling business

frugality attempts to resist, but ultimately participates in the commodified modernization that puts candy-wrappers in the children's play areas and thins the soil with chemicals. Meanwhile, the universalized imagination of urban life as equivalent to clean and rural life as equivalent to dirty stubbornly persists in the minds of both villagers and urbanites. For Shang Village, and rural China generally, the recent problem of excessive trash production and lack of a garbage disposal system exposes a fundamental question of so-called modernization, one that is materially and systematically repressed in only some urban settings. As philosopher John Scanlan has said, "garbage is a ghostly foe, a shadow of our supposedly cleansed reality, where its method of disposal ensures that it no longer really comes to light. Instead, it vanishes into a spectral reality that is uncanny" (2006: 160).

Indeed, everyday hygiene in rural Henan reveals the "spectral reality" of modernization, a reality that has been partially removed from view in modern towns and cities, making them seem clean.⁶³ The imagined cleanli-

63 There have been increasing complaints about the heavy pollution in the countryside of the more industrialized east coastal area such as Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Fujian, and Guangdong

ness and order of modern cities not only depends on taken-for-granted infrastructures, but also on waste being sent elsewhere. For those who must participate in the modern economy but lack the resources to make its inevitable “dirt” disappear, dirt accumulates on one’s own doorstep in an everyday environment like that of Shang village. Barring any means of truly removing trash from the roads, yards, and fields of the village, residents can only strive to achieve a certain amount of distance between their own bodies, or their family domestic life, and the refuse that is a by-product of their (and our) modern lives. To put it directly, the modernity that marginalizes villagers as “dirty” people is the same regime that pollutes their ailing bodies and renders the countryside “unhygienic”.

Environmental hygiene is a target for governmental intervention, a site for promoting self-discipline, and a social field in which villagers are subjected to mutual evaluation and surveillance. Everyday hygiene in Shang village makes it clear that a life-optimizing state-governed biopower has not been very effective in the countryside. The shortfall of any positive governmentality is all too evident for those who have to live with pollution and environmental degradation. Indeed, in a recent phone conversation with Li Shu, he told me that due to the increasing groundwater pollution in the Zhaoying area, all households in Shang village have now installed *zilaishui* (piped water), including those villagers who buy water from the plant located at Tonglu at a cost of 2.30 RMB per ton, and a few others, like Li Shu, who installed their own indoor plumbing system (those who can dig the well as deep as 100 meters, much deeper than traditional ones). However, the sewage system is still missing and no garbage collecting service is in place. This has become an increasingly serious problem, he told me.

Furthermore, the dilemma is not just economic. Norms around hygiene and the repression of trash and dirt in the modern consciousness are internalized by villagers, and the stigma of peasanthood figures as an integral part of their collective life. The carefully maintained divide between clean personal bodies and dirty village spaces brings an *uncanny* tenor to the so-called modern world. The prevailing narrative of “modernization indoors, dirt and disorder outdoors” (*shinei xiandaihua, shiwai zangluan*), which has been used to describe environmental problems in rural areas, is, at the same time, commonly identified by many as a reform-era shift

provinces, where clusters of small-scale private enterprises are run without sufficient methods of pollution control. In my visit to Shang villagers who worked as migrant laborers in a suburban area in Wenzhou City, Zhejiang province, the river there was literally black and the riverbank was filled with domestic trash. I will extend this discussion in Chapter Three.

in the relation between private and public.⁶⁴ Some have gone so far as to denounce the (so-called) revived bad character and essence of Chinese peasants, expressing a selfishness that was repressed in the collectivist era but, with privatization, restored an “immoral” lifeway (Liu 2000) or “crisis of ethics” (Shen 2006). In the next chapter, I will address this question of the transformation of social relations in Shang village under new economic conditions.

64 Ironically, in major Chinese cities, as Joshua Goldstein indicates in his study of migrant laborers who come to cities to glean and recycle urban trash, the public spaces for trash handling are subject to fierce competition between refuse scavengers. See Goldstein 2006, “The Remains of the Everyday: One Hundred Years of Recycling in Beijing”, in Dong and Goldstein, pp. 260-302.

3 Immanent Sociality: Open-ended Belonging

One morning, I woke up to the sound of Ayi's voice, unusually loud outside the courtyard. Quickly getting up and hurrying out, I saw her standing at the gate angrily waving one arm; a stream of curses flew from her mouth. A dead chicken that had been dumped near her gate the night before that had sparked her anger. This anonymous "polluting" act immediately enraged Ayi. She was furious, and her fury could be heard in the whole neighborhood. Other neighbors seemed to have chosen to stay inside to avoid Ayi's sharp tongue; only Lihua and Shaoli were standing nearby. About ten minutes later, Ayi took a spade out to pick up the chicken. She carried it to the main north-south road and threw the dead chicken into the roadside ditch. On the face of it, this was nothing more than another polluting act, but, as it turned out, "pollution" in the form of more trash in a public area was not her main concern at that moment. In fact, Ayi was angry about this *quede* (immoral) behavior because she feared her own chickens might be infected by the diseases that might have killed the dead bird. She later admitted that she could have buried the chicken instead of throwing it in the ditch, but Ayi justified herself, "at least on that part of the main road there were not any households nearby." She was, in a sense, acting according to the principles of hygiene mentioned in the previous chapter; she established a distance between village bodies (those of humans and healthy chickens) and a polluting substance. In such events, pollution is re-defined in local terms.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, in practice, the privatization of cleanliness and the recent trash problem in public areas, with its relationship to the idea of the "dirty" peasant, is complex. On the other hand, the prevailing public media narratives of "modernization indoors, disorder outdoors", used to describe environmental problems in rural areas, has likewise stirred up criticism among urban intellectuals of "Chinese peasants" as being selfish, and lacking a sense of the collective (*quefa jiti yishi*).¹ In the case of Ayi's action of throwing the dead, possibly diseased chicken

¹ In addition to the common criticisms from major media outlets, such as the *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency, which see villagers as a "petit peasantry" that is atomized like "a sheet of loose sand," quite a few others have examined socio-political influences on "the changing ethics in rural society", focusing on the process of modernization and especially the rapid development of a market economy. Some argue that these changes have produced individualistic, selfish peasants indifferent to collective affairs.

into the ditch, a place owned and managed by no one, on the surface it would seem to support the perception that villagers have become completely selfish under the present system of “household responsibility”, especially when their attitudes are compared to a presumably more communal spirit during the collectivist era.² Zhishu, the village Party Secretary, when he speaks as a grassroots official of Shang Village, shares a similar concern, which I will discuss further in the next chapter. Many intellectuals, despite their sometimes self-critical stance, tend to view Chinese villagers as being unable to organize on their own and as being in need of external help in order to form, for example, a collective cooperative.³

However, my field experience persuaded me that Shang villagers’ life, far from being selfish or “lacking a sense of the collective”, is significantly interdependent and sociable. These qualities are embodied not only in everyday activities in the village, but in networking for marriage arrangements, in migration patterns, and in migrant daily life in cities. I suggest that village sociality is, to a great degree, based upon a “broad familism”⁴ shared by the residents of Shang village, or more generally, a tacit sense of communalism that stems from local co-existence. The fact of having lived together in the same place for a long period of time provides the most obvious foundation for a full experience of membership in the group or community.

This chapter describes forms of village sociality in Shang people’s life, including the lives of villagers working far away as migrant laborers in cities, and traces some changing social relations in the village, especially family relations. The two forms of relationship, family ties, and community ties, are constantly interwoven in villagers’ everyday life and conversation. In fact, throughout my description and discussion, it may prove impossible to separate them into different or distinct domains. In a certain sense, this inseparability of kith and kin demonstrates that Chinese villagers have always lived interdependently in one way or another, and continue to do so.

2 Some researchers have gone even further, decrying “the crisis of ethics in rural society”, a claim that has been widely accepted in Chinese academic discourses about rural society.

3 He Huili, for example, a well-known activist and rural sociologist who has led the building of a few cooperative agencies in Lankao County, Henan Province, in a recent article she co-authored with Professor Wen Tiejun, who coined the term of *sannong wenti* (three-dimensional rural problems), calls for attention to “the dilemma of “petit peasantry,” who do not know how to cooperate on their own. See He and Wen 2014.

4 This term emerged in the 1990s, when many Chinese scholars favored the concept of “neo-collectivism”. See Wang Ying 2000: Wang argues that the “broadened familism (*fan jiazou wenhua*)” is “the socio-cultural foundation of China’s rural modernization” (p. 246). It is noteworthy that in the 1990s the intellectual discourse on rural familism took a fairly positive tone, in contrast to recent (since the turn of the twenty-first century) negative uses of the term.

As I will show in this chapter, this manner of coordinated (and coordinating) living is a kind of “open-ended belonging”; that is to say, a sociality that is “the effective condition of collective change” (Massumi 2002: 77).

My discussion in this chapter also aims to engage the prevailing discourse that sees a *lack* on the part of Chinese peasants of any sense of the collective or of any capacity to organize by themselves.⁵ I will argue that village sociality may be unformalized, but it is not unorganized. That is to say, social relations are non-formally ordered on a certain plane of immanence,⁶ relations are constantly being constituted and habituses are being formed, though not usually through formal regulation. Village sociality is organized through long-constituted relations and always already formed habituses, however contingent and changeable these may be. With regard to discourses on “*peasants’ state of lack*”, I argue that a recent scholarly refusal to recognize village sociality can be traced to the informality of village ties; these ties tend to exist, and even thrive, beyond the State’s purview. To a certain degree, social action at the immanent village level is of no interest to formal regulatory and reporting structures at higher levels; it goes unnoticed. For example, free labor exchange, instead of paid labor, is still taking place among fellow villagers and relatives and friends; practical goods of this kind do not appear in accountings of the rural economy. To put it another way, what village residents “lack” is a formalization of their actions within a normalized discourse.

In relation to health services, for example, there are always forms of illness that are not recognizable, deemed to be non-infectious, and not likely to influence the sufferer’s or community’s labouring capacity. Such illnesses do, however, directly relate to villagers’ everyday activities. Examples are toothaches or upset stomachs; these ailments remain a usual topic of conversation, especially when Shang villagers gather to talk at the village clinic, where they share folk prescriptions to treat illnesses that diverge from the standardized practices of medical institutions. It is common for next-door neighbors to drop by asking for some specific kind of thread to mend a quilt, or for relatives to ask for help harvesting their land, or housewives to ask for some small cooking ingredient that they have run out of. Such practices would not be of any interest to the governing state, but they are

5 Cao Jinqing, a well known scholar on rural problems in China, for example, considers “the fundamental task of the recent state project of the New Socialist Villages is to construct rural organizations,” because peasants are now “scattered” due to the individualistic economy.

6 This refers to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of “the plane of immanence,” introduced first in *What Is Philosophy?* I will elaborate on this idea further in my later discussion relating to village sociality.

immanent in everyday life. In fact, during the land reform era of the 1950s, some official reports were critical of the “excessively social” Shang villagers who apparently tended to ignore official demarcations of class boundaries.⁷

In the past, before the beginning of the reform era and the household responsibility system, I was told, organized – or assigned – collective activities were scheduled constantly, leaving little time for villagers to enjoy leisure activities and visit friends and relatives. In addition to their collective farming responsibilities, young men were continually being recruited to labor at construction sites far from their village and family; and everyone was required to join various mandatory *zhengzhi yundong* (political mobilizations), most of which took the form of mass meetings. “*Guoqu jiushi yundong duo, huiduo* (In the past it was all about mobilizations and meetings),” I was told, “*yige jiezhe yige* (one right after another)” and “we got only five days [during the Chinese New Year] to visit with our relatives and friends out of the whole 365-day year.” Understandably, those five days were very important to villagers. In our conversations, they still talked about their vivid memories of how they managed to maintain some of their Spring Festival customs during the collectivist era. Village sociality never stopped coexisting with the official system, no matter how much the latter cut across the former, or how much tension and equivocation existed between these two orders. Village sociality is *immanent* to villagers’ everyday life; in this case, too, village sociality is something that, though prevalent, can find no place in official discourse.

Here, my discussion of the immanent sociality somewhat differs from Adam Chau’s notion of “red-hot (*honghuo*) sociality” (2006), which he convincingly employs to depict sociable events in rural China, such as temple festivals, weddings, and funeral banquets. While he emphasizes “the sensorial production of the social” by people engaged in heterogeneous activities in those “hot and noisy” (*renao*) events (Chau 2006, 2008), I use immanent sociality to capture an everyday, taken-for-granted, and unarticulated sense of shared well-being.⁸ In contrast to recent social analyses that suggest a

7 In my archival research in the County Archive, I found a local report from Zhaoying Township office – then known as “the People’s Commune of Zhaoying” – that complained about Shang villagers neglecting to advance the class struggle: apparently ordinary villagers still talked to the former landlords and rich peasants, and even laughed together with them, because of their kinship ties. In the report, such behaviour was considered disruptive to the solidarity of the collectivist system.

8 In his 2006 monograph, Chau makes an explicit contrast between *honghuo* sociality and the everyday: “the more dramatic modality of honghuo desire lies in the contrast Shaanbei people make between the dull and bland drudgery of everyday life and the lively and exciting

growing lack of morality and rise of selfish individualism in rural China, I follow Ellen Oxfeld and Hans Steinmuller to suggest that one needs to pay attention to “everyday ethics” (Steinmuller 2013: 13-19), attending to those “moral processes [that] are found in the daily living and discussion of ordinary people as they encounter conflict, make decisions, and pass judgments on those in their own communities” (Oxfeld 2010: 24). It is in this sense that a thorough exploration of village sociality can better reveal “local moral worlds,” as Long and Moore have argued, “[recognizing] sociality as a dynamic matrix of relations [...] [that] always contains both ethical and political dimensions” (2013: 10).

To understand sociality as a dynamic matrix of relations, the Deleuzian idea of “the plane of immanence,”⁹ as developed for questions of social belonging by Brian Massumi, can help to imagine social forces as operating in a three-dimensional space with depth, instead of being represented across a two-dimensional flat surface.¹⁰ This pluralization of the “planes” of social connection (and disconnection) helps us to avoid the commonly-held assumption of an opposition between the public (or collective) and the private (or individual).¹¹ Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong’s notion of *chaxu geju*, which is translated as “differential mode of association” (Fei 1992), also refers to the relational ethics that characterize rural social networks,

social events such as funeral and wedding banquets or temple festivals” (2006: 155). Although Chau does not mean to say sociality only exists in those social events, obviously he downplays the “blandness and drudgery of everyday life,” which, I suggest, is also filled with shared and continuously produced sociality.

9 In *What Is Philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari develop the “plane of immanence” to account for problems that concern philosophy and the history of philosophy, mainly the ongoing question of transcendence. Although their discussion is focused mainly on the field of philosophy, images they sketch of the planes of immanence – for example, “that becoming, that coexistence is why planes may sometimes separate and sometimes join together” – are useful to distinguish village sociality from hegemonic formal structures without losing sight of the communication between the two, as well in highlighting certain features of village sociality that are local and intimate. Two sources for understanding the Deleuzian concept of immanence are Osborne and Rose’s historical analysis “Governing the City” and Brian Massumi’s explication of “The Political Economy of Belonging”. See Osborne and Rose, *Governing Cities: Liberalism, Neoliberalism, Advanced Liberalism* 1998, and Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation, Post-contemporary Interventions* 2002, especially pp. 68-88.

10 “[...] there are varied and distinct planes of immanence that, depending upon which infinite movements are retained and selected, succeed and contest each other in history” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 39). Also, “we can and must presuppose a multiplicity of planes, since no one plane could encompass all of chaos without collapsing back into it [...] each plane has its own way of constructing immanence” (*Ibid.*: 50).

11 “The plane of immanence is *interleaved*” (*Ibid.*). And, “every plane is not only interleaved but holed, letting through the fogs that surround it” (*Ibid.*: 51).

in which “the boundary between the public and private spheres is relative” (68). Rather than continue to worry about a classic individual-society divide, which seems salient only when social practice is represented structurally and ahistorically, Deleuze and Guattari maintain that “on the plane of immanence we are always and already on the absolute horizon” that is in “infinite movement.”¹² In other words, village social relations are always present and under construction, but the forms of local social practice continuously change and interact with other practices, such as those of formal regulatory structures, which, in turn, contribute to the endless becoming of an ungraspable, irreducibly complex, and changing social: what could be known as immanent sociality.

In what follows, I will first discuss a debate among Chinese intellectuals, dating from around 2006, about the so-called “Xiaogang village paradox”. The perceived paradox is that residents of Xiaogang Village in Anhui Province, in 1978 just as Reform policies were being established, collectively initiated a system of (individual) Household Responsibility. This was a move in which villagers themselves, working together, decided to decollectivize their previously strong collectivist system. And they did so well before the demise of the large agricultural communes in the 1980s. Through this discussion I hope to make clear that what I refer to as village sociality is not to be conflated with the practical life of “collectivist society”, which was endorsed at the time by the Maoist governing discourse. Village sociality instead describes a tacit, intrinsic, and taken-for-granted mode of practice that is specific to a society or community where people grow up and live together in close proximity.

I The Xiaogang Village paradox

In November 1978, eighteen households of Xiaogang Village¹³ in Anhui Province collectively, yet secretly, signed a contract to practice “household responsibility” among themselves. This was an extremely bold act enacted against the then-prevailing Commune system.¹⁴ The Xiaogang villagers

¹² *Ibid.*: 38.

¹³ Xiaogang was actually a production team at the time, but it was the size of a so-called natural village today. The two levels that were above this production team were the production brigade, equivalent to today’s administrative village, and the people’s commune, equivalent to today’s township.

¹⁴ It was still required that the people’s commune system should be firmly implemented, according to the Communiqué of the historic “Third Plenum of the Party’s Eleventh Central

decided to divide the collective land among the households, under the principle that they would first fulfil the required state allotment of, say, grain, then save enough for certain collective uses (production team administrative expenses, for example), and, lastly, allocate the remaining surplus to each household.¹⁵ The allocation of these portions from each plot of land was to be under the control of the landholder, rather than the formally recognized production team.

Unexpectedly, their collective de-collectivization was positively recognized by the Anhui provincial government, and then singled out for praise in 1980 by central government leader Deng Xiaoping. With this encouragement, more and more production teams and brigades collectively adopted the decollectivized form known as “the household responsibility system”. Finally, on 1 January 1982, the Central Committee of the Communist Party (CCCP) issued its first “*Yihao Wenjian*” (Number One Document) to confirm that the “household responsibility system” had become official state policy for agricultural production. By 1983, all of the 12,702 communes in China had been dismantled along these lines.¹⁶

Since then, the Xiaogang Village decision has been seen as a watershed moment, signalling the start of China’s rural reform process. It is also considered to be a significant achievement in changing state policy from the bottom up. Almost thirty years later, a Chinese scholar, Wang Xiaoyi, initiated a discussion of this movement with an essay entitled “The Paradox of Xiaogang Village”, arguing that, in hindsight, it was, in fact, contradictory for the Xiaogang villagers to *collectively* decide to dissolve their own collective (Wang 2004). Wang Xiaoyi asks, if the Xiaogang villagers could gather themselves together to depart from the state collectivist system – running a risk that they, at least, perceived as enormous, not only in political terms

Committee” of December 1978, which announced the Party’s decision to “shift the emphasis of the Party’s work to socialist modernization.” The Communiqué was seen as a decisive ending point of the Maoist era, though the agricultural communes were not abolished at that point. There have been numerous books published in English on this period of Chinese history, including Meisner 1999; Schram 1984; and Tsou 1999.

15 The hand-written contract reads, “We, the heads of each household, sign and seal here to divide the land down to the household. [...] If we fail, our cadres are willing to be imprisoned and even beheaded, and the other members’ promise to raise their children till they are 18 years old.” This contract has been declared a national treasure and is now kept in the Museum of Chinese Revolution in Beijing, under the code GB54563. When I looked at the picture of the contract, written on a piece of paper, I was most impressed by the 20 signatures followed by red fingerprints and seals.

16 See Ma and Ling 2011, *Dangdai Zhongguo Disanci Sixiang Jiefang Shilu* (Record of the Third Wave of Thought Liberation in Contemporary China), 2011.

(their pursuit of a seemingly non-socialist path), but also economically (when you consider their small chance of finding trading partners outside the collectivist system) – why did they not agree to continue to labor on their collective's land, collectively?

There have been various responses to Wang Xiaoyi. The majority, including Wang, maintain that Xiaogang villagers' collective action was only a means to an end, i.e. that of achieving, or once again expressing, "peasant individualism" as Wang called it. In other words, according to these analyses, the Xiaogang villagers' collective action should not count as "collective", but as a sign of underlying peasant individualism reflected in their long-standing preference for the self-evidently valuable goal of de-collectivizing and individualizing production. Wang goes even further to state that this exposes the *nature* of peasants as being "*zisi* (selfish)" and "*sanman* (scattered)",¹⁷ as many Chinese intellectuals have insisted.¹⁸

Qin Hui, a prominent historian from Tsinghua University, on the other hand, pointed out that Wang had confused compulsory state control with voluntary village collectivism, failing to realize that there were two "communities" at play – the small community (villagers' voluntary and natural collective) and the great community (the official collectivist system). Based on this distinction, Qin maintains "it is all too reasonable for the small community to undermine the great community."¹⁹

Qin's differentiation between villagers' voluntary collective and the official collectivist system seems to make better sense of Chinese social conditions than Wang's essentialist claims. However, his conception of the small community and the great community has limitations,²⁰ especially as

17 I find it difficult to identify an English word compatible with *sanman*, which literally means "scattered" and "hard to organize". Here, it connotes the meaning of the well-known Chinese phrase, coined by leading intellectuals in early twentieth-century China – among them Liang Qichao (1873-1929), who was the first to use this term for the Chinese common people in 1901. Sun Yat-sen also highlighted it in a famous speech in 1924 – he denounced the Chinese people at large as "a sheet of loose sand," seeing them as unwilling or unable to form a collective body or a public-spirited ethics.

18 And not just Chinese intellectuals; Marx described the French small peasants as "potatoes in a sack" in his famous essay "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte". This was a similar metaphor that denounced peasants as being unable to organize and represent themselves. See Marx 1972.

19 See <http://www.sannongzhongguo.net/shownews.asp?newsid=13420>, "*Zhongguo dadi, weishenme renxin sanle* (Why have people's minds been scattered in China)?" by Qin Hui.

20 Here, what comes to mind is Robert Redfield's discussion of the little tradition and great tradition in his classic *Peasant Society and Culture* (1956). As many critiques of Redfield's idea of two traditional planes of culture have made clear, this sense of "tradition" tends to assume a relatively self-bounded entity. See, for example, a critique made by Kearney 1996.

he puts these two in a naturally antagonistic relationship. If Qin means to suggest that there is an *intrinsic* contradiction between the small community and the great community, the very fact that the State was soon in agreement with the Xiaogang villagers does not seem to support his assertion.

But what was the real sense of paradox for intellectual analysts of rural society? It seems that for scholars debating the “Xiaogang Village Paradox”, only the formally organized and institutionalized collective is really “society”,²¹ while the household responsibility system is not seen to be grounded in any sociality. In other words, once the collective is divided into households (a natural unit, it is presumed), direct and sustaining connections between households become implausible or invisible. Households were considered to be discrete entities “scattered” (*sanman* in Chinese) back into their natural state of atomism by the responsibility system. According to some of these scholars, then, the “paradox” of collective decollectivization is thus understood as a curiously social refusal of society.

I argue instead that the Xiaogang villagers’ voluntary collective action was actually an effect of an immanent village sociality that had not been banished by formal collectivism – that is, the long-standing network of informal ties and everyday practices in which households are embedded and without which villages and their residents could not function as dwelling places of any kind.²² There are, after all, a great and relatively constant number of shared concerns in villages: who has bought a certain piece of land to build a new house (and how will they, or did they, raise funds to do so)? Who will be available to help with a large harvest, or with a wedding banquet? Who can volunteer a day’s labor to help take down the old house? Who can help the children find an appropriate marriage partner? Instead of a “small community”, which inevitably contrasts with a “larger”, but arguably more imaginary “community,” I find the term *immanent* community better enables us to capture the intrinsic, tacit, and taken-for-granted qualities of village sociality. Immanent sociality might also be thought of as encouraging attention to the plane of habitus that becomes specific to a society or community where people grow up and live together for long periods of time.²³

21 The connotation of these two Chinese words: *jiti* (collective) and *shehui* (society) are noteworthy here: *jiti* means a simple gathering of individuals; while *shehui* means something more like structured social association.

22 Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the plane of immanence as “the breath that suffuses the separate parts” provides a helpful image of this (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 36). And they go on to maintain, “We will say that *THE* plane of immanence is, at the same time, that which must be thought and that which cannot be thought. It is nontought within thought” (59).

23 See Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* pp. 47–48.

In any case, the social practice of rural villages in China today requires a separate appellation and a distinct analysis. The failure to perceive and address the specificities of village sociality, I argue, is exactly the reason that Wang and others can remain judgmental about rural society. They adopt the perspective of “seeing like a state”;²⁴ that is, their tendency is to equate the social with the “collective”, the latter being the main concern of governing.

In other words, village sociality does not coincide with the regulatory field of applied State power, which is “in an operation of transcendence” (i.e. appearing static and abstract) (Massumi 2002: 82-83). Instead, immanent sociality “leak[s] from State regulation on every side,” as Brian Massumi indicates (2002: 82). Meanwhile, the authoritarian party-state system is not entirely separate and remote; it nevertheless influences social relations in Shang Village and has its presence even in the most mundane necessities of village life.

We can now better understand the State endorsement of the Household Responsibility System, a circumstance that Qin Hui failed to convincingly account for, with his assumption of conflicting small and great communities. As argued above, villagers’ voluntary “collective” action was an effect of what I am calling immanent village sociality. The Xiaogang example suggests that the ethics and politics immanent to villages are not necessarily antagonistic to state power. On the contrary, as Brian Massumi has written, the “social” is one of the “effective expressions of the positivity of belonging [that] elude the State, [and] this is why the State, like any regulatory apparatus, *follows* that which it regulates [with its] attempt to recoup, to re-channel into State-friendly patterns” (82-83). In the Xiaogang case, at least, village sociality is contingent and open to change, working beyond but not necessarily against state agencies. State actors (as I will particularly show in Chapter Four) are themselves part of this plane of immanence; they too are enmeshed in kin and social networks.

It is noteworthy that in 1977, one year before the Xiaogang Village decision, state agricultural policies had begun to permit larger private family plots for subsistence production and to encourage the expansion of rural markets.²⁵ These policies were already slowly tending toward the assembling of a Household Responsibility System, in comparison to the previously

24 This phrase is borrowed from James Scott’s book *Seeing Like a State* 1998, which critiques the “high-modernist, authoritarian state planning” as abstraction, distinct from local customs and practical knowledge. Although I find Scott’s account of state abstraction useful at this point, I should also add that, by making a clear and attractive contrast between the State and the individual, in this book Scott also falls into a similar logic of the antagonistic small and great communities. For a thoughtful critique of Scott’s simplification of modern state administration (and territorialization), see Feuchtwang 2004, pp. 19-24.

25 See Meisner, *Mao’s China and After*, pp. 427-435.

more strict managerial institution of the People's Commune. As historians have shown, since the 1970s, and especially following Mao's death in 1976, national leaders dealing with the aftermath of Cultural Revolution were prone to adopt a path that departed substantially from the Maoist state's emphasis on centralized organization of agricultural production. For Xiaogang villagers in particular, a province-wide drought in the summer and fall of 1978 left most villagers of Anhui Province with no harvest. Under such urgent circumstances, in September 1978 the provincial government decided to encourage members of the People's Communes (i.e. villagers) to reclaim wasteland on which they could plant their own wheat and vegetables, eschewing any demand on this produce from the collective. By November, though, the Xiaogang villagers, not wanting to risk starving to death, had gone farther, choosing to endanger themselves with the institution of "household responsibility" over collectively-held lands as well.²⁶

Xiaogang Village is a substantial example of the political and economic potential of village sociality: its elusive "immanence" directly counters scholarly narratives that draw a strict contrast between collectivist and household responsibility social forms, between the State and the family. Indeed, history is made up of "path-dependent"²⁷ adaptations to conditions on the part of groups acting at various levels, or on various "planes". Rural institutions and practices that are clear outcomes of pre-determined planning by the State are perhaps more rare, though planning for and with the countryside in China is a constant process of formation and reformation.

Indeed, I suggest that immanent village sociality persists in any form of society, even in societies that have been structurally atomized by modern market economies more radically than rural China has been. With its potential to produce collective change through "open-ended belonging", village sociality deserves specific analyses, and I will further develop the term in the following pages.

II Society of familiars

As I was moving into Ayi's house, I realized the immediate question for us was how to verbally address (and thus position) each other. Growing up

²⁶ See Ma and Ling 2011, (in Chinese) *Record of the Third Wave of Thought Liberation in Contemporary China*.

²⁷ This is a phrase often used by Deng Xiaoping to depict his idea of how to build "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics", otherwise known as Reform and Opening up China.

in my parents' work unit²⁸ I had used the term "Ayi", often translated as "Auntie", to address women who were one-generation older and unrelated to my family.²⁹ I ventured to ask, "Can I call you Ayi?" She gladly agreed. Before long, I realized that "Ayi" was a unique name employed only by me, a form of address that does not belong to the village. In conversations with Shang villagers, whenever the talk had to do with Ayi, they would add "*your Ayi (ni nage ayi)*." Through TV soap operas and movies, which are predominantly about urban life, villagers know "Ayi" is a form of address that can be widely used to refer to just about anybody. Use of the term signifies a particular urban perception of the social world as a "stranger society (*shengren shehui*)", where there are many encounters among people without kinship bonds with each other. In Shang village, however, and in most rural areas, familiarity with each other, through kinship ties or long-standing community ties, still plays an important role in social networks. That is, in contrast to the "society of strangers" of the city, the village still exists as a "society of familiars (*shuren shehui*)", where people always have some way to relate to each other via well-known connections.³⁰

Certain historical factors make Shang Village a rather typical "society of familiars". According to the written genealogy of the Shang family, the village was formed approximately 640 years ago (the second year of *Hongwu*, Ming Dynasty, which is 1369 AD), when two brothers moved to the area from Shanxi Province. According to senior villagers, the younger brother later decided that the two of them could not live in the same place and he thus moved again to a location nearby, which became another Shang Village, which now belongs to a different township. Shang-surnamed families in the village, therefore, are all supposed to share the same ancestor. This

28 An urban counterpart of the rural People's Commune in the planned economy era, the work unit embodied a unique Chinese socialist urbanism in its combination of economic, political, and social functions. For socio-cultural studies on the work units, see Henderson and Cohen 1984; Liu 2000; Lu 2006; Lü and Perry 1997; and Walder 1986.

29 Similarly, *Shushu* or "Uncle" is used to address the non-related men who are one-generation older. *Ayi* and *Shushu* are still commonly used among urbanites, though less prevalently than in the past. Ironically, there is now one more denotation for the term *Ayi*, that is for the maid hired by middle-class urban households. People generally add a *Xiao*, meaning "young", before *Ayi* to refer to their young maid, usually a migrant laborer from the countryside.

30 This concept of *shuren shehui* (society of familiars) is from Fei Xiaotong, who described Chinese rural society as "a society without strangers, a society based totally on acquaintances" in his most famous work in Chinese, *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (China From the Soil). This book was translated into English in 1992 by Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng, entitled *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, University of California Press. Andrew Kipnis has also described the prevalent use of kinship terms and names in his ethnography of Fengjia Village in Shandong Province. See Kipnis 1997, esp. pp. 32-38.

fourteenth-century progenitor had five sons who formed the five different lineages of the village; each such line is called a *men* (gate). The other two big families, i.e. the Wangs and Lis, also claim a similar history with the Shangs, in that their ancestors moved into this region in the fourteenth century and their families gradually developed into natural villages, i.e. Wang Temple village and South Li Manor village.

As noted, surname exogamy is generally practiced, and villagers do marry across different families within the administrative village unit. These marriage practices further complicate social networks in Shang village. To somewhat simplify, people do not invariably use kinship terms to refer to those outside their *men* (gate). It is common to call more remotely related fellow villagers by a first name or a nickname, especially given that the village has been made up of these same intermarrying families for hundreds of years. For example, Zhishu, the village party branch secretary, who belongs to a younger generation in the Shang family's fifth gate, is often called only by his first name or his nickname *Heilian* (Dark Face), a reference to his dark complexion. But this usage too conveys a general sense of intimacy, especially among those of the same generation.³¹

This is unlike some fairly standard forms of address used in urban work units. Even in Zhaozhou, there were sites where "urban" practices were the norm. During my stay in Zhaozhou County, I was called *Xiao Lai*, meaning "young Lai", or *Lai Boshi*, meaning "Dr. Lai". Calling people by their last name with either a prefix of *Lao* (old) or *Xiao* (young) to indicate an age difference, or a suffix that indicates one's social position, such as *laoshi* (teacher), *daifu* (doctor) or, even more frequently, *chuzhang* (director), or *shuji* (Party Secretary), has been a widely employed linguistic practice in urban work units since 1949.³² These practices are still prevalent in the post-Mao urban world.³³ While in Shang Village, I only heard township officials call Zhishu

31 This seems to be somewhat different from the Fengjia Village of the early 1990s that Kipnis studied. According to Kipnis, "in the context of everyday village life, being called by relational kinship terms instead of a name was considered a privilege" (Kipnis 1997: 37). For those who belong to the same generation in Shang Village, first names are clearly preferred to kinship terms.

32 Another important term much used in Maoist urban China but now mostly fallen out of use is *tongzhi*. Originally a Chinese translation from a Soviet communist term "comrade", *tongzhi* literally means "same will" in Chinese. It was after 1997, according to Chou Wah-Shan, when Hong Kong was reintegrated with China that the term *tongzhi* gained a homosexual connotation: "the emergence of the discourses of *tongzhi* signifies an endeavor to integrate the sexual into the social and cultural" (28). See Chou 2001.

33 One can easily identify this form of address from the TV soap operas, which are mostly based on mundane urban life, *Yearnings* (*Kewang*) is an example, an extremely popular series

Shang Shuji (Party Secretary Shang); villagers never referred to him in this way.³⁴ These differences in forms of address indicate a distinction in people's perceptions of urban and rural sociality, reflecting a taken-for-granted difference between a society of strangers and a society of familiars. By virtue of being conventional language practices, these differences are expressed in all the activities through which people position themselves and weave their way through the linked urban and rural social networks that are in play for villagers. Within the village itself, on the surfaces of social interaction, forms of address reflect actual structures of kin and an ideology of familism that play an important part in the social hierarchy in Shang village.

Xia, a retired teacher from the village elementary school, once expressed to me her frustration over a librarian position that Zhishu, the Party Secretary, wanted her to assume.³⁵ She said,

I am hesitant to take this position because I don't need the extra money. Both my sons have decent jobs in Zhengzhou and Luoyang³⁶, so I don't have worries about them; as a retired teacher I have my pension, and that is enough to support my husband and me without us having to work in the wheat fields. I know [to take care of the library] would be a good deed, but I also want to enjoy my life, not to mention, the salary Zhishu will pay is so low. On the other hand, it's hard for me to decline this position to his face. Unlike Xinhua, whom he calls "*shen'r* (auntie)" and who therefore can say "no" to him directly [because she is more senior than he is], I am of the same generation with him and he calls me "*saozi* (sister-in-law)". Whenever I want him to take my refusal seriously, he just jokes around and changes the subject. *Meifa shuo* (I can find no way out).

Xinhua was the other candidate who had declined Zhishu's request to be the librarian. Retired from her position as the *Funü Zhuren* (Director of Women's Affairs) of Shang Village in 1997, she is a well-respected woman in the village. Xinhua was in her sixties, Xia in her late fifties, and Zhishu

in the 1990s that has also been discussed by Lisa Rofel 1999.

34 Of course, it is never absolutely this way. Zhishu's friend in the township office called him by his first name as well, just as my friends in Beijing call me by my first name.

35 To comply with the national policy of the "New Socialist Villages", Zhishu built a community library with the support of a non-profit student-run organization, whose major task is to support rural education in a broad sense, and to expand villagers' access to published books and information. I am a member of this student organization.

36 Zhengzhou and Luoyang are the two biggest cities in Henan province. Zhengzhou is the capital city of Henan.

was in his early forties. They are all from the fifth gate of the Shang family, but not directly related in recent generations. A week after we talked, Xia reluctantly agreed to look after the library. Obviously, Zhishu was taking advantage of their kinship relations to get his work done, in a way that is by no means uncommon among village cadres.

Andrew Kipnis has also made a fine observation that the verb “to call” instead of “to be” is often used by Fengjia villagers together with a kinship term when introducing someone. “She whom I call *gugu* [father’s sister]”, for example, rather than “she who is my *gugu*” (1997: 37). However, instead of following him to interpret this way of using kinship terms as “a practice of *guanxi* [relationships] reproduction” (37), I think the habit of “calling” each other in kinship terms embodies immanent village sociality, which is tacit and taken for granted. As I shall illustrate shortly, the use of these kinship terms is not a calculated, conscious “making of *guanxi*”, but rather the expression of an unconscious habitus.

Kinship ties, especially within a gate, also play a role in important events such as arranging weddings and funerals, including the associated banquets and other gatherings. Kin ties figure in the organization of the labor of pulling down old houses and building new houses. Not only kinfolk within a gate, but more distantly related neighbors are called upon to help in such complex labors, and many others pitch in without being asked. Neighborly cooperation is especially common nowadays in the neighborhoods where there are new-style houses, even though in these newly built areas people are less likely to be related to each other. In such a case, it seems, the term “within a gate” becomes literal, since neighbors usually share the same front path that connects to the main road. And this “kinship”, or a broadened familism, is established by long-standing shared modes of being and relatedness.

For instance, Li Shu’s family and their next-door neighbor, who are Shangs, are on quite good terms. I was there for wedding preparations for the neighbor’s son during the Chinese New Year vacation. Li Shu and his family were actively involved in these preparations. From the beginning, when the bride’s parents came over to *kanjia* (inspect the house), through to the post-wedding banquet that accommodated the new daughter-in-law’s visiting relatives, the Li family helped out. In fact, house and marriage are usually closely interrelated as larger life projects, and the house is usually taken as the site of generating a future (of the family). In his ethnography of Fengjia Village, Kipnis has also indicated the complex social calculus involved in the larger life projects of house building and marriage which, as he rightly puts it, “were neither matters of daily activity nor formal ritual”

(1997: 30). The way in which the house literally invokes the social could be perceived in every aspect of everyday life. One interesting comment, which I overheard from Li Shu at one of the banquets, was an effort to articulate his relationship to his neighbors by saying, “since my daughter-in-law is a Shang, I am [the neighbor’s son’s] family by all means, no matter how winding is the path [that connects us].”³⁷

III Everyday sociality

Seeking to preserve a sense of Deleuzian immanence, in this section I will describe and interpret some expressions of village sociality in Shang villagers’ everyday life, in particular some random afternoon chat in two village clinics, so as to reveal some of the strong community ties among Shang people. In the previous chapter, I pointed out that most houses, including many new-style houses, have little furniture. Households are not set up for individual families to entertain or hang out inside their houses. Even though several well-to-do households do have modern-style furnishings such as sofas, upholstered chairs, and three-door wardrobes, these are usually bought by or for newlyweds. And most of these young couples, in fact, only stay in the house for a short time before leaving as migrants to work in the cities. Also, despite the popularity of television ownership and the fact that some individuals engage in a lot of unsociable TV viewing, for the majority of Shang villagers, watching TV happens only after dinner and before bedtime, a time when families in many northern Chinese villages tend to withdraw inside their houses anyway.

In the village, during busy agricultural periods, adults spend most of their daylight hours in the fields. During the fallow season, approximately from November to May, many men work for pay in village housing construction³⁸ while women get together for various projects such as sewing quilts, making baby clothes, or knitting sweaters and long underwear for family members (and occasionally friends). The fallow season is also a busy season for important events such as holiday celebrations, weddings, and baby’s *manyue* (first month) and *zhousui* (first year) celebrations, all of which

37 What Li Shu said in Chinese was: “七拐八拐总是一家人。”

38 This is undertaken alongside the cooperative labor-exchange noted above. Usually, taking down old houses is done by free labor exchange, while to build a new house requires an average pay of 20 RMB a day plus free meals for a few additional relatively skilled workers.

require collective effort and all usually include banquet preparation.³⁹ The most common public village scene during the fallow season, besides the collective labor of groups working on house construction and domestic production, are small groups gathered in front of village stores and clinics, or (less visible but far from private) in someone's courtyard. In the latter sort of gathering, because the gate to the courtyard is usually left open whenever the owner is at home, visitors tend to just walk in (though they are usually announced by the barking of the family dog). The host will then come out to greet and welcome his or her guest(s). In good weather, even when it is quite cold, many productive and unproductive activities take place in courtyards or in small front yards outside the gate: small chairs or stools are pulled out and people sit and *paihua* (chat).⁴⁰ Women usually knit and men tend to smoke. An open gate is an invitation to whoever passes by. People who walk past groups at doorways will always stop and greet one another, and being asked by such questions as, "*Shangjie qu* (are you going to the [market] street)?" or "*Shangna'r le* (where have you been)?" While people at their own door always urge, "*Jinlai zuo* (come on in and sit for a while)." These queries are not considered intrusive, and, in general, invitations to visit are usually sincerely meant. It would be awkward if villagers did not say anything to each other in passing. This is not only a "traditional" practice occurring at old-style courtyard houses; it is also expected at new-style houses located off busy main roads. Even motorcyclists passing by new-style houses along the busy road will slow down and extend greetings.⁴¹ Although the housing style has changed – there are, for example, no more courtyards in new-style houses – cultural practices of socializing have remained. Relatively few Shang villagers go to a teahouse to socialize because one has to spend money there, even though it is very inexpensive.⁴² More common places for

39 There is always a distinct division of labor in banquet preparation: there are one or two paid male cooks and a group of unpaid women facilitators in charge of keeping the fire going in the stove, cleaning utensils, cleaning, cutting, and chopping meat and vegetables, etc. The latter are usually friends and relatives of the host and come to help without any payment except for sharing the meal. Some might leave immediately after the preparation, too.

40 Households of Shang village are never short of small chairs or stools, which are called *dun'r* 墩儿 by villagers. They are made small so as to be easily carried around, to informal public gathering spots like the village store.

41 The only exceptions are outsiders who are not from Shang village just passing through, and people know this right away; still they can often tell if the passersby are from the neighboring villages, and from which household, even without knowing their names.

42 People use bowls to drink tea in countryside teahouses. In 2006, one bowl of tea cost 0.50 RMB, about 0.07 USD. Teahouses usually offer free playing cards and chess sets. The customers are predominantly elderly men. People said customers were usually gambling there, not going

social interaction include village stores and the crossroads at the center of the village where the larger open spaces provide a place to sit away from car traffic.

A village clinic is another popular place where Shang villagers gather socially. With more and more villagers leaving home to work outside as migrant laborers, Shang Village, like many other Chinese rural areas, has become a *kongxin cun* (hollow heart village), one with young people working outside and leaving their older parents and young children at home. For senior villagers, it is little wonder that their children's and their own health and illness become a central aspect of their everyday concerns. As one villager put it, "our staying healthy is the biggest contribution we can make to our children, who are away working hard to earn their livings."

The clinics usually have plenty of benches and offer a lot to talk about. Like other villagers, doctors are called by their first names or kin terms and the clinics are commonly called *yaopu* (drug stores). Villagers also referred to the clinic as a place "to get packets of drugs" (*bao yao*), instead of as a place to *kan bing* (literally meaning "look at disease"; that is, to see the doctor⁴³), which is how urbanites usually refer to the places where they seek medical care. There appears to be no class difference between doctors and their fellow villagers, even though doctors, considered to *you shouyi* (have a craft), do enjoy a certain amount of respect from villagers. This is especially true of Li Shu, who is recognized as the most experienced doctor in the village.

There are three clinics in Shang village.⁴⁴ Two of them, Shijin's and Li Shu's, are located beside the main country road, and the third one is inside the natural village of Back Wang Temple and provides service mainly to its own neighborhood. Most villagers go to Shijin's and Li Shu's because

there only to drink tea. There used to be only one tea house in the surrounding area, on Tonglu Market Street. I twice tried to sit in the Tonglu Teahouse to see what was going on, but it seemed awkward for folks there to talk to me, a stranger and a young female. Toward the end of my fieldwork a Shang villager from South Li Manor 南李庄 opened the "Culture Teahouse 文化茶馆" on the south side of Shang Village. I did see gambling there, but the players were young and there were a mixed groups of males and females; most of the old folks were simply sitting outside and chatting, and some brought their own tea from home to avoid the cost. The owner did not seem to mind.

43 Farquhar has also pointed out the difference between the Chinese "to see disease" and the English "to see a doctor". See Farquhar 1994.

44 The three doctors are all native to Shang Village, and all have their allocated share of land. In the collectivist era, there were once doctors from outside working at the Shang village clinic; now, with the privatization of rural medical care, most village doctors have gone back to their own villages. Li Shu is the one who always worked at the Shang Village Clinic. The first time I met Li Shu, he told me, "I was a barefoot doctor and I still am one."

of their convenient location, with the latter, as the officially assigned village clinic, being their main choice. Shijin's clinic is smaller than Li Shu's, but it is located by the main east-west village road that runs through the neighboring market village and all the way to Zhaozhou county seat, passing Zhaoying Township. For many villagers Shijin's clinic is convenient because it is on their way to the stores and teahouses on the market street. This without doubt is the biggest advantage for Shijin's business, since his clinic obviously runs at a much smaller scale than Li Shu's. It has only one room, equipped with a drug cabinet, a glass counter, and two benches.⁴⁵ Shijin also tries to sell the drugs in his clinic at a lower price than Li Shu's. He is known for always prescribing patients an intravenous (IV) drip, *shushui* (transfusing fluids) as villagers call it.⁴⁶

I visited Shijin's clinic on an early November day when three patients were sitting together having their IV therapy: a four-year-old boy (treated for coughing), a middle-aged woman (for anemia), and an old man (for mild apoplectic sequellae, or post-stroke syndrome). The plastic IV tubes were fairly visible in this dark room, connecting the veins in left or right hands with the three infusion bottles, two hanging on a home-made wooden pole and the third on a big nail in the wall. The boy's maternal grandmother was there with him: his parents, I was told, had been away working in Guangdong Province as migrant laborers for several years. In fact, the boy was born in Guangdong.

The four adults were chatting away while they waited for the fluid to be fully administered. The boy fell asleep. After sitting down on the bench in front of the glass counter, with Shijin sitting on the other side of the counter, I took the opportunity to ask about the boy's ailment. People started to discuss how much attention children get nowadays. Shijin seemed wary, wondering whether I would think the IV therapy unnecessary for the simple symptom of coughing. He said old folks usually sought the best way to dispel their grandchildren's illness, and this was also expected by their faraway

45 Shijin does not live in the clinic. His house is at the east end of Shang village and next to the market village. He told me the property of his one-room clinic belongs to Zhishu, who lets him use the place for free.

46 Of course, if patients came in with serious conditions that were beyond the doctor's capacity, he would send them to hospitals right away, Shijin told me. On the other hand, according to Shijin and Li Shu, villagers themselves also prefer to take the IV therapy because it works more efficiently than oral medicine. And it is still affordable for most villagers, the average price ranging from 10 to 20 RMB for three doses. In comparison to oral medicine, it usually takes about a week to cure an ailment at an average cost of 5 to 10 RMB. The IV drugs used for post-stroke syndromes are understandably several times more expensive than those for other common ailments such as cold, stomach ache, anemia, migraine, and high blood pressure.

parents, who sent money home regularly with their children in mind. Shaoli's father walked in upon these remarks holding his granddaughter Jiaojiao in his arms, not for a treatment but to sit by the door and chat with us. Picking up the thread of our talk about the village's out-migrants, Shaoli's father continued the topic,

It is now like a joke saying that rural people have reached *xiaokang* [meaning a relatively comfortable life] by farming.⁴⁷ What *xiaokang*? It all depends upon the money sent home by the migrant laborers. How can you count on farming? You see all these new houses [pointing toward the houses along the road] built by the money earned by migrant laborers.

The woman patient agreed and told me she had quit her migrant job and come home to build a new house. Exhausted by the hard labor of house building, she fell ill with dizzy spells. Then, diagnosed as anemic in the county hospital, she came to Shijin's clinic to get IV infusions. Continuing the conversation on the health conditions in Shang Village, Shijin remarked that,

[When it comes to healthcare,] except for children, most adults in rural villages would rather endure their discomfort, neither paying attention to it nor taking care of it. The main reason is that we don't have the economic resources. If we had the economic means, we'd follow what the state cadres do, who receive regular physical examinations regardless whether they are ill or not. A couple of days ago someone in this village, who was helping others to build their house, all of a sudden fell onto the ground and died. [I] had measured his blood pressure, which was extremely high.

47 The image of *xiaokang*, "moderate well-being", was a common narrative in the early to mid-1980s when the national policy greatly favored the agricultural sector, and most villagers did have their living standards greatly improved by working on the land in comparison to the Maoist era. However, since 1988, according to Shang villagers, there has not been any progress in terms of income and standard of living. Then came the tide of migration in the early 1990s, and the economy has gradually shifted to a reliance on migrant labors. Since then, farming has become a way to maintain basic subsistence without making much extra money. For reference, see a 2008 piece by Du Runsheng, a leading Chinese intellectual on rural issues who led the design of the first five "Number One Documents" of the central government from 1982 to 1986. These documents have greatly changed the rural policy, <http://magazine.caijing.com.cn/20080912/77580.shtml>. Note that toward the end of the article, Du points out that due to deep structural conflicts, especially between the industrial and agricultural sectors, and between the urban and rural, rural reform could no longer be pushed further in 1986, which was the last year of the first five "Number One Documents".

If he had paid attention to his blood pressure occasionally, he would not have died. You see most patients in rural villages have cancer, stroke, cardio- and cerebrovascular diseases.

People in the room all nodded in agreement with Shijin's comments. His words also stimulated the others' memories of that villager's tragic sudden death, which had been much talked about throughout Shang Village. The conversation shifted toward the preparations for his funeral, such as who was being called upon to help, what arrangements were being made, and what remained to be made. Everyone was very engaged in this conversation.

Further away from the market street than Shijin's clinic, Li Shu's clinic is nevertheless close to the intersection of the two major village roads, with the village committee offices on one side and the elementary school on the other side. Many people dropped in there to sit and chat after walking their grandchildren to the nearby school or on their way to or from the market. Two benches are lined up alongside the counter and desk by the gate, on which patients/visitors perch. And whoever is actually seeing the doctor sits right in front of the desk to converse with Li Shu, whose chair is on the other side of the desk. On the other side of the entrance, two other benches are against the south wall, and quite a few small chairs are scattered around the clinic.

With such a big open space and many available seats, Li Shu's clinic has always been a common space for socializing. I often overheard people saying "I'm going to the drug store to *paihua* (chat)." And conversations often take place among the visitors while the doctor is occupied with his own business. As I described for Shijin's clinic, health and illness are a central aspect here of the "society of familiars".

One afternoon I was sitting by the front gate of Li Shu's clinic when two elderly men came in from the main road, announcing "we came to chat!" Li Shu, who was talking to a patient in front of his desk, stood up and greeted them, calling them "elder brothers". It turned out they were fellow villagers of Li Shu in South Li Manor. After offering them cigarettes, Li Shu sat back down and continued his treatment. Not wishing to interrupt the doctor, the two visitors talked randomly with others in the room. Now that I had learnt a usual way for Shang villagers to greet others, I asked them, "Where have you been?" even though this was the very first occasion I had had to talk to them. One of them said, "I had just gone to the street to pay my electricity fee, and then I met my elder brother here on my way home. Since we were passing by Shu's clinic, we came to see him. Also my elder brother said he's having headaches lately, he might as well get some drugs from Shu." At this

Figure 17 Li Shu's clinic

point, his companion added, “I’ve been careful about my headaches because I have cerebral arteriosclerosis. When you get old, you have to be careful.”

Soon after, the visitor with the headache complaint went over to sit in front of the desk to discuss his illness with Li Shu. I proceeded to ask Runhe, the other visitor, “so you called him ‘elder brother’?” Runhe said, “Oh we’ve known each other forever. We shared the same desk in elementary school!” I was amused. Runhe’s hair had completely turned grey. Later I was told he was 65. Concerned about his classmate, Runhe walked over to watch Li Shu measuring his blood pressure, meanwhile Runhe contributed his own advice to his friend: “you should eat more nutritious stuff”. He continued upon hearing his classmate’s coughing, “There’s junk in your lungs (*feili you laji*). Now that you’ve gotten old, you’ve got more and more [health] problems. Any pains in your body?”

I have found that villagers are often very familiar with medical terms, such as the “cerebral arteriosclerosis” mentioned by Runhe’s “elder brother’s”, a term that is fairly esoteric.⁴⁸ Moreover, there is no clear separation of doctor/patient roles in this dialogue: Runhe contributed his advice as if he

48 This kind of medical term is easier to grasp in Chinese than in English because they deliberately don’t differ much from ordinary language, as the English medical terms with their

were the doctor, and Li Shu didn't appear to mind at all. The intimacy of this conversation also vividly shows the interdependence and informality of immanent village sociality.

Most villagers know the connection between high blood pressure and stroke. They often drop by the clinic not only for a chat, but also for a free blood pressure check, which is commonly offered in village clinics. Besides the blood pressure check, village clinics generally do not charge for diagnostic services either, making most of their profits from the sale of drugs. From time to time, I would see villagers come to get medical advice on ailments suffered by their relatives or friends, mostly migrant laborers who were away from their home village and not covered by any healthcare insurance in their work place.⁴⁹ This consultation is also free of charge. This may explain why villagers think of their clinic visits as "getting bags of drugs" instead of "looking at disease" or "seeing the doctor".⁵⁰ Meanwhile, there is a steady demand for doctors to go to patients' houses to treat those who are too ill to move, or to look after elderly shut-ins whose young family members are not around to help them get to the clinic. Again, the home-visit service is free.

Furthermore, villagers often get their drugs on credit, the same way they buy things in the village stores. Li Shu kept a long list of names and debts in his record book. During the last month of the Chinese lunar year, I often saw people sitting on the bench in front of the counter at Li Shu's clinic, ready to pay off their debts. Li Shu would be sitting on the other side, flipping through his book, looking for their records. "Getting prepared for passing the New Year well (*hao guonian*)," they told me. According to Li Shu and others, including the village storekeepers, nobody failed to pay their account as Spring Festival approached, except for a few who might take several years to pay. In fact, doctors in the township hospital considered

Greek and Latin roots do. Cerebral arteriosclerosis, for example, is called *Nao xue guan ying hua* in Chinese, a literal translation would be brain blood vessel hardening.

49 People often call home to ask their families or friends to describe their ailments to the village doctor. Once they get some advice, they might purchase the suggested drug in their local store near their factory. If the drug suggested by doctor cannot be purchased directly over the counter, the families at home will then get the drug from their village doctor and either send it by post or ask someone in the area who by chance is going to the same work site soon to carry it.

50 The only charge beside drugs is for IV therapy, at 2 RMB per infusion, mainly to cover the expense of the disposable equipment such as needles, syringes, catheters, and tubing. Li Shu said his clinic makes its profits mainly from the price difference between wholesale and retail drugs; in his clinic the drugs are sold at a price about 15-20 per cent more than the price he pays to the wholesale drug store; this is a mandated profit margin nationwide. This is indeed akin to the way in which drug stores run their businesses.

the flexibility of village credit customs an important reason for people to favor their village clinics over the township hospital, which, as an official hospital, is not allowed to advance any credit.

In a sense, village clinics, besides being public spaces for social gathering, are also places where people practice the organic credit system that can be considered emblematic of immanent village sociality. Local credit is another example, I would argue, of the horizontal interdependencies of village social life. And indebtedness is also a form of intimate sociality, which in Shang village is ritually recognized as such. So far I have spent many pages to convey a vivid sense of interconnectedness among Shang villagers on an everyday basis, including seemingly trivial activities beyond the State purview. Indeed, these diverse gestures are “effective expressions of the positivity of belonging [that] elude the State,” as Massumi put it.

IV The art of social relations

The routine enjoyment of all these social spaces in the village reveals that public and communal life persists in the village. I find it hard to think of Shang villagers as fitting the description of ethnographer Yunxiang Yan as “uncivil individual[s] who emphasize the right to pursue personal interests yet ignore [...] moral obligations to the public and other individuals” (2003: 217). I do not wish to argue against the recent emergence of a post-collectivist sense of individualism among villagers, a situation that scholars have noted for decades.⁵¹ In Shang village, though, which is well described as a “society of familiars” where people live a fundamentally interdependent social life, it is impossible for anyone to ignore moral obligations to others. On the contrary, others’ interests constantly need to be taken into account if one is to pursue one’s own interests. An everyday saying in Shang village goes, *nihao wohao dajiahao* (if you are well, then I am well, [and] everyone is well).⁵²

51 Aside from the aforementioned Yan Yunxiang’s work, Liu Xin has also discussed the producing of selfish individuals in a northern village in post-collectivist era. Even earlier, a collection published in 1981, edited by Richard Wilson and Sidney Greenblatt, was committed to discussions of “moral behavior in Chinese society”, particularly individualism in terms of moral behavior. See Liu 2000; Wilson and Greenblatt 1981. For an extensive discussion on the emergence of discourse of individualism in the early Republican period, see Lydia Liu 1995, where the author situates the translingual notion of *geren zhuyi* (individualism) in the Chinese theory of modern nation-state.

52 This phrase builds on and adds meaning to the ordinary – and almost “meaningless” – daily greetings of *ni hao*, a Chinese equivalent to “how are you?”

The following anecdote displays these interdependencies clearly. It was June, the harvest season for winter wheat. Every open piece of ground in the village, including the village roads, was covered with threshed wheat, drying in the sun and soon to be winnowed and sent to the flourmill. The busy scene included villagers standing among piles of wheat, throwing shovelfuls into the air with a thin wooden spade, and letting the wind blow away the chaff as the wheat grains fell back to the ground. Everyone was working hard. Because it often rains in the summer, and damp wheat cannot be stored, it is imperative to get the dried and winnowed wheat to the mill as fast as possible.

This was also a busy time for the village clinics, however, because the summer heat and hard labor caused many people to fall ill. As a result, the village doctor Li Shu's family had yet to deal with their own wheat. One afternoon Hui, Li Shu's son, who had finally driven a full tractor-load of threshed wheat from their field to their new-style house, found that their own space, extending from their front gate to the main road, was occupied by their neighbor's wheat, whose own usual space was about the same size as the area in the front of Li Shu's house. Their neighbor was doing his winnowing alone.⁵³ Without saying a word, Hui jumped off the tractor and started right away to help the neighbor. At the same time, Li Shu came out of the house with spade in hand and joined them. The tacit agreement of the father and son to pitch in was impressive. After an hour or so, they were able to unload their own wheat and spread it to dry in their front yard.

This was truly a tactful way to handle potentially conflictual social relations. In particular, I noted that everything happened without a second thought, it was just done spontaneously: to help the neighbor finish his job was an obvious course of action, even though everyone was in a hurry to winnow their wheat and the space properly belonged to the Li family. Shang villagers, it seems to me, simply expect an interdependent social life with their neighbors and fellow-villagers. Such a life has become a matter of course, and includes many tactics for getting along with fellow villagers. Nowadays, for example, not many people raise pigs, but people still save food scraps in buckets for those who do. Another example: Manzi, a woman in her fifties who lives alone, and whose husband and two children are out working in cities, has been suffering from high blood pressure and diabetes. She told me that whenever she gets up later than usual, her neighbors come

53 His children were working as migrant laborers in a big city. Only he and his wife remained at home.

to her window and call out her name. “They won’t leave till I respond, so they know I am all right,” Manzi said.

The forms of interdependency vary, of course. Reflecting again on the story above, Li Shu and his son would not deny that help for their neighbor was also in their own interest, but in a village of familiars, can people possibly pursue their own interests without considering those of others? Even when interests conflict, there is continuing engagement between the agents concerned. For example, a neighbor of Lihua’s auntie planted a tree over the line on the auntie’s property, an act that engendered much tension between these two families. The neighbor, according to Lihua,⁵⁴ had been living under great pressure from his fellow villagers because he was *li kui* (not on solid ground) in this dispute. In a word, his behavior was widely deemed unacceptable in the highly interactive village social world. By contrast, Li Shu once planted a tree between his and the neighbor’s front yard, close to his property line – but remaining on his property, with the purpose of marking the boundary. As the tree grew bigger, he overheard a whisper of complaints from the neighbor that the root and crown of the tree would stretch across the border. Several days later, Li Shu chopped down the three-year-old tree.

Village sociality emphasizes interdependencies and tactics of common life, because village life is conditioned by taken-for-granted relations among familiars. This might prompt us to think of immanent village sociality as what Durkheim called “organic solidarity” (1964). However, this solidarity is not simply the relationship of belonging that embeds individuals in the group. Instead, it is a “differential mode of association”, *chaxu geju*, a term the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong used in his 1940s lectures to describe a cultural mode of simultaneous individualization and social connection in rural Chinese society.⁵⁵ By describing the cultural difference of village life, I by no means want to suggest an unchanging and homogeneous rural Chinese society (though Fei arguably might have). I will discuss some changing forms of social relations in Shang Village in the section that follows. But the Deleuzian idea of a plane of immanence has enabled us to perceive village sociality as emergent in and through everyday interactions rather than stratified by social and administrative structures. Here, I turn again, then, to Ayi’s “selfish” act of throwing a dead chicken in the ditch, understanding

54 I only witnessed the dispute when I visited auntie with Lihua in her village, which was not part of Shang village.

55 Although Fei described this idea in lectures given in the 1940s, I do not want to suggest that things have not changed since then.

it against the backdrop of Shang village as a society of familiars. In this task, I have found Fei's concept of the "differential mode of association" helpful.

To explain what he meant by "differential modes of association", Fei uses a metaphor: "[An individual's social network] is like the circles that appear on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it." While "everyone stands at the centre of the circles produced by his or her social influence," still, "everyone's circles are interrelated" (1992: 62-63). Therefore, according to Fei, rural social networks are elastic and "the boundary between the public and private spheres is relative" (68).

Let us take Ayi's dead chicken as an example. She was upset by the unknown person who had dumped a dead chicken near her gate. This was considered by her to be an inappropriate act, because she feared her own chickens could be infected by some disease carried by the dead chicken. As I noted above, trash "pollution" was not a main concern for her in this event. She walked all the way to the ditch to dispose of the dead bird, and she felt she had done so "properly" because no households lived beside that ditch. Although her reaction could be interpreted as selfish by an outsider with no understanding of village space, a closer attention to the shifting boundaries of public and private, exterior and interior, can reveal otherwise. For Ayi the boundary is not between a universal and anonymous public (the ditch) and the private domain (one's own house), but in relation to what is inside and outside one's own neighborhood. By disposing of the chicken away from her neighborhood, she actually contributed to the hygiene of *her* "public" place; that is, the immediate neighborhood of her house. On two different occasions I asked Shang villagers who live outside of Ayi's neighborhood their opinion on Ayi's decision to throw the dead chicken into the ditch. On both occasions my interviewees were puzzled by my question and neither of them thought it a big deal; in fact, they were made uneasy by my hidden value judgment: "selfish? That goes too far (*na tanbushang*)".

Indeed, social circles are flexible and overlapping, and concepts of public and private are always relational. Thinking about Fei's metaphor of ripples flowing out from the splash of a rock thrown into water, one can say that even though there are centers – "self-centers" – what matters are the rings always moving outwards from the center, because the ripples are the water itself – the immanent sociality – which is always moving outward. "Standing in any circle," as Fei suggests, "one can say that all those in that circle are part of the public" and "it is impossible to prove that someone is acting selfishly" (1992: 69). Taking this insight further, to apply it to the household responsibility system, centered in the household instead of the individual, the embedding sociality enables households to center their

own existence within overlapping practical spheres of significance that extend well beyond the walls of their own houses. The following example demonstrates the fluidity of villagers' understanding of their "public", which, at times, can be extended from one house to the whole village.

One day when I was sitting with others by the front gate of Li Shu's clinic, all of a sudden everyone heard the grinding sound of a tire spinning in a rut. A truck with a heavy load of concrete had got stuck and, in its efforts to extricate its wheels, was digging a deep ditch in the middle of the main village road. The truck belonged to someone in another village to the south of Shang. Once the first onlookers, who went over to check what happened, found out the road had been damaged, people's curiosity quickly turned into discontent. On this issue the village instantly became one. Soon, Zhishu and other village cadres came, and they too stood with other Shang villagers demanding compensation for the damaged road. The drama went on till the owner of the concrete, a villager preparing to build a new road-side house in neighboring Xia village, managed to persuade an acquaintance of his in the township office to talk to Zhishu by cell phone. They reached an agreement for a later settlement.⁵⁶

This event reveals something about the shifting boundary of the public among villagers. When Ayi threw the dead chicken outside her neighborhood, she was acting in consideration of her neighborhood as her salient public, even though the ditch is still a part of her larger village. In the truck event, the damaged main road may have had a direct impact only on the Shang villagers who lived beside the road, but all the villagers spontaneously gathered in solidarity to defend their "public", i.e. the village as a whole.⁵⁷

To a certain degree, the kind of social action at the immanent village level, which I have been discussing, is of no interest to formal regulatory and reporting structures at higher levels. These kinds of actions are unlikely to be quantified and accounted as part of a rural economy. Not only government inattention, but even the scholarly refusal to recognize the depth and effectiveness of village social ties can be traced to the informality of village expectations of connection, which tend to exist, or even thrive, outside the gaze of the State. In other words, what villagers "lack" is not a sense of

56 However, when I left Shang village the deep rut was still in the road. Perhaps Zhishu had not received the money that would make it possible for him to hire Shang villagers to make the repair. Nowadays, this would not be a job for voluntary unpaid collective labor.

57 A facile rationalization of this collective act would be that since all villagers had paid money into building the village road, of course they would stick together to condemn the truck driver, and they would be concerned that they would have to pay again to mend the road. However, I would insist that immanent village sociality goes beyond this kind of calculation.

collective belonging, but rather the means and the desire to formalize their actions and commitments into a normalized “public” discourse.

Fei’s idea of differential modes of association suggests that working social relationships emerge out of diverse personal networks that are elastic and have ever outward-shifting boundaries. Any all-encompassing moral judgment on the “individualism” of social interactions among villagers would thus fall short of grasping lived sociality.

This is not to say that the social foundations of village life have always been the same. If we turn to relations within the family, particularly the relationships between different generations, we can perceive some important changes brought by the household responsibility system, which privatized family production, and the more recent widespread reliance on labour migration. How have “moral” obligations and sensibilities changed among family members? In the following section, I will examine some new forms of family relations and explore some anxieties generated out of a more global restructuring of local social relations.

V Migration: A general background

Like many other villages in China, Shang is a “hollow heart village (*kongxin cun*)”,⁵⁸ a village in which those between the ages of eighteen and forty-five are almost always absent. Many or most of these young adults have gone to work as migrant laborers, leaving their parents and children back in the village. According to Shang villagers, migration to the big cities where factories cluster in Eastern and Southern China, such as Hangzhou, Wenzhou, Dongguan, and Shenzhen, started in the early 1990s and has now become a settled pattern of family life in Shang village. There is no doubt that resulting changes in family demographics has altered the horizons of belonging in the village.

Let us start with formal education. There is a primary school and a kindergarten in Shang village; almost every school-age child goes to the village school. The State has been pushing hard to implement the law requiring “Nine Years of Compulsory Education” since 1986, encouraging an education

58 A literal translation of the two characters, *kong xin*, is “empty” and “heart”, meaning an important part (the heart) is missing (emptied out). This has become a common phrase to describe the prevalent phenomenon in rural areas brought on by the tide of migration: young couples who are considered the pillar of the family are physically missing in villagers’ everyday life. This rather evocative term for a demographic phenomenon reflects some of the tension felt by villagers and sociologists alike concerning the negative impacts of migration and the resulting changes in village communities.

through junior middle school for every child. However, many Shang village children stop after the eighth grade without obtaining a middle school certificate. Some even stop going to school after only six years of primary education. There are at least two main reasons for this: first, the township junior middle school – offering seventh through ninth grades – is in Zhaoying Township, about six kilometers away from Shang Village, and students are required to board there. It is the only junior middle school they can attend. It is not hard to imagine the inadequate conditions in this institution, which is the only secondary school for a township with a population of 80,000. When I was staying with Li Shu's family, his youngest daughter was at the township junior middle school. According to her, there were nine to ten classes in each grade and about 130-140 students per class. The total number of students for all three grades was about 4,000.⁵⁹ I was amazed when she told me that her dorm held 48 to 50 students in one room. Second, the courses in middle schools are mainly set up to prepare students for the college entrance examination, a highly competitive national exam that is almost impossible for village children to pass with a high score. Moreover, the required courses – physics, chemistry, and mathematics – are felt to be especially hard for students from village schools to study. Students needing help do not receive sufficient guidance due to the low number of teachers (about 120 in Zhaoying) and poor teaching facilities. Further, these courses, oriented toward a style of “elite education (*jingyingshi jiaoyu*)”, in which the knowledge taught is based on the expectation of a more or less lettered life, seem quite irrelevant to rural children's everyday life, which has tended to teach them more about manual labor than chemistry and physics.⁶⁰

Much research has been done on China's rural education.⁶¹ One consensus reached in these studies is that basic education in rural China has

59 Though Li Shu also told me the number of students in his daughter's school years was larger than usual, due to an extraordinarily high birth rate in the three years from 1989 to 1991. In these three years, Shang Village had, respectively, 106, 104, and 87 newborn babies, in comparison to an average of 40 babies per year normally. That said, a national investigation has shown a rather low ratio of teachers and students in rural schools (1: 23) compared to the urban schools (1: 18), see <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/68294/72286/72287/4946917.html>.

60 The fact that a learning habitus needs to be acquired is taken for granted by the school system. Teachers never teach students how to sit down and read books page by page. During my volunteer experience, building the library room in Shang village, I noted the tendency among the school children to rub the book page so as to turn it over, which crumpled the books in a rather short amount of time, even though the children's eagerness to read any books that are outside their class demonstrated the shortage of external readings in the village.

61 A useful general review can be found in Hannum 1999, “Political Change and the Urban-Rural Gap in Basic Education in China, 1949-1990”, among many other studies by education

experienced a radical decline since the 1980s, after a high tide in the 1970s during the Cultural Revolution period. And the ideology of education has also shifted from mass education with a focus on egalitarianism and class struggle to an exam-based system emphasizing “quality, competition, individual talents and skills important in the development of science and technology” (Hannum 1999: 200). According to statistics issued by the State Education Commission, the total number of students in China’s secondary schools in the academic year 1977–8 was 68.9 million, plus another million in specialized schools. In 1980 alone, however, the decline was nearly 14 million, and during this year 23,700 secondary schools were closed down in China (see Gao 1999: 114). Since then, key-point schools have proliferated, with more concentrated funding. However, most of these are located in urban areas and enjoy a national funding priority commensurate with their mandate to produce highly trained graduates capable of passing the college entrance exam. In contrast, the financing of rural schools was around the same time turned over to the township and county levels. According to Hannum, “rising direct costs for educating children associated with decentralization of finance to local areas were matched by rising opportunity costs associated with the widespread adoption of for-profit family farming in the early 1980s” (1999: 200). It was against this background that the State issued the Law of Nine-year Compulsory Education, acknowledging urban-rural and regional economic disparities. But as I will show shortly, the law did little to remedy the “liberal meritocracy-oriented” (Hannum 1999) educational system and the uneven financial investment between cities and countryside. Since upward-mobility opportunities for rural children have been greatly curtailed, the population of rural China has witnessed an erosion of educational credentials; yet, it still produces a huge number of relatively unskilled labourers who, not surprisingly, meet the demands of world labor markets. Levels of education, as Kipnis also indicates, “shape the forms of social and political hierarchy” (2013: 169).

Knowing perfectly well that going to college is the best way to “jump out of the fate of being a peasant (*tiao nongmen*)”, parents seldom encourage their children to halt their studies for labour migration to the cities. Rather, it is usually the child who decides to quit school or stop pursuing further

researchers. Andrew Kipnis’ monograph, *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China* based on Zouping county in Shandong Province, provides some insight into the cultural, political, and economic consequences of Chinese desire for higher education in general. Other case studies can be referred to; for example, Pepper 1996; Gao Mobo 1999; Han Dongping 2000; Rachael Murphy 2002.

education after junior middle school. On the other hand, once the child has made up his/her mind, parents do not insist on their own opinion. After all, the chance to go to college is extremely remote for rural children, in comparison to their urban counterparts, as many education scholars have indicated. And senior middle school education, for which the State no longer provides funding, is expensive.⁶² When young people start to work early they can at least reduce the family economic burden, as Shang villagers often said to me. After spending two to three years in junior middle school, some children may stay at home for a year or two, while others go to work as migrant laborers with the help of relatives or neighbors.

In general, teenagers aged fifteen to eighteen migrate to cities to work, usually following in the tracks of their brothers, sisters, or other fellow villagers. During their working years, they may move from one city to another, with or without their spouses and children, but they always tend to shift within family networks; only a few adventurers might follow a self-made path from and toward relations established in cities, far from Shang village.

Labor migration from villages like Shang needs to be understood in a wider framework of the conventional life strategies adopted by village families. As I observed in my fieldwork, marriage is a prominent example of a process relevant to migration that is completely enmeshed in village social networks. In Henan villages (as in many others), marriage is still considered to be a linkage between two families, not something that is strictly private between two young individuals. When young people reach the age of eighteen or twenty, their parents start to consider their future marriage. (At this age, these sons and daughters may already be working in a faraway industrial area.) First, they head to a village matchmaker to get help in finding a partner for their child. A matchmaker can be a relative, a neighbor, a friend, or a fellow villager who will be responsible for conveying his/her knowledge about the families concerned and informing all involved

62 In 1985, the central government decided to shift the burden of basic education to local governments, mainly at the county level, and cash-strapped counties then turned to the peasants to charge an "additional tax for education 教育附加费" to support the schools. Since then, villagers have been seeing ever-increasing charge for high school tuition. For a scholarly review of unequal rural and urban education, see Zhang Yulin, "The educational resource distribution under the hierarchical school system and the gap between rural and urban education – an inquiry into the political economy of equal opportunities in education" (in Chinese) at <http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/PaperCollection/Details.aspx?id=1863> retrieved on 15 December 2015. According to a villager whose daughter was studying in a senior middle school in the county town, the average expense for a semester, including school fees, books, lodging and food, is at least 5,000 RMB. While the average annual income for a Shang villager in 2005, according to the document I found in the village committee office, was about 3,400 RMB.

families as completely as s/he can. S/he no longer need be an expert in fortune telling. But if the matchmaker does not know fortune telling, villagers will usually consult someone who can *suanming* (calculate the fate) of the young people after the potential marriage has been proposed (*ti qin*). Runhe, Li Shu's "elder brother", with whom I had conversed at the clinic, is the most popular *yinyang xiansheng* (master of yinyang divination) in Shang village. Even those involved with the Christian community rely on village fortune tellers to predict whether their children will have a good marriage and also to choose the day of the wedding festivities.

The difference between contemporary and past practices for arranging marriages, however, is that before they make any move, the parents will consult their children over the phone (young migrant workers usually call home weekly or every other week). Only if the young ones feel interested in each other will arrangements continue. Negotiations over bride price, dowry, and gifts can take place in the wake of an expression of willingness by the young couple to allow marriage arrangements to move forward. Throughout all marriage-related proceedings, villagers both young and old emphasize the importance of "looking for a family (*zhao ge renjia*)". They see arranging a marriage as a shared collective process that goes far beyond a single potential relationship, a process that invokes much wider networks.

Villagers call this preliminary process *kanjia*, literally meaning "to see a family" or even, to see the house. Indeed, the house is such an important element in marriage that building a new house has become the most often-encountered topic in everyday conversation. In the process of *kanjia*, the prospective groom's family, usually composed of the boy and his parents, pays a first visit to the prospective bride's family. As a matter of course, the matchmaker is also there. A midday banquet is usually expected, and over the dinner table the canny parents can learn much about the personalities and lifestyles of their counterparts. The banquet is therefore considered a very important factor in decision making. The next step will be a visit from the prospective bride's family to the groom's family, including a banquet hosted by the groom's side. At this point, an important factor is housing conditions on the groom's side: is the house old-style or new-style, how long ago was it built, what are the furnishings in the house, how many family members live there, etc. All these household arrangements, if they are desirable, reflect well on the promise of the groom.

I talked once with Shang Sheng, Li Shu's neighbor's son, who came home in the Chinese New Year holiday to *kanjia*. Sheng had left home at the age of eighteen and had been working in a big umbrella factory in Hangzhou

for over three years after leaving his first job in a factory in Dongguan.⁶³ He would turn twenty-four after the Chinese New Year. Along with his parents, Sheng had been looking around for marriage prospects in the Zhaoying township area, and they had just decided on one family who lived to the south of Shang village, about five kilometers away. I asked him, “Sheng, don’t you have any girlfriends when you’re out working in the city?” He admitted that he did. He explained:

[M]ost of us have boyfriends and girlfriends in the work place, but we all know at the same time that the relationship is only temporary, because both sides don’t know each other well enough. We’re just playing. It’s different back home because [in arranging a marriage] my parents would know her parents and her whole family better. I would feel more secure.

After the wedding the young couple normally spends some time, from two weeks to a month or two, at the groom’s home, and then they will leave together, ideally for the same city, to work again as migrant laborers. Ordinarily, after a year, the young wife will return home when she is expecting a child. After staying home for a year or two to tend her new-born, the wife will often leave the village again to join her husband, leaving their child with the paternal grandparents and returning home once or twice a year to visit.

This pattern holds for most of the families of Shang village. Since the tide of migration began to swell in the 1990s, so far there have only been a few couples who have returned from a faraway work sites to re-establish permanent residence in the village. These couples have seen their children leave as second-generation migrant laborers in cities.

VI Migrant life: Reproducing belonging

In this section, I aim to characterize the process of open-ended belonging of village communities, arguing that village sociality is in “infinite movement” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). To do this, I use observations of the informal associations enjoyed by “*tongxiang* (fellow countrymen and women)” from Zhaozhou living in Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province, where many migrant workers from Shang Village have moved for work in the shoe industry.

63 Hangzhou is the provincial capital city of Zhejiang on the east coast, one of the ten biggest cities in China. Dongguan is a rising city in Guangdong province, famous for its cluster of labor-intensive enterprises, especially manufacturing electrical appliances.

Once again, I will go into some detail about their living space and everyday encounters, and their ways of continuing village ties in faraway places. In my encounter with these workers in their early twenties, the feeling of migrant life as transitional was pervasive. I could see how their experiences far away produced and reproduced a sense of belonging to their home villages. I argue that in these unformalized modes of migrant association, especially where there is no governmental control over basic living conditions like housing and health care, immanent village sociality plays a significant role in migrants' everyday life.

As many studies on China's migrant laborers have shown, conditions of life in the big factories are hard (Chang 2008; Gaetano 2015; Jacka 2006; Murphy 2002, 2009; Solinger 1999; Yan 2008; Zhang 2001, etc.), and local ties to those who belong to one's home village are valued. Both for those few who remain in the village and those who temporarily migrate out, the structures of migrant life change villagers' visions of the future. As I will show below, village sociality accommodates different understandings and imaginations of a desirable or attainable life. Such visions and aspirations constitute an ever re-forming village sociality, an open-ended belonging. The Deleuzian idea of a plane of immanence enables us to perceive village sociality as emergent in and through everyday interaction, even when the population is scattered.

Before my trip to Wenzhou, I tried to call Mei on her cell phone, the number for which was given to me by her mother in Shang Village. She didn't answer my call until after 11:30 pm because she had been working from 7:30 am to 11 pm, with only a one and a half hour break in total for lunch and supper. She had not had time to answer my call until after work. Nevertheless, despite the fact that we had never met before, in this very first phone conversation Mei warmly welcomed my visit, and offered to let me stay with her while I was there. This was because I was someone "*laojia laide* (from home)," Mei indicated.

On an early Sunday morning I arrived at a suburban district of Wenzhou city, where the shoe factory Mei worked at is located. She told me to wait for her in the shopping center near to her factory, which she called the "neighborhood center (*linli zhongxin*)". As planned, Mei would ask for a short leave right after their daily morning assembly at 7:30 am, to take me to her apartment. However, she did not get the permission to leave and I had to wait until her lunch break. I first spent some time in the dining area of a supermarket in the center, observing the customers who were mainly young migrant laborers working in one of the shoe factories in this area.⁶⁴

64 Wenzhou is known for numerous shoe factories, mostly manufacturing shoes for overseas famous brands.

Obviously, factories operate on different schedules: though Mei and her fellow workers did not have their Sunday off, many other workers came to the supermarket to hang out in the dining area. Most of them simply went to buy a soft drink and then sat and chatted. The dining area was not big, with five rows of chained-down plastic chairs and tables, like the ones that can be found in any fast-food restaurant. But people came and went, there were always available seats, and I heard conversations sometimes in dialect, sometimes in variously-accented standard Chinese. Filled with youthful people, the place was bustling, and the atmosphere was lively. Occasionally, I saw couples with young kids as well. Obviously the “neighborhood center” was oriented toward the migrant community. Indeed, I did not encounter any local people, or at least I did not hear anyone speaking the local Wenzhou dialect.

Finally, at 11:30am, I got to meet Mei outside the entrance to the supermarket. Mei came with Hao, her brother-in-law, who worked in the same shoe factory with Mei and lived upstairs from her. Hao took my suitcase and we called a “taxi”, which was a tricycle-cart, to go to where they were living. After crossing a main street we left the shopping center and the factory area, and went into the migrant community; this looked more like a real “neighborhood center” to me. The road was much narrower, and alongside it were all kinds of shops supplying everyday necessities, from vegetable stands to mini-markets, from cell phone stores to long-distance phone service stalls, from pharmacies to bicycle shops, from hair salons to public shower rooms, from restaurants to small hotels.

Although less tidy and clean than the factory and shopping center area, in this part of town the streets were busier and the businesses seemed to be doing well. We turned onto an even narrower path running by a heavily polluted river. The river was full of household garbage, so much so that one could hardly see the water that, unsurprisingly, had turned completely black and rancid. The path was narrow and the residential buildings on both sides of the river were only one step away from the garbage-strewn riverbank. Secretly, I was relieved that our tricycle-taxi did not stop at any of these buildings.

Except for a couple of main roads, most of the paths and alleys were winding. Many buildings had expanded into the street with obviously added-on extensions. There seemed to be no restrictions on the use of the space. The crowded buildings made the already narrow street even narrower. We could have walked through several shortcuts if we had not been taking the tricycle-taxi, as I found out later. Hao told me this area belongs to a local village, but many villagers have left, renting their houses to migrant

Figure 18 The other “neighborhood center”

Figure 19 The polluted river in Wenzhou migrant community

laborers. This seemed to be a very profitable business: local villagers were obviously trying to make their houses hold as many tenants as possible, and the rent had to be cheap so that migrant laborers could afford it. In a sense, the local villages here may be considered a kind of “hollow heart village” as well: many Wenzhou villagers have moved to live in the bigger cities, or places closer to the city, leaving only those senior villagers who do not want to go away still at home (and helping to collect rent).⁶⁵ Occasionally, I did see old people chatting with each other, sitting in front of their houses, when there was such a space.

At last our tricycle-taxi reached the house that Mei and Hao shared with many others. Their house was at the end of an alley and next to a piece of empty land, on which trash was scattered and weeds were growing high. It was a three-storey house, but definitely smaller than the new-style

65 Many local villagers have made money also through doing business. Wenzhou had been known for being the “birthplace of China’s private economy” in the early days economic reforms, by selling its manufactured small commodities, such as buttons, zippers, and later, shoes, on the global market. In 2012, China’s State Council announced that Wenzhou would be the site of a pilot project for the reform of private investment rules since, the city had been a significant source of illegal loans.

Figure 20 Old people chatting in the Wenzhou village

two-storey houses in Shang Village. Up we went via the narrow concrete stairs. Mei's room was on the second floor by the stairs.

Standing in the corridor, I could tell the house where Mei lived had been built for family use before it was converted to contain dorm rooms. Mei told me there were about twenty tenants living in the ten plus rooms on the second and third floors. The original floor plan was unrecognizable, because most space had been taken up by newly partitioned rooms separated by thin pressboard. The other workers were not yet home. The corridor was narrow and dark without windows, especially when all the doors were shut. In a short while, though, those doors would be open when people came home for lunch, Mei said. The factories provide lunch in the cafeteria, but workers have to pay about 5 RMB for a meal. This is more expensive than eating at home, so most people come home to cook on their own in the one-hour lunch break. They do not usually eat supper at home, though, because the supper break is only half an hour. Still, most workers choose to buy a quick meal on the street for supper, which also costs less than the factory cafeteria.

There was no window in Mei's room, just a single light bulb. The room, located on the second floor beside the stairs, was small and simple: one double bed, a small desk covered by a plastic tablecloth, and a couple of

stools with cardboard boxes sitting on them. I could see her clothes in the boxes. Helping me to drag my suitcase next to the bed, Mei once again invited me to stay in her room during my visit, as “staying in hotels costs money,” she said. We had only met for less than twenty minutes, and yet she already treated me like an extended family member. “You are from home,” she explained, again.

Shortly, we went upstairs to join Hao for lunch. Hao is from a village near Shang, which also belongs to Zhaoying Township of Zhaozhou County. He and Mei’s sister met here in Wenzhou and got married two years ago. After giving birth to a son, Mei’s sister went home to Shang village to care for their new baby with extra support from her own parents. Hao’s room was about the same size as Mei’s, but brighter because it was at the end of the corridor and it had windows on the end wall. It was also more crowded, especially since it included a few kitchen facilities. Upon entering the room, one sees, by the door, a line of plastic bags hanging on nails beneath a plank that makes a simple shelf, on top of which are cups with toothbrushes and toothpaste, shampoo and conditioner, facial moisturizer, bottles of soy sauce and vinegar, and a jar of salt. The plastic bags hold supplies like flour, rice, dried noodles, ready-made steamed bread, and dried chili peppers. On the floor behind the door stood a plastic broom and a tin dustpan. Further inside, against the same wall, was a makeshift countertop converted from an abandoned school desk; a one-burner gas stove was on top of it and next to the window.

A bed occupied the other side of the room. The wall alongside the bed had been covered by the pages of a used wall calendar, pasted up not only for decoration, but also to hold down the dust from the whitewashed wall. There were also two large square plastic carrying bags hanging on this wall above the mosquito net, one with a quilt inside it and the other with some winter clothes (I knew this because the bags were transparent). In the middle of the room is a small table with several stools sitting around; this is the dining area.

The room became even more crowded when Hao’s brother Zheng and his wife Yu joined us.⁶⁶ They turned out to be living in this house as well. Later, I was told that all the tenants in this building were from Zhaozhou, their home county. And Yu, too, is from a neighboring village not far from Shang.

66 Obviously, these young migrants have extra siblings, almost without exception. The relatively lax or frequently disobeyed “one-child policy” in their villages on the other hand showed the “interrelatedness” of this generation of village youngsters, who have brothers and sisters in law, unlike most twenty year olds born in the city.

Figure 21 Dorm rooms of Mei and Hao

She works in the same factory with Mei and Hao, and is even in the same department as Mei. Zheng had just quit his job a few days ago, because, he said, he was not happy with it. This meant that he was jobless, but he was looking for new employment in Wenzhou. In fact, an acquaintance had introduced him to another factory that he was going to see the next day.

More people had come home by now, and the whole house had become bustling with the noise of steps, doors opening, cooking, talking, whistling, and singing. From time to time someone would stick his or her head into the room – some stepping in, already with a bowl of noodles in hand, asking: what are you all having for lunch? This is a sign that everyone knows each other very well. Having been introduced to quite a few fellow workers, I decided to walk around and take a look at others' rooms. I went with Liangliang, a school-aged boy who came to play with us while waiting for his lunch, which was being prepared by his father. Liangliang had come to live with his parents over a year ago, and he went to a migrant school in this area.

Liangliang's father was the resident who had lived in this house the longest and he had won the trust of their landlord; she relied on him to collect the rent for her. They also lived in the biggest room, which had a balcony, where they had set up a kitchen such that it looked as if they actually had two rooms. Liangliang and his parents stayed in the one indoor room; apart from two beds, there was not much space for other furniture. They said most families stay in one room to save rent, including those who bring their child to come and live with them. All other rooms in this house looked quite similar: simple furniture, the way the kitchen was set up, and the plastic bags on the wall to store things and save space. Hao told me later that Liangliang's father paid the same amount of rent as he paid due to his special relationship with the landlord. Hao paid 200 RMB per month, and Mei's room was 100 RMB.

I had not realized that they were going to cook a special meal to welcome me until I returned to Hao's room. Mei had gone out to buy some vegetables and meat, Yu helped Hao with cooking, and Zheng had just come back with the water he fetched from downstairs. Tenants do not have running water in their rooms; water has to be brought in with plastic buckets from the faucets outside the house. This reminded me of my life at Ayi's house in Shang village, but here water use seemed to be even more inconvenient, since they were living on the third floor without toilet facilities or drains for water. Soon Mei came back with her purchases. Still being somewhat shy, she turned to help Yu with washing the food, after giving Hao the change from the money he had provided. A lively conversation immediately started between her and Yu about their work and co-workers, with interjections

from Hao from time to time. Despite working in the same department, Mei and Yu only ever saw each other at lunchtime.

Soon the lunch was ready. My hosts had cooked rice and four dishes, honoring me with great kindness. I wanted to assure them that they did not have to make such an effort on their short lunch break. I mentioned the customary one dish per meal in Shang village; they said it is also their village custom to treat visiting guests to a good meal. Hao played songs stored on his cell phone while we were eating, which I took as a way of showing me that they, as migrant workers, also have ways of enjoying a good life. The dishes Hao cooked were delicious.

After the meal, there was not much time left, and all three of them went to work. Mei left her room key for me. Zheng and I stayed to clean up. We carried all the pots and bowls downstairs with a basin and a bucket, and stepped outside the house. It was then I noted the line of faucets by the wall. These faucets are low above the ground, each at the top of a standpipe. Every faucet was connected to a meter, and every faucet had a padlock on the handle to prevent unauthorized usage. Zheng walked to the faucet that belonged to them and unlocked it; putting the basin and bucket underneath the faucet, we squatted down and started to wash dishes. Looking around, I saw faucets surrounding almost every single house. Simply looking at the faucets outside a house revealed an idea of how many households lived in the building, since the faucets are designated individually to each resident who pays a water bill. It makes sense that Mei and her relatives share one water faucet to save the expense (and maybe the hassle of having to lock and unlock the faucet), as many others do.

Once we had cleaned the dishes and pots, Zheng offered to give me a tour of the neighborhood and take me to “Zhaozhou village”, a community composed of people mostly from their home county. Walking through the narrow alley in this residential area, we saw many recently built (or thrown up) houses, in among the local village-style residential buildings. Among these were simple cement cubes, clearly short-term housing meant to accommodate migrant laborers. During my visit, such construction was ongoing, and there were also smaller projects underway, such as adding rooms to the outside of older houses, which made the paths between houses narrower and narrower. Zheng reminded me that local residents often lived differently to the migrants. We passed by a house with a porcelain tile floor that, according to Zheng, signaled that it housed local villagers; this was much nicer than the cement floors commonly found in migrants’ quarters. And of course, that house was not as crowded, nor did I see the lines of locked faucets outside.

Figure 22 A line of locked faucets outside a migrant residence

If Zheng had not told me, I would not have known that we were already in the so-called Zhaozhou village. It looked much the same as other places in this area: temporary buildings, lines of public water faucets, trash heaps, blackened water in the river, vegetable stands, mini markets, small construction sites, tricycle-carts, and many pedestrians. Nevertheless, a conspicuous sign, painted on the wall of a hut, invoked the county's name: "Clinic from Zhaoying of Zhaozhou County, with pharmacy and dental reconstruction services". Zheng told me that he and his Zhaozhou friends usually found a medicine man like this through personal connections when over-the-counter drugs from a drug store failed to cure their ailments. It was obvious to me that the clinic was run by an "underground" doctor, a health worker who had practiced medicine at home but later migrated to work in factory jobs, just like his clients. These doctors are considered to be "underground" because their practice is not strictly legal, in that they lack certification from the local Wenzhou health bureau. But it would be nearly impossible for such doctors to be certified anyway, since holding an official local *hukou* is a precondition for a medical license. Official medical services are expensive for migrant laborers, who receive no medical benefits from their employers: their factories only compensate them for extreme cases of

industrial injury, such as those that may lead to amputation or even death. In addition to the lower cost, migrants prefer to go to underground doctors because, as Zheng said, they feel more comfortable talking with their *laoxiang* (fellow townsman), and feel as if they are better understood there.

Most migrant workers know one or two such doctors through their own networks of fellow villagers. At the same time, however, people often call home to ask their family members or friends to report their ailments to the village doctor. If the drug suggested by an underground city doctor cannot be purchased directly over the counter, the families at home can get the drug from their village doctor and either send it by post or ask someone in the area who is going to the same work site soon to carry it. The home village doctor's consultation is usually free of charge. The village doctors at home, then, are an important resource for the migrants who are living far from the village, especially those who need to manage, long-distance, chronic disease conditions such as digestive disorders.

On our way back from the "Zhaozhou village" section of Wenzhou's industrial area, we bumped into two of Zheng's fellow villagers who did not have to work on Sunday, unlike Mei and Hao. Most migrant laborers in these factories earn their wages on a piece work basis. When the factory is not doing well, their workload is reduced accordingly and their earnings shrink. Although they had more spare time, Zheng's friends did not consider this a good thing. They were out looking for new jobs. Zheng spent quite a while exchanging information with them about potential new jobs. This conversation confirmed what I had learned elsewhere: that most jobs were acquired through personal networks, mainly through information and referrals from fellow villagers who were working in factories that happened to have job vacancies. Zheng said to me,

We *dagongde* (migrant labourers) are like this: we like our factories to be running well so we workers are kept busy. We become anxious if we stay idle, because that means we would not only make less money but also spend more money [killing time]. You ask me if we ever get too tired, working without breaks? Since we are on the piece-work system, everyone wants to make more money; we don't mind if there's no break. We usually get a rest during our lunch break.

This phenomenon represents the capitalist strategy of squeezing surplus value out of an underprivileged, unprotected reserve army of low-wage migrant labourers. But rather than approaching this often-discussed topic from a political economy perspective, here I take the point of view of Zheng

and his fellow workers, which is focused on the explicit goal of making money one piece at a time – money that will ultimately allow a better way of life back home.

For Mei and Hao and Zheng, and many other fellow villagers, their migrant life is experienced as transitional. When I visited their make-do dorm rooms adjusted to their lives as busy factory workers, I could not help but contrast their “urban” lifestyle with life in the new modern-style houses in Shang village, which have nice furniture and modern electric appliances like washing machines, DVD players, and even air conditioners. It is perhaps ironic that all of these amenities are paid for by the young married couples working as migrant laborers far from their home villages. Hao and Zheng had such a house back home, and Mei was planning to have one when she got married.⁶⁷ Every migrant worker had practical goals that could only be realized at home: getting married and having at least one child, providing their child with a good education, saving enough money for a future business back in Zhaozhou, and living a comfortable life near family after enduring all the hardships of the first couple of decades of adulthood.

VII New village, new families

Today’s Shang village displays a fairly common pattern for the life course of an individual. After nine-years (sometimes less) of school education, many villagers leave to work as migrant laborers. They then usually return home briefly to get married and (less briefly) have children who are cared for by grandparents. After working as migrant laborers again, sometimes for several decades, they move home to build a comfortable house for themselves and their children, presuming that they have saved money from their factory work. Most villagers hope to be able to stay home for good, eventually. All of these long-term life arrangements are made possible through a dense weave of village-based networks.

Although the Zhaozhou villagers I met in the city of Wenzhou were far away from their home villages, I noted details of their everyday lives that displayed the indispensability of village ties: they relied on village-centered relationships that were produced and reproduced, both in their home villages and in their new work places. All the tenants in the building where Mei lived were from Zhaozhou County, for example; and they work in the same factory

67 In a phone conversation with Hao during the Chinese New Year in 2008, I was told that Mei was going to be married to a man from the neighboring Zhaoying Village within a month.

and even in some cases in the same department as Mei and her sister-in-law do. Job information was constantly exchanged between *laoxiang* (fellow-townsmen). Given the high degree of fluidity, there was often routine mobility between industrial sites and Zhaozhou: some Zhaozhou entrepreneurs even run direct bus services between the county seat and township and major urban work destinations. As for the uncertainty in migrant jobs, the home village works as the most reliable base for developing useful connections with people in a new place. Village networks are a means of self-protection in a potentially hostile urban environment. Village workers not only live close together, they go to “underground” doctors from their hometown together and, even more importantly, they get jobs for each other. This village network building, which occurs far from Zhaozhou, meanwhile enhances village ties and renders them more complex. Indeed, I was told that when there is occasionally some leisure time to enjoy together, such as national holidays when factories give a day off, the most enjoyable thing for the Zhaozhou group to do was to gather with their “fellow countrymen”, cook, eat, chat, and update each other on news and gossip relating both to things around them and to their home villages. These moments together were precious opportunities to reconstitute village sociality together, as kith and kin.

The so-called “hollow heart village”, therefore, may not be as empty as it has been made to sound, once we consider how these extensive village networks are practiced. Although most young adults leave their villages to work in faraway places, they stay closely connected with home both virtually (with regular phone calls, as well as letters, photographs, and money sent home) and physically (making home visits in harvest seasons and for the Chinese New Year, getting married at home, and more). Village networks are constantly woven into these practices of shuttling back and forth between home village and workplace, following the footsteps of migrants, and constituting the village as an open plane of immanent social relations.

There is no doubt that labor migration has had a great impact on village life, altering the horizons of belonging with the new forms of family relations and certain transformations in habits and practices of marrying, childcare, and village networking. For example, most Shang villagers consider a new-style house to be an investment not only for their own future, but also for their children's. These two story cinder block and plaster houses have greatly changed the face of Shang Village, giving it, in some respects, an air of prosperity. The most obvious result in practice, however, is “hollow houses” at the heart of the “hollow village”: young couples – many of them absent – own and control but do not often occupy the new-style houses, while their parents either continue to live in the old-style family house, or

they stay only on the ground floor of the new house where the old furniture (and an older way of living) is maintained.

Some prevalent new forms of family life in the village significantly reflect these changes in family demography: it would seem that the older generation no longer enjoys an unambiguous high status in kinship arrangements. In particular, the old pattern of a main house with central rooms for the elders and side rooms for the junior generation has been reversed, in that the more desirable spaces now tend to be reserved for the younger generation. In what follows, I will describe such a family situation where the older generation lived separately from the younger generation, and their arrangements suggested the existence of a cultural generation gap.

Ping is a nice old man in his sixties,⁶⁸ who retired from a provincial coal mine and came home in 1998, so he holds a “non-agricultural household registration” and he seems to be pleased with that; in addition, he has a retirement pension. No such resource is available to his fellow villagers who are registered as “agricultural households”, including Li Shu and Shijin the doctors. When I first visited Ping and his wife, his wife told me that their standard of living might have been among the middle group in Shang Village up until the 1990s, but now she considered it to be at a lower level because their two sons had not been able to earn as much money as others did. Their house was an old-style courtyard house; it had been built in 1981 and renovated once in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, things soon changed. Having spent the Chinese New Year at home, Ping’s second son and daughter-in-law did not go back to work, but stayed to build a new house on the same site as their family’s main house.⁶⁹ Everything went smoothly: soon, the new house was erected and Ping’s son left again to make money as migrant labourer. The daughter-in-law stayed to look after miscellaneous details of moving. One day on my way to the market street, I noticed with surprise that Ping and his wife had not moved into the big new house, but were still staying in their old side house, now

68 I first met Ping one afternoon when I joined the chatting group sitting by the village store. Ping said he had seen me at Li Shu’s clinic, and he claimed he knew Li Shu very well because “we used to play together.” Curious, I asked him what he meant by “play”. “Chatting,” he replied in local dialect.

69 This way is much cheaper because they own the land. Ping told me it cost them 4,000 RMB for a building permit, issued by the township administration, which was much cheaper than roadside land that would have cost 15,000 RMB for the same size. And Ping’s family is lucky because their old house was already on the busy main road. They had also saved another half of their land for their elder son to build his new house, which was nearly finished when I visited Shang Village in the summer of 2008.

Figure 23 Ping's old side house alongside the new house

dwarfed by the newly erected two-storey mansion. I recalled the excitement Ping's wife had expressed when the new house was under construction, and wondered about this surprising arrangement.

I asked them about it. Ping's wife said, "Well we don't even eat together now. She got herself a gas stove over there, and we're still using our brick kitchen here in the side house. [Anyway] that was *renjia de* [that person's] money and we don't really have a say." Ping also explained,

We've gotten old. We don't share the same tastes with the young ones. They usually like to eat strongly flavored food while we prefer a bland diet that is easier for us to digest. We don't share the same taste in watching TV either. She [the daughter-in-law] likes to watch those serial dramas but I like our local operas. [Living separately] is fine. [Anyway] we built the new house mainly because our old house doesn't follow the current style.

In agreement with her husband's explanation, Ping's wife added,

Renjia [that person] goes to bed late [because of watching TV] and gets up late. We don't watch TV after 7:30 pm since our grandchildren are living

with us and we don't want them to go to bed late. They all have to get up early in the morning for school. Yes, her [the daughter-in-law's] son also lives with us because he's grown used to being with us, plus he likes our cooking better, and his mother comes over to eat from time to time as well.

It is interesting that Ping's wife referred to her daughter-in-law as "that person" instead of addressing her by a kinship term or even by her name. A certain distance might have developed between them. And it looked odd that the daughter-in-law was living in a big house all by herself, without even her own child staying by her side. Understandably, when the new house was built, a formal decision of *fenjia* (family division) might have been made, supposedly by the daughter-in-law, of which the marked sign was the *fenzao* (separation of stoves).⁷⁰ What should be noted here is that this form of family division is not the traditional way that a son receives a share in the family assets, bestowed by the parents, to start his new home/house *somewhere else*: the parents did not leave their own residence. Despite the fact that Ping and his wife had contributed the land of their very own house – the house they had built from scratch and lived in for 25 years – Ping and his wife nevertheless seemed to be amenable to this disadvantaged situation of living in their old side house instead of moving (back) into the new house. The main reason, as noted above, was that the new house is built with the money earned by the young couple.

On the other hand, Ping and his wife's mundane yet concrete rationalizations also make sense: Why would they want to live with someone who does not share their taste in food and way of living? What happened in Ping's house was not an exceptional story, but a common phenomenon in Shang Village. It is not only the building of a new house that can occasion this kind of arrangement: when Zhenke's son came home to get married, he and his wife moved to the side house that had been used as storage, and renovated the three-room main house to be used by the newlyweds.⁷¹ Another senior

70 Family division has long been a major topic in the study of Chinese kinship anthropology. Early studies show that family division throughout Han Chinese society generally follow customary procedures, such as the calling in of witnesses or mediators and the working out of a settlement of goods (Baker 1979; Johnston 1910; Fei Xiaotong 1939, 1992). In Shang village, though, it seemed to me that most family divisions took place informally, in an ad hoc manner, when a new house was built. Again, with the adult children working outside the village, most family still stayed together even though the new house had been built. For a general review of family division in rural China, see Myron Cohen 1992.

71 As mentioned in Chapter Two, this is also out of a consideration for the younger generation's increasing desire for privacy. Yan Yunxiang has extensively discussed the issue of private life in a rural village in northeastern China, see Yan 2003.

villager, whose two sons lived across the lane from her simple two-room hut (with only a kitchen and bedroom), made a similar comment on a different occasion when answering my question about generation gaps: “You see people who are our age always interact with others like ourselves. We care about the same things, talk about the same things, and we do the same things. As for those youngsters, we can’t even live with them: we don’t talk about the same things, or do the same things. We are entirely different.”

Though the intergenerational tensions that would seem to be entailed in these new housing forms might index something of the transition currently under way, it would be hasty to assume that this phenomenon signifies what Yunxiang Yan has denounced as “the rise of the uncivil individual” (Yan 2003: 217). In this regard, I prefer to revisit the Chinese concepts of personhood and social belonging that were theorized by Fei Xiaotong (1992: 65). As discussed above, Fei used the image of the ripples that form after a rock is thrown into water to explain the existence of diverse personal networks that have ever outward-shifting boundaries, such that a village would have multiple “self-centers” (1992: 69). That is to say, an active self (or individual) always acts in full awareness of collective obligations, or “everyday ethics” as Steinmuller has also argued in his ethnography of Bashan villagers in Hubei, China (Steinmuller 2013). Instead of drawing on moralistic critiques of “deteriorating rural ethics”, here I take seriously people’s own interpretations and rationalizations of their village living arrangements. Shang villagers do not feel that family and communal life are falling apart, and there are continuing interdependencies and even satisfactions in this new form of family life. Many such forms of interdependency have been taken for granted by and occluded within the discourses of declining rural morality.⁷²

Moralistic discourses, I would argue, illegitimately naturalize both how “peasants” are and how they ought to be. To a great extent, this naturalization of rural people has fundamentally dehistoricized and depoliticized

72 Liu Xin for example, in his monograph *In One’s Own Shadow: An Ethnographic Account of the Condition of Post-reform Rural China*, concludes his ethnography of a northern rural Shaanxi village with the statement that, “[t]he process of decollectivization in the countryside has continued, and economic reforms have brought the question of social and economic differentiation – fundamentally an ethical or a moral issue – to the attention of every person” (2000: 182). For Liu, it is obvious that rural ethics has gone to hell, with the Chinese countryside being kept “in the shadow” of China’s uneven modernization. This simplistic understanding of a contemporary rural “(im)moral world,” is rooted in a sense of loss arising from an “old-fashioned modernist subject-position” (Spivak 1999: 320) that may have little connection to historical rural conditions. Here, I would join other recent ethnographies of rural China that have made it clear that morality (and sociality) are not in fact waning; to name a few, see Chau 2006; Lora-Wainwright 2013; Jing Jun 1996; Oxfeld 2010; Steinmüller 2013.

contemporary “rural problems” in China. Further, as Oxfeld has argued, “the very critique of a society or regime as lacking in ethics or a moral code is in itself the implicit acknowledgement that the critic holds on to one” (2008: 226). It is in this sense that immanent village sociality, which as I have shown intensified and expanded (in the county-based social networks in Wenzhou for example) instead of attenuated in the process of rapid family and social change, becomes *uncanny*. This taken-for-granted sociality reveals, and presents an alternative to, the deeply held uncertainty of “a still-emerging moral practice based on individual self-regulation and ethical responsibility” in an urbanized society of “strangers” (Palmer 2012: 263).

Villagers of all ages insisted that the older generation (those over fifty-five in the 2000s) *willingly* accepted the new family housing situation. They argued that older people did not use the same language or have a vision in common with the middle-aged and youthful generations. Everyone understood the necessity of the most able-bodied generation working away from the village, and they were well aware of the difficulties migrants faced in this new economic and social order. Given the apparent lack of alternatives for rural families, the former heads of extended families have accepted that they are increasingly cut off from influence over the plans of their children and grandchildren. This transformation in what has long been thought of as a patriarchal hierarchy has also transformed dispositions of power in kin groups and in the state administrative system. This was made evident in a project to restore a village ancestral hall, which I will discuss briefly in the beginning of the next chapter.

Generally speaking, it seems to me that high family standing has shifted downward to the next generation, even in some respects to the grandchildren and younger children’s generation. This shift is closely related to the widely agreed undesirability of an agricultural life.⁷³ As discussed above, village migrants work hard to build an eventual better life at home, while “home” to them is no longer their actual farming village, but a somewhat vaguely imagined place that is once again close to their kith and kin. One might say that they *have to go home* because of the household registration system. Though I am basically in agreement with this, I nevertheless do not want to lose sight of the importance for migrants of returning to a familiar place where their habits have been formed and where their most significant

73 And, by extension, the strong association of agricultural labor with “dirt”, which, as Ayi argued, is unavoidable. Kipnis also acknowledges this fact in his discussion of education desire that “[y]oung people who desire urban lives are [...] a driving factor behind the shape of China’s urban labor markets” (2013: 166).

social networks are centered. And the hopes of this middle-generation for a “better” future, learnt through a migrant life that has provided glimpses of the global market and “modern” consumerism, tends to be deferred “downward” to the third generation and even further. It is, after all, not easy to save enough from piecework in factories to be wealthy and modern in a farming village.

Still, migrant workers’ ultimate goal of a comfortable life back home in the village was strongly conditioned by the near-total absence of the State in their lives away from home.⁷⁴ With very few state policies or programs addressing the social needs of “the floating population”, it is nearly impossible for millions of migrants to live a desirable life in cities, where they are classified as a “population from outside (*wailai renkou*)”. The only place where their household registration card – a foundational legal classification for Chinese citizens – allows them to build a permanent family life, with access to state services such as healthcare and education, is in their home villages.

The immanent village sociality, therefore, goes beyond, but is not posited against higher order formations such as state agencies. On the contrary, state forms can be thought of as elements that are also active on the plane of immanence. As Deleuze and Guattari have indicated, immanent being is neither transcendent, nor accessible to abstract theory, nor confined within administrative hierarchy.⁷⁵ Instead, as Brian Massumi writes, immanent being “leak[s] from State regulation on every side” (2002: 82). Village sociality is contingent and open to change. I argue that it is exactly under the changing conditions – state, market, societal, ideological, and more – which regulate and partly determine rural everyday life, that people constitute and reconstitute relationships and social ties, in an irreducibly contingent and changeable manner. This way of coordinated (and coordinating) living is “the effective condition of collective change (open-ended belonging)”

74 Maybe the only exception is family planning mechanisms, which, as a national policy, are strictly implemented through its extensive network. Every migrant woman is required to register in her workplace, and her fertility is closely monitored by both workplace and hometown administrations.

75 “[...] immanence is immanent only to itself and consequently captures everything, absorbs All-One, and leaves nothing remaining to which it could be immanent. In any case, whenever immanence is interpreted as immanent to Something, we can be sure that this Something reintroduces the transcendent” (Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, p. 45). See Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion on the history of philosophy in “Example 3”, where they explain that immanence, which “can be said to be the burning issue for all philosophy” (*Ibid.*) is not to be confused with any form of transcendence.

Figure 24 The Yellow Dragon Master

(Massumi 2002: 77), as the villagers of Xiaogang, Anhui Province, showed in 1978.

In terms of rural morality, after all, the Temple of the Yellow Dragon (*Huanglong Miao*) in Shang village has served as a grassroots moral educator, as all temples do. I found the *duilian* (paired couplets) permanently mounted inside the temple especially interesting: “How can I make you prosper if you haven’t accumulated virtue? Do good deeds! How can I guarantee your happiness, longevity, health and peace if you haven’t shown mercy to others? Hasten to do good works!”⁷⁶ Straightforward yet poetic, this exemplary form of “folk culture” underscores that virtue and sociality are inseparable for local practices in pursuit of prosperity and happiness. In the next chapter, I will explore further the politics of culture in “building a new socialist (Shang) village”.

76 In Chinese: 没积德咋让你兴隆昌盛去积阴德吧, 不行善怎保你福寿康宁快行善事去.

4 Culture Plaza: Why Culture? Whose Plaza?

On the day of Lantern Festival, the fifteenth day of the Lunar New Year of 2006, the newly rebuilt *Huanglong Miao* (Temple of the Yellow Dragon) held its very first temple fair since it was torn down in 1957 during the national *shuilihua* campaign (the irrigation systems mobilization).¹ On that day, Jianzhou, a villager retired from the county liquor factory, who is now in charge of the temple along with two other senior Shang villagers, announced a meeting to be held that afternoon in the meeting room of the Village Committee courtyard, “concerning the rebuilding of the Shang ancestral hall.” Zhishu, the village Party Secretary, was also at the temple fair. But as a public official he was not in a position to announce the meeting because, he told me later, it was *jiawushi* (a family affair).² (Zhishu is, after all, a member of a Shang lineage.) Still, it is significant that this *jiawushi* meeting was allowed to convene in the Shang Village Committee meeting room. Most of the senior male Shangs came to the meeting, and Jianzhou was presiding. He concluded his own brief remarks with some excitement. As he opened the meeting, Jianzhou invited Zhishu to make a few remarks and the latter chose to give a report on his achievements during the past year to the assembled elders. Zhishu’s talk was not restricted to issues relating to the families of the Shang surname; he talked not only about the ancestral temple of the Shangs, but also introduced his project of building a *Wenhua Guangchang* (Culture Plaza), which would be located in a site belonging to the whole administrative village. The relationship expressed between Zhishu and the senior Shangs on this occasion was interesting to me: this intertwining of patriarchal and official bureaucracy seemed to be a relationship of mutual respect.

It should be obvious that, for Zhishu, official administrative responsibilities should outweigh family matters. In Chapter Three, I argued that state provisions and entitlements could not replace the many kinds of

1 Villagers considered this campaign a prelude to the Great Leap Forward, when many trees were felled to build an unnecessarily large number of wells. Eventually, the campaign led to the dismantling of all the village temples, including both some smaller temples such as that of the earth god and the major temple of Shang Village, the Temple of Yellow Dragon. Most of the wells turned out to be useless, without water. They were “just for the sake of appearances 就是个样式,” people told me.

2 See my discussion in the previous chapter. All Shangs in this village are related.

interdependency and cooperation that continue, as immanent sociality, to make life possible in the village. But state activity is nevertheless an important feature of the active and heterogeneous plane of immanence that is village sociality. This chapter discusses some contentious and dynamic local politics and explores how different actors situate themselves in relation to the national discourse on urbanization/modernization. In particular, this chapter traces the politics that surrounded the Shang village *Wenhua Guangchang* (Culture Plaza) project. I will engage Chinese discourses on *wenhua* (culture)³ and *suzhi* (population quality), terms that have taken on new significance in the newly implemented national initiative of “*xin-nongcun jianshe* (building new socialist villages)”.

According to the Central Committee's Number One Document (*Yihao Wenjian*)⁴ issued for the year 2006, “building new socialist villages” is a program to develop “an all-inclusive, systematic whole that includes the following five aspects: enhanced production, a comfortable standard of living, a *wenming* (civilized) social atmosphere, neat and clean villages, and democratic management.”⁵ An earlier statement in the same document contextualizes these euphemistic phrases in a longer-standing policy history: China's development, it says, has reached the stage of “industry promoting agriculture and cities bringing along the countryside.” In the 2015 Number One Document, “building new socialist villages” remains central for rural development, with the persisting goal of “increasing the overall *suzhi* (quality) of the rural population” so as to “elevate the level of civilization of rural society.”⁶ That is to say, rural China should now be held

3 In classical Chinese, *wenhua* denotes the domain of *wen*, aesthetic cultivation in contrast to that of *wu*, or military prowess; the term connotes an acquired learning and refinement that, as I have argued, tends not to be associated with “the peasantry”. It was at the turn of the twentieth century that *bunka*, the Japanese kanji translation of the English word “culture” equivalent to the existing Chinese term *wenhua*, was borrowed back by Chinese intellectuals, such that the term started to carrying with it the modern notion of “culture”. Lydia Liu maintains that “the modern notion of *wenhua* or culture has resulted from the recent history of East-West encounter that forces the questions of race, evolution, civilization, and national identity upon the attention of native intellectuals” (Liu 1995: 240).

4 Published annually by the Chinese central government, the *Yihao Wenjian* shows what issues most concern the government at the time, and it is therefore considered the most important document of the year.

5 See <http://china.org.cn/e-news/news060222.htm>. Note that in this document this term is translated into English as “building a new socialist countryside” instead of “new socialist villages”.

6 In Chinese: 全面推进农村人居环境整治, 提高农民综合素质, 提升农村社会文明程度. See <http://edu.sina.com.cn/official/2015-02-09/1532457422.shtml>, and the official website of Ministry of Agriculture: http://www.moa.gov.cn/ztzl/yhwj2015/xwbd/201502/t20150205_4397256.

to the standard of urban areas in all respects, from “basic” production to the superstructures associated with “civilization”. Faced with this new official policy, however, a few older Chinese readers might recall, in comparison, the policies of the Maoist 1960s and 1970s, when the slogan of “learning from [rather than teaching] the peasants” was in vogue. As discussed in Chapter One, the legacy of this particular way of framing peasants as leaders of revolutionary development was once powerful, and has not yet been entirely forgotten. Still, the meaning of *wenhua* has irreversibly changed, both for the Party and for villagers themselves.

In government plans for the comprehensive rural development of “new socialist villages”, narrowly defined economic development still occupies the position of highest priority in state policy. With the development of the market economy, *wenhua* has apparently come to refer to the possession of commodities, enjoyment of certain forms of leisure, and high levels of education. The related notion that *wenhua* refers mainly to one’s level of formal education or degree of technical knowledge seems to be quite natural and common in village usage today. Shang villagers often remarked to me: “We peasants don’t have *wenhua* (culture).” Indeed, a simple statement about what level of education (upper middle school, college, etc.) a person has attained is referred to in the household registration system and on standardized forms with the term, “cultural level (*wenhua shuiping*)”, which identifies an individual’s highest level of education. This understanding of *wenhua* fits with a larger economic discourse that denigrates the rural while valorizing urban cultural industries and urban consumerism. Likewise, well-intentioned intellectuals rather orient their social research in the countryside to an economic needs-assessment approach, which tends to be blind to the particularities of local forms of life. Even when *wenhua* is deployed in an anthropological sense, and “input” is collected from rural people, analyses tend to be subsumed within a development model (Escobar 1995).⁷

Meanwhile, the “Culture Plaza” project to be discussed here uses a somewhat different, though not necessarily more natural or comfortable, idea of culture that is closely related to the hegemonic discourse of *suzhi*

htm. Note that it starts with “If China wants to become [a] beautiful [country], the rural villages must be beautiful (*zhongguo yaomei, nongcun bixu yaomei* 中国要美, 农村必须美)”.

7 One salient example of critiquing the reform-era socioeconomic problems without questioning the development discourse, is He Qinglian’s well received 中国现代化的陷阱 *China’s Modernizing Descent into a Quagmire*, first published in 1998 (revised edition published in 2003). Despite his presentation of a great many astounding facts collected from different kinds of media on socioeconomic inequality and injustice, the author insists that the existence of a peasantry with intrinsically low *suzhi* has blocked Chinese modernization, or indeed “Westernization”.

(population quality). *Suzhi* is an explicit expression of state biopower (Anagnost 1995; Woronov 2003; Kipnis 2006). For farming people in particular, this way of making the rural population a problem in terms of its “low quality” is consistent with “the social Darwinism that drives China’s developmental ideology” that “places the blame for underdevelopment on the rural population itself: its weaknesses, its traditionalism, its conservatism, and its lack of *suzhi*” (Woronov 2003: 17). *Suzhi* then becomes “Development’s phantom child” (H. Yan 2003: 496) and serves as a way to speak of “lack”, both of culture, including psychological quality or character (*xinli suzhi*) and quality of consciousness, or intelligence (*sixiang suzhi*) – and shortfalls in embodied physical quality. The “low *suzhi*” rural population, then, is preconceived as being both mentally and physically “backward”.

In a sense, *suzhi* can be considered largely an urban vision, one that can be realized best by a certain social class with access to diverse educational resources (such as those available publicly to many urbanites) and by those who can purchase the commodities that express their “good taste” (Anagnost 1997, esp. Ch.3). The concept of *nongmin suzhi* (peasant quality), meanwhile, has become salient in various accounts of the “rural problem” (Chen 2002).⁸ The *suzhi* discourse continues to position peasants as an unchanging anchor of this hierarchy of qualities – they occupy the lowest point of reference on the curve of modernization. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, a direct consequence of this is an interventionist government that has paid little attention to villagers and has not listened to their own characterization of their lives and dilemmas. In its own complex way, the Culture Plaza project demonstrates the systematic deafness of the State to actual rural life and concerns. So too does the story of a government program for planting poplars at Shang village, to which I will turn in the second part of this chapter.

However there were the “cultured” households of the countryside, at least prior to the wars,⁹ which were the homes of scholars, aesthetes, examination candidates, doctors, scribes, diviners, and priests, for example. In fact, *wenhua* literally means “*wen*-ization”, the acquisition of learning and

8 One book entitled *On Chinese Peasants’ Suzhi* 中国农民素质论, published in China, for example, argues that *suzhi* in general can be perceived through three levels: individual, collective, and national (Chen 2002: 5). The author defines *nongmin suzhi* (peasant quality) as “the quality of a social collectivity at a certain social status, i.e. peasants” (Chen 2002: 5, translation mine). And the major task for a modernizing China, according to him, is to improve the low *suzhi* of peasants. Though this “low *suzhi*” is seen as a result of certain socio-historical conditions, peasants “normally” have lower *suzhi*, Chen maintains.

9 See Duara 1988.

refinement – echoing a sense approximate to “civil-ization” or education. And *wenhua* was classically understood as a process of moral transformation through the Confucian civilizing project, an educational process conducted by elite literati and inherited through generations. Filled with history, memory, material practices and, as I will show, creative projects, culture has a real presence in village life, even when the term is seen as referring only to that which is utterly refined and sophisticated.

In the last section, I will describe my encounters with Shang villagers’ *lao guiju* (old ways) and *fengsu* (customs). These are the terms for cultural activity that villagers employed in lieu of the loaded word *wenhua*. The local process of villagers producing their very own village gazetteer (*cunzhi*), for example, is emblematic of the complexity of local self-understanding; it “invokes” and mobilizes culture, but not in a straightforward way (Flower 2004: 671).

Further, even a “culture” that is understood as everything urbane, refined, and sophisticated is far from absent in Shang village. This chapter suggests that many forms of local cultural production never ceased to coexist with official systems. In the case of the Culture Plaza proposed by Zhishu, some concept of culture was (re)created in myriad forms by the differing actors who planned, built, observed, and daily passed through the *Wenhua Guangchang* (Culture Plaza). I will argue that cultural lifeways, not easily conceived or conceptualized, can never be replaced by the more reified *wenhua* promoted by the developmental state system, even when the State makes its presence felt among the most mundane necessities of village life through a culture policy.

In its own complex way, the Culture Plaza project demonstrates a systematic deafness to actual rural life and concerns on the part of policymakers and the leadership, even though the project was advanced by local actors. A modernist state discourse about the low level of *wenhua* and *suzhi* that is taken to be characteristic of the peasant population was at work in the implementation of the project. Understanding its importance opens up fundamental questions about the politics of culture in Chinese socialism and state practice as a whole.

I Building the Culture Plaza

Let me first provide some background for the Culture Plaza project. As noted above, in February 2006, the Chinese central government issued its Number One Document for the year 2006, in which “building a new socialist countryside” was posited as the government’s primary task. A

central government official explained at the press conference sponsored by the State Council Information Office on 22 February 2006 that,

A new socialist countryside is an essential requirement for expanding domestic [consumer] demand. The farmers' low income and lack of purchasing power have in effect adversely affected the implementation of the strategy of expanding domestic consumption. Only 32.9 per cent of the total retail sales of consumer products in China were realized in counties and rural areas under counties in 2005.¹⁰

This passage shows that attention to rural issues has not yet strayed away from the interests of those in power, the elites and urbanites, who, as fuller participants in a national economy, would gain direct and indirect benefits from increased rural consumption. On the other hand, as the Chinese sociologist Sun Liping has underscored, this position reflects the politico-economic social tensions attendant upon the increasing gap between urban and rural. He criticizes this "cleavage" in Chinese society, which has produced a high potential for social instability.¹¹ Certainly, the "building new socialist villages" policy is intended to address the widely recognized problem of the urban-rural divide throughout China. Since 2005, rural areas have witnessed an increasing infrastructural investment. For example, in 2006, the central government claimed to have spent 40.4 billion RMB in rural areas, an increase of 12.42 per cent in comparison to 2005. However, the gap between rural and urban infrastructure development was still wide given the expenditure of 2,000 billion RMB on urban infrastructure in 2005.¹² A National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) report states that, in 2010, the total fiscal expenditure on the rural sector was 858 billion RMB, a 23.6 per cent increase compared to the 339.7 billion RMB spent in 2006; this amount, however, is only 17.8 per cent of the total fiscal expenditure of 2010.¹³ The most recent Number One Document issued for

10 See <http://china.org.cn/e-news/news060222.htm>. Note here, in this official English translation, *nongmin* is rendered as "farmers" instead of "peasants".

11 A professor of sociology based at Tsinghua University, Sun Liping explicitly discusses the "cleavage" in Chinese society since the 1990s, pointing out that there was a perceptible change between the 1980s and 1990s, during which period China saw the formation of "two societies co-existing within one country." The solution to this problem, Sun suggests, is to undertake a complete urbanization, especially "big-city-ization" (*da chengshi hua*). See Sun 2003, esp. Chapter Five.

12 See http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2005-12/30/content_3990833.htm.

13 The NDRC report also indicates an increase in expenditure on rural infrastructure investment at 199 billion RMB. See <http://njns.ndrc.gov.cn/tzzn/201110/W020111018600521627462.pdf>.

the year 2015 continues to call for “centering on integrating urban and rural economic development to deepen the building of socialist villages.”¹⁴ By highlighting the three lines that read, “to make China a beautiful country, its rural villages must be made beautiful,” “to make China a wealthy country, its peasants must be made wealthy,” and “to make China a strong country, its agriculture must be made strong,” it manages to literally solve the *three-nong* problem (see Chapter One) all in one. When it comes to rural people, however, the major concern is still economistic: policy aims to let them get rich.

As Chapter One argued, the rural-urban divide is by no means a phenomenon unique to China. Deng Xiaoping’s 1980s policy of “let a part of the population get rich first and then everyone will get rich together,” which some have seen as symptomatic of a general neoliberal state orientation (Anagnost 1997; Harvey 2005; Yan H. 2003), might be seen as an application of a “trickle-down” approach (Harvey 2005: 64-65). In this case, the direction of development would be not only from the wealthy to the poor, but specifically from the industrialized sector to agriculture, from urban elites to rural peasants. Our focus here is on the State’s plan to develop “new socialist villages”. What value does “socialist” hold in this national policy, if it is indeed structured with a neoliberal capitalist orientation? Is this a form of “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics,” as David Harvey has paraphrased Deng’s notion of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (2005)? Is this phrase mere lip-service to an irrelevant state commitment?

In the following pages, where the story of Zhishu building a *Wenhua Guangchang* unfolds, it is easy to see that *wenhua* plays an important role in the official discourse of the “new socialist villages”. The fact that the narrative of “*wenhua*” and “new” continue to matter in Chinese national policy evokes a familiar socialist tradition characterized by ideological progressivism. My discussion aims to bring forth the complicated local situation of rural politics within which the notions of the masses, *suzhi*, and *wenhua* are constantly interwoven. In particular, the hegemonic discourse about the low *suzhi* of the peasant population brings home a fundamental question about the politics of culture in Chinese socialism.

The Number One Document of 2006 emphasized rural economic development as the nation’s central task, but the rhetoric of “new socialist villages” seems to have provided an even broader invitation for local authorities to

14 See the official website of The Ministry of Agriculture: <http://www.moa.gov.cn/ztl/zl/yhwj2015/>.

engage in “cultural” development projects.¹⁵ After the New Year of 2006, Shang village’s Party Secretary, Zhishu,¹⁶ hatched a grand plan to build a Culture Plaza or *Wenhua Guangchang* as an expression of the “new countryside” policy. The plan sought to accomplish three tasks at once: dredging and cleaning the Old Pit (which was both a lotus pond and the destination of much village waste), expanding and paving the entryway of the village committee courtyard, and building the Culture Plaza. All three projects were started at about the same time. A single bulldozer came to dredge the Old Pit, and then it moved to the front yard of the village committee offices, where the muddy entryway was to be expanded into a concrete front yard that would connect the village committee offices to the new Culture Plaza. When the bulldozer moved on, a front-end loader was brought in to continue digging the mud out of the Pit, and concrete was applied on the side walls of the pond to make the Old Pit “neat” and “clean”.

The plaza would require 10 *mu* of land that had originally been planted with wheat. According to Zhishu, it was the village committee’s decision to create the plaza.¹⁷ But everyone in the village knew it was only his idea. One afternoon I heard Auntie, Li Shu’s wife, calling to her daughter-in-law to grab a basket to take to the wheat land that was soon to be bulldozed for the plaza. It was early March, springtime, and the wheat was growing but still green. Though the wheat would not mature to produce grain, the remaining stalks could still be taken as feed for chickens, so women in the neighborhood gathered on the plot of land, baskets or sacks in hand, trying to gather as much as they could. Still, walking out the front gate with a big

15 Since 2005, the government has been putting effort into improving the infrastructure of the countryside. The main paved country road of Shang village was finished right before my arrival in the October of 2005. And the village Party branch secretary went ahead to build a graveled path within one natural village before the spring festival of 2006. These activities were considered to have surpassed the general standard of building “roads between villages” (*cuncun tong*) and added to the “roads between households” (*huhu tong*). According to the published documentation, by 2010 the Chinese government aims to have paved or concrete roads in 80% of all Chinese villages.

16 As far as I know, most villages in Zhaozhou County are led by village Party branch secretaries. Even though the heads of the village committees are supposed to claim the same power, they usually are considered the number two figure in the village power structure. See Feuchtwang and Wang 2001. *Grassroots Charisma: Four local leaders in China*. Huang 1989, and Kipnis 1997 also reflect this power structure.

17 The village’s farmland has been collectively owned since the 1950s, soon after the land reform movement carried out by the then newly established communist government. Although in the Reform Era, from the late 1970s and early 1980s, land has been distributed to households under contract on a per capita basis, the villagers still have only the use rights of the land, while the collective, that is the village, classified as a basic production unit, owns the land.

Figure 25 From the Old Pit to Lotus Pond

bamboo basket on her arm, auntie sighed to me: "Having experienced the hardship of 1960 [i.e. the great famine of 1959 to 1961], I could have never imagined people today would not let the young wheat grow but cut it just to feed chickens. What a waste." People had started to graze their pigs, sheep, goats, and cows there, too.

The construction was rapid. The land for the plaza was leveled and colorful tiles were arranged carefully on top of a bed of gravel. Then, one day, four bright-colored red, blue, and yellow exercise machines arrived. These exercise machines have been very common in urban parks all over China since the 1990s, but this was the first time I had seen any in the countryside. A pair of old basketball backboards appeared, and two concrete ping pong tables seemed to erect themselves overnight. Finally, there were only the four corner pavilions left to be worked on according to the plan.

However, the ongoing construction and the loud noise of the machinery did not seem to make either the Old Pit or the *Wenhua Guangchang* much of an attraction.¹⁸ On the main roads right beside the Old Pit and Culture Plaza constructions sites, villagers came and went without lingering – to the kindergarten to pick up their grandchildren, to stores to get everyday necessities, to the market to get vegetables, or on their way home from somewhere else. Except for Zhishu, the occasional village committee member, a few school kids, and me, few villagers stopped to watch the construction process. Most people pointedly ignored these scenes of the emerging "new socialist village". Zhishu, however, spent a lot of time there, squatting and silently watching the machinery at work, or talking with whoever approached him; cigarette always in hand, his expression, I felt, was always sullen.

What did villagers think of this Culture Plaza project, anyway? At the beginning of the construction, most Shang villagers, when I asked them, referred to the plaza as a *yule changsuo* (recreation area), thinking, no doubt, of the exercise machines, the basketball backboards, and the concrete ping pong tables. Two villagers' comments explained their view of the "recreation" promised by the plaza: "Recreation? We peasants work everyday from dawn to dusk; we don't need to exercise." The idea of recreation as some form of physical exercise not only makes little sense in the context of villagers' hard-working everyday lives, it could also involve spending extra money on unnecessary consumption. Some pointed out to me that even simple games required the purchase of ping-pong paddles and basketballs, which

18 As anthropologists of rural China have pointed out, rural people are usually attracted to *renao* (heat and noise), which Chau summarizes as "*honghuo* (red and fiery) sociality". See Weller 1994: 113-128; Chau 2006: 147-168.

will not be provided by the village committee. They were not pleased to see the villagers' public money spent on such superfluous activities. Money is always in short supply, as I was often told.

For most villagers, the issue of building the plaza centered upon the legitimacy of collecting the money that would pay for it: where would the money come from? The answer was self-evident to Shang villagers, who know such situations all too well. In a chat at the village store, one man said,

In villages people within one family lineage might help each other [with free labor]; but not with things on a larger scale which have to be done with money. It's not allowed to organize compulsory labour for village [government] business any more. In the past one day of compulsory labour was paid at 12 RMB, now the price has gone up to 15 RMB at least, because the ones who go out to work [for private businesses] as unskilled laborers even get over 20 RMB a day. [Zhishu will] have to collect money from us, the masses (*qunzhong*); there's no other choice. In this business, I'll tell you the truth, Zhishu won't actually pay out his own money. The only solution, then, [to pay for the labour] is for the production team to sell 8 or 10 mu of land per year to villagers at a price of 100 or 120 thousand RMB per mu.

Later, a township official told me that the county government was planning to give Shang village the sum of 250 thousand RMB for this project. But it would be in the form of an award and disbursement would have to wait until the *Wenhua Guangchang* was finished and could be held up as an achievement. Zhishu had known this from the beginning, and he did hire about twenty of his fellow villagers at a rate of twenty RMB a day for the construction projects. Where did the money come from? It was an open secret among Shang villagers that the collectively owned village farmland was being sold to village residents who wanted to build new houses in order to make money. And it was a rather strong statement that "he'll have to collect money from the masses," meaning "our" money.

One day, when I walked over to the plaza construction site, I saw an unforgettable scene: a group of grey-haired older men were paving the site (the young people being mostly away from the village, either working faraway in cities or working in private businesses closer by that paid more than village collective projects would). The old men worked silently, with Zhishu squatting alongside, darkly supervising. I could not help but mentally contrast this image with those of collective labor undertaken with

Figure 26 **Laboring on the Culture Plaza**

heightened joy depicted in Maoist posters.¹⁹ On other occasions, I saw smiles and joking among the elderly men who were working there, and Zhishu would join in. Even though people joked with Zhishu at times, I never saw him do manual labor himself. His insistence on “supervising” made this scene hard to compare with an earlier era of labor for the socialist collective. Instead, it seemed to be ruled by the commoditized notion of “getting what you paid for” out of the workers.

Some weeks before the bulldozer appeared, Zhishu had actually mentioned to me his idea for the plaza. It was during an evening visit when we were both helping his wife make fried bread in their kitchen. The ambience was intimate and we felt close, with him standing on one side of the stove frying the dough made by his wife, and me sitting on the other side tending the fire. We talked while cooking. He seemed to be pleased at my efforts to keep the fire going by feeding dried peanut stalks into the brick stove, and I guess he was glad that I did not mind the smoke filling the kitchen. He talked more than I expected, given that he is known for his reticence.

19 For example, see Judith Farquhar’s discussion of the Maoist-era poster “Wintertime Warmth” in *Appetites: Food and Sex in Postsocialist China*. She discusses the “realism” of an image of “healthy, active, committed bodies,” (2002: 20-21). See also Stefan Landsberger *Chinese Propaganda Posters*, 1995.

I ventured a question about what changes he felt had occurred in Shang village, and he said,

Shang village hasn't changed much in recent years. But if you talk about relations between people, they are getting shallower and shallower; they are not as genuine as before. [...] Are rural villages to be pitied (*kelian*)? Indeed they are rather pitiable, which is primarily due to their low social status. There is too little *wenhua* (culture) and *zhishi* (knowledge) in the village; people lack learning of all sorts, especially awareness of the law and [concern for] interpersonal relations. They don't even know what the most important thing in their lives is, what the ideal consummation point (*liangdian*) [of their life] should be. I really want to build a Culture Plaza [to address this lack]. Nowadays in the village people only care about making some money, building a house, finding a daughter-in-law, living a comfortable life, having one or two bankbooks at hand – that satisfies them. They don't care how society develops, how things work for the public good. They just don't care! It's very difficult now for the village [committee] to do anything. You saw the road we are building, on which everybody will walk. But there are some who refuse to contribute their share of the money, with all kinds of excuses; they make even paving the road so difficult.

It is noteworthy that he used the literary word *wenhua* (culture) together with *zhishi* (knowledge) to refer to learning or education. To Zhishu, education and knowledge were so important that he made a direct connection between the situation of “too little learning” in rural villages with other domains of lack on economic, social, and personal levels. Zhishu was aware of the “low social status” of peasants, including himself, and he suggested that there is a vicious cycle between peasants at low social status in China as a whole and the consequent “low level of *wenhua* and *zhishi*” in rural villages. Furthermore, he disapproved of people's exclusive emphasis on money. To him, as he visualized the Culture Plaza project, the meaning of *wenhua* should go beyond even education and knowledge, and reach a higher plane of life, a “*liangdian*” or culmination point in which life would be meaningful beyond material progress.

Understandably, Zhishu's remarks sought to legitimize his plaza project by contrasting it with what he took to be people's indifference to a “meaningful” life. As discussed in the previous chapter, immanent village sociality differs from the “collective” obligations that concern those involved in governing. Here, Zhishu's complaint about the “shallow relations

between people” is best understood as linked to his position as a village Party Secretary. Positioning himself above the villagers, he was able to quickly change his tone from a general complaint about the systematic deprivations of rural villages to personal complaints about the difficulties he encountered as a village cadre. By accusing his fellow villagers of being selfish or “short-sighted” in pursuing their own life of limited comfort, and not caring about the public good, Zhishu distanced himself from them and sought to occupy a higher moral ground. However, as exemplified in the laboring scene I witnessed, and as indexed in the sardonic views of some villagers, the actual building of the plaza turned his project for “the public good” into a bit of a farce?

Here, I would like to point out that with the deepening privatization and atomization of agriculture since communes were abolished in the early 1980s, it has become increasingly difficult for village governments to fulfil national mandates such as family planning, grain collection, and various local projects initiated in the name of “developing” the rural economy.²⁰ On the other hand, villagers understand the difficulty village cadres face nowadays in their work. This became clear to me one sunny winter afternoon when I joined the chatting group that was always sitting by the village store. After Shilang, the new leader of Team Four, dropped by for a pack of cigarettes, people started to talk about how the fourth team had been without a leader for a while. Then they pointed out an old guy sitting among us, telling me he had been the previous leader but had been retired for some time. In my chat with Shichen, the previous team leader, and now an ordinary villager in his fifties, he said,

It is not easy to be a village cadre now. You always have to collect money to do things. As a matter of fact, [since] the land has been divided up and become privately owned, it is all right for people to say no to [the village cadres] who come to their door to collect money.²¹ [Plus] the state is not supportive of cadres who randomly demand money from villagers. However, there are things in the production team that are collective affairs and [the money] has to be collected. To carry out collective projects,

20 Philip Huang also discussed this in *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350-1988*, 1990.

21 To collect money from villagers, usually village cadres would visit households door to door with an improvised explanation. Sometimes, the village committee would call a meeting to be attended by representative villagers where they would explain reasons for collecting money based upon a recently issued policy. I attended two such meetings when I was there; it was not easy for Zhishu and other village committee members to get the representative villagers to come.

meanwhile, you cannot expect the masses to give their money willingly, this would be impossible. Take the road-building, for example, we had to count on the money collected from our villagers and most of them did give their money, just a few did not, simply saying they refused. What's the problem here? There should be a policy that decides what is legitimate to collect money for and what is not.

Similar to Zhishu's complaints about the difficulty of getting money from his villagers, here Shichen too gave the example of road-building, but without criticism of his fellow villagers. On the contrary, he used it as a positive example. This is due to the fact that when the decision was made, most villagers had reached an agreement, concurring that building the village road legitimately required collecting money. In fact, for some people even the Culture Plaza was not necessarily a bad thing. One villager told me it would be nice if there were "a recreation area" and everyone could spend some time there because,

[I]n villages we have fewer collective entertainment activities than we did in the past; back then the production brigade would always hold some kind of activity when there were big issues [to be addressed]. Now [for entertainment] we just come to this spot [where we were now sitting around] to chat with others and happily laugh together, or to play poker, which is also just for fun. After all, we would have something to do there, to kill time. Especially in fallow seasons like now, we have time on our hands. Today, the weather is good and we can sit and chat like this; once it gets colder, what can we do? Yesterday, we just made a joke about gambling, which we say cures three things, cold, hunger, and sleepiness. Because when you're playing cards you can forget the freezing cold.

This villager was clearly not opposed to the idea of the plaza per se. He felt that there was less collective life in the village as compared with Maoist times, when people were often gathered together either to work in the fields or to attend the obligatory assemblies. Ayi once told me that she knows fewer of the residents of Shang village now, because there have been so few village assemblies in recent years. Consequently, she has fewer encounters with the whole village, usually only seeing the people in her own team.²²

22 Many have assumed that grassroots administration, after the dissolution of People's Commune System, was changed into a county, township, and village structure. And indeed these are the official terms for the three levels of rural administration. In fact, however, the commune

Even the team is seldom encountered as a unit. Residents really need to go to team meetings only at the time of land redistribution, which occurs about every three years. And that meeting, now lacking a public place, is usually held on the land in question or alongside the village road, so the work concludes as fast as possible.

Toward the final stages of constructing the plaza, when more people had learned its formal name, they nevertheless preferred to call it just “the plaza” in common use, dropping the *wenhua*, or culture. The feeling that *wenhua* has little to do with local everyday life had become ubiquitous in Shang village. As noted above, I kept hearing people describe themselves (sarcastically?) to me in this way: we old peasants don’t have *wenhua*.

II Cultivating a new type of peasant who has *wenhua*

It seems probable that Shang villagers have drawn their conviction that they lack *wenhua* from a more national policy discourse. This negative view of peasants is demonstrated clearly in the wording of the “building new socialist villages” policy, which calls for “a new type of peasant” who “has *wenhua*”:

Building new socialist villages presses for improving the *suzhi* (quality) of the whole peasant population, and cultivating a new type of peasant who has *wenhua*, understands technology, and knows about management.²³

The image of this “new” peasant takes a great deal for granted about what peasants normally lack. According to the official *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, *wenhua* mostly refers to level of education or knowledge,²⁴ while the

structure has remained the same size, with only the names of the units changed: in hierarchical order, the commune was changed into the township, the production brigade was changed into the village, and the production team is now simply call the team. For a detailed description of the historical changes of the three-level grassroots administrative units, see Gao Mobo, *Gao Village: A Portrait of Rural Life in Modern China*, 1999.

²³ See the Chinese Government’s official web portal: http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2006-02/21/content_205958_2.htm. Item 5: To speed up the development of social affairs in the rural areas, and cultivate the new type of peasant who is able to promote new socialist villages.

²⁴ There are three definitions of *wenhua* (culture) in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* published by the Commercial Press, Revised Edition, 1999. Page 1318: 1. the summation of material and spiritual wealth generated by humankind in the socio-historical process, particularly spiritual wealth such as literature, art, education, and science, etc.; 2. archeological term that refers to a synthesis of relics of a certain historical period, the same tools, utensils, and technology as

other two categories, technology and management, refer to valued forms of knowledge that are firmly linked with China's national culture since its accession to the World Trade Organization. An article by the Xinhua News Agency shortly after the national policy on new socialist villages was issued, for example, reported statistics on the low degree of *wenhua* (education) of the "rural labour force". Its title was a quote from remarks by the Vice-Minister of Agriculture: "The relatively low *suzhi* of peasants has produced a bottleneck in finding a solution to the three-dimensional rural problem". He asserts, "the core of the three-dimensional rural problem (*sannong wenti*, i.e. issues concerning agriculture, rural villages, and peasants) is the peasant himself; the core of the peasant problem is *suzhi*; and the core of the *suzhi* problem is education". He further suggested, "peasant training/education is the fundamental approach to cultivating a new type of peasant."²⁵ This position is emblematic of a shifting of responsibility for population welfare from the socialist state to entrepreneurial individuals, and it entails a shift in moral attitudes and the structure of blame – "You are poor because you lack *suzhi*", is the effective message, not because of insufficient government support or the sometimes impoverishing effects of the free market. Thus, the policy quoted above proposes that training be oriented toward producing a more skilful labour force that can enter the global market more effectively.²⁶ This can clearly be seen as a case of neoliberal reorientation of the rural economy toward functionality within global capitalism (Harvey 2007).

The state government, then, has recently tended to relate culture to the economy, at least for rural areas. This goes along with the officially promoted consumerism that encourages Chinese domestic businesses

the character of a same kind of culture, e.g. *Yangshao wenhua*, and *Longshan wenhua*; 3. the capacity to apply letters and general knowledge, e.g. to learn *wenhua*, and level of *wenhua*. Most ordinary usage of *wenhua* falls on the third definition, i.e. knowledge or learning.

25 Wei Chaoran, the Vice Minister of Agriculture, said on 16 April 2006 that, among the 490 million strong rural labor force, only 13 per cent have a high-school-level degree of culture [*wenhua chengdu*] or above, 36.7 per cent have only an elementary-school degree of culture, and less than 5 per cent have received systematic professional training in agricultural technology. The relatively low "population quality" of peasants, thus, has "bottlenecked" finding solutions to the "rural problem". See the official website of Xinhua News Agency http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/200604/18/content_4438517.htm.

26 According to the "one-million-technical-students project 百万中专生计划", a new project initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture, starting from 2006 the Chinese government is to spend ten years to train one million technicians for work in the countryside. See http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2006-04/18/content_4438517.htm.

to explore “the vast rural market”.²⁷ As many scholars have noted, one of the major incentives behind the new village policy is to expand domestic consumption in the countryside and encourage rural people to buy more.

Indeed, in pointing out that recreation and leisure activities are correlated with higher incomes, Shang Villagers expressed their perception that *wenhua* in recent years always seems to involve money. Where Zhishu’s village improvements were concerned, villagers paid most attention to the money they would cost: how much Zhishu would expend and how much he would pay for the labour. Ayi once said to me, “nowadays everything is about the money: every time you turn around, some business is coming after your money.” Villagers might feel indifferent to the notion of *wenhua* in its guise as leisure consumption because, compared to both everyday tasks and more significant local events (weddings, funerals, festivals, and friendly encounters), the leisure form of *wenhua* could only be a secondary concern since extra money is always in short supply.²⁸ Clearly, when villagers said “we peasants don’t have *wenhua*”, they partly meant that they simply could not afford the leisure, recreation, and levels of education denoted by one particular version of *wenhua*.

Let us now consider how this sense of lack differs in important ways from the official discourse of “having *wenhua*”. In village usage, *wenhua* is viewed from a rather different standpoint than that of the state discourse. As Zhishu indicated, the low level of *wenhua* (education) and *zhishi* (learning]) he perceived is resulted from the institutionally deprived rural situation. In other words, “we peasants don’t have *wenhua*” is a statement of effects or consequences, not an analysis of essence or cause. In the official discourse on the “new type of peasant”, however, the inference goes in the reverse direction: policy tends to start from the taken-for-granted low level of *wenhua* in the countryside as a natural causal fact, asserting the low *suzhi* of the peasant population as a matter of fact, and thus claims to reach “the core of the three-dimensional rural problem”. A direct connection is conveniently drawn here between low *suzhi* (population quality) and low levels of *wenhua* (education and knowledge). From this logic the conclusion is easily drawn that the rural population, due to their low *suzhi* and *wenhua*, are themselves responsible for all three parts of the “rural problem”.²⁹

27 See Item 5 of the Number One Document of 2010. It explicitly promotes to expand the rural market by “sending household appliances and automobiles to the countryside”.

28 Almost everyone in their answer to my survey question “how do you feel about your current life” said their life would be better if they had more “extra money on hand”.

29 Googling the Chinese term “new type of peasant”, millions of search results appear, and the number keeps growing. Among these sources almost every one has something to say about the

This is a reform-era departure from earlier official positions on the culture of the agricultural populations of China. The Maoist concept of culture was known for its sympathy toward the “peasant masses”.³⁰ *Wenhua* in the Maoist era was closely related to a political consciousness with a “revolutionary character” of overturning old hierarchies (Mao 1967, also see Meisner 1999). Mao laid out his approach to culture in 1942 in his “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”.³¹ In the text of these talks, Mao addressed “a question of principle” that he took to be fundamental: “who are literature and art for?” (Mao 1967). In answering that literature and art are “for the masses of people (*renmin qunzhong*),” Mao never assumed that the masses do not “have *wenhua*” but insisted they were the very source of *wenhua* and at times represented a privileged national form of *wenhua*. It was later, in the Dengist era after the death of Mao, that the Party revised their reading of the Marxist dialectic of base and superstructure,³² which “re-privileged the power of the material base to determine the progress of cultural development” (Anagnost 1997: 84).³³ With the development and liberalization of the market economy, the notion of “culture” has been reduced to a form of capital, an approach to leisure, or a level of education (Wang 2001; Kraus 2004). The sole focus on economic development in recent policy has thus made for a narrowed “*wenhua*” that floats free of all the concerns that really count in rural life. In other words, official efforts to promote *wenhua* in villages look suspiciously like an effort to improve the skill level of workers and redress the “lowness” of rural

low *suzhi* of peasants. Major media include Xinhua News Agency, *People’s Daily*, and *Guangming Daily* among others.

30 The firm Maoist belief in “the boundless creative powers” of the masses was also a radical departure from Leninist as well as the Western Marxist tradition (see Meisner 1999: 295–301). While Lenin believed that cultural transformation of the people needed to be carried out through bringing urban industrial culture to the peasants in the backward countryside, Mao on the other hand – at least for some years – considered the countryside as the true repository of social and cultural creativity (Meisner 1999).

31 Although the talks are specifically about literature and the arts, they were also generally considered to set up the guiding principles for culture in the PRC, which, after all, supported music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film. See Richard Kraus, *The Party and the Arts in China: the New Politics of Culture*, 2004.

32 See “中国新文艺大系 1976–1982 – 理论一集”, which has included all the important talks on culture since 1979, by Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang, Hu Qiaomu, Zhou Yang, etc., especially Deng’s influential talk at the Fourth Representatives Assembly of Chinese Art and Literature Workers in China 中国文学艺术工作者第四次代表大会上的祝辞 on 30 October 1979. 中国文联出版公司, 1986.

33 Also see Liu Kang’s discussion in “What is ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’: Issues of Culture, Politics, and Ideology”, in Liu 2004.

suzhi. So “*wenhua*” is not separate from economic concerns, rather it is an instrument of rural development. No wonder Shang villagers saw cultural programs as irrelevant to their lives.

Meanwhile, the hegemonic discourse on the low *suzhi* of peasants has deeply influenced all walks of life. In Shang village, the implementation of new socialist villages policy lays bare the contested and redefined meaning of *wenhua* and *suzhi* at different levels of society. In the following discussion of a poplar tree planting project, some direct consequences of the hegemonic and economic *suzhi* and *wenhua* discourses are made clear.

III Planting poplars to develop the economy

I had heard quite often about “the Poplar Economy” before I went to Shang village. While I was staying in the county seat waiting to get transported down to the countryside, my friends in town often talked about the “poplar industry”, a recent project proposed by the then county Party Secretary of Zhaozhou County. Historically, the economy of the county relied almost exclusively on grain production, predominantly wheat. With so little profitable non-agricultural industry, Zhaozhou is now considered economically backward, a sense commonly shared by Shang villagers as well. Lao Han, my friend’s husband who worked in the county government, told me the idea of establishing a “poplar industry” was meant to encourage in turn the establishment of a series of businesses, from lumber sales to wood-processing and a furniture industry, thus promoting the local economy. As for the benefits to peasants in particular, Lao Han thought the program would undoubtedly be positive, because compared to the value of poplar wood – about 100 RMB per tree – the price of wheat at one RMB per kilogram was too low for farmers to make much profit. When I was visiting the clinic of Dr. Fang, a locally renowned doctor at the county hospital of Chinese medicine, he often enthusiastically and authoritatively advised his villager patients, while writing down his prescription, “[p]lant poplar trees (*yangshu*). It will not only bring you more money but also save you labour and thus alleviate your illness.”

Soon after, on my way from the county seat to Zhaoying Township, the words *fazhan yangshu chanye, zhenxing Zhaozhou jingjin* (Develop the Poplar Industry, Make the Zhaozhou Economy Flourish) kept appearing, painted with whitewash on walls of houses along the road. There were, moreover, many poplars growing alongside the road, so the project seemed to dominate the scene in the countryside. Upon arrival at Ayi’s house, the

news of my coming to Shang village spread quickly around Ayi's neighborhood. Immediately after supper, while we were still sitting around the dinner table, Zhenke, Ayi's brother-in-law, stepped into the courtyard wanting to have a talk with me. Having heard that I had come from Beijing to "investigate the local society (*gao shehui diaocha*)", he assumed I might be capable of conveying villagers' complaints up to the central government. I explained to him my research role and my purposes in coming to stay in Shang village. Somewhat disappointed by the fact that I could not claim as much power as he had assumed I had, he nevertheless could not help talking rather bitterly about the poplar planting project. His version was different from that of my more urban friends. And it was not long before the conversation had got both Ayi and Zhenke emotionally involved, showing their resentment. Thus, a different version of the poplar project that had been so much advocated in the county seat was revealed by Shang villager Zhenke, on my very first night in the village. He said,

The majority are opposed to this [requirement to plant poplars]. Why? What the trees occupy is all good plowing land, which is for growing grain. As a matter of fact, [our land] here is not suitable for planting trees, they grow faster in the sand along the river. Here on our plow land, it takes at least 15 years for a tree to grow to maturity. You tell me, how much income would one mu of land produce over 15 years [if we were not planting poplars]? Planting poplars, in the first two years you may be able to grow something else on the land; starting from the third year, you can do very little. By the fourth year you can't do anything at all, nothing else will grow there. We figured the profit was not worthwhile, even if we wait for 15 years until the trees are full grown and sell them at 100 RMB each. [Not to mention] over 15 years a tree may well only grow to this big, with a circumference of 60 centimeters, and that won't be worth much.

This is a careful and reasonable (and practical) calculation. Villagers have been growing grain for generations; they know their own land best. For Zhenke and Ayi, who both belonged to the Sixth Team, most of their land was along the road, with the result that the poplar project would take up a lot of their land in particular. According to them, in the beginning, people were required to plant poplars as far as 10 meters into the fields, measuring from the roadside; soon, the required roadside acreage was expanded to more than 10 meters wider. Now, they were worried the officials might still want more land devoted to trees. In their team, each villager gets only 1.3 *mu* of plow land. Given this already limited land, it is no wonder

that villagers would “make a move to plant poplars only when pushed,” as Zhenke said.

After all, villagers have farmed on their land for a long time. They know where poplars grow well and where they do not. In my later research I learned that the poplar project was pioneered by another township located on the edge of the county. The land there, people argued, has a different quality of soil than Zhaoying Township does. Poplars were initially profitable there and this success inspired the newly posted county Party Secretary to extend the project to the whole county, paying no attention to what experienced farmers thought of as the fundamental question of soil conditions. None of my friends in the county seat ever took note of this problem either. When I arrived at Shang village in October of 2005, the village had been committed to the poplar project for about two years. There were quarrels every time poplar-planting was assigned to villagers, I was told. And the year before, some poplar trees that had been planted early had even been chopped down, drawing the attention of the police post.

I arrived in Shang village during wheat-planting season. Going with Ayi to her land to take part in the field work, I could understand Ayi's affection for the *heitu* (black soil), as Shang villagers called it, which reliably produces wheat, soy beans, sesame, and peanuts, year after year. On our way to the fields, we would pass by the sickly-looking poplars on the roadsides, and Ayi would always have something to say, sometimes a joke, sometimes a curse. One day she pointed at a slender poplar branch and asked me, “How useful would that be? To clean the mud off the bottom of your shoes when it rains?” On another day she told me the roots of the poplar can reach deep into the earth and, ultimately, destroy good plow land; the field cannot possibly be returned to grain production. One might think that Ayi's remarks are more of an anxious myth than fact. The anxiety behind her concerns, nevertheless, deserves attention: given that the profit (if any) from the poplar trees takes much a longer period of time to realize, what should Ayi do during the years when there is no output and only the precarious investment in slow-maturing trees, yielding no “extra money” to work with?

983 *mu* of Shang village's arable land were designated for planting poplars in 2005, and 831 *mu* in 2006. The village records show that the arable land in total is 6060 *mu* and the registered population was 3,240 in March 2006. Old people told me villagers had long been called upon to plant trees, starting from the 1960s after the Great Leap Forward movement had left the village barren, because all the trees, including saplings, had been put into the ovens to make steel. “Our village looked hideous with no trees to cover the bare walls of the thatched mud-houses [we had then],” they said. Afterwards,

planting trees became an annual assignment, but people did not take it very seriously because they “are not interested in it,” I was told. As one villager put it,

From the 1960s till now, so much money has been wasted on planting trees in villages. Alas, all the same they keep calling for it every year. Before, the forestation project was going on for many years [...] isn't there a “Tree-planting Day”? It was said [trees were planted] to “adjust the weather,”[but] now the saying has turned into “economic profit.” People once said the weather in the rural areas was normal in the past thanks to the large number of trees; then with the trees reduced, it was either extreme draught or bad flooding, so we had to plant trees to “adjust the weather.” And we did plant trees along the roads and ditches. Now they say [planting trees] is intended to “develop the economy.” But poplars won't work in our place, not even if you call it a “poplar economy.”

From “adjusting the weather” to “developing the economy”, what a joke this all seems to this farmer. In Shang village nobody denies the importance of “environmental greening”, a national project long advocated by the government. The question is, what places are in need of being greened. They suggest that trees might not have been a bad thing in the past when they did not take up too much plow land and merely had the purpose of “environmental greening”. As villagers pointed out to me, “you see our village has many trees in front of and behind our houses, all kinds of trees. Forestation may be good for the desert areas where trees are lacking to break the wind and hold the soil. But here we are on the central plains; it's the opposite, the trees will destroy our good plots of land.” In contrast, the current project puts its hope of developing the local economy on the poplar planting at the cost of removing significant amount of arable land from food and annual cash crop production. People know the poplars will not grow well, but they have to listen to the local authorities.

How could the county Party Secretary have come up with this idea without attending to the agricultural wisdom of “the peasants”? The villagers, who have endured all kinds of arbitrary top-down policies, offered me an explanation as follows,

Maybe those above him have assigned him some task, requiring him to develop one kind of characteristic economy. Otherwise why has our Zhaozhou County's Party Secretary been showing up on TV, from morning to night, talking about “Developing the Poplar Economy”?

People are not insensitive to the absurdity of these programs. Cao Jinqing, a Chinese sociologist notes in his ethnography, also conducted in Henan province, that a predominant number of local economic development projects express nothing but “formalism”³⁴ due to the vertical power structure. In his well-received ethnographic account, Cao offered a number of anecdotes concerning local state-society relations in Henan province, where one can find many stories similar to the ones happening in Zhaozhou County. For example, Cao also described an unsuccessful tree-planting project, which failed because “the peasants just go and pull [the saplings] out on the quiet afterwards.” All the same, local officials mainly pay attention to fulfilling higher-level demands. They need to hold on to their jobs (and privileges), and there is little penalty for ignoring voices from below (Cao 2000).³⁵

On a later occasion, I paid another visit to Zhenke and we talked at greater length about the poplar project that always concerned him. After reiterating his earlier points, he went further and narrated to me a drama involving the previous county Party Secretary. He depicted it so vividly that I think it worthwhile to include the whole story below,

The villagers' viewpoints on this [Poplar Economy] are: for one thing, good plow land is not suitable for planting trees; for another, [the local government] doesn't protect you [from economic losses]. Those at the upper levels only pay attention to assigning tasks; they never come down to investigate [what the results are].

For example, the year before last there was a different county Party Secretary, who insisted on planting yellow ginger³⁶, a kind of medicinal plant from which it was said curcumin could be extracted and exported to foreign countries at a market price of tens of thousands of RMB per ton. Planting that yellow ginger was [already] popular on the other side of the Han River in Hubei Province.

At the beginning [of the yellow ginger project], each village was assigned to plant 100 *mu* of yellow ginger; the village would be fined 20,000 RMB if we didn't plant it. Later, in the fall, everything got waterlogged; there was no harvest of yellow ginger at all. According to [the higher-ups], it

34 This bureaucratic phenomenon was first criticized by Mao Zedong as early as 1930. See Mao “Against Bookishness” (反对本本主义), in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*.

35 Here, Cao mainly concerned himself with the current individualistic style of rural households, by contrasting the communes-era when it was easier to achieve a collective project. He does not seem to sympathize with the villagers' account that “trees will keep the sun off the crops and reduce the yield.” See pp. 533-534.

36 Zhenke was talking about tumeric here.

would produce 2,000 kilograms per *mu*, but after the rain, ginger roots didn't form, even the seedlings rotted. Since there was no harvest, the price of yellow ginger dropped, it was only 10 or 15 cents per kilogram. But the seeds had been bought at 75 cents per kilogram. If you planted 250 kilograms of seeds, three bags of fertilizer were needed including at least two bags of compound fertilizer. The compound fertilizer costs at least 100 RMB a bag. Now, you figure it out, was it worthwhile? Otherwise, how could some of them – who had contracted for 100 *mu* and put investment into it, who had been laboring on that land and weeding it (because herbicides were not working they had to pull up weeds by hand) – how could these people, who had waited for the harvest time of the yellow ginger, do other than run away to other places [as migrant laborers as soon as they saw the poor outcome?

Now when you go on the road to the township, you'll see the plots planted with yellow ginger in the past. There's one south of the main road that belongs to Tonglu village and two other pieces of land to the east on both sides of the road belonging to Zhaoying village. Those fields of yellow ginger are out of luck; they have been shifted to tobacco land even though there is still lots of ginger in the ground that hasn't been dug out – it's not worth it to dig it out. Some people go there to pick them, but they have no worth. They are used for medicine, not even food.

I was impressed by this well-articulated narrative. Zhenke's reasoned account (and exact calculation) lays bare the carelessness of the county government in its agricultural policymaking. Note that the poplar planting initiative came along after the yellow ginger project. With the ginger roots still rotten in the land, out there beside the main road, how can villagers who walk by and see them everyday be expected to comply willingly with the poplar project, yet another misconceived idea from non-farmers in leadership positions?

With their male family members out working in the cities, two other women and Ayi formed a mutual-aid group during the busy season of wheat planting. One afternoon, when we were taking a break from hard labor in the wheat fields, they once again picked up the insistent topic of poplars. One woman told us that the night before, she had gone over to the poplar land and pulled up the saplings, planting some wheat seeds in their place. "I don't care. If I'm caught I won't mind losing that wheat, if not then I get a bit more land to grow my wheat on. What poplar economy? To hell with the poplars!" This was by no means an uncommon phenomenon. Binggui, a senior villager, said to me on another day, "we all laugh about it [the poplar

planting]: first year, sapling; second year, branch; the third year, nothing but some roots.”

On the other hand, the difficulty in promoting poplar planting was taken by local officials to be evidence of the low *suzhi* of the villagers. The poplar planting project clearly shows a lack of communication and lack of sympathy between local leaders and ordinary villagers. Furthermore, there is a kind of structural *impossibility* of communicating properly, or sympathizing: even if these two camps communicated, what would that accomplish? While the leaders have little confidence in the cultural level of “the masses”, villagers are made to feel voiceless and often forced to comply with policies they believe are foolish. (Recall the fines levied on the village in relation to the yellow ginger project.) They keep being required to commit their resources willy-nilly to major projects that are pushed downward from all the levels above, without being asked for their assessments about feasibility. Even though the intentions of the government may be good and benign, the disconnection runs deep between village knowledge, needs, interests, and values, and the programs designed above, which proceed in ignorance of local priorities and conditions.

Zhenke’s accusation that the local government does not “protect you” succinctly expresses villagers’ disappointed expectations of their leaders.³⁷ As discussed earlier, the Mao-led Chinese Communist Party launched the mass-line policy in the 1930s. It was intended not only to strengthen the CCP’s power in its fight against the Nationalist government, but also to reach specific goals that, firstly, were to secure socioeconomic rights for disadvantaged groups. After 1949, in the Maoist era that ended in the late 1970s, the masses – providing they were willing to function collectively – continued to enjoy substantive socioeconomic entitlements such as land, health care, and education.³⁸ It is their sincere belief in the Party, based

37 See the idea of “protectionism” discussed by Andrew Walder in *Communist Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*, 1986.

38 Here, I found the insights of the late political scientist Tsou Tang’s illuminating with regard to differentiating the two concepts of “the masses” and “citizenship” in his discussion of the politics of the Chinese communist Party: “The concept of citizenship begins with members of the society viewed as isolated individuals, equally possessing a set of abstract rights, who form autonomous social groups by exercising those rights. This concept stresses the rights of society’s members rather than their duties. In contrast, the notion of the masses begins with individuals viewed as members of social segments, possessing not abstract, legal, or civic rights but substantive socioeconomic entitlements. The masses as the overwhelming majority of society are members of the lower classes, who by themselves cannot exercise these rights effectively within the existing socioeconomic structure. They are to be mobilized and organized by political activists” (2000: 217). Against this theoretical background, Tsou argues that these

on this history and founded on a mass-line policy, that accounts for Shang villagers' ubiquitous faith in the national (but not local) leadership until today.³⁹

The bitter resentment I saw in the stories of Ayi, Zhenke, and others indicates a profound transformation of local governing practices. As Wen Tiejun, the leading Chinese scholar in rural studies, maintains, the "*da-baogan* (great [household] contracted responsibility [system])" was not so much meant to "liberate" the peasants from the constraints of a collective economy, as it was to enable the government to withdraw from its role as proprietor in the unprofitable agricultural sector (Wen 2005). From the early 1980s into the 1990s, according to Shang villagers, they enjoyed a relatively better living situation and could concentrate on their own land, start businesses, and have more free time during the fallow season.⁴⁰ But this relative improvement did not last long. Today, most Shang villagers' living standard, their supplies of food, clothing, and housing,⁴¹ is almost at the same level as in the first several years of the household responsibility system of about thirty years ago.⁴² One decisive factor, which I will discuss later, was felt to be the tax-assignment policy of 1994. Since then, as I was told, the cadre-villager relationship had worsened.⁴³ To put it directly, it

two different ways of linking the state of political power with individuals and social groups, produce "different processes and patterns of political, social, and economic development or more specifically of state-building" (1987: 265). See Tsou 1987 and 2000. Also see Dirlik 2005; Dutton 2005; Meisner 1999.

39 After the Tian'anmen demonstrations in 1989, the Sixth Plenum of the Thirteenth Central Committee in March 1990 adopted a resolution to strengthen the linkage between the Party and the masses of the people. The decision resurrected the once-effective slogan of "from the masses and to the masses", but coupled it to the operational procedures of "democracy, scientization and implementation" and to building up and strengthening "socialist democracy and legality". Both of the latter ideas were developed during the Dengist period. See Tsou 1991.

40 I was surprised to learn that in the collective era villagers had only about five days off, at Spring Festival, for the whole year. At other times there were always collective construction projects or assembly meetings.

41 Among the four categories of basic necessities, i.e. clothing, food, housing, and transportation (衣食住行), which have historically been claimed to be essential concerns by the Chinese government, transportation may be the one that has improved the most in Shang village. Since most roads have been paved, and thanks to the flat terrain, many households own motorcycles, and bicycles are ubiquitous. The other three, listed in descending order of degree of improvement, are housing, clothing, and food. For a description of villagers' extremely simple daily meal, see Chapter One.

42 Li Shu recollected, "Come to think of it, we ordinary people haven't had that many good years (要说起来我们老百姓没过几年好日子)."

43 Some villagers even thought the decollectivization did not truly begin until then, since there had been small-scale collectively owned village enterprises before, e.g. a carpet-weaving

seems to me that neoliberal economic policies, adopted in fiscal reforms especially since the mid 1990s, has re-positioned local officials so that they are no longer “of the masses” but definitively above them. At a different level, Wen Tiejun attempts a “deconstruction” of the Chinese government. He argues that rather than being regulatory and supportive like a government, the Chinese government is more like an economic entity (or enterprise); its governing serves primarily to pursue and maximize its own profit (Wen 2005). It will take a long time, Wen insists, for the government to become independent of the market economy and for officials to stop seeking profit for themselves.

What is interesting here is the moral standard embedded in Wen’s charges. It seems that Wen, an intellectual in his fifties who grew up with the People’s Republic, takes it for granted that any government should always do its best to serve the people (or the masses) before serving itself. As the responses I saw to the poplar project have shown, in local politics too, this conception of the government’s duty to the people still holds sway, but there is no longer much confidence in the principle of “serving the masses”. Without enjoying many socioeconomic entitlements, except for the right to use a piece of land, how could the masses, a.k.a. the peasants, be expected to comply willingly with the duties imposed upon them? Is it not quite natural that they would resist poplar planting?

It is exactly at this point, I would argue, that the discourse of *suzhi* (population quality) has become hegemonic as an attempt to reconcile the conflict between socialist values and government privatization. The notion is convenient because *suzhi*, which in Chinese literally means “essential quality”, can be used to characterize people at both the population and the individual levels. And *wenhua*, with its meaning changed (and at times individualized and privatized as “education level”) and according with the now different status of the masses in official discourses, has become lodged at the core of the concept of *suzhi*.⁴⁴ Insofar as good order fails in

workshop. Even the village clinic was run collectively until then. Soon after 1993 most village industries went bankrupt due to insufficient market information and guidance and due to the enterprise taxation. This information was obtained from my interviews with Shifa, the former village chief, and Li Shu, the village doctor.

44 See Kipnis 2006. Here, he examines the rise of the word’s popularity during the reform era. In particular, citing Tamara Jacka’s work on migrant workers in Beijing, Kipnis also points out that *wenhua*, usually referred to as educational level in contemporary use, is often used interchangeably with *suzhi*. What is worth considering is a somewhat different opinion Kipnis provides in his conclusion about this loaded word: “[*suzhi*] has tapped into long-standing cultural traditions of cultivation and post-Mao concerns with being left behind in a competitive society. Though anti-*suzhi* discourse may point at a backlash of sorts, even this backlash demonstrates

rural areas, low *suzhi* has been a key element in the hegemonic discourse of qualitative “lack” in the countryside. The issue here is that the responsibility for socialist development is displaced from the paternalistic state onto the people themselves. As Anagnost, citing Foucault, has illustrated: “we could easily replace ‘population’ for ‘sexuality’ as the entity that becomes ‘the theme of political operations, economic interventions (through incitements to or curbs on procreation), and ideological campaigns for raising standards of morality and responsibility” (Anagnost 1995: 26; Foucault 1978: 146). Thus, where there are shortfalls, the “development” problem can be laid at the door of an always already inadequate group of people.

However I do not intend to make simplistic value judgments about the uses of *suzhi*, “the masses” (and “the peasants”), and *wenhua*, which, after all, are important terms in use when social actors (including anthropologists) confront and define each other; such terms help to configure the deployments in terms of which our interactions are defined. Comparing the now-prevalent use of such terms with Maoist slogans (to be found in the little red books, *The Sayings of Chairman Mao*, for example), so widely repeated during the Cultural Revolution, Kipnis has noted that the use of *suzhi* is becoming quite mundane: “*Suzhi* discourse is commonplace in contemporary China both because it is a sacred language of political correctness and because it is adaptable enough to be used in a multiplicity of contexts” (2007: 395).

As I will show shortly, the ubiquitous phenomenon of local villagers’ faith in national but not local leadership further clarifies the issue of *suzhi*. Villagers, who seldom believe that their national leaders would ever betray their interests, often distrust the local cadres, accusing them (in turn) of having low *suzhi* in their way of implementing national policies. Local cadres, on the other hand, also justify their leadership positions by insisting that villagers have lower *suzhi* than themselves. As Kipnis reasons, “No matter how self-serving, disingenuous, or subversive one’s intent, expressing one’s thoughts through Maoist slogans implied that one was respecting the leadership of the Party, and thus offered a modicum of political protection as well as an opportunity to be heard. The language of *suzhi* works similarly today” (2007: 393). And it certainly works in Shang village.

Meanwhile, the most often heard complaint from Zhishu that villagers “demand only their rights while forgetting their duties,” reveals a profound discrepancy between local cadres and villagers in their deployment of

the necessity for all either to participate in or to resist desires to cultivate *suzhi* (and most likely both at different moments)” (313).

political concepts, such as legitimacy, entitlements, rights, and obligation/duty. How do local officials interpret state policy and how do villagers assert the needs of their specific life situation against the more abstract demands of vertically organized bureaucratic systems? I will turn to this question in the next section.

IV Interpreting the “scriptures” from above

During the aforementioned evening spent at Zhishu’s house, we had a pleasant dinner with five other village cadres.⁴⁵ Earlier, Saozi, Zhishu’s wife, told me that Zhishu likes *renao* (heat and noise),⁴⁶ and that there are always dinner parties going on in their house. Perhaps the “shallower” interpersonal relationships Zhishu perceived, noted above, were not between him and his cadre friends, but between cadres and ordinary villagers. Township officials kept coming “down”⁴⁷ to see the progress of the Culture Plaza, but they never stayed long. They were busy, all kinds of meetings awaited them, and they had only a little time to converse with Zhishu or the head of the village committee. I never saw them talk with ordinary villagers. It is not surprising that the project was taken by some villagers to be nothing more than one village head’s efforts to gain recognition in a “higher” political arena.

After I had been living in Shang Village for several months, I got to know Mr. Tong, the associate Party Secretary of the township office, a little better. Mr. Tong graduated from a teachers’ college in the prefectural city, he was now in his late thirties, and he considered himself an intellectual administrator. He seemed to like to talk to me. One day, I was invited to meet his friend Mr. Tao, head of another township office; he had been Tong’s classmate in college. Having worked in more than four different township offices, starting right after college, and having now advanced from a position as an ordinary cadre to become head of a township office, Tao claimed to have a thorough understanding of “rural issues”. He wanted me, as a researcher, to have sympathy for the dilemma he and Mr. Tong

45 People who are called village cadres need not be members of the Communist Party. This category includes (production) team leaders and accountants, village committee members, and the village accountants.

46 Or “red-hot sociality” as Chau argues. See Chau 2006.

47 The language of implicit spatiality and sense of hierarchy, such as “up” and “down”, “high” and “low”, is pervasive in daily usage of Chinese. Another example relevant to our topic here is the often encountered phrase in official talks, published documents, and broadcast media: sending *wenhua* down to the countryside (*wenhua xiaxiang*).

shared, being situated between villagers and upper level (county and above) officials. Tao started out by expressing an opinion on national policy,

Hu Jintao⁴⁸ originated [the policy of] “building new socialist villages”. But there are so few guiding principles on how to carry it out. We [officials] at the lower level have always had to fumble through the implementation. Working in the rural areas, we bear the hardships the most. Although you are at the upper level to do research, you’d do well to gain some understanding of our work at both the township and village level. Taking the central government’s benefiting-the-people policies, for example – yes, some policies are beneficial to the masses, such as exempting them from agricultural taxation. And those who plant grain even get a subsidy of 11.18 RMB per *mu*,⁴⁹ which is really good. But before the exemption [was passed] those experts should have made an investigation: can the agricultural tax be [totally] exempted? What if we were to charge 1 RMB per *mu* instead? As a matter of fact, as a result of the exemption, the rural grassroots administration has been anarchic and basically paralyzed at the township level. The upper level may not notice it, but we basically feel the township administration is being paralyzed gradually.

Why would grassroots administration be paralyzed? Agricultural tax monies had, up to then, been a major source of funding for local government service provision and enforcement. It seemed to Tao that with the agricultural taxation exemption now in place, local officials would not be able to do much. Some intellectuals also expressed doubts about this seemingly benign policy. The main concern, according to them, is that this cut-off of significant funding would damage the structure of local level administration and, after all, it is the army of local level cadres who were really doing the job of implementing policy.⁵⁰ On the other hand, villagers such as Li Shu, the village doctor, and Shichen, the retired village cadre,

48 Hu was the president of China at that time. It is common in China for people to bring up the national leader’s name in conversation from time to time. This is an example of how the State is very much present in everyday discourse in China.

49 In a recent phone conversation, Li Shu told me that the subsidy has increased to about 40 RMB per *mu* in 2007. But the cost of fertilizer and pesticide has increased significantly as well, he said.

50 Provincial leaders also expressed their concern about the tax exemption issue, complaining that the local government has to do an ever bigger job with ever less financial power. “地方政府要做的事越来越多,但手中可支配的财力相对越来越少”, see the website of Xinhua News Agency http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2005-03/07/content_2663940.htm, retrieved on 1 December 2015.

told me that, starting from the 1990s, the local administration seemed to do nothing but collect money from “the masses”. Scholars have published many discussions on the predominant phenomenon of “charging random fees” in the countryside.⁵¹ According to this research, one main reason for these fees was the fiscal reform of 1994, which featured a new tax-assignment system (*fenshui zhi*) that replaced a previous upward-sharing form with a complex downward-sharing form of tax collection.⁵² Since then, local administrations were encouraged to be financially self-supporting, and the burden of financing development projects was often shifted onto farming families. Villagers told me that in 2002 the levies were as high as around 200 RMB per person.⁵³ When taxes were calculated together with investments in seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides, farming became almost impossible for

51 Among the most well known publications is *Zhongguo Xiandaihua de Xianjing* (China's Descent into a Quagmire) by He Qinglian. This journalistic book exposes to its readers many sensational stories of the “rascalized” grassroots administration. One event described in the book took place in a village of Zhaozhou County in 1995. Mr. Tao told me about it as well: apparently village cadres capriciously killed a village malcontent. See He 2003: 269-308.

52 The old financial system was called “eating in separate kitchens” (*fenzao chifan*). It was carried out in 1980 as part of the “reform and opening” policy, and it provided a great incentive for local enterprises, especially the once well-known township and village enterprises (TVEs). But before long it became a major problem that the central government could now claim less financial power than the provincial government (See Walder 1995). According to Wang Shaoguang, the major promoter of the 1994 Tax-Assignment System, from 1978 to 1993 the Chinese economy grew sixfold, but the share of national income controlled by the central government barely held at the 1978 level. The 1994 system, therefore, was aimed at “fundamental institutional changes” to enhance the central government's finances (Wang 1997). It divided taxes into three distinct categories: central, local, and shared. Central taxes would go into the central coffers, and local taxes into local budgets. As for shared taxes, they were to be divided between the central and provincial governments according to some established formulas. See “China's 1994 Fiscal Reform: An Initial Assessment” in *Asian Survey* (September, 1997), which is also available online: http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/gpa/wang_files/1994.pdf.

53 This is an estimated figure, because villagers turned in not cash but grain harvested in the same year. Li Shu told me that in 2001/2002 Shang villagers were required to turn in about 150 kilograms of wheat per person. The price of wheat at that time was around 0.3 RMB per kilogram, so along with the expenses for fertilizers and seeds, the tax was about 200 RMB per person. Each household has around 4-6 persons (and some have more). Considering the average yield of wheat at about 250-300 kilogram per *mu* and the land allocated to each household at 1.5-2 *mu*, that year almost all the wheat had to be turned in; no wonder it was seen as “imperial grain 皇粮”, a common term used by villagers in Henan Province. Some families had to borrow from others to fulfill the levy. The phrase “harsh rule is crueller than a tiger 苛政猛于虎”, is a well known formula about extortionate governance by a Tang-dynasty scholar Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元; it circulated widely in those years in the Chinese countryside. After the wheat is harvested, soy beans, sesame, or peanuts would be planted, and they would be counted on to make the net income for the household. According to Li Shu, 1 *mu* of land could generate about 550 RMB net income for the year.

many people. In one of my walks out to the fields, I met an old guy from the neighboring village who told me that in those years, some of his fellow villagers had abandoned farming and just let weeds grow in the field. It was only after 2004 (when the national leadership shifted), that Shang villagers felt less burdened, thanks to the new regime's measures to reduce taxation.⁵⁴

For now, the long-term effects of the agricultural taxation exemption are hard to predict. After all, without enough funding from above or a designated tax base of income that would remain at the township or village level, financial support for local administration has to be found through other (and perhaps more "random") means. At the same time, the "build new socialist villages" policy seems to expect rural cadres to do more now, despite the agricultural taxation exemption. Thus, according to Tao and Tong, new pro-rural policies added even more difficulties to local practices of governing.

In 2006, Zhaozhou County was selected to be one of 60 counties in the nation to try out the New-Style Rural Cooperative Medical-Care System (NRCMS).⁵⁵ Under the NRCMS, each villager is expected to pay 10 RMB per year, which is put together with 40 RMB allocated to them by the central and provincial government. This sum of 50 RMB per capita will form an annual fund to finance medical care for villagers who need it. Officials consider this to be a great effort by the government to improve rural health. To be selected as one of the 60 pilot counties to test the program was considered to be a major achievement by the leaders of Zhaozhou. Local officials were required, and motivated, to get all villagers to pay the 10 RMB individual contribution in a very short period of time.⁵⁶

54 It was a historic move to exempt farmers from paying the agricultural tax, starting from 1 January 2006. However, the abolition of agricultural tax leaves a shortfall of more than 10 billion RMB compared to taxation revenues in previous years. To settle the discrepancy as well as to transform grassroots administration, the Chinese government started to promote a reduction in force at the township level so as to squeeze out "unnecessary expenses". See Chinese Government's official web portal: http://www.gov.cn/xwfb/2006-02/22/content_207097.htm. In Zhaozhou County, my field site, there did not seem to be a substantial reduction of administrative staff, but a reshuffle of officials instead.

55 By 2015, the NRCMS covered the entire countryside of China. The standard government subsidy in 2015 is 380 RMB per capita with villagers paying the annual fee of, on average, 120 RMB. See an official report by the National Health and Family Planning Commission (previous Ministry of Health): <http://www.nhfpc.gov.cn/jws/s3581sg/201501/98d95186d494472e8d4ae8fa60e9efc5.shtml>.

56 The tactic the county government was applying is called the "cadre responsibility system 干部负责制". In this case, the village head was responsible for turning in the collected money to the township office on a strict schedule, while the head of the township office was responsible

Collecting money has never been an easy task, and this program, even with its seemingly obvious benefits, was no exception. Talking about this, Tao thought the policy had been made somewhat “blindly”: why should the central government bother with the 10 RMB? Why not simply contribute the 40 RMB for them directly, so that the villagers would not complain and the officials would not have so much trouble? He said to me,

Now that we have to collect money from the villagers, you see what they've been saying: “the CCTV [Chinese Central Television Station] has been broadcasting about the ‘three-dimensional’ rural problem everyday, how come you are still asking for money from me?” This makes sense; even I myself share this attitude with them. Having been working for these many years I have reached the conclusion that there are many policies made at the upper level that may or may not address the local situation, some of these I just call “*bimen zaoche*” [willfully blind] because they are too difficult to implement in practice. But we cannot help it; these are things that have to be done.

Tao was understandably concerned about the gap between upper level policies and the difficulties of grassroots administration. He felt that policies made at the upper levels did not address the local situation, and therefore were not practical. From this point of view, local cadres too, like the villagers, are voiceless as they face a “willfully blind” upper-level policy. They have no option but to get the work done.⁵⁷

But villagers may not want to empathize with the dilemmas of local officials. From time to time, when I passed by the village committee courtyard, I would catch a glimpse of cadres playing cards there. In spite of the casual and presumably open character to the place, most villagers showed no interest in going there; they said “It's a *yamen*,⁵⁸ not a place for us.” Villagers plainly told me they do not trust anyone who “*dang guan'r* (secures an

for turning in the money from all the villages to the county government by a certain time. Whoever failed to fulfil this task would lose their post right away.

57 It is noteworthy that once the taxes were revoked, it became convenient for people to claim to be peasants even if at all other times they tended to defer this designation to someone even “lower”. Such identification and recognition practices are obviously highly contingent on routines and rituals of state. See Scott 1998, *Seeing Like a State*.

58 *Yamen* is the old Chinese imperial term for the magistrate's compound, i.e. the lowest level of imperial administration. Villagers usually go to Zhishu's house (or the head of the village committee's, depending on whom they have a closer personal relationship with) to talk about the issues they feel need to be addressed. As for the village committee compound, it seems only to be used to hold village meetings (now very rare) or to accommodate visiting township

official position)". As for the 10 RMB NRCMS fee, they asked me, "How do we know the money won't be embezzled?" Nevertheless, they are by no means unsympathetic to this "benefiting-the-people policy". They always said to me that they believed the intentions of the central leadership were good and benign; the only problems are at the local level.⁵⁹ One phrase captures well the feelings Shang villagers hold toward local cadres: "the scriptures from above are a good canon, but down here they get interpreted awry."⁶⁰

This understanding is taken by Tao to be a reflection of the frictions that develop in the course of implementing central government policies; together with other local cadres, he also used this well-known proverb. According to him, the problem mainly stems from the fact that local cadres have to fill the gap between theory – i.e. the policy – and practice, i.e. implementation. On the topic of the local initiation of the NRCMS, Tao explained his understanding of the "scriptures from above" phrase,

The rural cooperative medical care policy, for example – obviously it is a good thing [for the villagers], but they won't give you the money if you only go about it the normal way by educating them [about the benefits brought by the policy]. Instead, the village Party Branch Secretary had to put his foot down and shout [at them]: "so and so, you won't get away with not giving over your money!" Then the money could be collected. He [the villager] won't listen if you only sit there trying to talk him into it. There are many down-to-earth methods [for getting things done] working in the rural areas, especially [on the part of] village officials. Even though their methods might to a certain degree deviate from the policy [that does not condone forcible implementation], it will be all right if they do not go too far. Villagers have always commented that "the scriptures from above are a good canon, but down here they are always interpreted awry." I would say, it is not that the policy is being interpreted awry but that there are concrete difficulties encountered during implementation, which do not exist in theory but in practice.

The local officials' misinterpretation or rough implementation of the "scriptures from above", according to him, is simply a practical way for cadres

officials. There is a kitchen in the compound and an old bachelor cooks meals there, sometimes for officials and sometimes for villagers laboring for village projects.

59 When the person who has to implement the policy is just another villager or even a "nephew", if we consider Zhishu as an example, this tension becomes localized in a complex way. See my discussion in Chapter Three: Immanent Sociality.

60 上面的经是好经,只是到下面就念歪了。

to get the required work done. Tao was consistent in his discontent about the gap between upper-level policymaking and the local circumstances of implementation. If anyone is to be blamed, it seems to him that primarily it should be the upper-levels of government and their insensitive policies and secondarily the villagers with their inability to understand the policy – he and his colleagues in the middle have done nothing wrong. Tong explicates Tao's viewpoint about the necessity of applying “down-to-earth methods” to the masses, whom he explicitly blames by saying:

Yes, in theory the policy is benign, no matter how you interpret it. When the villagers call it “scripture,” they don't look at the circumstances of implementing [the policy], that is, their degree of *wenhua* is not high enough. Ideally this kind of policy should run smoothly without question, but neither the economic nor educational status of the villagers is sufficient. What can you do? Now the upper levels have too high an estimation of the peasant quality in this region, they are equated with those in the economically advanced coastal areas. As for the population quality in our area of the mid-west as a whole, you tell me what it is like!

To him, the villagers' faith in the national but not the local leadership is blind because they are ignorant. The fundamental reason for the difficulty of implementing government policy, according to Tong, is the “low degree of *wenhua*”, which here is interchangeable with the low *suzhi* of the villagers. Therefore, the gap lies not only between urban policy and the rural reality, but also the “wrong” estimation made by the upper-level policymakers and the “actual” low population quality of villagers. Moreover, according to him, there is a direct connection between economic conditions and the quality of the rural population, which then forms a self-perpetuating vicious cycle: an inadequate economy produces ever lower population quality, and so on.

Tong's concern is understandable as a product of the difficulty he and other township heads encounter in their attempts to fulfil the tasks mandated from above. While the Party tries to maintain its leadership by claiming “to represent the fundamental interests of the broad mass of the population” (one of the “three represents”⁶¹), it has become much harder at

61 The “three represents” policy of the CCP was first proposed by the previous General Party Secretary Jiang Zemin in February 2000, and subsequently became Party policy after being ratified by the Sixteenth Party Congress in November 2002. The other two “represents” are: to represent the advanced productive capabilities of the Chinese nation, to represent the nation's advanced civilization demands. See Liu 2004; Dutton 2005.

the grassroots level for this ideal to be realized by local Party organs. As Zhishu's and Mr. Tao's and Mr. Tong's complaints suggest, administrative interests – even the basic interest cadres have in representing the interests of the people – diverge fundamentally from those of villagers and national policymakers.⁶²

V Every day life and the travels of “culture”

Most villagers did not consider themselves to be people who “had *wenhua*”, especially when they were talking to me, a person they supposed to be highly “cultured” owing to my doctoral degree. Nevertheless, when I first volunteered to help the Shang families resume a stalled village gazetteer project, the project leader quietly withdrew his initially warm support for my participation after he learned from Li Shu that I could not write in classical Chinese. Despite my “high level of culture”, I failed to meet his and others’ expectations as an appropriate facilitator for compiling the gazetteer.⁶³ This experience suggested to me that, despite being ambivalent about their own *wenhua*, culture and civilization matter a great deal to Shang villagers. This experience also made me wonder about my own “culture”: am I cultured, after all?

Once the villagers understood my eagerness to learn their “old ways” and “customs”, some of the asymmetries of our relationships changed dramatically. From time to time, I would be pulled aside to be lectured on things like “our habits”, “customs in this area”, or “according to the old ways”, though these speakers did not use the loaded term *wenhua*. For example, the local rules for table manners at different kinds of banquets included: what kind

62 One phenomenon noteworthy here is that except for village cadres, the officials at and above the township level, especially the leaders, are not supposed to be native to the region under their governance. For example, the Party Secretary of Zhaozhou County is from a neighboring county, while both Tong and Tao, the township-level officials, are native to Zhaozhou. In theory, the system is intended to avoid corruption. But one direct consequence has become an “upward-responding” work style with less “downward-sharing” with the people being governed. In *China Along the Yellow River*, Cao Jinqing also notes this “native-shunning cadre system 干部回避制”. See Cao 2000: 580–681.

63 This project was finally realized about two months before the end of my fieldwork in Shang village, after I proposed to Zhishu that it be included under the heading of the village committee's project of “building new socialist villages”, the national policy discussed throughout this chapter. Seeing that it might be claimed as one of his achievements, along with the Culture Plaza project, Zhishu became very supportive and I finally got to sit down with five elders, gathered by Zhishu, to talk about the past of Shang village since 1949, including histories/memories of events, geographical changes, and the genealogies of the local single-surname families.

of table should be used; what kind of dishes should be prepared (not only the ingredients, but also the number of dishes; not only the order of the presentation of dishes but also the order of seating positions around the tables); who should sit at the northeast corner of the table and who should not, and so forth. All these “table manners” are part of a strong local sense of propriety (for a parallel see Kipnis 1997: 48-50).

In a pre-ceremony banquet marking his daughter's impending marriage into another family, Zhenbang, owner of the village store where I often joined villagers' afternoon chats, made a special effort to come from another room to my table so he could explain to me the importance of seating. He said even the direction of the divide between the panels that form a square table top requires consideration: the split in the surface is not supposed to be perpendicular to the side where the two most honored seats are located. If such a careless arrangement were to occur, Zhenbang said, the honored guests would be entitled to knock over the table and leave.

I was already aware of these proprieties, and of their historicity when I attended the wedding banquet of Xiaobin, a nephew Ayi. After a few hours at the banquet, people started to chat more, once we had become full from the meal. With the table still full of ample amounts of food, older people turned quite naturally to talking about their lives in the 1960s and 1970s. Sansao, a maternal relative of Xiaobin's who came over to sit by me, said,

Let me tell you one more thing: in the past we had the collective dining hall, three production teams, the number five, six and seven teams, we shared the same big stove. At that time, when someone got married, the accountant would say, “Oh, you just got married, let me give you one more scoop of food.” That was it for the wedding banquet! You know, at that time, the ration for everyone was only “*yiliang erqiansan*” (0.13 *jin*)⁶⁴ of grain a day; thinking about it, how much was that per meal? This was the 1960s, when the bride would only get one additional scoop of food to celebrate her marriage.

At that point, someone remembered that the room we were now in was exactly the location of the collective dining hall that Sansao had just talked about: “Ah! *Yiliang erqiansan*, it was right here! We ate in this dining hall until 1961, just before harvest time [that year].”⁶⁵ I was impressed by the

64 1 jin equals 0.5 kilogram.

65 It was the nationwide three-year famine from 1959 to 1961 that struck Shang village the hardest, when, after the hard winter of 1959, shortages reached their peak in the spring of 1960.

freshness of everyone's memories. Shilang joined in the process of educating me about the past. He said,

There was a saying circulating in the 1960s that went, "holding my bowl of gruel, I think of a photo studio; if I want a photo of the whole family, I get them to stand around a caldron."⁶⁶ Do you understand what that means? It says that there's nothing in the bowl! When you lower your head to the bowl, you see nothing but the reflection of yourself in a bowl of water. The same goes for the caldron used to boil the gruel. The life we villagers lived was miserable. And it was such a pity that even at harvest time we got only *yiliang erqiansan* (0.13 *jin* grains). Many people starved to death. That was the [early] 1960s.

As for the 1970s, there was another jingle: "Looking like a cadre, wearing smelly pants; seeming very chic, really dirt-cheap."⁶⁷ The two parts of this jingle have to be interpreted separately. The "smelly pants" refers to trousers made from nitrogen fertilizer sacks imported from Japan. During the 1970s, the Japanese government donated a large amount of chemical fertilizer to China, and it came in nylon bags. Someone figured out that the nylon bags could be made into pants. But at that time only cadres had access to fertilizer sacks, and one was allocated to each cadre. But one bag was only enough for one leg. Therefore to make a pair of nylon pants required that two cadres share them; weren't the pants precious, then? The second half of the jingle was about pants, too. In rural villages, people started to buy gauze from the commune's hospital to make pants: this purchase didn't require a cloth ration ticket. One *chi*⁶⁸ of gauze cost only about 0.19 RMB. It took about 4 or 5 *chi* to make a pair of pants. So this cost less than 1 RMB, and saved quite a few ration tickets!

From the 1970s to the 1980s, there was a saying about our diet: sweet potato soup, sweet potato bread, no life without sweet potatoes.⁶⁹ At that time our life was already much better than in the 1960s, with 80 *jin* of wheat flour per person per year on average [after we had turned in the wheat required by the state], though this, of course, was still not enough. So all the rest of our nourishment came from the sweet potatoes; we ate

66 The original in Chinese: 端起稀饭碗, 想起照相馆; 要想照个全家相, 全家站在锅台上. In order to better capture the jest, I'm making a liberal translation here. This strategy also applies below.

67 The original in Chinese: 看着大干部, 穿着尿臊裤; 看着怪拽, 不值一块.

68 1 *chi* equals about 1.0936133 feet.

69 The original in Chinese: 红薯面汤红薯馍, 离了红薯不得活.

them all year round. Nowadays, every household [is able to] keep at least a thousand jin [500 kilos] of wheat each year. Back then, how could we have eaten these many dishes [like you see here]? Just now I saw you were amused by those jingles. You should talk some more with the elders in the village to learn more [about our experience], from those previous hardships to our recent comforts.

To me, these truly were history lessons. In spite of the extent of my knowledge about China's recent past, what I was learning there, in the house belonging to Xiaobin's grandparents but once appropriated as a communal dining hall, is how people remembered their past without making explicit political judgments. Even though this conversation was about memories of hardship, which had been "inscribed on people's bones and hearts" (*kegu mingxin*, a Chinese expression), villagers nevertheless seemed to take this experience of hardship as a kind of given: "this is society (*zhe jiushi shehui ya*)!" Xiaobin's uncle remarked once, or "society is always on the move (*shehui zongshi zai zouzhe*)," Li Shu once said to me. Particularly the jingles, bittersweet and amusing with their incisiveness and rich connotations, are clear marks of a strong sense of history and, indeed, a culture that is locally owned.

Let us state the obvious: people speak particular languages, live with unique histories, make dwelling places, and live with memories that define their cultural differences and condition their mode of being. Shang villagers have long coped with rapid socio-political change, and endured much hardship, but they have not let go of their "local customs and old ways". Even the extra scoop of gruel in the collective dining hall was an explicit cultural gesture toward marking a wedding celebration.

There are numerous cultural practices that are not called *wenhua* by the people of Shang village – banquets, calligraphic couplets posted annually on the doorframe, Spring Festival hosting and guesting traditions, artistic performances for celebrations, and the affectionate recounting of collective memories. Rather than being called *wenhua* in village conversation, these activities are often referred to as "playful things (*wanyi'r*)" or "playing around (*paozhe wan'r*)". How should we understand this "play"?

In *Making a Name and a Culture for the Masses*, Li Hsiao-ti shows that there were historical moments in the 1920s and 1930s when *wenhua*, with a relatively novel meaning derived from imported models, was "found" (or "made" according to Li) at the grassroots level by Chinese intellectuals, officials, and cadres. This was especially the case when leftist intellectuals

decided “they were the masses” (Li 2001: 44).⁷⁰ And the neologism *zhong*, a.k.a. the masses (read: the peasants), was used to conceptualize a new historical agent capable of making and narrating a history of its own. As Li also recognizes in his discussion, this development directly led to Maoist cultural policy, which from the late 1930s through the Cultural Revolution, always emphasized the great potential for revolutionary agency of “the masses”. Now, however, in the twenty-first century, *wenhua* seems to have departed again from villagers’ everyday life. Currently, it always seems to be imported or even imposed from above, as is stated explicitly in government policy. Below is a quote from the Number One Document on measures to bring *wenhua* into the countryside. Note the frequency of the term here:

[We shall] develop rural *wenhua* projects and make them thrive. All levels of administration shall increase fiscal investment in rural *wenhua* development to improve the facilities for public *wenhua* activities, such as *wenhua* centers and libraries in counties, *wenhua* stations in townships, and *wenhua* rooms in villages[...] so as to build up a public *wenhua* service system in rural areas. We shall also promote the implementation of the peasants’ physical fitness project.⁷¹

Here, *wenhua* becomes an adjective to decorate projects, activities, centers, stations, and rooms, while the content itself does not seem to matter. It can be filled up by different people with different purposes in different contexts. Interestingly, even “peasants’ physical fitness” is taken into consideration, albeit as an add-on; this at least appears more concrete than the buzzword *wenhua*. It is also interesting, and consistent with my argument above, that *wenhua* becomes a “public service”. This is a kind of state-centered pedagogy of the masses, very “Confucian” in a way.

Zhishu’s Culture Plaza project seems to have closely followed national policy of this sort, since it even included colorful exercise machines and basketball frames installed on the plaza. Still, it is noteworthy that the government holds onto the rhetoric of *wenhua* in its discursive practice of governing, even though, as I have argued, the government’s invariable emphasis on economic development has semantically reorganized the meaning of “culture”. In government usage, in a sense, culture has come to

70 Chinese scholar Meng Fanhua has also discussed “the great discussion on *wenhua* 文化大讨论” in the 1920s and 1930s. See Meng 2003.

71 See the Chinese Central Government website: http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2006-02/21/content_205958_2.htm.

be a pure contrast and supplement to the “material” economic base. It is, in other words, a very idealist or superstructural category. But Shang villagers’ “old ways and customs” are not some kind of merely communicative ideal channel, they are the necessary forms in which all kinds of substantial exchange and co-construction of life takes place.

Following the shift in national rural policy in 2006, i.e. after the Number One Document had urged the development of rural “culture”, the Party Secretary of Zhaozhou County called for better use of all the village committee courtyards: he sought to reform these official centers of village administration into “*wenhua dayuan*” (culture courtyards) and open them to ordinary use by villagers. Soon, all over the county, signs saying “*wenhua dayuan*” appeared above the main gates of the village committee courtyards. However, no further steps were taken to make these spaces more welcoming to village residents, and the meaning of “*wenhua dayuan*” remained ambiguous in practice.⁷² In Shang Village, it was clear that residents were unwilling to join the village cadres in their card games inside the courtyards. The *wenhua dayuan* signs, then, produced an even louder cacophony of remarks on *wenhua*-as-lack, clearly reminding people: out there where you live you do not have *wenhua*; it properly belongs inside this (deserted) courtyard.

As *wenhua* was becoming such an important organizing principle and buzzword, Shang village’s Eleventh Team decided to open a “*wenhua chaquan*” (culture teahouse). Since its opening, this shop has been doing good business thanks to its location beside the main road. Youcai, leader of the Eleventh Team, had a huge signboard mounted over the road, anchored onto two telegraph poles, on which the two lines of characters are prominent. Villagers going to and fro on the busy road are confronted with the official discourse of *wenhua*: the first line reads “Shang Village Science and Technology *Wenhua* Teahouse”;⁷³ the second line reads “Stews and Pork”. It appears that in the final analysis, as far as Shang Villagers are concerned, stews and pork are more fundamental than science and culture. This arrangement of terms on Youcai’s big sign fits perfectly with the principle advocated by the post-Mao leadership for nearly thirty years: the economic base shall decide the “cultural” superstructure.

72 Some local cadres pointed out to me when I asked why there was no substantial support from the county for this change, that the program mainly aimed to provide a public space for villagers, which had been scant since the dismantling of communal organization. As discussed in the previous pages, however, villagers are reluctant to spend time at the *yamen* in any case; whether their reluctance will change with time remains to be seen.

73 In official discourses, *keji* (science and technology) and *wenhua* (culture) have often tended to be invoked together.

VI Discerning *wenhua*, the cultural

Anthropologists have long maintained that culture is the whole way of life of a people (Tylor 1871). And life itself is a space where social relationships and historical formations of interests and desires are neither fully determined from outside, nor captured by the systems to which living, experiencing actors seem to be subordinated (Cf. De Certeau 1984; Farquhar 2002; Taussig 1987). As depicted in the previous section, history and memories, with their distinct local characters, are indispensable components of everyday life and culture. On the other hand, instead of attending to what culture in rural areas positively is, the official discourse employs a rhetoric of “lack” in rural areas, a lack that needs to be addressed: *wenhua* is something to be transported from the city to the countryside as part of an economic development initiative. At the same time, the actual economic problems of villagers are exacerbated as they are held individually responsible for paying the cost of new “cultural” installations.

Nevertheless, it would be premature to dismiss the State’s enactment as the moral educator and bearer of culture to the countryside as entirely arrogant. As was evident in Zhishu’s Culture Plaza project, the idea of *wenhua*, at least for him, sincerely invokes a higher plane of life, a *liangdian* (an ideal consummation point). I would argue this is a Maoist attitude, now outmoded; indeed, at one point Zhishu explicitly claimed some “old Maoist” commitments to me:

In the time of Chairman Mao it was advocated that we be “red” before being expert. Though Deng Xiaoping talked about “white cat or black cat, it’s a good cat if it catches the rat,”⁷⁴ this [pragmatism] does not convince me. To be honest, I don’t believe you are naturally going to be “red” simply by being expert; instead, I insist you can only become expert if you are “red” first.

The term “both red and expert (*youhong youzhuan*)” was a historically specific term deployed especially in the later years of the Cultural Revolution to refer to the prerequisites of any true knowledge. Here, being “red” may be roughly translated as holding a political stance that attests to the Maoist ideologies of revolution, mass democracy, and egalitarianism. By invoking the socialist ideal in these Maoist terms, advocating redness even above

74 This is a famous aphorism stated by Deng first in the 1960s and highlighted in the reform era, cited as a declaration of Deng’s pragmatism.

expertise, Zhishu made a not-so-indirect critique of then hegemonic Dengist economic determinism. In the recent past of Chinese history, “redness” gained a distinct political flavor, symbolizing the revolution, the Chinese Communist Party, standing with the proletariat, and building the socialist system. In Zhishu’s view, his efforts to privilege *wenhua* through the Culture Plaza were a form of “redness”, i.e. a way to politically yet “expertly” serve the people.

Mao’s emphasis on culture and consciousness is perhaps not unlike Gramsci’s contribution to a cosmopolitan Marxist appreciation of culture as hegemony, which “made [culture] into a constituent element of social life” (Dirlik 2005: 125).⁷⁵ On the other hand, unlike some notions of culture, *wenhua* in Chinese is neither static, nor innocent of politics. After all, *wenhua* literally rendered is “*wen*-ization”, enculturation, a term that connotes active cultivation and developmental change.

If we take the political position embodied in Zhishu’s comments further, in older Chinese traditions the Confucian civilizers, lordly figures who conducted a moral education process, also assumed that they controlled the moral authority and power to transform others in an ever more cultivated and civilized direction. Tang Tsou argues that there is a long Chinese tradition of emphasizing the moral foundation of the State. He suggests that the notion of the unity of governance and moral teachings was not totally obliterated by the Marxist notion of scientific laws. In China, the State “was and still is the institution of civilization” (Tsou 1987: 287). Perhaps for Zhishu and some other Shang villagers, even the village administration can sometimes be a cultivating institution of civilization.

When Shang villagers introduced some old customs to me, however, they would often add “but this is a superstition.” When I first met Runhe at Li Shu’s clinic and asked him what he usually did besides farming, he told me with some embarrassment that he was a locally popular yin-yang master, a specialist in geomancy and divination. Li Shu tried to lessen Runhe’s

75 The notion of “totalism 全能主义” developed by Tang Tsou (2000) is useful here as well. According to Tsou, instead of “totalitarianism”, the notion of “totalism” better captures the characteristic of the Chinese political regime because it separates the dimensions of regime type and state-society relations. The totalistic regime means there are no legal, moral, or religious constraints preventing the State from intervening in any sphere of social and individual life. As for state-society relations, the totalistic Party still inherits the Maoist notion of the masses, viewed as members of social segments, possessing not abstract, legal, or civic rights but substantive socioeconomic entitlements and, accordingly, expected to be actively involved and perform duties. Thus, as Cui Zhiyuan further explains, “This [the totalistic regime] does not mean that the totalistic state always penetrates into every sphere of social and individual life. Rather, the point is that the State can, when and where its leaders choose, intervene in society” (2000: 197).

embarrassment by saying his expertise was “just a hobby.” Their self-consciousness clearly reflects the normalizing and secularizing programs of the secular state. In practice, though, so-called “superstitions” (such as temple worship, geomancy, and divination practices, and the burning of paper money for deceased family members) and “outmoded” or “backward” habits and customs (such as the complicated principles and procedures of banquets, ceremonies, and festivals) are all constitutive of Shang villagers’ senses of propriety and well-being. In other words, villagers, in their own cultural discourses and practices, unobtrusively contest the State’s arbitrary configuration of what is proper and what is not. In a great many highly valued “customs”, they materialize a distinct, embodied “whole way of life”.

The Temple of the Yellow Dragon in Shang village is an example of a customary institution that cannot be dismissed as superstitious. Despite being demolished in 1957 during the national mobilization of irrigation systems, whenever a Shang villager died after that, his/her family members never failed to go immediately to the site where the temple had been to report to the *Huanglong Ye* (Yellow Dragon Master). This is called “*Baomiao* (reporting to the temple)”, a duty as central as compliance with the household registration system, I was told, with the difference that only the dead need to be reported to the temple. Even though the temple had not been there physically all those years (from 1957 to 2005), villagers knew where to report and they had faithfully reported to the temple in that plowed and planted wheat field, no matter whether the death occurred in the daytime or night time, in scorching summer or freezing winter. The temple was rebuilt in early 2005 at an expense of 10,000 RMB.⁷⁶ Because the money raised was not enough to rebuild the original grand three-hall temple, the village ended up with a small one-room Daoist temple (see Figure 27). “Now that we don’t have to kneel out in the wheat field [when reporting to the temple], we are more or less content,” Jianbao, the temple manager, told me.⁷⁷ One year later, Zhishu started to build the *Wenhua Guangchang*,

76 Understandably, people would also expect the temple to be gradually funded by worshippers’ incense money 香火钱 donated to the temple; and many larger temples do get quite prosperous from the donated money. But for this temple that is built exclusively for the Shangs – not even for the Wangs and Lis in Shang Village – and which also only opens on the first day and the fifteenth day of each lunar month, the donations are rather scant. During its very first week-long temple festival held in early 2006, for example, the Temple of the Yellow Dragon received only 420 RMB in total, without even including the expense of hiring the local troupe to perform beside the temple. For a fascinating discussion on local temple politics, see Chau 2005 and 2006.

77 Three Shang males are in charge of the temple, mainly because of their seniority in the village and, of course, their reputation of being honest and upright. The small scale of the Temple of the Yellow Dragon is typical for many village-level temples that have no professional clergy;

Figure 27 The Temple of Yellow Dragon

with a direct investment from the county government of 250,000 RMB (and the final expense was over 400,000 RMB). Secular “culture” carries a higher price tag than cultural revival, it would seem.

When my friends from the county seat accompanied me on my first trip to Shang village, Yujie’s husband caught a glimpse of the Temple from our car and immediately commented: “That’s illegal.” He was not wrong; this renovated and re-consecrated ancestral hall is tangible proof of villagers practicing “superstition” as well as possibly making unauthorized use of agricultural land. But this tiny temple does not seem to have bothered the local police, and Zhishu too, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, attended the temple fair.

In fact, Zhishu played an important role in organizing the whole village to parade as a group at a large-scale inter-village post-Spring Festival temple fair. It is called *Paozi Hui* (Fair of Firecrackers), held annually during the

there are also no Daoist liturgies conducted at the temple festivals, including the much bigger festival held by the Temple of Fire God in the neighboring Tanglou Village, which I will turn to shortly. In the rebuilt Temple of Yellow Dragon, there is only one deity being enshrined, the Yellow Dragon Master.

Figure 28 *Paozi hui*: preparation

Lantern Festival in Tonglu, the neighboring market village. This Temple Fair was a remarkable event. Preparations in Shang Village had started more than a month before, mainly with efforts to train the elementary school children to perform in the parade. The adult villagers, mostly in their fifties and early sixties, who had learnt to play drums, gongs, and perform the land boat dance during the Cultural Revolution (mainly through their participation in the Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team of Shang Village) drilled the school kids in various performances. There was one even older expert in this group, Shaoli's father, who, in his seventies, was a master of the lion dance and known for his skill in *meihua quan* (plum blossom boxing), both of which he had learnt before 1949 when he was a child. The training became increasingly serious after the Spring Festival. Even the rehearsals were a big and happy event for everybody, with many spectators gathered around the rehearsal space, making all kinds of suggestions.

Finally, the day of the show came. The performing school kids were the center of attention: their costumes had been purchased from a professional opera troupe in the prefectural city, and paid for from the accounts of the village committee. On the morning of the show, the kids gathered at Shigang's house to let the adults, also gathered there from different households, put local opera-style make-up on their faces. All the props, such as the land boat, the lion with its ball for the lion dance, and other decorations for the performance, had been made by experienced villagers several days before. Zhishu had collected ten vehicles from villagers, including one car, one truck, and eight tractors.

When everything was ready, I hopped onto a tractor along with other villagers. The entire population of Shang proceeded grandly toward Tonglu village, where the temple fair was held. The parade procession first made a stop at the Temple of the Yellow Dragon in the village to show respect and report to the Yellow Dragon Master and the Shang ancestors. After a huge pile of firecrackers was set off outside the temple, and the Master was worshipped by performing a lion dance in front of him (this was performed by Shaoli's father and two other older villagers), we proceeded to Tonglu village. The street was already filled with crowds from all over the county, as well as many from the adjacent township, which belongs to Hubei Province. I was told that this temple fair is one of the biggest in this area. Even in that teeming street of Tonglu village, Shang Village with its cultural performances was the center of attention.⁷⁸

78 An anecdote about "tradition": when the Shang village parade arrived at their destination, the *Huoshen Miao* (Temple of the Fire God) in Tonglu Village, the three schoolgirls who had been

Figure 29 *Paozi hui: the show day*

That was truly a glorious day for the Shang villagers. I had never seen so much solidarity and mutual enjoyment among them. Moreover, it was Zhishu who made it happen successfully. And it was exactly at that moment that I was reminded that local culture and the officially defined “*wenhua*” are not the same, but they are also not mutually exclusive. Rather, the boundaries are continually crossed by a variety of social actors like the gazetteer authors, the local diviner, the elders who renovated the ancestral hall, and those who eventually gathered for tea and conversation in the Science and Technology Culture Teahouse. Had Zhishu, the village Party Secretary, reached a cultural “consummation point” on that day? Or did he think he had brought the whole village to a “consummation point”? I wonder.

performing the land boat dance stood in front of the crowds and started to sing. Ideally, they should be singing local folk songs, but to everyone's surprise, amusingly, they sang a song from a popular Korean TV soap opera. Zhishu told me later that there was nobody in the village who could teach them to sing an aria from a local opera; and there is no music teacher in the village elementary school. So the three girls picked a song themselves.

5 The Uncanny New Village

After the glorious parade to Tonglu, everything in Shang Village seemed to return to normal. With the Spring Festival season fading away, younger villagers began to leave for their work in the cities, while the elders who stayed behind returned to complaining about the poplar-planting project due to the advent of spring. With the commencement of the new school term, Li Shu was again greeted by friends every morning as he swept his front yard, when the grandparents resumed escorting their grandchildren past his house to the village kindergarten and elementary school.

Changes were underway, as always. In my visit to Shang village in 2010, I found that Ayi had rented out her land and left Shang Village for Beijing, to take care of her eldest daughter's twin babies. Villagers told me that after Lihua got married, Ayi had no one to care for at home. Her children persuaded her to leave her small piece of land behind, because it required too much labour and generated too little income. No one in the village had any idea when she might return. As for Li Shu, his son, Hui, had moved to the Zhaozhou county town; both he and his wife found sub-contracting jobs in the Number Three County Hospital, leaving the old couple in their village clinic to take care of their home, business, and land, mostly by themselves. The reason for their move, Li Shu told me, was mainly to achieve a better (urban) education for his two grandsons, then both in elementary school.

As for the Culture Plaza, Zhishu told me he had been responsible for re-designing the pavilions standing on the four corners of the plaza. He decided to install a round instead of a quadrangular roof, as had originally been called for in the plan. He was proud of designing the whole plaza on his own. He reminded me of a trip I took with him and others to the county seat back in 2006, which was still vivid in my mind. We had gone to learn about what city parks look like, as preparation for building *Wenhua Guangchang*, the Culture Plaza. The trip was not very informative in the end, and Zhishu was left to imagine the urban style his “plaza” could achieve. Indeed, just as the often empty *Wenhua Guangchang* implies the emptiness of *wenhua*, its central signifier, the plaza, at least for Zhishu, embodies a well-organized space as tight and clean as that of an imagined city.

In the process of what I have called “uncanny modernization”, *chengzhenhua* (urbanization) has been announced as the goal of rural development, as stated in China's *New-type Urbanization Plan, 2014-2020*. Issued in March 2014, this was the first national urbanization plan, in which it is stated that a total of 100 million new urban household registrations (*hukou*) will

Figure 30 The *Wenhua Guangchang* in 2010

be granted by 2020.¹ This has been interpreted as a positive sign for rural development, or better, for “the integration of urban-rural development” that was articulated alongside the “building new socialist villages” policy in the Number One Document for 2015.

Urbanization, as Kam Wing Chan indicates, “for the past three decades [has] often meant allowing millions to move into cities without giving them an urban *hukou*, thereby excluding them from using social services. [In] recent years, urbanization has also meant local governments borrowing huge amounts of money against land (much of it expropriated from rural people) to build infrastructure [for city dwellers]” (2014: 4). There is a third type of urbanization, and that is “village-in-city (*cheng zhong cun*)” where villages and their residents become engulfed in metropolitan areas, coming to dwell in the city but falling outside the purview of the urban governance system.² The migrant community I visited in Wenzhou City stands as this kind of “village-in-the-city”, which is also a place where migrant-renters and villager-landlords seldom interact. Indeed, the place almost feels like a Chinese “slum” (Li *et al.* 2014: 308).

None of these types of “urbanization” are meant to be beneficial to villagers, the farming population who do not have an urban *hukou*. With the New-Type Urbanization Plan, in which the government specifies a target of extending coverage of urban social benefits such as education and health to another 100 million people, it is becoming clear that the beneficiaries will be those no longer involved in farming, with priority granted to the college-educated, skilled workers, and longer term migrants (Chan 2014). Moreover, this plan “is unlikely to fundamentally change the nature of social-spatial differentiation in these ‘first-tier’ cities where most migrants congregate” (Li 2014: 308); the new policy only applies to smaller urban centers while it attempts to “extend controls on migration to the big cities” (Chan 2014: 6). One consequence, as Li *et al.* point out, is “further differentiation of the urban population socially, politically, and spatially, especially in Beijing,

1 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-03/16/content_2640075.htm. Accessed 18 December 2015.

2 As Li *et al.* point out, the frenetic “land enclosure” campaigns by municipal governments, especially after the State, facing the global financial crisis in 2008, released a large fiscal stimulus into construction to prop up growth, have directly resulted in the rapid engulfing of suburban villages by urban development, hence the notion of villages-in-the-city. See Si-Ming Li *et al.* 2014. Quite a few studies on China’s “village-in-the-city” phenomenon have been published. Among them, the pioneer study is done by Zhang Li on a “Zhejiang village” in Beijing, see Zhang, 2001. The Chinese anthropologist Zhu Xiaoyang has been working on this topic over a decade, mainly conducting his fieldwork in Kunming, Yunnan Province. See Zhu 2003 and 2011; Zhu and Lin 2014.

Shanghai, and other major metropolises" (Li *et al.* 2014: 307). Once again, the rural-urban divide functions here as a mobile and relative dyad in the further differentiation of the urban population, with "rural" remaining a value-laden term occupying a lower position along the upward curve of an idealized modernization.

Alongside this New-Type Urbanization Plan, an even more recent move by the central government was announced in December 2015 to address the serious problem of excess commodity housing all over China, mainly in second- and third-tier cities, by expediting the "citizenization" of migrant workers (*nongmingong shiminhua*).³ Insofar as migrant workers might be in a position to both accept lower wages and fill the surplus urban housing facilities, they appear very convenient for economic planners. Here, once again, the rural/migrant population is called upon to make a low-cost contribution to the "demographic dividend".⁴ But the question is, who really benefits from such "dividends"?

This book has maintained a conversation with the hegemonic discourses about "rural problems" that continues to keep the rural-urban divide alive in China. It is in this sense that I employ the Freudian conception of *uncanny* to comment on the policy of "building new socialist villages" that has been in place for ten years since early 2006. The *rural* is thought of in China today as a kind of essence, one that is produced by simplifying and purifying practices that conceal "compounds or conjunctions or conglomerates or aggregates of many disparate ideas, acts, values, images, traits" (Bennett 1994: 111), hiding rural heterogeneity behind a stigmatized name, e.g. "the peasant". As I have made clear in this book, the "building new socialist villages" policy tends to take China's rural-urban divide as its foundation, while advancing a global ideology of modernization that both fetishizes and engenders a socioeconomic distance between rural dwellers and urban residents. But are the urban and the rural far apart? My field research has shown, following Bennett, "what was overlooked or submerged in the very process of perfecting the actual into the ideal, [produces] a sense of the uncanny, a certain *déjà vu*" (1994: 112).⁵ In other words, the "new socialist

3 This is called "Reform on the supply side (*gongji ce gaige*)". Accessed on 20 December 2015. http://guoqing.china.com.cn/2015-12/15/content_37318600.htm.

4 See an interview with a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS): <http://news.sohu.com/20151123/n427586222.shtml>, and a critique of this policy: <http://groundbreaking.cn/shehui/guoji/5019.html>. Both accessed 20 December 2015.

5 Note that Bennett here is discussing "an ideal" instead of such devalued category as the *rural*. I think, however, that they function similarly in terms of being essentialized. See Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and The Wild*, 1994: 110-113.

village” under a regime of urbanization/modernization, displays “problem” features that have not been openly recognized in the urban setting: environmental degradation, (im)moral practices, and cultural politics – as problematic as the *Sannong Wenti* (three-dimension rural problems). I call it an “uncanny new village” out of the sense of “an eerie fraternity: one is disturbed, unsettled, almost frightened by the presence of something that is not wholly new to one’s experience, and yet one has only recently become conscious of one’s experience with it” (Bennett 1994: 112).

As stated at the start of this book, the sense of uncanniness I have tried to convey also partly stems from my own experiences of unfamiliarity, inconvenience, and discomfort as I adjusted to living in Shang village. A product of China’s urban-rural divide myself, I was taken aback by my ignorance of village life and my ineptitude in managing everyday life there, especially given that my parents are both the first generation of urbanites in their families. The intimacy and efficacy of China’s urban-rural divide is not only lived by villagers but by me and many other urbanites as well. Making an effort to remedy our limited understanding of contemporary village life, this ethnography seeks to speak from three standpoints, or open up three arenas: hygiene, sociality, and culture. Rather than exhaustively describing a “whole way of life” in today’s Shang village, I have taken these three perspectives on a community life that escapes all stigmatizing summations.

Chapter One discusses the socio-historical background of the institutionalization of China’s urban-rural divide. Chapter Two aims to provide a temporal-spatial understanding of the village life in practice by illustrating a coherent set of principles governing the maintenance of domestic hygiene, describing in great detail the hierarchical organization of space and matter inside and outside the old-style and new-style houses in particular, and the village in the past and present in general. In Chapter Three, by engaging with the “moral crisis” discourse propagated by Chinese critics and some anthropologists, I develop the idea of immanent village sociality to show how villagers live a social life intertwined with each other, including continuing engagements between the migrant generation and their stay-at-home parents, as well as the new patterns of family life formed by decades of participation in the “floating population” and “hollow hearted villages” phenomenon. In Chapter Four, by discussing the curious repetition of “*wenhua*” in the government’s rural policy, I am able to demonstrate contentious and dynamic local politics and observe how villagers situate themselves in relation to different levels of the State, sometimes contesting, in their own cultural discourses and practices, the State’s arbitrary configuration of what is proper and what is not.

This book has suggested that the stigma of peasanthood is not so much victimizing as it is productive: the discursive and administrative urban-rural divide generates unique forms of life and structures of feeling for Henan villagers (and for urbanites, as it has become clear to me). One constant narrative in this book has been villagers' comments on money: money is always in short supply. This is an (*un*)*canny* response to the predominant economic emphasis in China's development policy. As I have analysed in this book, the goal of "building new socialist villages", announced as a program to enhance production, standard of living, *wenming* (civilized) social atmosphere, neat and clean villages, and democratic management,⁶ is actually to tackle the problem that "the farmers' low income and lack of purchasing power have in effect adversely affected the implementation of the strategy of expanding domestic consumption."⁷ That is to say, villagers are targeted as potential consumers to contribute to domestic economy. They see it clearly, although from the other side. Despite the many euphemistic phrases in the "building new socialist villages" policy, many of which connote the "lacking" characteristic of villagers – a lack of *suzhi*, or *wenhua*, or *wenming* – villagers said to me, "what we lack is economy (*mei jingji*)". In other words, it is not we peasants who have benefited from national economic development.

However, rural life, as approached in this book, is not solely and ineluctably centered on the State and its categories; villages are not entirely defined by the contemporary government policy mandating the development of "new socialist villages". Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the "multiplicity of planes of immanence" has helped me to convey my discovery that village sociality is better perceived at a level and in forms other than those where bureaucracy (or the official regulatory system) operates. If we agree that village sociality can be included into the anthropological sense of culture as a whole way of life, then the cultural, with its distinctive local character, never ceased to coexist with the official system, no matter how much the latter cut across the former, or how much tension and equivocation existed between these two orders. Even in the case of the "*wenhua*" that is embodied in the *Wenhua Guangchang*, the local cultural, clearly visible to everyone, may find a place alongside the official discourses of *wehnhua*.

In my first post-fieldwork visit in 2008, I noticed Zhishu had added a cement ditch that goes right around the plaza. "Later I'll channel water

6 In Chinese: *Shengchan fazhan* 生产发展, *Shenghuo kuanyu* 生活宽裕, *Xiangfeng wenming* 乡风文明, *Cunrong zhengjie* 村容整洁, *Guanli minzhu* 管理民主.

7 See footnote 217 in Chapter Four.

around the plaza and it will bring good *fengshui*,” he told me. Being a Party Branch Secretary, of course, he was not supposed to practice anything labeled as “feudal superstition”, such as *fengshui*. Though he had invested so much effort in this plaza, and obviously had developed a strong emotional attachment to the project. I still remember the day I met him in Shang village by the roadside, when the Culture Plaza was under construction. We did not talk much, but we both stood looking at the plaza. After a while, he said, decisively: “I’ve decided to make the *Wenhua Guangchang* [the plaza] as perfect as I can; I don’t even care if I lose my position [because of this].” I asked why he would say that. It turned out that the expenditures on the *Wenhua Guangchang* project had gone far beyond the 250 thousand RMB promised by the county government and much grouching among villagers had been heard.

Zhishu’s effort paid off. Thanks to the *Wenhua Guangchang* project, Shang village was announced as one of the model “new villages” of Zhaozhou County, and the county Party Secretary had come to visit the plaza a couple of times. One night, Zhishu appeared on the local television news as a model village Party Secretary. He was famous.

Zhishu has stayed on as Shang Village Party Secretary. In a phone conversation, Li Shu told me that Zhishu had sponsored quite a few social (collective) activities on the *Wenhua Guangchang* during Spring Festivals in the past few years. Youngsters have been playing basketball and ping pong in the plaza, and the school kids use it as their playground; they go there all the time. But older people still prefer to hang out in the village store or the clinics or in someone’s front yard, where they sit around and chat. According to Li Shu, the land adjacent to the plaza has been sold for housing, so, once houses are built next to the plaza, people will probably get more accustomed to spending time on the *Wenhua Guangchang*. As for the “*wenhua* courtyard”, which is to say, the village committee yard, Li Shu insists “it is [still] a *yamen*.” As I earlier observed, nobody goes to the village government courtyard, not even Zhishu himself. He has moved the big TV provided by the county government, which he was supposed to use for “educating Party members on the progressiveness of the Communist Party (*Dangyuan xianjinxing jiaoyu*)”, into his own house next door.

Life goes on, teeming with social cultural activities. And life, as Farquhar and Zhang have eloquently argued, is filled with manifold meanings that are “local, momentary, empirical” (2012: 276). Further, “every position from which evaluation could be made is situated among all manner of other things in an immanent cosmos. From any actual point of view, only some things – a lot, but not all – can be evaluated” (2012: 277). Indeed, hygiene,

sociality, and culture, situated at this local spacetime (Munn 1986), can only provide partial perspectives of the teeming life in this model “new village”.

Before I end this book, I would like to quote a comment on village life by Wenxian, a Shang villager in his fifties, who described to me his image of an ideal life:

The air is better in the countryside; also I have all my old kin and neighbors here, and we can chat and laugh together. I am content with this kind of life. I'd say I would still prefer to live in a rural village even if I got rich. You ask what is “rich”? [To be rich is] to have a house to live in and money to spend. I'd get lonely if I left my village. Doesn't [the humourist] Zhao Benshan have a performance called “What is happiness, happiness is nothing but enduring hardship” (*shenme shi xingfu, xingfu jiushi shouzui*)?⁸

He laughed.

If I were to go live in the city, I'd have to stay in a tiny room all day long, with nobody to talk to or hang out with. I'm joking, but this speaks for a lot of people and a lot of situations.

8 Zhao Benshan is a nationally known comedian, whose performances are mostly based on rural areas in Liaoning Province, Northeast China.

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