

**Discerning the Cultural:
An Ethnography of China's Rural-Urban Divide**

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ABSTRACT

Lili Lai, *Discerning the Cultural: An Ethnography of China's Rural-Urban Divide*
(Under the direction of Judith Farquhar)

This dissertation seeks a better understanding of the lived quality of the spatial and class division known as China's rural/urban divide through an ethnographic inspection of daily practice, attitudes (at domestic, community, and county government levels), policy history, and local memory in Henan, China. It shows how at every point a person's (or place's, or practice's) "ruralness" or "urban sophistication" is an intimate, local quality. By focusing on everyday social practices which may give insight into forms of embodiment and local cultural worlds, my ethnography brings together questions concerning space, embodiment, everyday life, and peasant status. My dissertation has made it clear that there are indigenous cultural processes through which the meaning of rural and urban location is made. The political economic roots and social determinants of "dirty villages," the strategies of inhabiting "villages with empty centers," and the local and national projects of cultural production all reveal much about class and power in China today. Unlike other close ethnographies of small places in China, this reading of local culture is considered in the context of the national and global practices that maintain a deeply divisive rural-urban divide. I argue that substantive ethnographic attention to the specificities of village life in the contemporary Henan context can destabilize China's chronic rural-urban divide and recover a unique and sophisticated voice for at least one group of silenced "peasants."

To my mentor, Judy Farquhar.

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Introduction: Rural/urban divide – an Old Topic to be interrogated Anew

Alarmed by urban-rural and regional disparities, in 2004 the Chinese central government started to re-address rural issues. Since then the government devised an annual “Number One Document” (一号文件 *yi hao wen jian*, a crucial policy document with highest priority)¹, every year for five consecutive years up to 2008, to guide work on the “three-dimensional rural problem” 三农问题, namely agriculture, rural villages, and peasants. In 2006 the Party made an unprecedented decision to completely abolish the agricultural tax, as part of an effort to “bridge the gap between urban and rural areas” and “build a new socialist countryside.”²

In July of 2007, however, a news report titled “Building a new countryside: Why are 900 million peasants collectively mute 新农村建设: 为何九亿农民集体失语?” started to circulate in Chinese media networks. According to the news 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 a new countryside.” They were concerned about peasants not being able to participate in policy making and implementation. As Professor Ye, one of the report’s authors, told the news reporter,

¹ The first No. 1 Document was issued in January 1, 1982, to confirm the state policy of “Household responsibility system,” so as to promote individual peasant households’ initiative to produce. There had been four such documents in the following consecutive years, until 1985. It is noteworthy that, while Mao’s emphasis on the countryside is well known, Deng’s reform policy starts from the rural reform too.

² No only the exemption of agricultural tax, peasants who stay with planting grains have even got direct subsidies from the central government 粮食直补. See Chinese Government’s Official Web Portal: http://english.gov.cn/2006-02/23/content_208437.htm.

“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.”³

I include the story above to set the stage for my ethnography. First, here we see that there are three main actors involved in addressing issues concerning the urban-rural divide: the state (represented by its policies), urbanites at large (represented by Ye and his colleagues, concerned intellectuals and media networks), and the peasants (absent actors who are represented by the state and intellectuals as lacking voice). Of course, the lines between these three elements are inevitably arbitrary in the Chinese context: the state is often embodied by policy makers and implementers, who can be both intellectuals and officials;⁴ similarly, at the village level the cadres themselves are both peasants and (embodying) the state when fulfilling their duties; not to mention the fact that the boundary drawn between urbanites and peasants is increasingly contested, especially in terms of the migrant workers who fill the cities. These three actors play central roles in my thesis, with the fluidity of their boundaries being noted from time to time.

Second, the news story states explicitly how widely the urban-rural divide has been recognized and it indicates how much policy and discourse have been directed toward bridging the divide. This thus sets the tone of my discussion, which does not assume an antagonistic relationship – such as domination and subordination – between the state and peasants, urban and rural. However, I do examine how this divide is constantly being kept alive, some reasons for which I will discuss shortly.

³ 他们集体失语了。他们缺少表达自己意见的机会，本来这台大戏他们是主角。 See <http://finance1.jrj.com.cn/news/2007-07-05/000002393759.html>

⁴ For example, the Chinese government encourages PhDs, mainly in social sciences, to work in a county leadership for at most three years to gain some first-hand experience, which is called “put-on field practice 挂职锻炼。” And quite a few important “rural-issue experts 农村问题专家” such as Wen Tiejun 温铁军, Chen Xiwen 陈锡文 work in top state agency which designs rural policies. Li Changping 李昌平 on the other hand turns into an intellectual after resigning from his post as township Party Secretary.

Third, instead of trying to answer Ye's question "*why* are the 900 million peasants collectively mute," I am more interested in the question itself, i.e., the discourse about the peasants: are peasants "collectively mute"? From what perspective do those professors and news reporters *accordingly* draw on this rhetorical question, and why? This introduction aims to tackle the peasant discourse in contemporary China, so as to pave the road for my ethnographic inquiry into the local intimacies of rural-urban divide.

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

Although experiences of being "rural" are quite diverse, the symbolic "rural" (农 *nong*) functions in China as a totalizing signifier in relation 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 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 for people who live in the suburbs of a county town like Zhaozhou (my field site)⁵, even if they themselves engage in some agricultural activities, they 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 presume that rural people share a quality of being "backward." The rural is a value-laden term with a shifting sense determined by the specific context of conversation. Furthermore, these distinctions are not just symbolic and conceptual; they are lived in important ways.

⁵ All the names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

When I was in college in Beijing, for example, whenever I was asked about my hometown in the interior of China, after unwillingly “exposing” the location in a province which is economically “undeveloped,” I always hastened to add a description of the distinctively elaborate 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. And all too often people would note with surprise my “perfect” Mandarin which they heard as without accent, i.e., achieving 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 the sense of hierarchy remains. Apparently the rural-urban distinction is by no means unique to contemporary China. Raymond Williams has said “a contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times” (1973: 1), even though there is of course a difference from classical times when multiple ways of life in both rural areas and cities were appreciated for different virtues. 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 (Harriss and Moore 1984; Shanin 1990; Knight and Song 1999; and Gupta 1998⁶). This is not just a geographical condition, but a historical one. For instance, Eugene Weber observes in his extensive historical study of “the modernization of rural France, 1870-1914” that, in France in the late 19th century, the prevailing idea of

⁶ 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 the “local” articulation through ethnographic methods. See *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*, 1998, Duke University Press.

urban life, especially the Parisian's, was the dominant force in its civilizing process, with the country being considered backward and undeveloped (Weber: 1976).

Thus the language used about cities and the countryside encodes a set of value judgments consistent with the progressivist language of modern 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 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 the time scale of unilinear 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 words for “peasants”, *nongmin*, can reveal much of this hegemonic modern bias against the countryside. *Nongmin*, the word used to refer to people who farm and live in rural areas, is a modern neologism in Chinese; that is, in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century the Japanese used *kanji* (Chinese characters) to translate European terms, and these neologisms were then imported back into the Chinese language (Cohen 1994; Liu 1995; Hayford 1998).⁷ In other words, *nongmin* was in use

⁷ Other important loanwords are, for example, *kexue* (science), *wenhua* (culture), *geming* (revolution), *jingji* (economy), etc. According to Lydia Liu's Appendix, *nongmin* was originally 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 refer 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 on another side states that in his research he found no English-language application of the word “peasant” to China before the 1920s (1998: 150).

before the Japanese translation, but was used equally with terms for other types of people that included intellectual people (*shimin* 士民), business people (*shangmin* 商民), and working people (*gongmin* 工民). Also, in the context of village life, there were once many words to describe rural people.⁸ Older usage of *nongmin* was completely abandoned once the translingual practices of the early 20th century, influenced by and modeled on the European use of peasant, had established that *nongmin* meant peasant.⁹ By that time a European urban-rural divide could already be found in the etymology of this modern term.¹⁰

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 (1994: 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 harshly negative

⁸ According to Cohen, the definitive *Chinese-English Dictionary* of Herbert A. Giles, representative of late nineteenth-century Mandarin, translates as “laborers; agriculturalists” the terms *nongfu* 农夫, *nongding* 农丁, *nongjia* 农家, *nongren* 农人, *zhuanghu* 庄户, and *zhuangjiahan* 庄稼汉. And Cortenay H. Fenn’s Chinese-English *The Five Thousand Dictionary*, first published in 1926, which “likewise has long served as a source of basic vocabulary,” in its fifth and last edition with major revisions (Peking: 1940) still has no entry for *nong min* 农民. See Cohen 1993, pp. 167, note 10.

⁹ It is important to know that *nongmin* used to be ranked more highly in social hierarchies than *shangmin* (business people). It is also interesting that *nongmin* is now still *nongmin*, while *shangmin* and *gongmin* both became “*shang-ren*” and “*gong-ren*”, i.e., from the plural “people” to the singular “man”.

¹⁰ 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’. [J. Le Goff in C. Cipolla, *The Fontana Economic History of Europe: The Middle Ages* (London, 1977), p.71.] The usages of language 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 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. [The Oxford English Dictionary vol. VII, (Oxford, 1933), p. 594.] Ref. Teodor Shanin, *Defining Peasants: Essays concerning Rural Societies, Expolary Economies, and Learning from them in the Contemporary World*, 1990.

representation of China's rural population" (Cohen 1994: 157). As he describes, once *nongmin* was 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 1994: 154).

Nongmin, i.e., 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).¹¹ To take it further, the reality represented by this generic group was “the past” which was in need of being overcome so as to arrive at (desirable) modernity.¹² This way of perceiving rural populations not only temporalizes rural and urban spatial difference, but also to a great degree operates an epistemic

¹¹ Also see Mallon, *Peasant and Nation* 1995.

¹² In the 1930s, 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 *nong min* 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” peasants (Hayford 1990: 113). (Also, Yan Yangchu was a Christian.) Fei Xiaotong made his comments in response 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 conditioned people’s distinctive conceptions of life. The gentlemen initiators of the movement, however, had been entrenched in the attitudes to attach value judgments to others’ different life styles than their own.

violence over people who have been less privileged. This perception remains prevalent among today's urbanites and intelligentsia,¹³ a situation that I will discuss in later pages.

At this point, it is important to bear in mind that one salient aspect of peasant realities is the "lived unevenness" (Harootunian 2000: xxii) of most rural areas compared to the emerging bourgeois conformity of urban elites. Instead of being a consequence of modernization, *nongmin* (peasants) have been a starting point of Chinese modernity, but only as the "other side," that which has been contained and concealed. Borrowing Harry Harootunian's comments on modernism in Japan, "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). This statement is as relevant to today's China as it was to Japan in the decades between the two World Wars of which Harootunian spoke. Gupta has made a parallel observation in 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 other words, agriculture is central to modernization but agrarian people are occluded on the down side of "civilization." And the "lived unevenness" of a rural/urban divide is not only structured by, but is also structuring the process of modernization.

¹³ There have been many well-meaning "reconstruction" movements oriented toward contemporary rural China, among which the recurrent theme of "educating the rural" is prominent. The websites I list below are only two examples among many. <http://www.fon.org.cn/index.php?id=2691>, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper66/11076/1002921.html> (retrieved on November 13, 2008).

Despite the increasing attention to “rural problems”, therefore, it appears that in the hegemonic discourse about the rural-urban divide, the rural is “symbolically central but practically peripheral” (Stallybrass and White 1986: 20). Or, borrowing Hayford’s observation, “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 peasant, quoted in the opening of this chapter. Though with different orientations, what both Hayford and Ye take on is the relationship between peasants and the state. A historical review of this relationship will be necessary, 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 (Sue 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 to grow (Shue 1988).¹⁴

¹⁴ 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)

In the context of this state control, it is also known that the Maoist revolution invested *nongmin* with a symbolically higher status than they had enjoyed in the pre-revolutionary era, though workers (*gong ren* 工人) – a kind of urbanite – were still accorded the foremost leadership in the PRC’s state discourse.¹⁵ As early as March of 1949, Mao declared in the Second Plenum of the Seventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (在中国共产党第七届中央委员会第二次全体会议上的报告) 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 urban 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 (Ref. Sit 1985).

In keeping with the program for industrial modernity, the “urban bias” (Lipton 1977; Whyte 1995) policies were put in place. Among which the most representative of these was the *hukou* (household registration) system that since 1958¹⁶ has assigned everyone to membership in one of two groups, “agricultural 农业” and “non-agricultural 非农业.” Membership derives from the affiliation of the mother at birth. *Hukou* registration cannot be easily changed, thus population movements from rural to urban areas are legally

¹⁵ 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).

¹⁶ Scholars have different perceptions about the time the system began to be implemented. Sun Liping states that the first one was as early as 1951, while Huang Ping stated it was 1955 and Potters 1957. Here I take the publication of *The Regulations for Household Registration of the People’s Republic of China* as the starting point. Other resources published in English that has thorough genealogical studies of the Hukou system include Cheng and Selden 1994, and Wang 2005.

restricted.¹⁷ With the *hukou*, the urban-rural divide was radically concretized; and the system remains effect up until today. Also, the “urban bias” policy hinged on the famous “price-scissors” policy that subsidized urban industrialization at the cost of agricultural incomes.¹⁸

However, under Mao’s leadership the Party did try to rectify the unbalanced urban-rural relationship,¹⁹ and the ideological importance of learning from the peasants even remains part of the current political morality, as many anthropologists have observed (Potter & Potter 1990; Kipnis 1997; Feuchtwang 2002, etc.). As Wen Tiejun has indicated, 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).²⁰

¹⁷ The purpose of this system is 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, 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 & Potter 1990: 302)

The tone in this explanation is obviously urban-centered, and the focus of concern was “the stability of urban life” while rural migrants were considered as disturbing this guaranteed 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).

¹⁸ 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. Ref. Knight and Song, 1999.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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 2001: 166).

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 themselves, without any financial support from the state. This was even true of the famed co-operative medical care program.²¹

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, sanitation, etc. 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

²¹ Though villagers did benefit from the "barefoot doctor" movement advocated since 1960s, rural medical care was run at a low level without substantial support from the state. And villagers still had to go to the county hospitals for more complicated diseases. People did tell me their poignant memory 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 his/her family nor their production team could afford to pay the fees out of pocket.

Martin King Whyte discusses the 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 don't 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, "City versus countryside in China's development", The Fifty-sixth George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology, Canberra: The Australian National University.

accounts reveal how large the urban-rural divide had become. The slogan of the 1950s to the 1970s, “sending *down* to the countryside 下放农村” itself shows the then common understanding of the rural as “low,” “backward,” and undesirable (Whyte 1995).

Even given the historically specific institutionalization of an urban-rural distinction, however, the Maoist regime did try to reduce “the three great differences” (三大差别), i.e. distinctions between mental and manual labor, between workers and peasants, and between town and countryside (Meisner 1999: 421).²² 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 (Johnson 1962; Meisner 1999; Knight and Song 1999, Whyte 1995, etc.).

At this point, three important features of peasant realities in the Maoist era can be classified as economic, social and material aspects. First, peasants sacrificed their economic interests more than urban-dwellers for the sake 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 1999; 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 2001: 168). Diverging radically from Mao’s approaches that sought to modernize China through industrialization and national autonomy, the socialist reforms that China is now implementing have seen the convergence of its economy with the global system. This vast change has had a great influence on all aspects of Chinese

²² Whyte thinks of this as rhetoric realized only on paper. Ibid.

people's life, in contrast to their recent past. With regard to agriculture, the reform era saw major institutional change such as big collective farms were transformed into "a commercialized capitalist system based on individual peasant proprietorship" (Meisner 1999: 462) i.e., individual family farming (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 (ref. 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 rural areas. Accordingly, many resources have been unequally distributed. Most urban education and infrastructure construction projects are fully sponsored by the government with significant subsidies, while in rural areas they have to be largely financed by rural households (Sun 2003: 150; Knight and Song 1999: 8). Yan Hairong has gone even further to label this phenomenon the "spectralization of the rural" (H. Yan 2003b).²³

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

²³ 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 yuan, a 240 percent increase. But investment in agriculture only increased from 5.33 billion to 7.04 billion yuan, a 34 percent increase. In the overall picture, agriculture's share of capital investment dropped from 10.6 percent in 1979 to 4.1 percent in 1990. It further decreased to 2.8 percent in 1992, to 1.7 percent in 1994, and remained below two percent throughout the 1990s. (Yan 2003b: 8)

1999: 468). From an economic perspective, this phenomenon is a consequence of an “innate contradiction between large rural population and limited arable land that was disguised by the commune system” (Huang 1990; Wen 2000). Meanwhile the rural population has doubled, expanding its excess of labor power. According to state statistics in 2000, under one-third of the Chinese population is officially engaged in agricultural activities, and at current estimates, rural underemployment affects approximately 150 million individuals (Issabelle 2002: 152).²⁴ Consequently, the floating population 流动人口 emerged as a generic term for an emergent major group within the Chinese population. These are people who are not residing in their place of *hukou* registration, and they are defined as predominantly from rural areas (Lei 2003; Issabelle 2002; Zhang 2001; Solinger 1999; Li 1998, etc.). This floating population, being away from their registered home places, often can not get any local governmental protection in the locations where they work, and they are often treated by local urbanites as “second-class citizens 二等公民”²⁵.

The term “floating population,” as Lei Guang argues, denied individuality to migrants and made 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).²⁶

²⁴ In a newly published work by Leslie T. Chang, a former Washington Post reporter, the total number of China’s migrant workers is about 130 million, “three times the number of people who immigrated to America from Europe while the United States industrialized.” See Chang 2008, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.

²⁵ Furthermore, as Yan has precisely pointed out, although “labor migration from the countryside to the cities is termed by scholars and the Chinese government ‘the transfer of surplus rural labor power’ [农村剩余劳动力转移 *nongcun shengyu laodong li zhuan yi*],” the migrants are mostly “better educated rural youth who are most needed for innovative agricultural production” rather than “surplus” labor (2003b: 9). Also see Taylor 1988.

²⁶ Zhang Li has also 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).

The logic is the same as with the term *nongmin* (peasant), and those within the category of “floating population” do not escape stigmatization as “peasants.”²⁷ Migrant laborers have become a “new lumpen-proletariat,” which forms a stark contrast to the new urban bourgeois elite who support the world’s most rapidly growing market in luxury goods (Meisner 1999: 468 - 536). Further, as more and more peasants poured into towns and cities, observed by Zhang Li, they came to be regarded as a social problem despite their enormous economic contributions (Zhang 2001: 23-46; H. Yan 2003a). Like the negative term “blind flow 盲流 *mangliu*, first used in the early 1950s to describe the peasants who moved to cities, “floating population” appears to be a sub-category of the generic *nongmin*.

On top of the institutionalized urban-rural divide, there is now a market-oriented urban-rural discrepancy which mainly refers to an increasing gap in standards (and ways) of living in urban and rural areas (Zhang 2001; H. Yan 2003b; Lei 2003; Sun 2003).²⁸ The impact of the now greater cultural differences between town and country can run very deep. Yan Hairong has described the young women migrant laborers she interviewed 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 commentary echoed with Juan’s words, a girl from Shang village I visited in

²⁷ Of course many college-educated elite workers also move. For example, many “white collar” employees of transnational companies in big cities do not have the local *hukou* either; neither have they 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.

²⁸ A professor of sociology based at Tsinghua University, Sun Liping, explicitly discusses the “cleavage” in Chinese society since the 1990s, pointing out there is a perceptible discrepancy between the 1980s and 1990s, the latter of which is 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, Chapter 5.

Wenzhou city, who told me one reason for her to rather endure the hardship in the shoe factory was because staying in her home village “was not fun (*bu haowan* 不好玩).” But there is literally no space for young migrants to live a decent life in the cities, because their “household” cannot be “registered” there due to 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 Two.²⁹

So far I have sketched some historical, political, and economic factors in the making of China’s urban-rural divide. Granted, the urban-rural discrepancy is a global phenomenon³⁰ and the Chinese government has recently taken steps to bridge the gap with its commitment to “industry promoting agriculture and cities bringing along the countryside 以工促农、以城带乡.”³¹ What is at issue in my study is the profound impact produced by the institutionalized urban-rural divide. Policy reforms notwithstanding, “rural” bodies keep being inscribed with disvalued characteristics by national and transnational discourses on “the peasant.” These discourses systematically reduce diverse conditions into generalized objects, at the same time disguising judgments as facts.³² In particular, hegemonic elite discourses (on the part of urbanites, intellectuals, government

²⁹ Also see Chang 2008, *Factory Girls*.

³⁰ Universalization of urbanism is indeed an intriguing topic but has gone beyond my current discussion. For now, I can only put 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, *Society must be defended*. Also, Osborne and Rose 1998, “Governing Cities”.

³¹ See Chinese Government’s Official Web Portal: http://english.gov.cn/2006-02/23/content_208437.htm.

³² A parallel situation can also be found in Stacy Leigh Pigg’s description of “the village” of Nepal.

officials, etc.) on social problems tend to produce a generic *nongmin* (peasant) at the level of image and language, along with a condescending representation of life in countryside. This manner of reducing and homogenizing the heterogeneous rural lives, I would argue, is consistent with arbitrary state regulation that, in a sense, needs to function on an abstract level and is always partial. If one wants to make an effective intervention in the arbitrariness of state regulation, which can change and is always changing, as we know, then a necessary step would be to not “see like a state.” 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,³³ to which I now turn.

III. The discourse of “three-nong question”

In 1987 Wen Tiejun first launched discussion on the “three *nong*-question” (*san nong wenti*, i.e., three-dimensions of rural issues). He was speaking of: rural areas (*nong-cun*), agriculture (*nong-ye*) and peasants (*nong-min*), all of which according to him should be taken more seriously because of increasingly severe rural problems.³⁴ Wen’s focus was consistent with the tendency of many scholars to describe the Chinese population as being divided into two groups, viz. an urban group and a rural group (Selden 1979; Hinton 1983; Potter & Potter 1990; Kelliher 1994; Knight and Song 1999; Huang 2002;

³³ “Three-nong” question is now a frequent word used in government policies and documents as well.

³⁴ Since then the *san nong wen ti* have become among the most-often-heard terms in both Chinese governmental and intellectual discourses. On February 8, 2004, Xinhua News Agency published the No. 1 Document (*yi hao wen jian* YHWJ) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for the year 2004, which was directly addressed to rural development and the improvement of the income of peasants. This was the first time since the first four YHWJ issued in the early 1980s, at least in a way employing any language of urgency.

Wen 2000; Issabelle 2002, Sun 2003, Whyte 1995; H. Yan 2003, etc.). All these writers acknowledge that among the three dimensions the “problem” (question) of the peasants is a key issue, but their concern is expressed in statements such as “for a long time peasants have been an important resource for produce, taxes and cheap labor,” and “the worsening of peasant existence would affect the whole society’s stability” (Cf. Guo 2003).

Thus, attention to peasants has not yet strayed away from the viewpoints and interests of those in power, the elites and urbanites who gain benefits from the peasants (Cf. Guo 2003). Furthermore, the predominant approach to the peasant question maintains a singularly economic perspective which, I would argue, still depicts peasants as if they were potatoes in a sack, as Marx once called them.³⁵ 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, production for auto-consumption, and “[values] centered on land reform and prices, taxes”, etc (Kearney 1995: 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).

³⁵ 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” (Tucker 1972: 608).

But rural conditions have in recent years seen an increasing diversification, or at least increasing socio-economic 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 “peasant.”

Reading through published books, news reports, web blogs and forum discussions, one can see that the most well-intentioned discourses that take generic peasants as their subject are imbued with tropes of modernization.³⁶ The vast rural population is taken as a whole, with one body – a peasant body – and this one body has always lagged behind.³⁷ If China is to modernize, according to these discourses, it has to transcend this grotesque body which is characterized by tropes like “backward,” “unenlightened,” “needing-to-catch up,” etc. Low “peasant quality” (*nongmin suzhi*), for example, is always mentioned as one “rural problem” (Chen 2002).³⁸

³⁶ 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 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.

³⁷ Drawing on Yan Mo’s 1988 novel *The Garlic Ballads*, Woronov has also made the following observation:

The bodies of urbanites – like the cities that produce them – are clean, modern, strong, and controlled, and are thus able to transform the nation appropriately. ... China’s rural people are literally made of different – and inferior – “stuff” than the urbanites, embodying the wrong kind of corporality to transform the nation to modernity, wealth and power. (2002: 18)

See Woronov’s well-written dissertation *Transforming the Future: “Quality” children and the Chinese Nation*, University of Chicago, 2003.

³⁸ A recently published book entitled *On Chinese Peasants’ Suzhi* 中国农民素质论, 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,

Suzhi, i.e. population quality (Anagnost 1995; Woronov 2003), is an explicit expression of the state's biopower, 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: it was put forward as the index of a society's strength, revealing of both its political energy and its biological vigor'." (Anagnost 1995: 26, and Foucault 1978: 146). For peasants in particular, this way of problematizing the rural population in terms of its "quality" is "consistent with the social Darwinism that drives China's developmental ideology, places the blame for underdevelopment in 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 2003a: 496) and is a way to speak of "lack", both of culture – including psychological quality (*xinli suzhi*) and quality of consciousness (*sixiang suzhi*) – and embodied physical quality. The rural population is preconceived as being both mentally and physically "backward."

Thus a gap, almost an epistemological one, can be perceived between the commonly encountered discourses (and imaginations) about the countryside and what is going on "over there" on the ground. Looking back on Professor Ye's comment at the opening, one can see an ongoing tension or "missing link" between the "mute" peasants and the various *renao* 热闹 (hot and noisy) scenes produced by policy makers and implementers of the "new countryside." This divide can be better comprehended by taking into consideration both the abstract (and standardized) government policy and the particular

according to him, is to improve the low *suzhi* of peasants. Though this is seen as a result of certain socio-historical conditions, peasants in general have lower *suzhi*, Chen maintains.

yet concrete (and diverse) local conditions. On the other hand, we must also entertain the possibility that rural life is not necessarily centered on the state, or on the government policy of “a new countryside.” Bringing into visibility the heterogeneity of everyday life in the countryside, I believe, will allow us not only to critique but perhaps to render obsolete the problematic rural-urban divide. And this is exactly what anthropological research can contribute, practically.

Nevertheless, more often than not, anthropologists too tend to reify their research object, “peasants”, with a similar desire to “connect social actions observed ethnographically with larger, easily generalized social forces” (Kipnis 2007: 395). In the following two sections, I’m going to review how “peasants,” inside and outside of China, have been treated in the anthropological literature.

IV. The question of “peasants” in anthropology

In his discussion of *China’s Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution* (Potter & Potter 1990) Kearney points out that by treating “China’s Peasant” as actual the authors fail to acknowledge that this essentializing term “is more an artifact of China’s developmental policy than a reflection of actual rural sociology” (1996: 57). This comment raises an important question concerning the social power of essentialized representations of peasantries. Such an economistic/objectivistic approach has by and large been favored by social scientific research (Friedman et al. 1991, Goodman 1997, Oi 1994 & 1999, Walder 1998, etc.) shaped by the hegemony of Cold War political science (Cf. Verdery 1996).

This section is a brief literature review of the anthropology of “the peasantry.” Kearney associates “the single most incisive statement of the political economy and ideology of ‘peasant’” with Eric Wolf’s *Peasants* published in 1966 (Shanin 1990; Kearney 1996). Wolf et al.’s pilot studies of peasants in the late 1960s (Mintz, Nash, etc.) were significant in their historical context – one that involved the rapid expansion of global capitalism, the realignment of states, and concerns with modernization – when the profound consequences of uneven development were taking effect in wider systems of exchange. These scholars tried to come to terms with an overarching political economy, and peasants became an important research object. Nevertheless in hindsight we can see that “the peasant” emerged as a supplement to the generic primitive other that had changed its value with the tide of decolonization (Kearney 1996).

Fei Xiaotong’s 1939 thesis *Peasant Life in China* was approved by Malinowski as one that “justifies my forecast [that] the anthropology of the future will be ... as interested in the Chinese peasants as in the Australian aborigines” (Preface to Fei 1939: xxii). Malinowski believed that anthropology is the science of man, and that productive social activities are ultimately explained by the fundamental “bodily needs” of human life (1944). Ultimately for him, culture was only appearance while bodily needs are fundamental. Malinowski tends to take the body as the concrete touchstone on the basis of which universal claims can be made about all human societies. This assumption reflects a Cartesian dichotomy of subject/object, mind/body, culture/nature, and it also presumes a hierarchy between the anthropological knowing self and the ethnological other it represents. A perception like this accordingly lends perfect sense to the notion of “rational peasants,” since their productive activities are directly related to the

fundamental “bodily needs” of human life. Although nowadays this kind of functionalist utilitarianism has been somewhat discredited together with the concept of “the primitive,” the idea that “culture is precipitated from the rational activity of individuals pursuing their own best interests” (Sahlins 1976: vii) still seems prevalent in many quarters, at least in accounts of “rational activity” and individualism. The myth of the “rational peasant” has not disappeared (cf. Popkin 1979; Little 1989). And the hierarchy between the knower and the bodies to be known has also changed little.

Meanwhile, with the invention of the concepts of “development” and the “Third World” after World War II, “the peasant” increasingly came to typify a generalized other, an other who drew attention especially from the perspective of political economy, in a capitalist-centered view of the world (Ortner 1984: 142; Kearney 1996: 35).

Anthropological studies on peasantry offer few exceptions to the Cold War style.

Manning Nash in the 1960s, for example, entitling his book *Primitive and Peasant Economic Systems*, insisted “Economic growth is not random change but rather is the set of changes in society, culture, and individuals that is conducive to participation in the stream of cultural history labeled modernity” (1966: 123-4). The economic basis is here clearly distinguished from socio-cultural superstructure. For Nash, modernization is the process of making societies, cultures and individuals receptive to progressive economics; and economic anthropology is “a normal and expected part of the total scientific anthropological enterprise” (1966: 15). This naturalization of the economic as a basis is consistent with Escobar’s reminder that “anthropologists have been complicit with the rationalization of modern economics, to the extent that they have contributed to

naturalizing the constructs of economy, politics, religion, kinship, and the like as the fundamental building blocks of all societies” (1995: 61).

Following Nash, Schneider goes further to advocate that the concept of “Economic Man” be taken as “a focus on how men relate their available resources to their desired ends [so as to explore] human behavior cross-culturally from that stance” (1974: viii). This claim echoes Malinowski’s universalist claims about the relation between culture and needs. It is also “evidence of the hold which the Cartesian tradition still has upon the anthropological imagination” (Gudeman 1986: 31). Although the political economists might remind us of the fact that peasants are part of states and “invariably involved in wider systems of exchanges of all sorts,” they tend to ignore, as Ortner argues, “the actual organization and culture of the society *in question*” (1984: 143, emphasis added). Instead they see peasants as “passive reactors to and enactors of some ‘system,’ without their own history” (Ortner 1984: 142-143). Peasants do not have history, or their own history simply does not count. Peasant bodies exist as wholly-known material entities i.e., they are no-body. In other words, the active subjectivities of peasant corporeality, i.e. particular forms of eating, drinking, dressing, dwelling, crafting life, etc., are denied. And the exteriority of peasants as others is affirmed (Dussel 1996), such that *the* body of “the peasant” is known through research on rural society as an objective thing, and the fertile peasant body as a big obsession. So it is anthropology that makes “the peasant” real, through and through.

Central to the idea of “Economic Man” is the notion of rational decision-making that presumes “an ordered world in the sense that items or units exist and are commensurate” (Gudeman 2001: 42). A representative ethnography is Popkin’s *The Rational Peasant*

(1979), which begins with “a focus on individual decision making and an expanded conception of the role of the village in peasant economic life” (17). By emphasizing individual needs, Popkin suggests that the notion of “collectivity” should be replaced by “corporation” in relation to the village, because “membership is a license to do business and a right of access to crucial institutions, both inside the village and in the larger society” (46). This theory, assuming that the rational individual makes trade-offs between binary choices such as cost and gain, pleasure and pain, stigma and prestige, is by and large “an offshoot of neoclassical economic theory” (Kearney 1996: 148), which takes the individual as a rational actor and emphasizes the autonomy of rational decision-making. Popkin’s concept of membership assumes that a community such as a village is nothing but a collection of uniform peasants, and economics explains all purposive conduct or, “*all rational conduct* (including rational thought, as a variety of rational conduct)” (Gordon 1991:43, emphasis original). Moreover, Popkin’s notion of “rational peasants” proposes a principle which empowers economic calculation effectively to sweep aside the anthropological categories and frameworks of the other human and social sciences (Gordon 1991: 43).

By the same token, Scott’s *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, in response to which Popkin writes from a political economy perspective, works just as much within the domain of economics in that it mainly addresses issues about markets and other economic institutions, despite its focus on villages instead of individuals (1976). Scott proposes “subsistence as a moral claim” and tries to indicate that “the stabilization of real income for those close to subsistence may be a more powerful goal than achieving a higher *average* income” (1976: 34, emphasis original). Again, peasant life is abstracted to

universal “needs” such as subsistence and income, and the concern with subsistence and security is called the “safety-first” principle. Villages are perceived as providers of peasant welfare, and the leveling mechanisms of the village economy are considered especially important (Scott 1976). Together with Popkin and Scott’s imagination of bounded peasant societies, other economic approaches to peasant studies include Chayanov’s “self-exploitation” (1925)³⁹ and Geertz’s “agricultural involution” (1963)⁴⁰. The way in which these studies take “peasant” as a preexisting ontological entity, not as products of history, as Kearney argues, “is but a permutation of the previously constructed ‘individual’ of the modern worldview that appears in political, economic, social, and moral discourses” (1996:62). In other words, to recognize “peasant reality” as such is consistent with the process of hegemonization, i.e. effects of truth being produced within discourses and diffused throughout society as realities.

These studies of “the peasant,” which take a unitary individual as the molecular social unit are based on the deeper dualism of Cartesian epistemology, turning this generally trans-historical and acontextual term into a common reification. As Kearney points out, “not just images of ‘peasants’ but the world view that structures these images [is] to some degree constitutive of the social categories, which thus, as it were, come to life” (1996: 74). As discussed earlier, the current historical moment in China is marked by an increasing disparity between images of peasants and the social conditions that shape such images, i.e. between abstract out-of-context generalizations and embedded social-

³⁹ According to Chayanov, peasant economy ought to be treated as an economic system in its own right that is based on individual peasant family since their production is to secure their own needs. Therefore, the peasant family is a production unit and at the same time a consumer unit, which he called “self-exploitation” (Chayanov 1925, cited in Shanin 1987).

⁴⁰ According to Geertz, as population density increases, there is an intensification of agricultural methods so as to achieve a minimization of socioeconomic contrasts ... through that more ancient weapon of the poor: work spreading. This is called “agricultural involution” (1963: 100).

historical practices. In other words, actual farmers and migrants, rural leaders and village residents, in their own discourses and practices, contest the stereotypes even as they, in part, materialize them. The way in which the rural population is reified, I will argue, increasingly produces the empty name of “peasant” without historically concrete bodies.

Nevertheless, there are and always have been anthropologists who do not want to throw away cultural descriptions of the countryside, whose works are noteworthy enough for me to spend some time discussing here. Robert Redfield is one of these. In *Peasant Society and Culture* (1956), Redfield does not separate “the peasant” from other social actors. He recognizes the difficulties in defining a “peasantry”: one does not first define the peasant; rather one defines a kind of economic, political, and social system of which the peasantry is but one part (1956: 19). Although Redfield holds to the dualism of two kinds of people, i.e. peasants and more urban elites, he also argues that “the relationships between the two kinds of people define the relative status of one to the other” (1956: 36). In terms of his notion of great and little traditions, he insists on their interdependency and interaction through, for example, “transformation of peasantry into kinds of peoples – industrial workers, urban social classes, proletariats, [etc.]” (77). This claim can be seen as akin to Williams’ insistence that [high] culture is ordinary i.e., it is also found close to the [rural] ground. Redfield’s book is an effort to understand culture from the ground level up, I would argue. However, treating “the little community” as a relatively homogeneous bounded entity, Redfield does not go beyond a modernist epistemology. He still takes the category of “peasant” as more or less pregiven, i.e., all peasants still have the one self-evident peasant “body.” Therefore, although he tries to depict the rich web of integrated relationships between the city and the countryside, his insistence on the

value-orientation, the view of the good life of the peasantry, can be seen as romanticized (Kearney 1996).

Despite his heavy reliance on a Marxist political economy approach, Eric Wolf takes a somewhat similar stand to Redfield's, arguing that "the peasant ... has an enduring relationship with the city," and "the distinctions in the exercise of power have important structural effects on the way the peasantry is organized, there are many kinds of peasantry, not just one" (Wolf 1966: 10). His *Europe and the People Without History* recounts with a certain degree of socio-historical sensitivity how various non-capitalist types are incorporated into global capitalism (1982). In his recent piece about the "peasant", Wolf makes it explicit that "the homogeneity of the peasantry is really an urban illusion, an optical error induced when city people look down upon the rural mass beyond the urban portals" (2001: 21). According to Kearney, Wolf is "one of the earliest and most consistent anthropologists to begin to deconstruct that very peasant essentialism in whose elaboration he has [nevertheless] participated" (1996: 88).

To conclude this section, it is clear that there is an important question concerning the social power of essentialized representations of peasantries. Most scholarly scientific research tends to objectify a subject of study (so as to universalize its significance). This way to engage with the peasantry is, as Kearney has argued, an "intellectual contribution [to] the formation of the images of 'peasants' that inform [state] policy" (62). In other words, the attempt to generalize *the other* functions together with the state's attempt to govern and reduce human lives. Both of these processes share to a certain degree a Cartesian epistemology, one aspect of which is the perpetuation of a practical hierarchy

of (urban) mind over (rural) body, and the imposition of a reductionist conception over heterogeneous embodiments.

V. Recent ethnographies of rural China

Rather than taking a purely economic approach, recent ethnographies of rural China display a notable emphasis on social and cultural forms of village life (Jing 1996, Judd 1994, Kipnis 1997, Liu 2000, Y. Yan 1996 and 2003). However some ethnographies tend to portray villages as discrete and almost immune to the ongoing urban-rural interactions and negotiations of urban, rural, and global spaces that have produced an irreversible impact on rural life, especially on families. By occupying an outside standpoint, these ethnographies cast the village as a discrete entity within a linear history and without a role in the network of increasing urban-rural interactions. Furthermore, conditioned by their subject-position completely outside of – and in many respects ignorant of – village people’s own understandings of their daily lives, they fail to provide a persuasive account of local people’s everyday practice.⁴¹

A couple of recent ethnographies of rural China focus on social networks materialized in gift exchange and other forms of *guanxi* production (Y. Yan 1996 and Kipnis 1997). In *The Flow of Gifts*, Yunxiang Yan says his book is “a systematic study” of gift exchange

⁴¹ The standpoint outside, as Clifford indicates, allows the ethnographer “to see without being seen, to read without interruption” (Clifford 1988, 12). This form of objectifying “a given reality” places the ethnographer in an assumed impartial stance. For the ethnographers I discuss here in particular, their description adopts an authoritative voice through which the villagers are silenced (there is only a stir-fry of villagers’ words accompanied by the ethnographers’ self-righteous interpretations; we don’t get much concrete representation of villagers’ lived experiences). As a matter of fact, this assumed impartial stance has been naturalized in traditional ethnography, and by those authors, and thus must be interrogated anew.

and network cultivation in a north China village that “involves gift giving in daily life” (1996: 20). However Yan presents gift exchange in China as “a total social institution” and makes a generalization of “Chinese culture” by emphasizing its cultural uniqueness, especially as regards the coexistence of expressivity and instrumentality in gift giving (Y. Yan 1996, esp. Chapter Three and Nine). Although Yan does not ignore social changes since 1949, referring, for example, to “recycling tradition”⁴² in lieu of “revitalization of tradition”, his Scottian approach to a “moral economy” directs him to take the category of “local moral worlds” out of context with his focus on what is “axiomatic” (1996, esp. pp. 15-19 and 226-227). In other words, by maintaining the commonly-held dichotomy between the state and peasants, he enmeshes Xiajia villagers’ gift-exchange practices within the state social-political transformation process. Thus he reduces the teeming cultural life to an aspect of the field of regulatory application of the State, inseparable from and subject to state power. Moreover, the social networks described by Yan are mainly among villagers, with little reference to on-going urban-rural exchanges and networks.

Also conducting his research in a northern village, Kipnis in *Producing Guanxi* takes care to link peasant status to the government *hukou* (household registration) system (1997, Ch.7). He focuses on the practices of *guanxi* and “generation (or materialization) of ganqing [emotion]” to describe “the mechanisms by which social actions like giving a gift work” (Kipnis 2002: 25) while trying to “debunk three related essentialisms – historical, causal, and psychological – upon which structural-functional approaches rely” (Kipnis 1997: 120). Kipnis explicitly writes against “an economism that privileges

⁴² 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.

material motives in *guanxi*” and suggests “Fengjia [village] residents see the formation of relationships simultaneously as means and ends” (1997: 23, 8). This however, as Yan Yunxiang has pointed out, displays a certain assumption of “a static, immutable, and unique Chinese mode of dealing with emotions” (Y. Yan 2003: 83).

Importantly, Kipnis makes his own subject-position in the research visible, stating that his study is based on government-arranged research and showing his strategies within the context of the field experience (1997: Introduction). At the same time, however, this disclosure becomes an excuse for Kipnis’s failure to provide a vivid picture of the daily life lived by Fengjia villagers. Instead, what a reader can get out of this research is more the ethnographer’s explanation and generalization than what is happening (in his presence) on the ground.

There have long been ethnographic studies trying to explore family life and kinship systems in rural China. The recent ones include Judd’s *Gender and Power in Rural North China* (1994) and Yan Yunxiang’s *Private Life under Socialism* (2003). Ellen Judd does not linger on the meta-category of peasant (nongmin) but tries to trace “the practical roles of women (and men) in several dimensions of rural life” (2). In terms of the interplay between gender and power, she rightly points out that state power is not articulated outside and above rural communities but is diffusely present and productive within everyday social relations (1994: 252).

In her attempt to depict the changes of everyday life in the context of the rural reform program, however, she takes households “as economic actors in the Chinese countryside” (14) and both the Chinese family and Chinese tradition (“three obediences” for women, for example) as a pre-given background against which women act (esp. Ch.7). This to a

great degree assumes *the* culture as an ahistorical *thing*. Yan Yunxiang has pointed out that Judd's research fails to question "the corporate nature" of the Chinese family, in that she "regards the Chinese family primarily as an economic group and a social institution organized according to rational corporate principles" (Y. Yan 2003: 219).

Yan's newly published ethnographic research, *Private Life under Socialism*, is based on his previous research on gift exchange in the same village, but he 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 took for granted in his previous book. In his introduction to this research on "private life," for example, Yan calls for an "experience-near, individual-centered ethnography," "a detailed narrative of everyday life" which, according to him, views private life as "a moral process ... in a local moral world" (2003: 10). The narrative is called for because these things are greatly taken for granted. In his study, nevertheless, not only Chineseness but the *individual* and, further, the *body* are taken as given. It is not surprising then, to see that Yan's research focuses on "a detailed narrative" of everyday life other than *articulated* and *practiced* everyday life.

Given the research discussed above, most of which shares a common emphasis on forms of village sociality instead of the economistic approach favored by earlier sociological studies that represent *nongmin*, they nevertheless tend to portray villages as discrete and almost immune to the ongoing urban-rural interactions and negotiations of urban and rural spaces which, with little doubt, have produced an ineluctable impact on life lived in rural areas. Zhang Li's research on migrant laborers in Beijing stands out as

an exception, concerning itself with the floating population, a sub-category of *nongmin*. In *Strangers in the City*, Zhang “using the politics of migrant community-making as an aperture”, tries to explore “the culturally specific re-articulation of power, spatial politics, and changing state-society dynamics in late-socialist China” (2001: 5).⁴³ Remaining vigilant about such conceptions as state, citizen, floating population, *cun* (village), *hukou* (household registration) and *suzhi* (population quality), Zhang explores important social changes in the post-Mao era through a detailed ethnographic account of the construction, destruction, and eventual reconstruction of the largest migrant community in Beijing. She at the same time does not homogenize these “strangers in the city” under the category of floating population. Rather she offers a nuanced understanding of the lines drawn around different groups of migrant laborers in Beijing from different regions and origins across China. Nevertheless, Zhang’s study still shows residual economism, and a deletion of the politics of these migrant communities (such as gangs and bosses in the community) and politics between the city and the migrant enclaves.

Rural studies in and about China, thus, appear to have been trapped between an economism (including the rational peasant model) and a romanticism which seeks (sometimes fruitlessly) for specific peasant consciousness or culture. To a certain extent, these studies tend to dehistoricize rural realities and also to depoliticize the rural populations. “The peasants” as they appear in most accounts are still an essence, a foundation of Chinese history that resists change.

Meanwhile, they also fail to capture the current historical moment in China, which is marked by an increasing disparity between images of the generic *nongmin* and the

⁴³ Zhang proposes the term “late socialism” in this book, to “resist the assumption that current societal transformations in China will necessarily lead to the demise of the socialist regime”. I sympathize with this point.

concrete socio-historical conditions that contain heterogeneously producing bodies. As a matter of fact, “the body” has never existed in a singular form. The boundaries and characteristics of bodies “materialize in social interaction” (Haraway 1990). Recent studies of embodiment in anthropology have suggested to me a new way of understanding changing forms of life in central China. In what follows, I am going to introduce my own research methodology and writing strategy.

VI. Discerning the cultural through embodiment, space, and everyday life

My ethnography seeks a better understanding of “rural” realities in today’s mobile Chinese society, with a focus on the dimension of practice by bringing together questions concerning embodiment, space, and everyday life, so as to go beyond the economic meta-narrative of “peasant” studies, while remaining committed to a broadly materialist anthropology.

A research starting from heterogeneity implies recognition of the interplay of power relationships at different levels. Embodiment, i.e. “embodied, historical life,” connotes “the contingency of bodies and the materiality of discourse” (Farquhar 2002: 5, 7). Embodiment is a term that covers concrete experiences of living the world. It can go beyond Cartesian mind/body dichotomies while remaining a materialist approach to *the mindful body*, as Scheper-Hughes and Lock once called it (1987). In terms of my research in general, I pay attention to people’s ways of walking, talking, and moving around; their dispositions in lived space (house, land, market, public space); and practices relative to each other including relations of villagers to local officials and patients to doctors.

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 2004). 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 – can be interrogated anew through studies of embodiment. Taking this approach, I understand bodies not as discrete biological organisms but “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” (E. B. Tylor 1871). This concept of culture, advanced in 1871, encourages anthropologists and other scholars to bridge diverse fields of anthropology, including all its mental and material elements. 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, and to historicize the local beyond the question of “moral worlds” (Yan 1993; 2003).

And 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, many of which are not made explicit. “Cultures” do not

enjoy equal levels of privilege, autonomy, or security, and a sense of inequality is often lived in taken-for-granted ways (Asad 1988; 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 nongmin. Thus, people in the village won’t deny that they are nongmin, either in terms of their formal classification (the household registration system for example) or in their experiences. Nevertheless everyday life is lived with many contradictions, and hegemonization is an ongoing process of negotiation and generates an infinite play of differences (Laclau 1990). As Taussig has perceived, despite the monotone 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). And implicit social knowledge, according to him, is “an essentially inarticulable and imageric nondiscursive knowing of social relationality” (367). This insight complicates the task of understanding everyday reality, which “is always going to exceed the ability to register it” (Highmore 2002: 3).

To make the invisible visible, therefore, requires that everyday life be taken as the *lived* space of social relationships, cultural politics and historical formations of (other) interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems to which the living, experiencing bodies seem to be subordinated.⁴⁴ For example, local officials’ re-interpretation of “building a new socialist countryside” and villagers’ refusals of poplar planting assignments, as well as many expressions of local cultures, have more to do with

⁴⁴ Cf. de Certeau 1984, Taussig 1987, Farquhar 2002.

their localized specific life situation than with the more abstract demands of vertical bureaucratic systems.

To approach the lived space of realities 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” (1990: 55). The examination of habitus, then, does not imply a return to an ahistorical individuality. In relation to my research, the concept of habitus prevents me from overly emphasizing heterogeneous embodiments in that it takes for granted the social and historical contingency of collective dispositions. The collective memory and embodiment of Maoist-era social experience among the villagers will thus be one important domain for me to engage with. As Farquhar goes further to point out, habitus helps “to achieve both specificity and commonality [and] avoid any claim of universality or to trace the life of any singular or abstract ‘body’” (2002: 9). With habitus taken seriously, it can be argued that the body is by no means “untouched by human history” – it is not “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 1990: 208). To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, one is not born a peasant or urbanite, but is made one. However, practical boundaries between bodies are central to institutions discourses. Peasants become peasants in many ways, as do urbanites. A mere refusal to assume the abstract

body is not enough; my research takes a close look at how the abstract peasant body has been and is being made, at the level of daily conversations and practices of different social actors. One such topic in my ethnography is *suzhi*, or population quality. As Anagnost observes,

[Suzhi] is a highly multivocal concept; one that can mean different things in different contexts: in population policy, in eugenics discourse and law, and in discriminating or articulating specific subgroupings or social interests (intellectuals vs. students, Han vs. non-Han ethnic minorities, core vs. periphery) within the larger mass. In all of the above domains, a difference is defined within the Chinese people themselves, between 'backward' and 'advanced', 'civilized' and 'uncivilized', that translates directly into notions of value. (1995: 25)

Surely notions of value are not fixed either; they depend on who is talking, under what circumstances, for what purpose, and out of what concerns (Barbara H. Smith 1981).

However the hegemonic discourses of economic development, which operate at different levels of socioeconomic privilege, have made *suzhi* an evaluation of heterogeneous human capacities in the narrow terms of their potential for development (H. Yan 2003a).

As Anagnost argues, *suzhi* “is premised on value as something that must be added to the body, rather than inherent in the body’s capacity for labor” (cited in H. Yan 2003a: 507).

Then, how do the discourses on peasants, with their many value judgments, delimit the boundaries between the peasant body and the urban body, how do urbanites and peasants position themselves through such discourses, and how have those concepts affected people’s perceptions of their bodies and lives?⁴⁵

⁴⁵ In another discussion, Yan Hairong describes the “inert and meaningless” life in rural young women’s narratives, and warns that their inert experience “should not be taken as a natural, given fact but as a product of the discourse of modernity itself, which has redefined the meaning of ‘peasant’ and rural life in both material and ideological aspects” (2003b: 11).

To answer these questions, my dissertation particularly deals with three premises that figure importantly in discourses on peasants: rural villages are dirty (in terms of hygiene and environment), “peasants” are like a sheet of loose sand (unable to organize themselves), and “peasants” have little wenhua/culture⁴⁶ (thus requiring a political-cultural intervention). Accordingly, my ethnography explores three aspects of Shang villagers’ everyday life through an examination of space, embodiment, daily practices and social relations.

This ethnography shows 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 resists the social science approaches that unknowingly collude with a continuing production of stigmatized peasant identities in China and elsewhere. Anthropology of embodiment has suggested to me a promising approach for going beyond dualistic tendencies; it can both enrich the thick description of “culture” and can be an empirically rich way of “writing against culture” (Cf. Clifford & Marcus 1986, Geertz 1983, 1988, Fox 1991, Behar & Gordon 1995, etc.). Instead of “writing against culture,” an anthropology of embodiment on the ground takes culture as “a whole way of life” and perceives “culture” at work in history through the “play of differences [from the cultural dominant]” (Spivak 1999).

VII. Writing the cultural

Despite the foregoing criticisms of village ethnographies, then, this remains a study of a “local village culture.” It might be accused, for example, of romanticizing the peasantry

⁴⁶ Wenhua is a Chinese translation of “culture”, whose meaning is as complicated as its English counterpart. See my discussion in Chapter Three: Wenhua Guangchang, the culture plaza.

and being blind to the dominations of structured inequalities.⁴⁷ Jameson for example – although in a different context – insists, “If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable” (1995: 6). The problem Jameson indicates here is that of cultural relativism, a “benevolent” recognition of the absolute heterogeneity of cultures which fails to recognize that behind this dispersion stands an *unmarked* culture, i.e. *the* culture of the dominant, namely Western Enlightenment culture with its claims to Reason. For China’s “rural problem” in particular, the cultural dominant might be identified as the global ideology of modernization that engenders socioeconomic distance between rural dwellers and urban residents.

As a matter of fact, the cultural dominant is fundamentally historically contingent, and it too is undecidable. To weave an effective counter-discourse, it is exactly heterogeneity, with its undecidable effects, that we should embrace. My affirmation of heterogeneity can be seen as a first move to deconstruct the generic category *nongmin*. As Spivak argues, one “cannot afford to ignore the irreducible heterogeneity of the cultural in the name of a ‘cultural dominant’ simply because it is dominant” (1999: 315). If we *merely* acknowledge the dominant, it will at the same time perpetuate the superior force of *the* dominant.

Being socially peripheral yet symbolically central, *nongmin* lives in society as a value category which is simultaneously acultural, reductionist and economistic. It is an essentialized conception of social agency (Laclau 1990: 89) and a form of cultural negation that is a constituent of hegemonic elite discourses. But the category of *nongmin*

⁴⁷ Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Tsing 1993.

also contains and enacts condensed contestations for meanings and practices. This notion goes along with Laclau's discussion of the struggle between the excess meanings of "the social" and the constituted "society." According to him, "the social always exceeds the limits of the attempts to constitute society; [each social formation is] always instituted through a complex process of overdetermination and therefore cannot be established *a priori*" (1990: 91). Therefore neither society nor the social is fixed, and any society seen as a system is always partial, or at most a totality which can only be captured in its moments. By the same token, the assumed cause-effect relationship between the cultural dominant and heterogeneous cultures should be reversed: the apparent form of a cultural dominant is actually the temporary result of ongoing struggles among heterogeneous cultures. Going beyond the economistic meta-narrative to bring the disguised heterogeneity of lived rural life into cultural description is, I believe, an intrinsically *political* act.

On the other hand, to undertake an effective critique of conventional anthropology's peasant essentialism, as Kearney points out, requires a reflexivity that would "situate the production and consumption of representations of peasantry within the relationships that join the anthropological self to the 'peasant' other it presumes to represent" (Kearney 1996: 3). In other words, if ethnography is to be counter-hegemonic, it not only needs to examine the epistemological, methodological and political configurations that frame its "object of study," it also needs to interrogate the ethnographer's own privileged position. If the economistic meta-narrative is taken as the cultural dominant, then, an ethnography that both presumes and discovers the heterogeneity of lived life is going to function as a critique of the dominant values that have produced anthropology's priorities.

In considering the responsibilities involved in my own relationship to people in Shang village, even though I am Chinese, as a cosmopolitan scholar I too need to be aware that it is impossible for me to achieve a full understanding of people's lives there. All our realities are conditioned by our diverse historical and geographical standpoints. A responsible representation would require me to try to "experience the impossible" (Spivak 1999: 17), while remaining sensitive to a perceptible gap, a divide that is not only social but also epistemological, between me as a researcher and the villagers whose lives are being researched.

In my writing, therefore, I have made my presence visible throughout the narratives, relating my interactions (which were often awkward) with Shang villagers. Meanwhile, I deliberately "buried" my own voice under the stories so as to make my ethnography more descriptive than analytical. At times, the same question came up again and again: what is my opinion about this? What is "the big claim"? But I decided to take a firm (and literal) stance of privileging "the native's point of view." After all, what matters should be their voices, not mine.

And my voice is here, already behind the organization of this thesis: deciding what to tell, selecting which stories are interesting, and finding a way to tell them. This is akin to how artists treat their work: they leave the meaning of the oeuvre to viewers, while they just assemble the materials.

An Overview of Shang Village

Administration

Officially, the administrative system of Chinese government runs vertically at five levels: the state governs provinces 省, and provinces are divided into prefectures 地 and prefectures into counties 县. Below the county level are townships 乡 and villages 村. Shang Village¹ belongs to the 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 provincial capital city. The population of Zhaozhou was 1.404 million in 1990 according to the census,² and among these the “rural population” (those holding a farmer household registration³) was 1.3 million. The county occupies 2,294.4 square kilometers and the population density in 1990 was 612 per square kilometer. The arable land in total is 2.40 million *mu*.⁴

¹ All the names here are pseudonyms, including both names of places (except for Henan Province) and persons.

² The data shown here come from *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Counties* 中国县情大全, co-edited by the Ministry of Civil Affairs 民政部 and the Ministry of Construction 建设部 of the P.R.C., published in 1992 by China Society Publishing House.

³ Ref. note 16 in Introduction.

⁴ *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*.

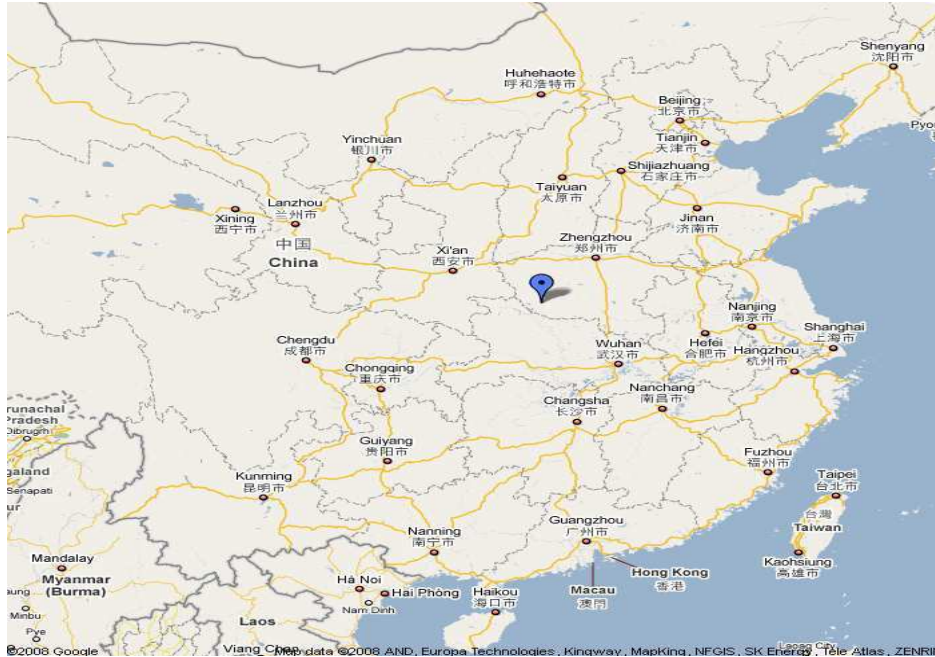


Figure 1: The location of Zhaozhou County in China

Shang Village belongs to Zhaoying Township, which 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 (family planning services station 计划生育服务, the office of village-township planning 村镇规划, cultural services station 文化服务, and agricultural services station 农业服务), and two institutes (the institute of labor and civil service security 劳动民政保障所 and the institute of national land and resources 国土资源所). All of these officials are paid by salary through the county bureau of finance.

Shang Village 尚村 has seven village committee “cadres” 村干部 and 10 team “cadres” 小组干部; all, including Zhishu the village leader and party secretary, are villagers who do not earn a government salary but do earn a small stipend.⁵ The size of a village is roughly

⁵ People who are called village cadres 村干部 may or may not be members of the Communist Party. Villagers are inclined to call all officials “cadres,” a commonly used term in Maoist era which was often juxtaposed with “the masses”, the relationship between cadres and masses 干群关系 for example. This

the same as that of a production brigade 生产大队 in the commune 公社 system in Mao's China, 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 组, now a subdivision of the village, also remains similar in size to the production team 生产队 which was under the unit of brigade in Maoist times.⁶ Although now 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, but also because most important tasks, such as collecting money, distributing government subsidies, or redistributing land, are still conducted at the team level. According to Zhishu, the village Party branch secretary, 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 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 conventional terms, Shang Village is composed of nine “natural villages,”⁷ which originally were formed around different families, distinguished by their surnames and

category includes (production) team leaders and accountants, village committee members, and village accountants. And their stipend varies from 100 to 200 yuan per month, according to their status.

⁶ At the beginning of the People's Commune era 人民公社时期 from 1958 to 1961, Commune claimed most political power such as accounting and planning. It was after the severe famine from 1959 to 1961, 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. Ref. Lu, 2006, p.101-102; Pye, 1984, p.248.

⁷ The concept of “natural village 自然村” refers to a group of people living together in one location, who usually share the same surname and interact with each other in ways that they do not interact with people from other villages. I consider this understanding of the natural village to be a common phenomenon in the northern rural China. Ref. Gao 1999, Kipnis 1997, Yan 1995, etc.

residential areas. Families surnamed Shang compose the two biggest natural villages⁸; Wang, Li, and Zhao families compose the other seven natural villages. In terms of the officially recognized 13 teams, seven teams are from Shang families⁹ and called by numerical names, e.g. Team Seven 七组; while the remaining six teams take the same name and size as the natural villages, i.e., South Li Manor 南李庄, West Li Manor 西李庄, Front Wang Temple 前王庙, Back Wang Temple 后王庙, Little Wang Manor 小王庄, and Zhao Manor 赵庄. Villagers having the same family name also recognize each other by their lineages, which is called a “gate” 门. For example, there are five lineages of Shang and three lineages of Li families. People from the same lineage may belong to different teams because they now do not necessarily live together; population-wise, the size of lineages varies greatly within one family name.

Despite the common tendency toward village exogamy, people also marry between different-surnamed families within 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 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

⁸ They are called the Eastern Side 东头 and the Western Side 西头, continuing a custom from the past when two landlords were in charge of the Shang families before the establishment of People’s Republic of China in 1949.

⁹ Actually Team Six includes another natural village, Zhao & Li Manor 赵李庄 due to its small size. And the Shangs at Team Six live closer to Zhao & Li Manor.

end of the 20th century but has died out since the year 2000, when a lowered purchase price made the laborious cultivation of tobacco not worthwhile. There are still many brick or mud sheds scattered in the village, built by villagers to process tobacco leaves but now fallen into disuse.

Shang villagers don't usually plant vegetables for market or even for household use. Instead, they buy everyday necessities at the adjacent Tonglu Village, historically a market village, especially known for its free market 集 every other day. Mainly food and clothes are sold there. Tonglu has long been a vibrant center of economic and social activity, while Shang Village does not have an economic/social center.¹⁰ In the village 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 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 very first restaurant in the history of Shang Village.

Geography

A bird's-eye view of Shang village would find it sprawling along east-west and north-south axes, at the crossing of two country roads, and the natural villages (or residential

¹⁰ 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).

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).

Along the east-west main village road, toward the east end, the First Team of Shang village is situated adjacent to Tonglu village. By the time of my arrival in Shang village, the road had just been paved, and according to villagers, there was a lot more traffic.¹¹ 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. Also the main east-west market street of Tonglu is paved with cement, and is broader, boasting recently installed street lamps.

Besides vegetables and meat, villagers can get everything they need in the stores on Tonglu Street: 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 attending banquets); sweets and snacks, alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, clothes, shoes, etc. 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 funeral ceremony services, as well as restaurants. Many doctors have moved their clinics

¹¹ People felt less safe with the increasing traffic, especially fearing the young motorcyclists who seldom paid attention to their speed. As a matter of fact, during my stay in Shang village an old woman was killed by a speeding motorcycle when she was just walking by the road.

from their own villages to Tonglu Street to attract business; these include orthopedist, pediatricians, a dentist, and general Chinese and Western medicine clinics, as well as wholesale drug stores.¹² 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 on Tonglu Street.

To the southeast of Tonglu Village is Zhaoying Village, which hosts the township offices. Although on the main road of Zhaoying Village there are also quite a few businesses, it doesn't have a periodic street market for food. Nevertheless, because of the presence of township offices, everyone knows that the restaurants on Zhaoying Street do better business and the food there tastes better. 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.

Transportation

The main village road, which connects Shang Village to the other villages and leads to the township, is the only paved road. Another main road in front of the courtyard of the village committee is partially paved. There is a regularly scheduled mini-bus running every 45 minutes from the neighboring market village Tonglu, to the county seat.

Bicycles are very common among village households. Motorcycles are getting more and more popular, especially among younger people. Quite a few families own a small tractor

¹² There are over 10 clinics on Tonglu Street, among which one is the officially assigned clinic for Tonglu village, fulfilling the same role as Shang village doctor Li Shu's clinic. However, nowadays there are no more "collective," or in theory, "officially run 官办" clinics in this area, including the so-called "officially assigned 指定" clinics that are in fact owned and run by village doctors themselves. Therefore another doctor who is in charge of a neighboring village's clinic has moved the village clinic to Tonglu Street.

that is not only used for farming but also for transportation. As of 2006, there were two families who owned an automobile in Shang Village; both of them were used as a cab to earn a living. Although transportation is fairly convenient, senior villagers rarely go to the county seat, traveling there maybe once or twice a year. Other village roads are either gravel or mud, dusty when the weather is dry and muddy when it is wet.

Chapter One: Habitus and Dirt: Everyday Hygiene

I noticed the state of hygiene immediately when I first arrived in Zhaozhou, the county seat. On the streets of the county seat everyone spits. Stinking trash heaps were everywhere, occasionally next to a restaurant's outdoor dining tables, complete with their odor. Polluted rivers flowed through the town – I could tell from the greenish color of the putrid water. Nevertheless, the people that I met in the county seat were amazed by my plan to live in a rural village for about nine months; they admitted that despite the fact that most of them grew up in the countryside, they could no longer stand the dirt there. My friend Luo asked, “Do you know they keep cows in the living room 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 to my eyes looked “country” enough. How much worse could it be in the “real” village?

On the first morning after my arrival in the Zhaozhou county seat, Yu Jie, my friend from the county Chinese medicine hospital, took me out for breakfast, “to have a taste of local life.” We went across the street from the hospital and turned onto a side street, where quite a few food stands sold “thick spicy soup 糊辣汤.” Yujie said the soup was pre-made at the seller's home, and then kept warm in a big pot sitting on top of a coal

stove, beside which sat another stove for making deep-fried bread. We joined customers who sat around short tables on small stools. As I sat, I could not help but notice that the ground was covered with sputum and bits of tissue used by customers to wipe their lips. Not far from the stoves someone was cleaning dishes in two buckets of water: all the dirty ones were first put in one bucket for washing and then in another for rinsing. Then they were ready for use again. Now and then the morning breeze would blow up ashes and smoke, mingling in the air above the pots. Although the “thick spicy soup” tasted good, I called off my plan to eat a local breakfast every day during my stay in the county seat.

Seeing me eating a breakfast of an Orion Chocolate Pie, a popular Korean-brand packaged food¹ that I purchased from the local supermarket, Yu Jie kindly suggested to me that, the “thick spicy soup,” freshly made every morning, was healthier. “You should eat savory food for breakfast,” she said. “Sweets are for kids 小孩子吃的,” she added, disapprovingly. I then came to realize that for Yu Jie and others who eat this local breakfast every morning, year after year, the issue of “health” has more to do with the quality of food (ingredients, freshness, taste, etc.) than the conditions under which it is prepared or served. They do not demand a “sanitary” or “germ-free” environment. Freshly cooked food is considered healthier than packaged food.

This chapter stems from my own adjustments to very different living conditions both in Shang village and its county seat, and in 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 such as eating, dressing, walking, talking, and

¹ According to Christopher Nelson, an anthropologist who has conducted extensive ethnographic research in Okinawa, Japan, this Orion Chocolate Pie was originally made to copy the Moon Pie, a favorite southern snack in the US, to accommodate the US army bases in Korea.

working. 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 to 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 such aspects as construction materials, spatial layout, furnishings and building forms, and concrete experiences of "making do" in daily life (de Certeau 1984).

Meanwhile, my discussion takes a liberal understanding of hygiene that is not restricted to personal practices to ensure cleanliness. Instead, hygiene refers simultaneously to "health" and "cleanliness". It is also noteworthy that in conversations with villagers, "environment" and "hygiene" were often used interchangeably, such as "[in our village] weisheng (hygiene) was better before," meaning there had been a cleaner environment in the village of the past. So this chapter also employs a broadened definition of "environment" that is not confined to the natural surroundings but, to a greater degree, refers to the built environment such as houses, roads, and land, the places where people interact. As I will show in this chapter, Shang villagers' understanding of hygiene is intimately connected with environmental degradation. They perceive "dirtiness" that is not really a product of their own actions. In fact, the environmental costs of improved domestic hygiene pose a new and serious problem in villagers' everyday life. Taking the recent trash problem in the public areas of the village as an example, the use of plastic bags, paper, and modern construction materials like commercially-made plaster and tiles increases the ability of individuals and families to

stay clean and comfortable indoors; but such modern packaging and construction practices simultaneously add to the collective problem of trash outdoors.

Many historians have pointed out that the term “hygiene,” with its intimate connection to classical dietetics, directly relates environment and aspects of life-style to health (Mikkeli 1999; Wear 1993)². Furthermore, Weisheng 卫生, the Chinese translation of hygiene, literally meaning “guarding life,” connotes much concern with the living environment in the maintenance of health and healthy living.³ It often evokes the interplay of “health” and “cleanliness,” “public” and “private”.⁴

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 by Chinese intellectuals engaged in early 20th century language reform.⁵ In her recent work, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (2005), Ruth Rogaski has undertaken an elaborate historical study of the modern Chinese concept of weisheng. She reminds us that, by the first decades of the twentieth century, when the

² 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).

³ Weisheng is also used to translate “health.” While for times “health” is also translated as 健康 *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 卫生部. Its branches at the municipal and county level are called Bureaus of Weisheng 卫生局. Other examples include the Chinese translation of “World Health Organization,” and the US “National Institution of Health”, in both terms “health” is rendered into weisheng (世界卫生组织, 国立卫生研究院).

⁴ The best example is the Committee of Patriotic Hygiene Campaign 爱卫会, a branch under the Ministry of Weisheng 卫生部 [Ministry of Health] that is in charge of environmental sanitation. And in the Ministry of Weisheng, the hygienic regimes have included, at least in theory, personal cleanliness, environmental sanitation, compulsory vaccinations, eradication of insects, and the control of germs.

⁵ See Lydia Liu’s extensive lists in her book, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China, 1900-1937*, which classifies over 1,800 loanwords 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.

discourse of weisheng was inextricably entwined with the violence of imperialism in general and the very “western” concept of hygiene in particular, its meaning had “[brought] together public and private meanings of health into a powerful model of modernity” (2005: 2). And this modernity, which Rogaski calls “hygienic modernity,” was at first foreign (and imperial), and then urban (and elitist).⁶

It is small wonder that hygiene is a field of power relations. Modern nation-states, by definition, have taken up hygienic regimes in their administration of life in general and public health in particular, as Foucauldian theorists have made clear in discussions of biopolitics (Foucault 2003; Rose 1998). And hygienic regimes entail both the effective interventions of government health policies and the effective internalization of the goals of the state. Since the establishment of the Ministry of Weisheng 卫生部 in November 1, 1949,⁷ the Communist government has effectively implemented a series of techniques of “governmentality,” among which the Patriotic Hygiene Campaign undertaken in the name of national defense and the pursuit of modernity is a salient example (Ref. Rogaski 2005: 285-299). Since then hygienic regimes 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 in the interplay of “health” and “cleanliness,” “public” and “private,” little changed from its colonial origins, it carries a strong value component.

More importantly, hygiene is a target for governmental intervention, a site for promoting self-discipline, and also a social field in which villagers are subjected to

⁶ See Ruth Rogaski 2004, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, Berkeley: University of California Press. I will elaborate more on her point of “hygienic modernity” in a later part of this chapter.

⁷ Also ref. note 5 of this chapter.

mutual evaluations and surveillance. Norms around hygiene and the repression of trash (and dirt) in the modern's consciousness are internalized by villagers.

Ironically, the same modernity that marginalizes villagers as “dirty” people, discussed above, is also what pollutes the body and what renders the countryside “unhygienic”. Everyday hygiene in rural Henan reveals the “spectral reality” of modernization, a reality that has been disguised in modern towns and cities, seemingly clean, with the “unwritten history of these exclusion zones of the present – the dumps, sewage works, and landfills” (Scanlan 2005: 160). The pollution to be described in this chapter, for instance, is not just a cost of domestic hygiene, but also the introduction of chemical fertilizer, a major contributing factor. In the mean time, the cleanliness and order of modern cities not only depends on infrastructures that we take for granted but depends on our dirt (in the broadest sense) being removed from our sight and sent elsewhere. For those who still must participate in the modern economy but lack the resources to make its inevitable “dirt” disappear, dirt can only accumulate at their doorsteps, such as Shang villagers’ everyday environment.

Drawing on Freud’s notion of “uncanny”, I formulate the concept of “uncanny modernization” to capture the issue of hygiene within the current moment of everyday life in this Henan village. I contend that the individualized and free market environment of government (and management) offers no solutions to the hygienic conditions of village life at present. This absence of solutions contributes to a persistent perception that “peasants are dirty,” continuing an ahistorical and irresponsible stigmatization of the peasantry.

In what follows, I will first introduce the space and arrangement of the village house, including divisions of space in terms of cleaning practices, and cleaning implements such as divisions of water containers, brooms, and wiping cloth. Then I will discuss the everyday practice of hygiene, especially the labor investment involved in “keeping clean”. The third section is involved with discussions of food in terms of local hygienic principles, and embodiment that reflects spatial/architectural divisions in hygienic practices. In the fourth section, I will compare and contrast the new-style multi-floor houses with the old-style courtyard houses, so as to depict a general picture of the ongoing landscape transformation in Shang village. In comparison to Shang village’s recent past, the newly emerged problem of trash has come along with the landscape transformation, which is to be addressed in the fifth section. The last section takes the issue further into a discussion of the uncanny modernization, situating Shang village against a general background of the urgent environmental degradation in rural China at large. I argue that the “dirtiness” of the countryside is directly (and literally) contributed by the dirt of modernization and urbanization which, uncannily “resists any attempts to disconnect from it” (Scanlan 2005: 36). To put it directly, if villagers are considered “dirty,” so are urbanites as well.

I. House, Home, and Family

In this section, I will provide great details to describe domestic space, Ayi, my hostess’s house in particular. In order to understand everyday hygiene one has to first understand the disposition of space. Everyday hygiene, as an aspect of habitus, is closely related to space and material life. More specifically, habitus articulates lived relationships

to space and 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 1990; 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 the locally specific practices of everyday hygiene. Spatialization conditions and is conditioned by classification, such as the nexus of high-clean and low-dirty. In Foucault’s words, “space is fundamental in any form of communal life” (1984: 252).

I arrived in Shang village in October 2005. It was a rainy day and the road was muddy. 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. We got out at the village committee courtyard of Shang. My friend Yu Jie had come along on behalf of the county Chinese medicine hospital to introduce me to officials at the township office. Fang, the township official in charge of family planning, had been sent by the township office to join us in introducing me to Zhishu, the Shang village Party secretary. After a brief introduction, Zhishu telephoned Hong, the director of Women’s Affairs of Shang Village and asked her to accommodate us for lunch. He excused himself, stating, “you are all women.” Zhishu’s gendered treatment did not surprise me, especially after being assigned Yujie and Fang as escorts. Both had been chosen out of the same consideration; they were women. Besides, Zhishu had one more task to busy himself with: figuring out a place for me, a complete stranger to Shang Village, to stay. I asked him if he could find me an old-style one-story house of the kind which, it seemed to me, dominated Shang

village, even though from the main village road many newly built two and three-story houses are visible. Hong is among those who live in a newer house by the main road.

After lunch we met Ayi at Zhishu's courtyard; she had been fetched and asked to host me. When we walked in Ayi was standing by the hog shed with Saozi, Zhishu's wife, commenting on the piglets. Having their pants rolled up, Ayi and Saozi were both sockless, 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.

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's inside the village⁸ instead of by the main road. 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, so as to scrape off the mud. I stomped as well, like everyone else did before entering into the courtyard.

Ayi's house looked perfectly "traditional" to me: a lovely courtyard with a three-room main house and a two-room side house, a dog, a cat, about 20 chickens and 10 ducks, but no cows. Ayi showed me the spare room in the main house, in which there was a bed, a washer, a sewing machine, and a makeshift bed board used as a shelf for an electric rice cooker and several boxes. The room looked all right to me. Plus, I could use

⁸ Being "inside" the village means being away from the main village roads with less traffic and therefore 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 by the village roads are referred to "roadside 路边" ones, in contrast to the "inside" ones. While in the past people preferred to live "inside" the village, the situation now has been reversed because of the increasing wish to take advantage of the paved main village roads for more convenient transportation and to avoid the mud of paths "inside".

the empty space 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.



Figure 2: Ayi's side house and main house

During my stay in the county seat, my local friends had told me that I'd better take everything I needed, including bedding and a plastic closet. They even said that I should bring a desk and chair to the village because villagers would have nothing to spare. Their words proved true: there was little furniture in Ayi's house, as in many other villagers' homes, especially the older houses which have fewer rooms. The old houses are nearly identical throughout the village⁹: 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,

⁹ Not only throughout Shang village, it seems most rural houses in Northern China have been sharing a similar style, especially in collectivist era. Ref. Knapp (ed.) *Chinese Landscapes: The Village as Place*, 1992. Yan Yunxiang described similar housing in his ethnography of a northeastern village, including the name of the west room and east room, 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, described the main room in a Shandong village that is called "north room 北房". See Kipnis 1997, Chapter 2: Guest/Host Etiquette and Banquets.

the middle room, locally called the hall room 堂屋, is the most functional and important room in the house. It serves as both a living and dining room. The other two rooms, usually used as bedrooms, are called the ‘east room 东屋’ and the ‘west room 西屋.’ In Ayi’s house, I had the West room and Ayi and her daughter slept in the East room. The size of the three rooms is usually the same. A two-door gate in the main house opens directly into the hall room. The entrances to the east and west rooms are inside facing each other, and are situated immediately to the left and right of the main gate. In old-style houses there is no door on these two 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 would not be necessary in any case, because the east and west walls that divide the house into three parts do not reach the roof, only being at the three-quarter 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 have become more accustomed to a fully enclosed private space (c.f. Yan 2003)¹⁰. Meanwhile, 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 most old couples have moved to the detached two-room side house 偏房, which was originally designed for kitchen and storage use. In other words, they have switched the storage function to their own bedroom, so as to give more privacy to the young couple who now stay in the three-

¹⁰ Yan Yunxiang has described in his ethnography of Xiajia village in Northeast China, family members now increasingly prefer their “newly-found” sense of privacy. See Yan 2003, *Private Life Under Socialism*, Stanford University Press.

room house on their own during the night. I will discuss these arrangements in greater detail in the next chapter.

In the hall room (see Figure 3), the main wall (north wall) facing the entrance is usually decorated with posters (many feature Mao or his calligraphy) that occupy the center. At times framed family pictures and/or certificates of honor are around the edges. Against the wall and beneath the posters there is usually a combination of altar table and cupboard, occupying the entire north wall of the hall room (see picture). Villagers call it a “table 条几”,¹¹ although it has a pair of cupboards, one low and one high, at each end: the tall double cupboard at the far end looks as if it is attached to the table; it is taller than the table surface. The cupboards closer to the center of the table are built underneath the table surface, but attached to taller cupboards. It is a piece of local traditional furniture designed for the hall room, usually constructed by village carpenters to fit exactly the length of the north wall. In Ayi’s hall room, two small statues, the Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin 观音) and the God of Wealth (Caishen 财神), occupy the center of the long narrow table.¹²

In front of the long narrow table, a full-size 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, or other gatherings of guests, e.g., in the lunar Chinese New Year season. There is another everyday square dining table of a much smaller size that fits underneath the big table but is usually pulled half-way out when not

¹¹ In a later conversation with Li Shu, he told me the cupboard-style has evolved from a previous table-style which was found only in richer households, the landlords before 1949 for example, and more for decoration than for practical use with elaborate designs on the surface and edges of the table.

¹² However the altar table, based upon my observation in Shang village, has 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 had to a great degree destroyed the village lineage system while reduced it into the nuclear families. See Knapp 1992, Link etc. 1989, and Yan 2003.

in use. Seeing through a vertical aspect, three levels of flat space are formed here: altar table, formal table and the everyday table. On the two side walls that connect to the east and west rooms, there are often a calendar, more family pictures, honor 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 hangs her late husband's black and white picture in a black frame. Ayi's husband died over two years ago, leaving her with three daughters and one son, the youngest.¹³

There is no couch in Ayi's hall room, but other relatively wealthier households do have one couch and/or a pair of single armchairs, usually put against the west and/or east walls. Instead, in Ayi's hall room against the west wall there is a long bamboo reclining chair, of a kind which can also be found in most hall rooms in Shang village. Besides 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

¹³ 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, was considered "black boy/girl 黑娃/女," a locally common phrase to describe those who were born illegally without hukou 户口 (the 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 get 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, it was because he had broken the regulation to have the son that he was dismissed from his position. Lihua told me, "at that time [when my mom was pregnant again], those officials took turns talking with my dad, warning him that he had to choose between my brother and the position; he shrugged and said, 'I'm fine to resign 那我退好了,' and he did." I talked once with Ayi about the family planning policy and she said, "What can we do when we get old and lose our strength for working in the field? Our life is dependent on the land. You urbanites don't have to worry about it because you will have the 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, Introduction: The Impact of Post-Mao Reforms on Family Life, in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, University of California Press, 1993, page 1-22.

the village store, and on the crossroads, which are popular gathering places in the village.

The setup of the hall rooms in most of the old houses is identical to a great degree.



Figure 3: Ayi's hall room

Most households own a color TV, located either in the hall room (on one end of the long narrow 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 piled 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 space beneath the window against the south wall. The dominant piece of furniture in this room is the full-size bed that Lihua sleeps on; despite the fact that it's been pushed against the two walls in the northeast corner of the house, still there is not much space between the two beds. Plus there is a three-door wardrobe between the beds, facing the entrance and standing against the east-end wall. From the top of the east-room entrance a plastic string stretches to the

east-end wall; on it hang clothes in daily use, mostly belonging to Lihua, who recently turned 25 years old. Clothes are cheap in the local market. Despite the presence of sewing machines in almost every household, few sew in Shang village. I used Ayi's sewing machine in the west room as my desk.

Lihua is the only person holding a “non-agricultural” *hukou* (household registration) in her family; all others in this family are registered as “agricultural,” including the son who is now a college student in the provincial capital city¹⁴. Having received training at a local professional school, Lihua teaches at Zhaoying Township Kindergarten, a government-sponsored work unit. Ayi's two other daughters work in cities as migrant workers, one in Fujian province, one in Beijing. With only Ayi and Lihua remaining at home, Ayi takes care of the family's 5.2 mu¹⁵ 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 by laboring on the land]够够的” when she was little.¹⁶ Plus her teaching in the kindergarten keeps her fairly busy for five days of the week.

Lihua watches TV every night, Ayi usually falls asleep soon after beginning to watch with her daughter. They watch it in bed, to stay warm.¹⁷ Ayi prefers to sleep on the single

¹⁴ College students also hold a temporary collective household registration 集体户口 that belongs to their school. In theory once the students get out of college, their hukou will automatically go back 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.

¹⁵ The portion of land-distribution in Ayi's team, Team Six 六组, is 1.3 mu per person. Because Lihua is not registered as “peasant” anymore, she cannot have land. By adding up the land of the other four, including Xiaojun the son, this family is distributed 5.2-mu of land. In general, the size of the land distributed per person varies between teams even as 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.

¹⁶ See Chapter Three on the impact of young generation's unwillingness to do agricultural labors.

¹⁷ At times I would watch together with Lihua, sitting on the edge of her bed, though she always invited me to share the bed with her.

bed by the window, to stay alert to thievery. She's concerned about her ducks and chickens. "Nowadays in rural villages public order has been lost 现在农村治安太差," 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 some other villager's house.)

The floor of old houses is usually paved with bricks instead of cement, which 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 the dirt and then sweep it away.



Figure 4: Ayi cleaning the hall room

Sometimes one or two chickens 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 then 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 at one end of this veranda outside the west-room window. On the other end, underneath the east-side windows in the corner, there was a pile of peanut stems harvested from the field, waiting to be worked on: there were still peanuts needing to be picked. Whenever Ayi had time, she'd 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. In the storage room the main item is a huge iron tank of wheat seeds. Other items include self-planted cotton from past years (Ayi does not plant cotton any longer), one more single-bed board, a couple of disused iron stoves, a sack of wheat flour¹⁸, many plastic sacks saved for future uses such as holding wheat grain in the summer, the harvest season. Many of these sacks had been used for fertilizer, but they had been washed and cleaned. Vegetables bought from the neighboring market town are also stored here. The space in the middle of the storage room is where Lihua parks her motorcycle at night. Motorcycles have become increasingly desirable among villagers, youngsters and the middle-aged alike; they are also a common item of dowry in most weddings.¹⁹

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ In the past, at least before 1980s when the villagers could not afford to brick houses, few had a separate storage room but a one-room kitchen built with mud, the same material for the main house. Quite a few

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 length, 0.2m width, and 1m height, with two ovens, one bigger than the other. Accordingly, there are always a caldron and a smaller wok sitting on the openings atop the two ovens. The top of 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 the fuel. These fuels are all over the countryside, free of charge, while the honeycomb-shaped coal briquettes cost money.

Both Ayi and Lihua have 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 ones. The biggest co-resident family I met in Shang village has only five to six members at most.²⁰ Of course during the lunar New Year's time, when family reunion always happens, the box-shaped stove will work best to cater group banquets.

The big stove works best when two people collaborate: one takes care of the fire while the other is cooking. It would keep the cook very busy if she had to also attend the fire. I learned how to keep the fire going so that I could help out when Lihua came home

housewives also told me they had a kitchen built in the hall room when they separated from their parents-in-law's kitchen.

²⁰ 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 at least 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 Two.

late. But at times when Ayi was busy with wheat-planting, Lihua would cook dinner on the coal stove, which is easier, and cleaner with less smoke. In front of the box-shaped stove to the right of the kitchen door, sits a big pile of dried stalks of soy bean, sesame, and peanut plants, as well as dried tree leaves and used paper. Except when the fire is being started, the smoke goes out through the chimney that is built outside the house. Smoke from the chimney at mealtimes is an easy way for villagers to tell whether a house owner is at home.



Figure 5: Ayi's kitchen

On the coal stove usually sits a kettle of water, another common scene in Shang village.²¹ Ayi's coal stove stands by the door on the left side. Boiled water is in constant use for both drinking and washing. It is normally kept in at least one thermos, a must-have necessity in every household. Along the left-side wall beside the coal stove is a

²¹ It's rather recent to boil water in a kettle, because in collectivist times coal briquettes were rare and expensive. Villagers did not have cash for the coal stoves. Nowadays from time to time, when people forget to attend the coal stove and let the fire go out, a quick make-shift then is to boil water in the caldron on the big stove, the oven there cannot support either a kettle or a small pot. But people use the same caldron everyday for stir-frying or steaming bread. The water boiled there tasted strange to me.

kneading machine which can easily make noodles and dumpling skins with turning of a crank. Underneath the kneading machine is a long narrow wood board to hold the machine's products. When it is not in use, Ayi always covers the machine and the 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, alongside the wall. 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.

There is no free-running water in Shang village. In the 1980s every household dug their own well in the yard, no longer going to the public village well, located in the middle of the village, to get water. 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 furniture in the kitchen that stores all the bowls, dishes, spoons and some canned food 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 quite a few nails for hanging kitchen utensils, bread steamers, etc. The walls have turned dark due to years of smoke, and the cement floor looks black.

The side rooms have a flat roof that can be used to dry corn cobs, wheat, sesame stalks, and many other things. 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 doesn't raise any cows, pigs, goats, or sheep. Across from the kitchen on the right side of the yard, to the back next to the main house is the latrine, a simple space between the yard wall and the main house, without a roof. But there is a screening wall in front of the latrine, which makes it rather private. Most latrines in Shang village

are pit latrines, i.e. a rectangular trench on the ground, with a pit underneath. When going to the toilet, one needs to plant her feet on each side of the opening and then squat. The pit usually reaches outside the back of the yard, and 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. 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; while the village doctor, Li Shu, put a used bicycle basket as trash can to receive used toilet paper in his old house.



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

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. The yard entrance opens at the southwest corner, instead of in the middle of the south wall. This way of avoiding the exposure of the main house is exceptional in Shang village, though it does accord with *fengshui* principles. Many other courtyards do have their main gate in the middle of the south wall, in line with the entrance to the main house. The well is usually close to the south courtyard wall and next to the gate. When Ayi's neighbor's pump recently broke, they came over to Ayi's to get water every now and then. Nowadays all wells in Shang village are closed wells, with only a long-handled pump sticking out of the ground; to get water one has to push down the long iron handle. This is not hard but learning how took some practice and some strength. In front of the well Ayi had put a used millstone on the ground to keep the water container from getting muddled by the dirt.



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

The courtyard is mainly packed dirt, except for a cement pathway going from the yard gate to the main house. There are several trees in the yard. The biggest one is an elm, standing to the south of the screen wall that hides the latrine; other smaller ones are all yulan. Lihua has an aloe plant in a garden pot; she uses the aloe juice for her facial skin care, a habit she learnt from her sister in Beijing, who works there in a kindergarten as well. For now the most conspicuous thing in the yard is the big pile of peanut stalks. After the winter wheat had been planted, Ayi's main task would be peanut-picking.

Outside and south of Ayi's courtyard is a rather big space full of weeds. To the east is a north-south dirt path leading to the east-west main village road that goes to the neighboring market village. 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. Right next to the western courtyard wall live Ayi's next-door neighbor, Shaoli, and her father, brother, and niece. There is a small graveyard between Shaoli's house and the other north-south main village road, which passes by the village clinic, village committee, and the elementary school, going all the way down to the south river that flows through the county seat. Shaoli's father said the space in front of Ayi's and his courtyards used to be a collective drying ground 集体晒场 for harvested grain; then it did not have many weeds at all. After decollectivization, and now that most young people are out working as migrant laborers, the old ones who remain cannot afford to take care of the drying ground and weeds have gradually filled up the space.

Ayi's house was built in the early 1980s. It was made of wood, brick, and mud at a time when self-made bricks were widely used in this area.²² Building a house was hard work because people made the bricks for their own houses. Usually they first built a brick kiln outside the village in the fields, then used a wooden handcart to transport the right kind of soil and sand, which could only be found alongside the riverbank 30 miles away from the village. It was thus a long and labor-intensive process, and in the sense of both time and space, because bricks have to dry for quite a while before being fired.²³ At that time not many families could afford a tractor,²⁴ so it was usually the youngsters with strength to pull the cart who went back and forth and the older ones who would be in charge of the brick kiln. Women remained in charge of cooking and household chores. It took about a year or two to finish the whole building process. Nowadays people don't make their own bricks, for three main reasons: 1) commercially-made bricks have become more and more accessible now that private business has prospered after the planned economy was dismantled; 2) villagers now have more cash in hand compared to the past; and 3) one brick costs only 0.25 yuan, and many brick-making factories deliver bricks to customers at a cost of 0.02 yuan more per piece.²⁵ In addition, more villagers own a tractor or even a truck nowadays, which can be rented out or lent to others to transport house-building materials. By the time when I was in the village, cement blocks

²² Cement has been prevalently used to build the new-style houses, and it provides better insulation.

²³ When Li Shu built his old house at South Li Manor in 1976, the whole house cost the family only a bit over 1000 RMB. In terms of bricks, the only cost was the coal at an expense of 0.016 per 500kg; they used about 3,500 kg of coal which cost them about 70 RMB. From an conversation with Li Shu in January, 2006.

²⁴ There were a couple of tractors in Shang village when it was a production brigade in the collectivist era, which however belonged to the then Zhaoying People's Commune, i.e., the present Zhaoying Township. After the implementation of the household responsibility system, the tractors were called back to the "Township Agricultural Equipment Station 乡农机站".

²⁵ Also see Knapp 1992: *Chinese Landscapes: the village as place*, esp. Chapter 4, for a discussion of the recent Chinese history of rural housing.

had gained more popularity than the traditional fired bricks, due to its lower cost at about 0.22 yuan per piece.²⁶ Poured concrete with its better insulation have also been widely used to build new-style houses. The traditional old house does not have good insulation. This is partly because the ceilings are left open to the rafters, which makes it very cold in winter. In the west room where I stayed at Ayi's, there was a big crack in the west-end wall and I could feel the wind blowing in whenever it was especially cold outside.

II. Everyday Hygiene

Ayi was still concerned that her house seemed dirty (“*meji*” in Shang dialect) to me. 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 said to me on the morning after I moved in, at breakfast:

It is meji (dirty) everywhere in rural villages. [We] have to work everyday in the fields. After all aren't the fields full of dirt? Plus 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 nevertheless make it clear that people have their own common-sense understandings about degrees of cleanliness, which have much to do with their daily activities, and vary widely. Different kinds of work – spreading fertilizer, using dried leaves (and stalks, wood or coal) as fuel to cook, washing dishes with buckets of water from the well, picking peanuts in the courtyard, and raising chickens – present different

²⁶ People recognize the better quality of fired-bricks, but the cement blocks are cheaper. A cement block-making business is also easier to set up without the need to find a right spot to build a kiln. As a matter of fact, in my last visit to Shang village in December of 2006 there was a brand new cement block-making factory located almost in the center of the village.

hygienic challenges. And changing pants three times in two days really points at how much labor investment is involved in maintaining “hygiene”.

Meanwhile, Ayi’s particular comments revealed her awareness of an urbanite’s possible imagination of country life. On one hand, she was very concerned about my perception of her house; on the other, she seemed to be even more concerned about dirt than I, on her own local cultural terms. Indeed, the “dirtiness” she spoke of is not only conditioned by the nature of rural life, it also reveals some indelible difference in our attitude and practices of “cleanliness”. As a matter of fact, living at Ayi’s house, I was less concerned with “dirtiness” than inconvenience. If I were Ayi, for example, would I have changed my pants three times, knowing the difficulty of pumping water from the well to wash clothes? I did not even brush my teeth the first night I moved in, because it was freezing cold outside; in addition, to pump the water I had to hold the iron handle tightly, which made me even colder, not to mention that I was awkward in dealing with the 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. Ayi and I agreed that 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.²⁷

On weekends when Lihua didn’t have to go to work, her main task was to clean the house and do the laundry. Ayi was busy in those late fall days preparing to plant the winter wheat. Getting all the laundry into quite a big pile, Lihua would undertake her weekly chore, a contribution that supported her mother’s hard labor in the field. To do the laundry is a big project, even though they owned a semi-automatic two-tub washing

²⁷ Actually this is a very “traditional Chinese” custom. According to Chinese medicine, to keep the feet warm is very important in terms of yangsheng, i.e., nurturing life, or healthcare in a broader sense. I still do it from time to time during the winter time, even here in Chapel Hill.

machine 半自动双桶洗衣机. This kind of washing machine does not need to be hooked up to plumbing and therefore can be used without running water. Of the two tubs, the bigger one is for washing and the smaller one is for spinning water out of the wet clothes; this is especially useful for heavy winter clothing. From time to time, for example, Ayi's neighbors would bring their just-washed clothes over to use the machine only for spinning. I noticed later that quite a few households in Shang village own this kind of washing machine, while some other households either have a one-tub washer without the spinning part, or a single spinning machine without the washing part. I did my laundry together with Lihua, only to find that the semi-automatic washer might save some labor, but it saved little time for the still tiresome laundry. We had to first pump water into a big washbasin and a plastic bucket and pour it into the washing tub, then repeat the process several times to complete all the washing and rinsing cycles: bending down, lifting the bucket, and pouring in water, along with pumping the water out of the well, was demanding. It took us the whole morning. I was exhausted.

To do the laundry, the washing machine had to be moved toward the front where the well was, because the only drainage is beside the well. The drainage channel starts with a groove lined with bricks and stretches toward the west, passing by the yard gate. The groove connects to a conduit which is actually a used concrete telegraph pole, being laid down to carry the drainage out of the yard. There is another conduit on the other side of the east courtyard wall that continues to take the water into a north-south ditch. The ditch is quite shallow, and looks like a natural waterway. But Lihua told me the water is guided to a pit and then changes its direction to the east, finally going into the central pond of Shang village, called "the big pit 大坑". Almost all the drainage water in the village goes

into the big pit. Ayi said the big pit was already there when she married into Shang village from a neighboring village. In the past, when cows were more commonly raised in Shang village, every household had a water pit for the cows to drink from, that the water flowed to the big pit and then to the river in the south. Ducks go to the big pit, too.

Some households have neither a well in their yard, nor drainage for water. Ayi's neighbour, Shaoli's family, is one of them. Shaoli, three year 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 guy 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 to come back from Guangdong province where he worked as a welder. Like Lihua, Shaoli too disliked laboring in the fields. Her father, then reaching seventy, had lost much of his strength to work on the land, and he had never been a very enthusiastic farmer. Her brother never left to work anywhere else except for the county seat during the fallow seasons, but he too was a lackluster farmer.²⁸ Since her sister-in-law had left the

²⁸ These are 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. Although Shaoli had been working in Zhengzhou for a while, in Shang village most households do not count on the daughter's income but on that of their sons and daughters-in-law. People told me that they were satisfied with their daughters being financially independent so as to reduce the family's burden in general. Moreover, for Shaoli's family in particular, it was always a relatively poor family even before the high tide of migration in the 1990s in this area. Shaoli's father is a fairly

family a couple of years before, Shaoli had been doing all the housework for her family, mainly 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 might have taken off a while ago. “My brother knows only to change, but he never washes his clothes; some of these things may have been there even before I came back from Zhengzhou, because I can smell them,” she complained to me. Doing laundry is an even harder project for Shaoli. Her family has neither a well in their yard nor a two-tub washing machine. Shaoli recently got a used single-tub washing machine from a neighbor. Still, to do laundry she had to first gather water from Ayi’s yard, carrying it back and forth in a plastic bucket, and pouring the water into the washing machine tub and two big washbasins, one of which was borrowed from Ayi. She did some laundry by hand as well, so as to save some of the repetitive labor of taking clothes out and putting them into the smallish machine. She let the machine run the washing cycle without letting out the water afterwards, so that the same detergent could continue to be used for the following loads. While the machine was running, Shaoli used the two big washbasins to rinse the washed clothes: one for the first round and the other for the second. I tried to help her but was declined, “your shoes and pants will get all covered with mud 会沾上泥巴的,” Shaoli kindly reminded me. It was already mid-November, and Shaoli was sockless in a pair of pink plastic slippers, the same kind as the ones Ayi wore all the time, with her

sophisticated old man, who, however, never liked agricultural labor. Unfortunately Shaoli’s brother shared a similar trait with his father, so he does poorly on their land too. Shaoli once recollected a childhood memory of a time when Lihua always wanted to exchange her white wheat bread 白馍 with Shaoli’s grey bread 灰馍, not knowing that white bread was much more desirable for Shaoli, because her father’s poor efforts in agriculture made the family unable to afford wheat flour bread. They mixed the wheat flour with sweet potato starch, which was also a staple for every household in the 1960s and 1970s. I have encountered many Shang villagers who openly make derisive comments about those who do poorly in agricultural work, but they show respect to the ones who are deemed truly skillful 好把式.

pants rolled up, too (see picture). I came to understand that this way of dressing reduced the chance to get dirt on their pants. After the work was done they would only need to wash their feet, which would be much easier.

All the used water was poured onto the ground in front of Shaoli, running into the weedy space, which formed several small puddles due to the former grain-drying ground being uneven. Some flowed to the south and joined the ditch to go to the big pit in the center of Shang village; some made a muddy spot, beside which her 2-year-old niece, Jiaojiao, was happily playing with the water. Shaoli had pulled a clothes line 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 of yellow, pink, and orange. Nearby two cows were eating the still green grass. Under bright sunshine of noon, the once collective grain drying ground did not seem to be wasted, at least at that moment.

To keep clean, it appears, is not an easy job. It requires hard labor and inconvenient effort. In Shang village, especially with men going out to work as hired laborers, women only have time to attend to their house on special occasions when, for example, they are hosting banquets or preparing for the lunar New Year. At other times, as a matter of fact, there's not much to do in housekeeping except for laundry and cleaning work surfaces in the house. Of course, a village house would never *look* as "clean" as urbanites' houses anyway, due to the dirt floor, the mud walls, and the muddy road outside. How can one possibly keep dirt away?



Figure 8: Shaoli doing laundry

Nevertheless, although keeping 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, especially their houses and courtyards. Mang Shen who lives in a one-story new house by the roadside, for example, told me that she swept the floor everyday, 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 like someone who is so meji 埋汲 [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 不扫不好看。”

Indeed, in their answer 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 do not pay attention?” And, “at least I sweep my house everyday, not only to make it a cleaner place for the kids to play on, but also to look nicer in my neighbors’

eyes.” To sweep the yard every morning is a traditional custom that seems to be well maintained in Shang village. Every morning I was awakened by the rhythmic sound of the big bamboo broom Ayi used to sweep the loose dirt and dead leaves from the yard, after making breakfast. Lying in my warm bed, I could picture the kitchen stove: egg and wheat soup simmering in the caldron with bread on top of it in the steamer.

It is small wonder that people have their own little-articulated common-sense about degrees of cleanliness, which has much to do with their daily activities and varies widely. To keep clean is a daily concern, woven almost imperceptibly into the round of productive tasks. Consider the washstand, an almost negligible yet common piece of furniture in every household of Shang village. This ubiquitous object reveals much about Shang peoples’ attention to hygiene, and serves as a strong indicator of local practices of hygiene.

Washstands are also a sign of hospitality. When guests come for a meal, once they have been welcomed into the hall 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 even neck! After they have washed that they are invited to the table to sit down and smoke or chat, while waiting for the meal. Washstands used to be made of wood by local carpenters. Now that readymade low cost durable iron ones have come to dominate the local market, wooden washstands have gradually died out. However the washstand itself remains central in villagers’ everyday life, and is still included on the list of bridal gifts.

There are two washstands in Ayi’s house, one in the hall room and the other outside the kitchen (some people also set one by the well). The one by kitchen is an old-style wooden one, standing at the corner outside the kitchen window on the cement veranda

(See fig. 9). Above the washstand a big rectangular mirror hangs on the end wall. On the windowsill are hand soap, facial soap, shampoo, hair conditioner, and a plastic comb.²⁹ Beside the window a towel hangs on a nail. Underneath the windowsill two big thermoses stand ready for adding boiled hot water to the basin when a certain temperature is needed for a wash. Ayi always washes her hands at that washstand as soon as she comes back from outside, as she does after going to the latrine. Instead of pouring the used water onto the ground right beside the kitchen veranda, as Lihua and Shaoli often did, Ayi usually sprinkled the water over the yard to settle the dust.



Figure 9: The washstand outside the kitchen

This is also the preferred spot to wash hair. Lihua washed her hair every other day. Shaoli came often to wash her hair as well, bringing her own shampoo. Ayi washes her hair now and then, whenever she feels it needs it. After a trial at the beginning of my stay

²⁹ Except for the hand soap, of which the brand I knew before my coming to live in the village, others I had never heard of, but the style of packaging is similar to the ones such as Panteen, Head & Shoulder, etc, that are prevalent in most supermarkets in Chinese cities. Ayi seldom uses the facial soap, which belongs to Lihua.

in Ayi's house, I turned out to be the most reluctant one: I felt it 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 water with a head full of dripping wet hair. It nevertheless did not seem a problem at all for others to wash their hair. I constantly saw people washing their hair in courtyards, on door steps, or in the hall room, normally without a coat despite the cold. There were no complaints about inconvenience. On the other hand, I had to adjust my habitus from an accustomed luxurious daily private shower (which was obviously impossible in Shang village) to a shower once-a-week in the same room with many others. In the township, the public shower room only opens on weekends. Even worse, the closest one on Tonglu Street did not open until December. I had to go to the next closest one that is on Zhaoying street, a 30-minute bike ride each way. My 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 my body and clothes did not seem to be so necessary for my acquaintances in Shang village, especially when it's winter time. Ayi thought it unnecessary to take a shower once a week. She said she'd take a shower after she finished picking the peanuts, which would be about a month later. Shaoli thought to take showers in the winter was too cold and she preferred to take them less often than every two weeks. Plus, she said, you need only shower often in the warm weather; since you don't sweat much in the winter, there's no need to go to the bath house. Lihua was the only one who was willing to go to the bath house with me. We even took a 40-minute motorcycle ride to the county seat to take showers³⁰. Ayi insisted that Lihua and I made too big a deal out of bathing. She also pointed out to us that the 4-

³⁰ There are more public shower rooms in the county seat, with better facilities. And they are open everyday.

yuan fee per shower is expensive.³¹ Later Lihua admitted that she actually preferred to shower every other week. Her reason for going with me was mostly out of kindness; she also wanted to go to the county seat to see the clothing market – another incentive for her to ride her motorcycle all the way from Shang village to the county seat.

Apparently, my interest in situated perceptions of hygiene stemmed from my own experiences – the unfamiliarity, inconvenience, adjustments – in very different living conditions in Shang village. People come to terms with their practical understandings of hygiene based on their local senses of habitus. The washstand, to be found in every household in Shang village, is a quiet yet strong indication of villagers’ attention to cleanliness, and weisheng in a general sense. How was I, a so-called urbanite who washed her hair less often than many in the village, and therefore always tied her hair into a knot at the back of her head to prevent it getting oily or dirty too soon, perceived differently by others in terms of hygienic standards? And could I pass judgment on those senior villagers who, in the interest of protecting their health, took showers only once or twice during the winter time?³²

³¹ The price is the same all over the county, including Zhaozhou, the county seat. Although it may cost little to the county-seat urbanites, I agree with Ayi that the price is expensive relative to villagers’ income.

³² To bathe less in winter goes along with the Chinese yangsheng 养生(nurturing life) practice, which understands that both during and after bathing the pores becomes more open, so it is easier to catch “wind” that may do harm to the body. This is especially true for the older ones whose pores are looser and have diminished resistance to the “evil wind 虚邪贼风”. As a matter of fact, classic Greek dietetics holds a similar understanding, as well as cautions about bathing the body. See Mikkeli 1999, *Hygiene in the Early Modern Medical Tradition*. Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters. On the other hand, Georges Vigarello has described a common belief held by the pre-eighteenth century French that, “the skin was seen as porous, and countless openings seemed to threaten, since the surfaces were weak and the frontiers uncertain” and “Baths and steam-baths were dangerous because they opened up the body to the atmosphere” (1988: 9). It was from the second third of the eighteenth century, after the installation of indoor private water closets among the traditional aristocracy and the great financial bourgeoisie, which made the use of water private and more convenient, that bathing gradually gained its significance, but mainly as a sign of privilege instead of personal hygiene (Vigarello 1988: 109-111). In his widely cited article in the authoritative *Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine*, “The History of Personal Hygiene,” Wear also indicates that it was in the nineteenth century when “baths and washbasins were given their own room in middle-class homes, and the wider availability of water, and the encouragement to use it,

III. A bodily concern of hygiene: food

Food is another important arena for perceiving practical understandings of hygiene. According to the County Gazetteer, in the Zhaozhou area people have been used to eating simple dishes for decades. In Shang village daily life food is especially simple except when there are guests and occasional banquets. The staple food for local people is wheat. Meat is still rarely served and usually there's one dish to serve the whole family no matter how big the family is. And the only dish is served at dinner time; mostly it is stir-fried potatoes, turnips, carrots, or cabbage. Few people grow vegetables on their own, especially during the winter season when it takes special care to grow vegetables such as plastic hothouses. In spring and summer people usually do grow some vegetables that are quick and easy, such as green onion, leek, tomato and cucumber. Also it is easy to buy vegetables in the neighboring market village, where the free market is open every other day. For both breakfast and dinner, people eat steamed bread and wheat-flour gruel 面水, a local specialty. Noodles are often eaten for lunch, with a small amount of vegetables added to the noodle soup.

But simple food doesn't mean that villagers don't care about their food. Even as simple a task as stir-frying sliced potatoes involves different techniques. Ayi and Lihua like spicy food, and they prefer peanut oil over lard, also a commonly used cooking oil in many other households in Shang village. Ayi explained to me, "Many [villagers] like to buy pork fat to make lard out of it and then use it in stir-fries. They claim that lard gives

made cleanliness a sign of civilized gentility and of good social order," while "those who were not clean (the poor) lay outside the pale of society" (Wear 1993: 1301). Obviously, the moral and hygienic benefits of cleanliness were closely associated. For extensive discussions of the concept of cleanliness, especially changing views of water and bathing, see Vigarello 1988. *Concepts of Cleanliness: changing attitudes in France since the Middle Ages*. Cambridge; New York; Paris: Cambridge University Press; Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

the dish some meat flavor. I never like the flavor of lard, it tastes rancid 腥臭 to me, [I think] peanut oil tastes purer 更纯”. She went on to describe her specialty in spicy stir-fries, “I like to let the fire and the caldron get very hot, then add the peanut oil, wait for a few minutes, put in some chopped chili peppers, some garlic, and then add the sliced potatoes, stir quickly and then add chopped green onions and some five-spice powder. Then it’s done. It tastes good, crispy and spicy 辣酥酥的, and looks nice too 看着也好看”. Isn’t Ayi a gourmet, or at least, a person with *taste*?³³

We usually didn’t start to make the one-dish dinner until Lihua came back from work, because Ayi was used to asking her daughter what she wanted to eat. She thinks Lihua deserves a good dinner, her only full meal each day. Lihua often skips breakfast due to her early work hours, and for lunch she usually eats randomly at work, mostly boiled noodle soup with eggs and some leafy vegetables. Although this sounds similar to her fellow villagers’ lunch at home, Lihua’s noodles are usually packaged dried noodles purchased from the market. A staple food, noodle’s quality matters for Shang people. Except for a few extremely busy days in the year, such as harvest or wheat-planting, most people make noodles from scratch using their kneading machine at home. Packaged dried noodles, which are available on the market in plenty of varieties, are never considered good food.

To prepare the dinner, we usually had a division of labor: Ayi would start the fire, with Lihua washing the green onions and vegetables in one of the vegetable basins (which are kept in the kitchen, not to be mixed with the face and foot basins) and peeling,

³³ This remind one of Bourdieu’s *Distinction* where he discusses how material circumstances and conditions generate dispositions of taste. However for him the poorer classes can only “make a virtue of necessity,” here Ayi’s taste nevertheless complicates his theory by showing villager’s concerns with health and their justified suspicions of mass produced, “urban” food.

if we were to have potatoes. My task was to clean ginger roots, peel garlic cloves and wash them together with chili pepper in an aluminum ladle (since a small amount of water is enough). The kitchen waste, peelings, egg shells, scrape, etc., was simply put in a garbage can that was once a bicycle basket, waiting to be dumped outside of the yard when it's full.³⁴ Then everything was put on the chopping board ready to be chopped up, either by Ayi or by Lihua, if the latter wasn't in the mood to stay in their bedroom and watch the pop song TV program. I liked to tend the fire, sitting there feeling cozy; it was also a comfortable occasion to chat with Ayi. After the dish was made and put into a big bowl, Ayi would add water to the caldron and use a bamboo brush to scrub it. Then she used a bowl to transfer the water into the swill bucket which sits next to her by the stove. After washing the caldron she would put more water in it and let it boil, and put the sorghum steamer, made to fit the size of the caldron, on top of the water to steam the home-made bread. There was really no need to use the other part of the stove at all. But during the course of cooking Ayi would keep some water in the smaller wok sitting on the other stove, so that the water would get heated up by the stove, ready for washing dishes after dinner. Ayi normally makes bread once a week; she seldom uses the yeast sold in the store but makes her own out of corn meal or sweet potato meal. So do many other housewives in Shang village.³⁵ When the water was boiled, the bread was heated, too. Ayi then put the steamer together with the lid on the idle wok beside the caldron, and started to sprinkle wheat flour into the caldron water, stirring the soup and adding two or

³⁴ Ayi does not conduct any composting since nowadays everyone uses chemical fertilizers instead of organic manure. I will discuss the prevalent use of chemical fertilizers in a later part of this chapter.

³⁵ Unfortunately it seems this technique is losing its attraction to the younger generation. Shaoli for example, could only make bread out of commercial yeast, and Yanyan, the village doctor's daughter-in-law, was like this too. After having this "organic" bread, I never liked the steamed bread made out of the commercial yeast on sale in the cities.

three beaten eggs. Five minutes later, wheat and egg gruel 鸡蛋面水 was done. The dinner was ready.

We always ate in the hall room on the small square table (see figure 3), for all three meals, every day. It was hard for me to adjust to eating meal by sitting (almost squatting) on the small chairs, which are close to the ground but not on the ground. This is not good for the digestion, I thought. But there aren't any tall chairs in Ayi's house, plus the food is served on the small table, which is low. When a banquet is held and the big square table is in use, Ayi will either borrow or rent long narrow benches from a village business, just as many other households do. Dinner time is short in winter, because sitting in the chair without moving, after eating it gets cold very soon. But this is still the most relaxed time after all the work that has been done during the day. From time to time Shaoli and her brother would come over, each with a bowl holding their dinner, sit on the bamboo reclining chair, and chat and eat with us. When I was new to eating there, I picked a chili pepper from the dinner dish and started to wonder where to dispose of it. Since my bowl was full of gruel, I put it on the tabletop. 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 tabletop, thus making it visible to others at the dinner table. Moreover, after dinner, the small square table was put back half-way under the big table, the small chairs were pulled against the wall, and Lihua swept the floor. Indeed, there is no need to worry about the floor, which, unlike the fancy waxed wooden floor in many urbanites' homes, is practical to clear.

After dinner, leftovers were dealt in an orderly manner: leftovers of 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 because that would be her own last task. She'd sweep the floor just before 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 mouse to slip in. The floor must be swept last because as everything else is cleaned, various other kinds of trash and dirt go down on to it.

It is also noticeable that most food in Shang village's everyday meal is cooked, people holding a common knowledge of the purifying importance of heat in cooking. Beyond the tight control over the quality of food that is actually eaten, now it is perceptible, that everyday life in the old-style house is full of fine distinctions of dirt and cleanliness, and a hierarchical conception of hygiene. This is particularly marked in the hall room, the room with the stronger ritual connotations that holds the formal heart of the family: in this room banquets are based, commensality takes place, and guests are entertained. Furthermore, the long narrow "table" signifies the symbolic hygiene of the family: The important things on it (the Goddess of Mercy, a.k.a. Guanyin, for example) are kept high and, as if on an altar, away from the low floor (dirty by definition) and the relatively lower table of everyday eating. At the same time, the modern "table" with its added-on cupboards signifies that the family has possessions or wealth, hence the need for cupboards built around the symbolic center of the altar table. It is significant

that the square banquet table is relatively high, only being put into use on important occasions (it is also notable that there aren't any taller benches or chairs that may fit the banquet table, for daily use).

More importantly, spatial purifications are embodied everywhere in the courtyard house: the kitchen and storage are located far from the latrine, the concrete/brick walk across the dirt courtyard keeps mud brought by whoever out of the house, the porcelain tiles over the cooking surfaces allow easy cleaning, the plastic sheets over the kneading machine keep food surfaces clean, and the "boundary" functions (between dirt and the self, between clean and dirty spaces) of the washstand are complexly practical and ritual. In particular, there is an obvious principle that dirt goes (or must be kept) down: food waste is dropped on the ground instead of on the table, the face basin is separate from 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).³⁶ Accordingly the well and the drainage trench used for washing and cleaning are near the front of the courtyard that is universally south, or down and low, so that the resulting mud will not be too close to the house.

IV. New House

As it got colder and colder in winter, living in Ayi's old-style house became more difficult, inconvenient and uncomfortable for me. Unlike other northerners who live in

³⁶ There are numerous works referring to this perspective. For Chinese rural villages in specific, see Knapp 1992, *Chinese Landscapes: The Village As Place*, University of Hawaii Press.

higher latitudes,³⁷ 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 Yangtze River, where the latitude is lower and the weather supposedly warmer in winter. There was no way for me to use 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 bed time, of course). In addition, as mentioned before, 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 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 didn't think I could move wearing so many layers. In January when Xiaojun, Ayi's son, was about to come home for his college winter break, I moved into village doctor Li Shu's new-style two-story house, where the big front room was used 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 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

³⁷ Although Henan people all consider themselves "northerners", a geographically large province, Henan covers a rather wide range of latitudes. Zhaozhou County for example, it is located in the south west of Henan, but also adjacent to Hubei Province, where people all consider themselves "southerners."

households had.³⁸ Li Shu's old house is located in his own natural village, South Li Manor 南李庄, where the land of their old courtyard house is inherited from his family as his private property, and it will be passed on to his offspring. Li Shu has been the village doctor since the 1970s and he was the head of the collective clinic before the decollectivization. Actually the village clinic continued to be a collective one till 1993, according to Li Shu. At that time the clinic was still in the old village committee courtyard, which took the location of the torn-down ancestral hall during the Cultural Revolution. After the clinic became privatized, Li Shu opened his own clinic in his old house, which is even farther from the village roads. Plus, South Li Manor is on the southern edge of Shang village. Many people complained about the inconvenience of coming to the clinic. Another reason for Li Shu to build the new house was that his son had gotten married in 2002. It has become an unwritten rule in the area that, the 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 expecting his grandson. The baby was born in the fall of 2004, shortly after the whole family moved into the new house. Though, for a while Li Shu and his wife had been going back and forth, sleeping in the old house at night and coming to the new house for the day. One reason was because his wife felt the new house was for

³⁸ The land can only be sold in the name of "use right 使用权 because nobody owns the land except for the state (though we do not know what will happen since in 2007 the People's Congress passed the law of private property). Even so, price of the housing land 宅基地 increases fast, especially after the "reduce-peasant-burden" 减负 policies since the new regime of Hu Jintao. Many have expressed their suspicion that to sell the land has become a new way to make profit for local officials, who nowadays cannot extort money in the name of all kinds of taxes any longer. There was a dispute while I was in Shang village, for example, between the village committee and a villager who was building his three-story house, about a charge of "rising fee" 升高费 newly established by the township office. The fee was explained to be for the reason of protecting the electric wires across the village. But most villagers felt this charge unfounded.

the young couple and she preferred to sleep in “her own” house. Also, according to her, 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 found out a deeper reason behind it, was the tension between Li Shu’s wife and the daughter-in-law, which I will discuss more in next chapter.



Figure 10: Li Shu’s old house and new house (the one with green door)

Most of the roadside land used to be the arable land that encircled the natural villages. Thus there are irrigation ditches, about 3 meters wide, along each side of the road. To build a roadside house connected to the main road, therefore, it is necessary to build a conduit underneath the path so as not to block the water flow. Usually the village committee assigns a member to enforce rules of this kind, including the distance from the house to the road, the depth limits of the house, and so forth. In the past people preferred to live away from the main roads out of consideration of safety and tranquility. With the economy getting more and more active, people’s desires have changed accordingly. The

charge for roadside land for housing 宅基地 is based on the numbers of the one-sized “shop-front room” 门面房, assuming that people want to build roadside houses to do business. The local standard size for two “shop-front rooms” is 7 meters width and 17 meters depth. Most people bought two-room size lot and some even bought three-room size lot; there’s no one room-size lot according to the villagers. To build a roadside house has become many villagers’ preferred goal, and it is a popular topic in everyday conversation. One convenient aspect of this standardization was that people could easily visualize the size of someone’s house. I often heard Shang villagers ask each other “how many rooms 几间,” meaning how large the house would be, instead of the literal rooms that the house would have. The two-room size lot cost 5,000 RMB before 2002; now the price has reached 8,000 RMB. Li Shu told me he was the very first one 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.³⁹ The price was much cheaper before 2000. A villager told me that his one-story 4-room house, built in 1991, cost him about 10,000 RMB. Meanwhile, of course, there are also many villagers who simply converted their own old-style houses into the new style without moving to the roadside and having to buy the expensive land. At the time when I was staying at Ayi’s, Shaoli’s brother decided to convert their deteriorated old house into a one-story new-style house using a big chunk of money that Shaoli’s fiancé had presented for the engagement.

Even before the year 2000, most new-style houses had continued to be one story since the early 1990s, when this form of development started to appeal to villagers. Now with

³⁹ As we shall see later, Li Shu was smart to be compliant with Zhishu, in which way he was able to undertake many small projects on his house that might have slightly violated some regulations. For example, by transforming his backyard into a living room he meanwhile enlarged the whole second floor of his house which now contains 3 more bedrooms in addition to the two at the upfront, on the top of his clinic. In the next chapter I will discuss more social relations and networking in Shang village.

more and more two and even three-story houses visible, Zhenrang, a Shang villager in his late 60s, said to me, “I was young when Shang village was liberated by the Communist Party. But I remember there was a cadre who told me that some day we peasants would enjoy a good life that would have “upstairs and downstairs, electric lamps and telephones 楼上楼下, 电灯电话”⁴⁰; in the past years whenever I went to cities, seeing the urbanites that had them, I would wonder when it would be our turn. It didn’t take long, now we’ve got them all!” Though, Zhenrang and his wife live in an old-style house.

Beyond the height difference, new-style houses look very much like each other, except for some decoration details such as archaized 仿古 eaves, depending on the owner’s interests and finances (see figure ?). As mentioned above, new-style houses are built of concrete and cement blocks and therefore have better insulation. The most obvious contrast to the old-style courtyard houses is the “shop front room(s)” of the new-style houses, which place the yard 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, i.e., the center of the house where activities such as meeting guests and eating meals take place. Many households moved the ritually important long narrow table from their old house into the front room of their new house, only to find that it could 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 orientation of the new houses, since they are required to face the

⁴⁰ Lu Duanfang has also described a same phrase in her discussion of “rural utopian dreams,” in which the city was always an object of comparison with its electricity, machinery and modern architecture that had not yet developed in the countryside in the collectivist era. 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. page 108-110.

roadside.⁴¹ 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 way to let the “table” face the main gate. Therefore it is usually put against a side wall. Kitchen and storage are now in the back as well. Here it is worthy to note, nevertheless, that despite of the changing living in new-style houses, people have been paying effort to maintain some old way of living, and the altar table is a salient example: no matter how awkward the position it now resides, the table remains an important piece of furniture.

Bedrooms are usually upstairs. In the case of the first one-story houses to be built in the 1990s, the front rooms are identical in size and divided by function into living room and bedroom(s). Many households have added extra bedrooms in the back simply by reducing the size of their backyard. 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 backdoor, transforming the entire back of the lot into a living room. The furniture in the living room is simple, too: A color TV sitting on the top of a TV cabinet, a wooden long reclining chair, a glass coffee table that is used as daily dinning table, the bamboo long reclining chair and several small chairs that are the same as the ones in Ayi’s house, and a single bed board used as shelf to hold cooking basins and pots. There is a sink with faucet in the other side of the room, closer to the clinic room. A two-tub washer stands beside the sink.

⁴¹ People do prefer a house with “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 the south even with money 有钱难买面朝南,” he sighed.



Figure 11: Li Shu's daughter-in-law, holding her son, in their living room

As a village doctor, Li Shu's family 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 no big difference between these two houses (see figure 10). For example, all the bedroom floors in Li Shu's house are installed with white porcelain tiles with decorative patterns; while his neighbor, as well as many other new houses in Shang village, has only cement floors. The most impressive distinction is the indoor plumbing in Li Shu's house. 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 many county-seat households.⁴²

As mentioned before, in new-style houses the kitchen nevertheless remains the same as those in the old-style courtyard houses, featuring a box-shaped stove fueled by dried wood and stalks. Li Shu's kitchen was between the stairs and the storage room adjacent to the back door. There were problems with the chimney, and the house was always full of smoke when cooking was underway. In my last visit to Shang village, in the fall of 2006, I found they ended up switching the kitchen with the storage room, at the cost of losing the traditional box-shaped stove, instead using both a coal stove and a liquefied natural gas stove. Soon thereafter I was told that they had built a shed outside the house beside the backdoor to hold a new box-shaped stove, just before the lunar New Year time. "Can't live without it," Li Shu said to me.

Not surprisingly, living at Li Shu's new house was more convenient; especially the indoor toilet made my life much easier since I did not have to squat in the cold winter wind any longer, as I had to endure when living at Ayi's. Also I could use an electric heater to keep me warm at night, when I was writing notes. However, soon I started to wonder where the waste water went, since there's no sewage system in the village. Li Shu took me to the front of his house and pointed out a small pit beside the pathway between the village road and his house.

⁴² Li Shu's first daughter took a job in a bank branch after she graduated from a local professional school specializing in financing. She is married and lives in the county seat.



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

The pit was connected to the north-south irrigation ditch alongside the road, which would eventually carry the waste water south into a river.⁴³ Although the water standing in the pit was greenish and right beside the main road and the clinic, people did not seem to mind. Most other households living in the new-style houses do not have the luxurious indoor plumbing. One reason is the expense of installing the system (about 1,000 RMB) and another is the cost of electricity by using the electric pump. Therefore most other new-style households still use the long iron handle to manually pump water out of the well. Unlike the old-style courtyard, many new households chose to build the latrine outside their backyard (see picture; one neighborhood went further to build a collective latrine in the lane). At Li Shu's next-door neighbor's house, the well is built in the far back against the wall of their backyard, and next to the kitchen; while to go to the dry latrine one has to step out of the backyard first and then go into a shed on the outside of

⁴³ This ditch doesn't go pass the big pit in the center of Shang village but goes straight south, alongside the main village road.

the back wall. This is where they also kept their chickens. Later on the neighbor too installed an indoor toilet for 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 they don't have any efficient sewage built underneath the house, even less than Li Shu's house.

Generally speaking, the same purification principles work all the same in the new-style houses, e.g. up-clean and down-dirty, as well as interior-clean and exterior-dirty, and near-clean and far-dirty, all in accordance with a perceptible hierarchy of hygienic configuration.⁴⁴ Even though washing is obviously easier in Li Shu's house, dirt there 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 visiting the clinic. Accordingly, two home-made mops out of used clothes, each with a long wooden handle, one upstairs and the other downstairs, not to be found at Ayi's, were frequently put into service at Li Shu's new house, especially when it rained and mud was inevitable. Furthermore, Li Shu's "advanced" indoor plumbing brings it to surface of the incompatible sewer system, i.e., no place for the waste to go but into ditches and canals outside the house. This in particular embodies a mismatch of the modernization process in countryside, and the resulting environmental crisis. In the following pages, I will focus on how the increasing of commodities, including new forms

⁴⁴ It is also worth noting that, at Li Shu's house the daily meals stay the same one-dish-for-all style with Ayi's, even though this household now had five members including Li Shu and his wife, his son and daughter-in-law, me the live-in guest, plus his youngest daughter in the township junior high school who comes home every other weekends, and his one-year-old grandson.

of packaging as well as new ideas of cleanliness are changing everyday life, and the resulting transformation of the village environment.

V. The uncanny trash

In this section, my discussion focuses on trash, or garbage. However fine the hygienic discriminations made in every household of Shang village, in both old and new-style houses, the trash problem remains salient outside the house in public areas. Trash is everywhere in the village, just as it is in the county seat, which I described in the opening pages of this chapter. Anyone walking on the main village road can see all kinds of trash spread along the roadside: plastic bags, packaging from various commodities, used toilet paper, discarded clothes, and much more. Now and then the same kind of trash can be seen in the ditch water as well. Occasionally in the ditches there were even dead domestic animals, such as piglets or inedible chickens that died of roup. The following anecdote is particularly telling about this incredible phenomenon.

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 with one arm akimbo and the other waving angrily about; a stream of curses flew from her mouth. She was furious, and her fury could be heard in the whole neighborhood. Only Lihua and Shaoli were standing close by; other neighbors seemed to have chosen to stay inside to avoid Ayi's biting tongue. Her anger had been sparked by a dead chicken that had been thrown near her gate the night before; it was lying on the small dirt path. This anonymous "polluting" act immediately enraged Ayi. Soon Lihua went inside to get ready to leave

for work,⁴⁵ while Ayi took a spade to pick up the chicken; walking to the main north-south road, she threw it into the ditch alongside. During the whole course of walking back and forth, she never stopped cursing, nor did she lower the volume. I was amazed by her outrage, even though on that occasion I could hardly understand her heavier-than-normal dialect in her extremely fast speech. I was bewildered, too, since, as a matter of fact, Ayi and Lihua had always dumped their trash just on the other side of the small dirt path, which was not far from the yard gate. The anonymous offender only needed to have gone a few steps further to throw the chicken on the usual dumping side. Why did Ayi make such a big fuss?



Figure 13: The dirt path outside Ayi's yard, and the pit that collects water from her drainage pipe

It turned out that trash “pollution” was not a main concern. Ayi was mad at this “immoral 缺德” act because of her own chickens, which she feared could be infected by some disease carried by the dead chicken. She meanwhile admitted that she could have

⁴⁵ Lihua goes to work in the early morning because kindergarten teachers are required to go with the school bus to pick up the kids from home at 7am.

buried that chicken instead of throwing it in the ditch, “but at least on that part of the main road there were not any households nearby,” Ayi justified herself. She was right; there was less likelihood that healthy chickens would come in contact with the dead chicken over by the main road. In any case, chickens were not supposed to come out of their courtyards any longer, because there had been rous from now and then around the village; it’s no longer considered safe to let chickens go freely about outside the houses. Where there were no houses, there would be no chickens. To raise chickens nowadays, then, is harder in new-style households, where there is only limited yard space. Li Shu’s neighbor, for example, kept her chickens penned up in the henhouse which was also the latrine. And Li Shu’s wife raised her chickens in a shed built on the flat rooftop.

How did people manage their trash? According to villagers, a trash problem in collective areas is a recent phenomenon. Shifa, who is in his sixties, made it clear to me when I asked him about the issues of 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 certain 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 10 to 20 years. Before the 1980s there weren’t even plastic buckets, all were made of wood. There wasn’t any trash in the past; all used things could be burned in the stove, used as fuel.

I too have seen that plastic bags are constantly brought into houses: everything purchased comes with a plastic bag. Even though villagers always bring a basket or a sack when they bike to the market village to get vegetables and other daily-life necessities, vendors are expected to provide a plastic bag, however flimsy. So do all the

regular stores. Plastic bags are everywhere in all kinds of markets, as in the cities, but the difference is that in the villages there is no service to dispose of them.

Despite some villagers' frugality and careful management, the omnipresence of trash is alarming. Besides plastic bags, another form of very visible trash in the village is all kinds of food packages, as Shifa noted above. In particular, snacks for kids always sell fast, according to the owners of village stores. In Shang village, as elsewhere in China, many young children have been left behind by parents who work as migrant laborers in cities for most of the year. The grandparents who take care of the kids are generally hesitant to decline their grandchildren's requests for treats, feeling sorry for them without their parents close by.⁴⁶ And the children, on buying these cheap snacks, immediately tear open the packages and litter the roads wherever they go.

In addition to the exploding numbers of packaged commodities available in the local market, agricultural technologies have, to a great degree, contributed to the trash problem in the countryside, especially the excessive use of chemical fertilizer and commercial animal feeds which, ironically, are often viewed as a sign of "modernization." With the intensive use of chemical fertilizers, the natural cycles connecting waste to agriculture output do not exist any longer. In Ayi's household, for example, vegetable trash is no

⁴⁶ Packaged commodities in village stores have been widely recognized as "junk food" in mass media all over China. For example, in a marginal area in Beijing, people also found all kinds of packaged foods which were oriented toward the school kids but without any method of quality control. See the following article issued in 2005: <http://news.163.com/05/0421/09/1HRPRMKE0001124T.html>. In my own experience conducting fieldwork, one thing that surprised me in terms 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 big cities, such as the Orion Korean chocolate pie, could be found in the 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 could hardly recognize, and the quality was suspect. Many manufactures manage to sell their low-quality products to the countryside without worrying about food safety, dumping literal "junk food" in the villages. The victims of this practice are rural kids whose grandparents usually have little idea of the world of commodities. See a report issued in June 2006, http://haochilao.net/food/2006/0602/content_864.htm

longer to be composted; kitchen waste is no longer fed to the pigs. Instead these discards are dumped out through the conduit in the front of the yard, and the human waste in the dry latrine has to be piled up at the back of the yard for months before it is eventually transported to the land and used as organic fertilizer.

The new-style houses, especially the ones built by the road, don't even have a space for the human waste but dump it in ditches or small pits. 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 ampules. But I saw none during the five months of my stay at Li Shu's. When medical waste needs to be disposed of, it is usually divided into two piles: the flammable items are burned outside the house in a nearby open area; and the inflammable ones, empty ampules and medicine bottles for example, are buried next to the waste pit beside their front yard.

The waste pollution situation was even worse in the busy Tonglu market village. In a conversation with Dr. Sun, a locally renowned senior doctor who now runs a private clinic on Tonglu Street, I was told that residents on his street have been dumping their trash, including human excrement, in plastic bags on the street or in the main north-south township ditch. The ditches alongside the main road today are polluted also because more and more land is used to build houses. They are not only full of all kinds of trash, but also commonly used to mix plaster for house building. People would dam a waterway near the construction site so as to make a plaster mixing pit.



Figure 14: The ditch along the main road

People know very well that the hygienic condition of their village is degrading.

According to Shifa, weisheng (hygiene) in Shang village was better in the 1980s. He said,

Why was weisheng better in the past? When we just started the land distribution [household responsibility system] there was not much fertilizer available. Everyone had to get up before the dawn [to gather waste]. Some would even start the night before, using a flashlight to collect the manure, from either the pigsty or 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 built it has to take out the manure, but there's nowhere to put it [because everyone is using fertilizer on their land]. Waste is piled up everywhere now. In the past, 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.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Here Shifa referred to the time of the Great Leap Forward when all the trees in Shang village were felled to fuel the big village furnace built for steel-making. People said that at that time the village looked bare without trees to hide the then prevailing thatched-roof mud houses.

I was expecting Shifa to comment on issues such as people do not care about the public area any longer, in contrast to the collectivist era. But it seemed to him the point at issue was chemical fertilizer. Shifa's commentary on the village environment reveals an interesting perception of the past in terms of private-public relationship. For Shifa and many villagers, Shang village's common space was cleaner then because most trash was put to use. That is, scarcities intrinsic to the planned economy worked against the production of trash. Relatively tidy conditions had little to do with any consideration for "the public" environment. Nonetheless, talking about the village before 1980s, few villagers thought that the environment was better then, because, 1) all trees were felled to support industrialization; 2) all houses were made from thatch and mud. Of course, it was less trashy, everyone agreed. But they don't want that kind of cleanliness. Whenever I tried to elicit some yearning for the "clean" Shang village of the past I have always failed. To villagers this idea was as ridiculous as a starving person preferring clothing to food 死要面子活受罪.⁴⁸ After all, life in the past had imprinted hunger and scarcity in most villagers' memories. Even Shaoli in her 20s remembers the grey bread 灰馍 of her childhood. Under Deng Xiaoping's ultimate pragmatism, in which it is axiomatic that everything is determined by the economic base, Shang villagers are authorized to worry first about their stomachs, and second about the money in their pockets.

According to villagers, the low output levels in the past were due to the scarce supply of chemical fertilizers.⁴⁹ Recalling the collectivist era, many villagers do not think the

⁴⁸ For the collective memory of hunger, see Farquhar 2002, *Appetites: food and sex in post-socialist China*, especially Chapter Two and Three, and Yue 1999, *The Mouth That Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern China*.

⁴⁹ I have been told many times how the production teams strategized to get more fertilizer for the whole team's benefit, and how they had gone to the county seat to transport the unwanted mud-ash or clay from a construction site, meanwhile feeling envy of the county-seat residents' easier life. They figured this

lower output of local agriculture was due to low “enthusiasm for labor” often mentioned in connection with the so called “big-pot 大锅饭” collectivist system – “Considering that our whole life depended on the land, how could we not want to labor?” one asked me.⁵⁰ As Li Shu commented once, “at that [collectivist] time the major issue for us was to dress warmly and eat our fill 温饱, [we had so little] due to the shortage of chemical fertilizers. The average output of wheat was only 75 to 100 kg per *mu*, and most of it we had to handover to the collective 交公粮. Now 250-300 kg per *mu* is considered low without having to handover any grain to the state 不用给国家交粮.”

Soon after the planned economy was liberalized, mainly the agricultural sector in 1980s, supplies of chemical fertilizers have increased dramatically. So has the use of them. According to Elizabeth Economy, in general “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.”⁵¹ In Shang village, from my own observations, in planting winter wheat people would use at least 100kg of chemical fertilizers per *mu*.⁵²

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 only with wheat flour unmixed with either sweet potato starch or mung bean paste.

⁵⁰ Previously a production team leader of Team Four, Shifa proudly told me that thanks to his “selfless” hardwork, his team members worked harder than other teams. As a result they always harvested more grain than other teams. Some people might have taken advantage of a big group to work less. But in general, as Shifa told me plainly, everyone shared the consensus that “If you don’t work, you don’t eat 不干就得吃”, especially at that time when scarcity was the overriding theme of everyday life. A well accepted novel published in 1988, *An Ordinary World* 平凡的世界 by Lu Yao 路遥, convincingly depicts village life in northwest China before and after the historic Third Plenum 三中全会 at the end of 1978. This was a watershed that demarcated the beginning of Deng’s “reform and open up 改革开放” policy.

⁵¹ See Elizabeth C. Economy 2004. *The river runs black: the environmental challenge to China's future*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. This work provides a useful overview of China’s environmental policy, economic development in environmental aspects, and China’s economic conditions.

⁵² There are at least two different kinds involved: one is mainly composed of diammonium phosphate 复合肥 and the other is nitrogenous 氮肥.

On the wall of the flour mill in Shang village is painted in huge characters “To Get Rich is Glorious 致富光荣, To Be Poor is Shameful 贫穷可耻.” To gain high grain yields, people have gradually come to care less about sustainable growth, instead trying to farm their small plots of land very intensively. I was told that in the collectivist era, each year the production teams used to leave some land fallow. But now every piece of arable land is in use all year round, further degrading the already depleted fertility of the land.⁵³

VI. Uncanny modernization

The central place of chemical fertilizers in Shang village agriculture resonates with Akhil Gupta’s discussion of Alipur farmers in western Uttar Pradesh, India, who also recognized the unprecedented life change brought by chemical fertilizers and expressed their ambivalence about this change. While being concerned with the defect that chemical fertilizers have brought to the soil and the grain, they were also satisfied with the high yield.⁵⁴ Even the language Shang villagers employed was similar. They spoke, for example, of the greater “heat” brought by chemical fertilizers compared to organic manure. They said that chemical fertilizer makes the plants grow faster but also damages

⁵³ 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). According to a research conducted by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, in 2003 the Chinese average use of chemical fertilizers was 464.5 kg per acre, more than a double of the developed countries’ upper limit of safe application, which is 225 kg per acre; and the use of pesticide was 15 kg per acre, over two times of the developed countries’ standard, and among the pesticide in use, the highly poisonous pesticide occupies 70 percent. See <http://www.cas.cn/html/Dir/2006/07/24/14/25/36.htm> E. Economy has made an 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).

⁵⁴ See *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*, 1998, Duke University Press, esp. Chapter Four: “Indigenous” Knowledges: Ecology, pp. 234-290. Gupta’s study stands out as a nuanced understanding of agriculture in the making of a modern nation-state, which connects globalization, postcoloniality and the local articulations through ethnographic methods.

the strength of the soil; organic manure, on the other hand, was understood to impart strength to the soil (Ref. Gupta 1998: 211-212). However, like the Alipur farmers, Shang villagers keep using chemical fertilizer as much as they can. One reason, it seems, is that chemical fertilizers and pesticides save much labor, an important consideration given that the whole village is now to a certain extent a “hollow village 空心村.” This term refers to the fact that residents are mostly either elderly or school-age and below. People always said that now it’s *easy* to plant crops: you don’t have to get up early to collect manure (thanks to the chemical fertilizer), don’t have to hoe up weeds (thanks to the herbicide), don’t have to harvest the wheat by hand (thanks to the combine harvester that come every year run 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 about five months at the most, approximately from the fifth to the tenth lunar month.⁵⁵

The comfort brought by technology is palpable; villagers often said to me “people today live such a life of ease 现在的人美呵,” approvingly. Invariably they followed this statement with: “[who] have also become more and more lazy 也越来越懒了,” disapprovingly. This is the most common reply to my question of the excessive use of chemical fertilizer, given their knowledge of the harm chemical fertilizer does to the soil. Li Shu once told me, jokingly, that the technician from the township office had called today’s villagers “soil robbers 地匪.” Shang villagers, though they know the soil has been “hardened 土壤板结” and is “losing strength 地力不足,” 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:

⁵⁵ Approximately from late May to early November, when people are engaged with harvesting winter wheat, planting fall crops 秋庄稼 such as peanut, soy bean, and sesame, and then harvesting the fall crops and planting winter wheat for the next year.

3), Shang villagers' heavy reliance on chemical fertilizer has much to do with their deepened dependence on the cash economy⁵⁶ or, really, consumption that has been promoted by both the market and the government.⁵⁷ In lieu of Gupta's term of "postcolonial developments", I think of the rural Chinese environmental conditions that I witnessed in my fieldwork, as "uncanny modernization."

Freud writes that the 'un' in uncanny makes the familiar foreign, such that the familiar becomes the "image or phantom that continually resists any of our attempts to disconnect from it."⁵⁸ In the context of this chapter, we can say that the referent of "our" here includes self-identified urbanites at large or the ones that "have-been-modern", like my friends in the Zhaozhou county seat. When they described to me the "unbearable" rural hygienic conditions, they were attempting to disconnect themselves from the stigmatized "dirty" countryside, yet they could not avoid an increasingly dirty environment in their own town. For them, dirtiness always resides somewhere else, like the dirty peasants.

Dead chickens in irrigation ditches and human waste in plastic bags piled beside the Tonglu Street, are grotesque and reminders of the uncanny, for both urban and rural folks. Walking on the village road, especially in the winter time when there's no grass or shrubbery to hide the trash, scattered all over the roadside slopes and ditches, was not pleasant. This undesirable state of affairs was recognized by Shang villagers. One

⁵⁶ "Everything needs money 什么都要钱" was villagers' common phrase that, interestingly, was also *the* feature (and deficiency) they conceived of urban life in contrast to their own.

⁵⁷ The primary feature of the highly-praised new policy of "building a new socialist countryside," issued in 2006, was an unprecedented waiver of the agricultural tax, intending to promote rural consumption so as to "pull" the national economy 拉动经济.

⁵⁸ See *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. XVII, trans. James Strachey, London, 1953, p. 241.

commented to me, “now our houses are better, but the environment is worse 房子比以前好, 环境没以前好.” Urban or rural, trash is being produced all the time, everywhere, kept invisible or visible. As I have shown earlier, in Shang village every detail of everyday life demonstrates residents’ fine discriminations about hygiene. They are by no means “less” clean than urbanites, including me. It also demonstrates that it is possible for residents of the village to identify as urban, partly through their hygienic practices, like Li Shu did in his new house.

Meanwhile, the trash heaps on the streets of the county seat uncannily display that urban folks “have never been modern” either, if, for example, to compare Zhaozhou with Tianjin, the big Chinese city discussed by 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.⁵⁹ While all of these means are currently unavailable in most rural villages, ironically, the lack of maintenance in rural villages perpetuates the persisting perception that “peasants are dirty”.

As a matter of fact, if one looks into historical inquiries, Europe was a dirty place until recently, which was indicated in the seventeenth century by Dutch amazement about the clean habits of the Africans of the Guinea (Wear 1993). Spitting is another example. Elias has eloquently indicated in his analysis of the history of manners, that the mores about spitting had experienced a radical reverse among the nobler classes of Europeans from

⁵⁹ Taking the famous Suzhou River in Shanghai for example, Suzhou River was once heavily polluted by both industrial waste water and sewage since 1920s. Shanghai municipal government started to treat the river in 1988; till 2005, 11 billion RMB has been spent in 17 years and the third phase of the treating 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. Ref. http://www.ycwb.com/gb/content/2005-07/19/content_943986.htm

the need *for* it to the more or less complete elimination of *the need*.⁶⁰ According to Elias, the feeling of revulsion is more a product of broad socio-historical processes than it is natural; or, in the best analysis, it is both (1997: 125-131). Like wise, 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” (1997: 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 19th century that the strong social, moral, and racial as well as physical components have been invested in modern hygiene regimes.⁶¹ These changes converged with global-scale colonization in the early 20th 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

⁶⁰ According to Elias, for example, in 1729, it was recorded in a manners-guiding book 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 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 that, “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). And 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 has driven the 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 of 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 Warwick 2006, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

This important ambiguity is heightened in the Chinese translation of hygiene, or weisheng 卫生 in early 20th century language reform, introduced briefly in the opening of this chapter. Rogaski has artfully illustrated an overdetermined transformation of the Chinese understanding of hygiene, the process of which she codes “hygienic modernity,” and makes it clear that this hygienic modernity was at first foreign (and imperial), and then urban (and elitist). For example, in her anatomy of the Tianjin city when it was a treaty port in the 1910s, Rogaski describes:

[Foreign] concessions labored mightily to eliminate from their streets any signs of wastes, waters, or the men who carried them. Through the 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. (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 (301).

In other words, in embracing 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 2005: 168). Reducing all the hierarchical social, financial, and colonial components into the hygiene regimes, for the urban elites weisheng was an ultimate global good (Rogaski 2005: 252). But the scale of “global” existed only in the head of those elites and imperialists alike because, at that time in

Europe, as Latour has clearly stated, it was also “a matter of dispute” that whether the rise of the standard of living was related to the decline of the infectious diseases (1988: 144).

As a matter of fact, the phenomenon of “modernization indoors, disorder outdoors 室内现代化, 室外脏乱差”⁶³ is prevalent all over rural China. A recent article published in December 2007 states,

*In a spot check conducted by the Chinese Ministry of Construction in 2005, among 74 villages all over China, 96 % have no drainage and sewage disposal system, 89% have no garbage dump, nor do they have any specially-assigned person in charge of the garbage collecting and disposal.*⁶⁴

The lacking of any infrastructure to dispose trash is core to the rural environmental problem. What is at stake here is the stark contrast in the state’s investment in urban and rural areas for environmental protection. According to Pan Yue, vice director of the State Environmental Protection Administration of China, in 2004 there was almost zero investment from the state to improve rural environment (Pan 2004).⁶⁵ Meanwhile every year there are 120 million tons of domestic trash piled up and over 25 million tons of sewage released directly in open areas of Chinese countryside, according to the state statistics⁶⁶. On the other hand, the urban environment has been improved at the cost of the rural environment, such as moving out all the heavy polluting industry to the

⁶³ This quote is from a news report in 2005 on rural environmental conditions in Jiangsu and Zhejiang Province, which are among the wealthiest provinces on the eastern coast. A general description is entitled “villages in trash 垃圾里的村庄.” See <http://www.southcn.com/news/china/todaycn/200508300471.htm>

⁶⁴ 据建设部 2005 年对全国 74 个村的抽样调查, 96% 的村庄没有排水沟渠和污水处理系统, 89% 的村庄将垃圾堆放在房前屋后、坑边路旁甚至水源地、泄洪道、村内外池塘, 无人负责垃圾收集与处理。See Wei and Yang, 2007, “The Types, Status quo, and Consequences of Pollution in Rural China 中国农村环境污染的类型、现状与后果,” retrieved from http://www.agri.gov.cn/JJPS/t20071127_928344.htm on 01-01-2008.

⁶⁵ 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. Website access: <http://www.eedu.org.cn/Article/epedu/greeneyes/200410/2884.html>

⁶⁶ See a 2006 news report on the 10th National People’s Congress, http://www.gov.cn/ztl/2006-03/08/content_222382.htm

countryside, interception to improve urban water system while directing the industrial pollution to the suburban areas, and the landfill producing secondary pollution to the countryside, and so on. As Pan has pointed out, the environmental issues are, fundamentally, issues about social justice.

As hygienic conditions degrade in the villages, so do public health services. Research has shown a direct connection between the degrading environment and rural health. In a 2006 report issued in *Science Times*, a journal sponsored by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the authors warned that some epidemics that were eliminated in the past, such as malaria, encephalitis B, cholera, and schistosomiasis have come back in the countryside.⁶⁷ According to Dr. Sun, in comparison to the Maoist era, the township hospital has done nothing about epidemic prevention. “Now they only come to ask for money [an administration fee] from us [practicing doctors], so as to keep their business afloat,” he said.⁶⁸ While in the Maoist era, by contrast, “inspections were conducted every few days. The latrines could not have any maggots, and the dining halls had to be free of flies 无蝇食堂”. In terms of epidemic prevention, vaccination remains a major task

⁶⁷ According to the article, in 2006 regions with schistosomiasis infections include 434 counties of 12 provinces in south China, with 840 thousand patients out of a total population of over 66 million, almost all of whom were peasants. In addition, China now has about five-million active tuberculosis patients, among which 80 percent are from the countryside. See <http://www.cas.cn/html/Dir/2006/07/24/14/25/36.htm>

⁶⁸ The time when I conducted my fieldwork in 2005-2006, the administration fee was 60 RMB every month for each practicing doctor. From time to time, there were some other added fees such as “designation fee” 指定费 for the village clinics who were recently designated as part of the “New Style Rural Co-operative Medical System.” Each village can only have one clinic designated, and doctors were competing for this position with a hope that in future they may be included in the state system and paid by salaries 领国家工资. On the other hand, the township hospital was on the verge of bankruptcy due to lack of support from the county. Villagers prefer to go to smaller clinics instead of the hospital because, one, it requires time and effort to go to the township hospital which is farther away; two, the fees they charge are the same. Moreover, one can buy medicine on credit 赊账 in village clinics but cannot do so in the hospital because the latter, unlike private clinics run by local practitioners, is officially run; three, convenient transportation has enabled patients to go to the county seat to pursue a better treatment when it’s needed. Therefore, the main income of the township hospitals has been the administration fees collected from private clinics, including village clinics. And most doctors in the township hospital ran their own clinics on the side while receiving hospital salaries.

of the township health office in the hospital, but public sanitation jobs have disappeared from its task list. Even the “Committee of Patriotic Hygiene Campaign 爱国卫生运动委员会”, a branch of the county Bureau of Health that is supposedly in charge of the public sanitation, has ceased to function since the early 1990s due to the shortage of county finance.⁶⁹ Although most doctors agreed that in the reform-era there has been improvement in diet and living conditions, and, more importantly, with the continuing state emphasis on inoculation in this area there hasn’t been an eruption of epidemics for years, there is nevertheless an increasing number of patients with tuberculosis and even malaria, a disease announced to be eradicated in 1998 by the County Weisheng Bureau after over 30 years of epidemic control efforts.

Furthermore, as many scholars have studied, the health issue brought on by the environmental pollution runs even deeper, intertwined with domestic environment (housing), poverty (access to medical care), and fluctuation in socioeconomic status (move/return to poverty due to the illness 因病致贫/返贫). According to a document issued by National Development and Reform Commission in 2006, each year China has about 10 million rural people who “move/return to poverty due to the illness”因病致贫/返贫.⁷⁰ In a phone conversation with Li Shu, after I had left Shang Village, he told me Wendian, the village chief, recently passed away due to his lung cancer. There are now 13 cancer patients out of 728 households in Shang Village.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Personal interview with Mr. Li, a previous official of the Committee of Patriotic Hygiene Campaign of Zhaozhou Bureau of Health, March 30, 2006.

⁷⁰ According to a document issued by National Development and Reform Commission in 2006, each year China’s has about 10 million rural population who “move/return to poverty due to the illness”因病致贫/返贫. Ref. <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/other/news/2006/09-05/785081.shtml>

⁷¹ The total population of Shang Village is 3,240, among which there are 1,300 villagers who have gone out to work as migrant laborers.

Shang people have their acute understanding of health in terms of the environment, concerning food and hygiene in particular. One morning Ayi made a typical local breakfast: sweet potatoes boiled in wheat flour gruel 红薯面水. While sitting by the table eating our delicious breakfast, Ayi sighed that nowadays it's rare to get a sweet potato that is as sweet or as big as before, because the prevalent use of chemical fertilizer has made the soil "thin 薄" [meaning weak]. Then she turned to a general comment on the quality of food today,

Nowadays you see endless advertisements about treating disease. [It seems] there has been a lot of high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Seeing these ads always upsets me. How can you explain that in the past when we had nothing to eat but sweet potatoes, we were always hungry but never had these many diseases? The wheat flour we are eating now is from my own land, dried by myself and sent directly to the mill here. So you see it's not as white as the ones sold in the cities, which have been treated with phosphorus [for whitening] because the wheat had grown moldy after years of storage. You would never know if they have sold you the flour with phosphorus. That's why there are so many diseases now.

This was news to me. Perhaps Ayi was exaggerating, but her comments resonate with those of Yujie at the opening of this chapter, in terms of the question of food quality and health. Furthermore, this is a commentary on the urban life, which is, according to Ayi, dangerous to health. She made me think of my observations at the village food oil processing mill, a place I had not considered to be very "hygienic." This is a very simple small mill with an engine that runs on diesel fuel. Outside the mill there is a huge stove for frying peanuts and sesame seeds, fueled by dried wood which fills the air with smoke since there is no chimney. However, villagers go there with their own peanuts and sesame seeds, all picked carefully at home, with shells removed and moldy nuts and seeds discarded. And they literally see their own peanuts turned into oil. Isn't this even better than the oils on sale at the supermarket, shining on the shelves with a look of being

perfectly clean and (even) fancy in all kinds of pretty packages? Who knows what kind of process has produced them?

Although there has been a significant increase in household income, Shang villagers' life style remains simple, much simpler than that of urbanites. The garbage generated in the village is much less than any urban space. Ayi, like many other Shang people, still tended to burn any plastic bags that would not be re-used. But many plastic packages aren't easy to burn in the stove, such as shampoo and soy sauce containers, not to mention the broken plastic basins or buckets. There are a couple of private businesses on the market street that recycle bottles and the like, and this service to a certain degree reduces the growing amount of trash in public places (see figure 15). Ayi, a careful housekeeper, usually kept most used glass and plastic bottles in a corner of the dry latrine and periodically sold them to the private recycling businesses. I also noted quite a few repair shops on the market street; villagers often take their broken pots, basins, and buckets to have them mended. Before such utensils are completely worn out, few would replace them with new ones. As a matter of fact, I was often impressed by people's way of making use of what seemed to me to be waste. Village banqueting businesses, for example, which rented out tables, benches, and tableware to the hosting household for serving large numbers of guests. The rented tableware they provided was generally held in a huge black rubber basin, which turned out to be made from a used tire! People had simply carved the tire into a level basin with a pair of handles on the side to make it easy to carry around.



Figure 15: Village recycling business

Indeed, the standard of hygiene is practically local and contextual. And the urban-rural distinction is mobile and relative, and ultimately imaginary. Households in Shang village have nowhere to put their garbage except beside or behind the back of their houses. Without facilities or personnel to process trash, burning or burying remain the basic strategies to keep the amount of everyday trash at a lower level. As time goes on, these traditional methods nevertheless prove unable to keep up with the increasing trash-generating practices. Meanwhile, the universalized imagination of urban-clean and rural-dirty persists stubbornly in people's minds, whether they live in a village or a town. "In reality," Freud remarks, the uncanny is "nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old – established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression." For Shang village in particular (and indeed, rural China in general), the recent problem of the excessive production of trash and the non-disposal of garbage exposes a fundamental question of so-called modernization, one

which is repressed in only some urban settings on a global scale. As philosopher John Scanlan has made it clear, “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).⁷²

The privatization of cleanliness and the recent trash problem in public areas, and its relationship to the idea of the “dirty” peasant, is complex.⁷³ Ayi removes the dead, possibly diseased, chicken to a public space owned and managed by no one.⁷⁴ This act is commonly identified by many as a reform-era shift in the relation between private and public. Some have gone so far as to denounce the (so-called) *revived* character of Chinese peasants, i.e., a selfishness that was repressed in the collectivist era but restored post collective, as “immoral” (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.

⁷² There are many other studies on the role of garbage/trash in the historical transformation of cities all over the world, especially the old metropolises like London, Paris, and New York City, only to name a few: *The Foul and the Fragrant*, by Alan Corbin, *Waste and Want*, by Susan Strasser, *Rubbish Theory*, by Michael Thompson, and *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*, by William Rathje and Cullen Murphy.

⁷³ There has been increasing complaints of the heavy pollution in the countryside of more industrialized east coastal area such as Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Fujian and Guangdong 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. See Figure 18 in Chapter Two. For a general information on the rural environment in Jiangsu and Zhejiang province, ref. http://www.jsacd.gov.cn/news/echo_article.php?id=6018&type=news

⁷⁴ Ironically, in major Chinese cities, as Joshua Goldstein indicates in his study of the migrant laborers who come to cities to glean and recycle urban trash, the public spaces for trash are under fierce competition between refuse scavengers. See Goldstein 2006, “The Remains of the Everyday: One Hundred Years of Recycling in Beijing,” in *Everyday Modernity in China*, eds. Madeleine Yue Dong and Joshua L. Goldstein, pp. 260-302, Seattle & London: University of Washington Press.

Chapter 2: Immanent Sociality: open-ended belonging

In the previous chapter I illustrated the carefully tended cleanliness inside private homes, and argued that trash in public areas of the village is one, among many, consequence of the uneven modernization efforts undertaken by the state in urban and rural areas, in this case demonstrated by the lack of infrastructure in villages. 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 among urban intellectuals another typical criticism of “Chinese peasants” as being “selfish,” and “lacking a sense of the collective 缺乏集体意识”.¹ In the case of Shang village, as I described in last chapter, Ayi’s action of throwing the dead chicken into the ditch, a place owned and managed by no one, does on the surface seem to support this perception that villagers have become selfish under the present system of “household

¹Besides the common criticism from major media outlets such as People’s Daily and Xinhua News Agency of villagers as “petit peasants” being “a sheet of loose sand,” quite a few others consider the socio-political influences on the “changing ethics in rural society,” focusing namely on the process of modernization and especially a market economy that have produced individualistic, selfish peasants that are indifferent to collective affairs. See a township party secretary’s suggestion on cultivating ‘new peasants’ <http://www.ymdj.gov.cn/wenzhangzx/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=89> . Zhishu of Shang Village shares a similar concern as a grass roots official, which I will address in Chapter Three. Many intellectuals, despite their more careful stance, also publicly express their undertaking of Chinese villagers as being unable to organize on their own and in need of external “help” in order to form, for example, a collective co-op. See an interview of Professor He Huili, a well-known activist rural sociologist who has led the building of a few cooperative agencies in Lankao County, Henan Province: <http://www.wyzxwyzx.com/Article/Class16/200708/22125.html> Note in this interview He chose to use “petit peasants” to identify the local villagers.

responsibility,” especially when compared to a presumably more communal spirit during the collectivist era.²

However my field experience persuaded me that Shang villagers’ life, far from selfish or “lacking a sense of 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. To a great degree, village sociality is based upon a “broad familism”³ in Shang village or, more generally, a sense of communalism that stems from locality. The fact of having lived together in the same place for a long period of time provides the most obvious foundation for 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 the changing social relations in the village, especially family relations. The two forms of relationship, family ties and community ties are constantly interwoven into villagers’ everyday life and conversation. In fact, throughout my description and discussion it may prove impossible to distinctly separate them into different domains. In a certain sense this inseparability of kith and kin demonstrates that villagers have always lived interdependently and continue to do so, and, as I will show in this chapter, this way of coordinated (and coordinating)

² Some researchers have gone even further decrying, “the crisis of ethics in rural society 农村社会的伦理性危机,” a claim which has been widely accepted in Chinese academic discourses about the rural society. See <http://www.snzg.cn/article/show.php?itemid-8249/page-1.html>

³ This term was first brought up in 1990s when many Chinese scholars favored the concept of “neo-collectivism 新集体主义,” See 《90年代思想文选》 (*Collections of the Thoughts in the 1990s*), edited by 罗岗 Luo Gang, 倪文尖 Ni Wenjian, especially “The Neo-collectivism and Rural Modernization” by 王颖 Wang Ying. Wang argues that the “broadened familism 泛家族文化” is “the socio-cultural foundation of China’s rural modernization” (page 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 21st century) negative uses of the term.

living is “the effective condition of collective change (open-ended belonging)” (Massumi 2002: 77).⁴

My discussion in this chapter also aims to engage the prevailing discourse that sees a *lack*, on the part of Chinese peasants, of a sense of the collective or of any capacity to organize by themselves.⁵ I will argue that village sociality is unformalized but not unorganized. That is to say, social relations are non-formally ordered on a plane of immanence,⁶ relations are constantly being constituted and habituses are being formed though not through formal regulations. Village sociality is organized through long-constituted relations and already formed habituses, however contingent and changeable these may be. With regard to discourses on “*peasants*’” lack, I argue that a recent scholarly refusal to recognize village sociality can be traced to the informality of village ties which tend to exist, or 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. 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 in another way, what they “lack” is formalizing their actions in a normalized discourse. In health services there are always forms of illness that are not recognizable or won’t influence the laboring capacity. They do, however, directly relate to villagers’ everyday activities. Examples are

⁴ Brian Massumi, “The Political Economy of Belonging,” in *Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation, Post-contemporary interventions*. 2002. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 68-88.

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 Countryside is to construct rural organizations 组织建设,” because peasants are now “scattered 分散的” due to the individual economy. See <http://www.snzg.cn/article/show.php?itemid-7723/page-1.html>

⁶ This reference 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.

toothaches or upset stomachs; these remain a usual topic, especially when Shang villagers gather to talk at the village clinic, along with folk prescriptions to treat illnesses that diverge from the standardized practices of those 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, and much more. All these practices would not be of any interest to the governing state, but they are immanent in everyday life. In fact, during the land reform era of the 1950s, there were reports 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 to visit friends and relatives. In addition to their collective farming responsibilities, young men were continually being assigned to labor at construction sites far from their village and family; and everyone was required to attend various mandatory political mobilizations 政治运动, most of which took the form of mass meetings. “In the past it was all about mobilizations and meetings 过去就是运动多、会多,” I was told, “one after the other 一个接着一个” and “we got only five days (during the Chinese New Year) to visit our relatives and friends out of the whole 365 day year 一年 365 天只得 5 天走亲访友.” Understandably, those five

⁷ In my archival research in the County Archive, I noted a local report from Zhaoying Township office – then known as “the People’s Commune of Zhaoying” – that complained about Shang villagers neglecting to advocate the class struggle: villagers still talked to the landlords and rich peasants, and even laughed together with them, because of their kinship ties. In the report, such behavior was considered disruptive to the solidarity of the collectivist system. I will discuss more of this interesting historical story later in Conclusion: Discerning the cultural.

days were very important to villagers.⁸ Village sociality never ceased coexistence 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 which, though prevalent, can find no place in official discourse.

In what follows, I will first discuss a recent debate among Chinese intellectuals on the “Xiaogang village paradox.” The perceived paradox is that villagers of Xiaogang, Anhui Province *collectively* initiated the practice of Household Responsibility in 1978 in a move that *decollectivized* their previously strong collectivist system. Through this discussion I hope to make clear that what I refer to as village sociality is not to be confused with a “collectivist society” endorsed by the hegemonic discourse that concerns governing. It is instead a tacit, intrinsic, and taken-for-granted practice that is specific to a society or community where people grow up and live together. Here the Deleuzian idea of “the plane of immanence”⁹ may help us to imagine the forces of immanence in a three-dimensional space with depth, instead of a two-dimensional flat surface (1994: 39),¹⁰ so

⁸ See villagers' memories of how they managed to keep their Spring Festival customs during the collectivist era in Conclusion: Discerning the cultural.

⁹ In *What Is Philosophy*, the idea of “the plane of immanence” is developed to account for problems that concern philosophy and the history of philosophy, mainly the ongoing question of “transcendent”. 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 in distinguishing village sociality from hegemonic formal regulations without losing sight of the communication between the two, as well in highlighting the features of village sociality as being immanent. Two useful sources for understanding the Deleuzian concept of immanence are Osborne and Rose's historical analysis of “Governing the City”, and Brian Massumi's explication of “The Political Economy of Belonging”. See Osborne, Thomas and Nikolas Rose. 1998. *Governing Cities*. In *Governing Cities: Liberalism, Neoliberalism, Advanced Liberalism*, edited by E. Isin, North York: York University, and Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: movement, affect, sensation, Post-contemporary interventions*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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” (39). And, “we can and must

as 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* 差序格局, which is translated as "differential mode of association" (Fei 1992), also explains the relational ethics that in rural social networks "the boundary between the public and private spheres is relative" (68). As Deleuze and Guattari have maintained, "on the plane of immanence we are always and already on the absolute horizon" that is in "infinite movement" (38). In other words, village sociality is always there but its forms of practice keep changing and interacting with other forms of practices, such as formal regulations, which in the mean time contribute to the endless becoming of an ungraspable social, a.k.a. the immanent sociality.

Seeking in what follows to preserve a sense of this Deleuzian immanence, I will describe and interpret some expressions of village sociality in Shang villagers' everyday life. I will first discuss village society as "a society of familiars," in contrast to the urban "society of strangers". Then I will describe some aspects of mundane village social life, including a long afternoon chat that I had with several villagers, so as to reveal some of the strong community ties among Shang people. I will also illustrate the art of social relations by discussing some ways in which villagers handle everyday conflicts or inconveniences. Then I will return to Ayi's action of throwing the dead chicken into the ditch, questioning whether we must still see this as "selfish" behavior?

In the last two sections I will characterize the process of open-ended belonging, arguing that village sociality is in "infinite movement" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). I

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" (50).

¹¹ "The plane of immanence is *interleaved*" (50) and "every plane is not only interleaved but holed, letting through the fogs that surround it" (51).

will consider some new forms of family relations and certain transformations in habits and practices of marrying, childcare, and village networking. There is no doubt that labor migration has had a great impact on village life, altering the horizons of belonging. So I will also discuss the communal life of the young villagers who work in cities, and their ways of continuing village ties in faraway places. In this section, how the village migrants act to produce and reproduce their senses of belonging to their home village will serve as my focus. The unformalized society of Zhaozhou “fellow countrymen” (同乡 or townfolk) (and women) in Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province, will figure importantly here.

To conclude this chapter, I will discuss the most obvious change in Shang village, that of housing. Nowadays young couples live in new-style houses while their parents typically stay in old houses. Nevertheless, instead of assuming that this phenomenon signifies what Yunxiang Yan has denounced as “the rise of the uncivil individual, who emphasizes the right to pursue personal interests yet ignores his or her moral obligations to the public and other individuals” (Yan 2003: 217), Shang villagers do not feel that family and communal life are falling apart. I will suggest that 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.¹² Moralistic discourses, I would argue,

¹² Rural morality has long been an important topic in China studies. To name a few recent studies, Jing Jun 1996, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village*; Liu Xin 2000, *In One's Own Shadow: An Ethnographic Account of the Condition of Post-reform Rural China*; Yan Yunxiang 2003, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949-1999*. Liu Xin, for example, concluded his ethnography of a northern rural Shaanxi village with the statement that, “The 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

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 contemporary “rural problems” in China.

I. The Xiaogang Village Paradox

In November 1978, 18 households of Xiaogang Village¹³ in Anhui Province collectively yet secretly signed a contract to practice “household responsibility,” an extremely brave act enacted against the then-hegemonic Commune system.¹⁴ Under the Commune system, including two sub-levels of the production brigade and the production team, every team was required to turn in a certain amount of the total agricultural output, mainly grain, to the government. What Xiaogang villagers decided to do was to divide the collective land, including the ponds and land in the residential area, among the households, under the principle that they would first fulfill the state assignment, then save enough for certain collective uses (production team administrative expenses, for

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.

¹³ Xiaogang was actually a production team back then, but it was the size of a natural village 自然村 today. And the two levels that were above the production team were the production brigade, equal to today’s administrative village 行政村, and the people’s commune, equal to today’s township 乡.

¹⁴ It was still in place 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 Committee” in 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, See <http://njdj.longhoo.net/dj80/ca16601.htm>. There have been numerous books published in English on this specific period of Chinese history, including Meisner 1999, *Mao’s China and After*; Schram 1984, *Ideology and Policy in China since the Third Plenum*; and Tsou 1986, *The Cultural Revolution and the Post-Mao Reforms*; and so on.

example), and lastly allocate the surplus to each household 保证国家的, 留足集体的, 剩下都是自己的.¹⁵

Unexpectedly, their collective de-collectivization was soon positively recognized by the provincial government, and then in 1980 by the 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 January 1, 1982, the Central Committee of the Communist Party (CCCP) issued its first “Number One Document” (一号文件 *yi hao wen jian*) to confirm that the “household responsibility system” had become official state policy. By 1983 it was announced that all of the 12,702 communes in China had been dismantled along these lines.¹⁶

Since then, Xiaogang Village has become a landmark signaling the starting point of China’s rural reform as well as being seen as a significant achievement in changing state policy from the bottom up. In 2006, almost 30 years later, the Chinese scholar Wang Xiaoyi initiated a discussion of this movement through a piece entitled, “The Xiaogang Village Paradox 小岗村悖论”.¹⁷ Wang argues that in hindsight it was in fact contradictory

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 decreed a national treasure and is now kept in the Museum of Chinese Revolution in Beijing, under the code GB54563. See <http://groups.google.com/group/jsdj/web/40%E5%B9%B4%E5%90%8E%E5%9B%9E%E5%BB%B6%E5%AE%89>, esp. note the picture of the contract, written on a piece of paper and showing 20 signed names followed by red fingerprints and seals.

¹⁶ Ref. 《当代中国第三次思想解放实录》 *Record of the Third Wave of Thought Liberation in Contemporary China*, 1998. Publishing House of the History of the Central Chinese Communist Party. (http://www.mlb.wh.sdu.edu.cn/jpkc/denlun/anli/ch1_page1.htm).

¹⁷ Wang Xiaoyi 2006, “The Xiaogang Village Paradox,” published on the official website of the Institute of Sociology of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: http://www.sociology.cass.cn/shxw/xcyj/t20040318_1977.htm

for the Xiaogang villagers to *collectively* decide to dissolve their own collective. Wang asks, if the Xiaogang villagers could pull themselves together to depart from the state collectivist system – running a risk that was enormous not only in political (their pursuit of a seemingly non-socialist path) but also economic terms (their small chances of finding trading partners outside the collectivist system) – why couldn't they agree to labor on their collective's land, collectively?

Many writers have responded in different ways. The majority, including Wang, maintain that Xiaogang villagers' collective action was only a means to an end, that of achieving, or once again expressing, "peasant individualism." In other words, according to these analyses the Xiaogang villagers' collective action should not really count as "collective"; on the contrary, it is taken as a sign of an underlying peasant individualism as reflected in the self-evidently valuable goal of decollectivization. Wang Xiaoyi goes further to state that this exposes the *nature* of peasants as being "selfish 自私" and "scattered 散漫,"¹⁸ as many Chinese intellectuals have insisted.¹⁹ In much of this literature, ironically, when villagers do organize, it is always seen as a result of their narrow self-interest rather than some higher purpose.

Qin Hui, a historian who teaches at Tsinghua University, on the other hand pointed out that Wang Xiaoyi actually confuses compulsory state control with voluntary village "collectivism" without realizing that there were two senses of "community" in play, i.e.

¹⁸ I find it difficult to identify a compatible English word with *sanman* 散漫, which literally means "scattered" and "hard to organize". Here it connotes the meaning of the well known Chinese phrase, made by leading intellectuals in early 20th century's China – among them Liang Qichao (1873-1929), the first to use this phrase, in 1901; while Sun Yat-sen also highlighted it in his famous speech in 1924 – to denounce the Chinese people at large, as "a sheet of loose sand 一盘散沙," i.e. unwilling or unable to form a collective body or a public-spirited ethics.

¹⁹ Not just Chinese intellectuals, Marx also described the French small peasants as "potatoes in a sack" in his famous piece "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (Tucker 1972: 608), a similar metaphor to denounce the peasants as being unable to organize and represent themselves.

the little community 小共同体 (villagers' voluntary collective) and the great community 大共同体 (the official collectivist system). Starting from this point, Qin maintains "it is all too reasonable for the little community to be destructive to the great community."²⁰

Qin's differentiation of villagers' voluntary collective from the official collectivist system seems to make better sense out of Wang Xiaoyi's essentialist claims. However his conception of the little community and the great community has limitations,²¹ especially as he puts these two in a naturally antagonistic relationship. If Qin means to suggest that there is an *intrinsic* contradiction between the little 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.

After all, what was the real sense of paradox for analysts of rural society? It seems that for scholars like Wang, only the formally-organized collective is really "society"²² while the "household responsibility system" is not seen to be grounded in any tacit sociality. In other words, once the collective is divided into households, direct connections between households – considered to be discrete entities scattered (i.e., *sanman*) by the responsibility system – become implausible or invisible. According to these scholars, the "paradox" is thus understood as a "social refusal of society," a.k.a. collective decollectivization.

²⁰ The original text: 王晓毅所谓“用集体主义精神去促成集体的瓦解，在逻辑上很难解释得通”，那是因为他把强制性的国家控制和“集体主义”混为一谈了。小共同体认同对于大共同体的一元化控制是一种“瓦解”力量，这在逻辑上太顺理成章了。

²¹ 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 traditions have made clear, this sense of "community" tends to assume a relatively self-bounded entity. See, for example, Michael Kearney's work of *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry: Anthropology in Global Perspective*. 1996. Westview Press.

²² The connotation of these two Chinese words: *ji ti* 集体 (collective) and *she hui* 社会 (society) are noteworthy here: *ji ti* means a simple gathering of individuals; while *she hui* means more associations.

I argue instead that the Xiaogang villagers' voluntary collective action was in fact an effect of immanent village sociality, in other words the informal ties and everyday practices in which households are embedded and without which villages could not function.²³ There are, after all, a great number of shared concerns: who has bought a 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 field work, or with a wedding banquet? Who can volunteer labor to take down the old house? Who can help the children locate an appropriate marriage? And so on, *ad infinitum*. Instead of "small community," therefore, the term *immanent* enables us to capture the intrinsic, tacit, and taken-for-granted qualities of village sociality. This might also be thought of as the plane of habitus that is specific to a society or community where people grow up and live together for long periods of time.²⁴ In any case, it requires separate appellation and analysis. Failing to address the specificity of village sociality, I argue, is exactly the reason that Wang and others became uncertain about "rural society" due to their perspective of "seeing like a state,"²⁵ or that is, their tendency to equate the social with the "collective" that concerns governing.

²³ Deleuze and Guattari provide a helpful image in describing the plane of immanence: "the plane is the breath that suffuses the separate parts" (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 nonthought within thought." (Emphasis original, 1994: 59)

²⁴ Ref. Deleuze and Guattari, "Such a plane is, perhaps, a radical empiricism: it does not present a flux of the lived that is immanent to a subject and individualized in that which belongs to a self. It presents only events, that is, possible worlds as concepts, and other people as expressions of possible worlds or conceptual personae. The event does not relate the lived to a transcendent subject = Self but, on the contrary, is related to the immanent survey of a field without subject... Its force begins from the moment it defines the subject: a *habitus*, a habit, nothing but a habit in a field of immanence, the habit of saying I" (Emphasis original, 1994: 47-48).

²⁵ This phrase is borrowed from James Scott's book *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, which critiques the "high-modernist, authoritarian state planning" as abstraction, distinct from local customs and practical knowledge (Scott 1998). Interestingly, it was recently

In other words, village sociality does not coincide with the field of regulatory applications of the State that is “in an operation of transcendence,” i.e. appearing static and abstract (Massumi 2002: 82-83). According to Deleuze and Guattari, immanent being is neither transcendent, nor available in abstract theory, nor connected to administrative hierarchy.²⁶ It instead “leak[s] from State regulation on every side,” as Brian Massumi indicates (2002: 82). More importantly, in infinite movement on the plane of immanence, village sociality is contingent and open to change. To put it in another way, it is beyond but not against higher order formations, e.g. state agencies. On the contrary, state forms can be thought of as elements of the plane of immanence, or *diagrammatic features* as Deleuze and Guattari call them (1994: 39-40). State actors are themselves part of this plane of immanence; they too are enmeshed in kin and social networks. As I shall show in the next chapter, the authoritarian party-state system greatly influences the social relations in Shang Village; it has its presence even in the most mundane necessities of village life.

Now we can better understand the state endorsement of the Household Responsibility System following the Xiaogang villagers’ voluntary collective action, a situation for which Qin Hui failed to provide an explanation in his argument regarding conflicting small and great communities. As argued above, villagers’ voluntary collective action was

introduced and translated into Chinese by Wang Xiaoyi. Although I find Scott’s account of state abstraction is useful at this point, I should also add that, by making a clear and attractive contrast between the state and the particular, 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, esp. page 19 to 24.

²⁶ “The problem of immanence is not abstract or merely theoretical ... 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” (1994: 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” (45), is not to be confused with transcendence.

an effect of immanent village sociality, which is not necessarily antagonistic to state forms. On the contrary, as Massumi has reminded us, the “social”, or village sociality in this context, 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 rechannel into State-friendly patterns” (2002: 82-83).

More importantly, as historians have shown, since the 1970s, especially following Mao’s death in 1976, national leaders were prone in dealing with the aftermath of Cultural Revolution to adopt a path that diverged from the Maoist radical egalitarian approach. It is noteworthy that in 1977 state agricultural policies began to permit larger private family plots for subsidiary production and encouraged the expansion of rural markets (ref. Meisner 1999: 427-435). These policies to a certain degree were already tending toward a Household Responsibility System in comparison to the previously more strict institution of the People’s Commune. For Xiaogang villagers in particular, at the turn of summer and fall in 1978 there had been an unprecedented province-wide drought which 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 Commune (i.e., villagers) to reclaim wasteland to plant their own wheat and vegetables, without any demand on this produce from the collective. On the other hand, by November the Xiaogang villagers, not wanting to risk starving to death, they chose to endanger themselves with the practice of “household responsibility”.²⁷

²⁷ See the memoir of Yan Junchang, who was then the head of the Xiaogang Production Team, at the age of 67, at <http://bbs.anhuinews.com/redirect.php?tid=312523&goto=lastpost>, also *Record of the Third Wave of Thought Liberation in Contemporary China*, *ibid.*

Suffice it to say, Xiaogang villagers' voluntarily collective action to decollectivize was a catalytic outcome of immanent village sociality alongside quite a few contingent factors conjoined with state actions.²⁸ Taking Xiaogang Village as a clear example of the substantialized potential of village sociality, the idea of it being immanent counters narratives relying on abstract theory to draw a strict contrast between earlier and later social forms, namely the collectivist and the household responsibility. Indeed, taking a look back on the historical shifts, they have always been "path-dependent"²⁹ adaptations to conditions rather than outcome of a pre-determined trajectory of planning by the state, which is also in a constant process of formation and reformation.

As Massumi eloquently states, the field of immanence,

[as] a dimension of becoming, gathering proto-, present and post-, is also transhistorical – uncontainable in the closure of any particular historical moment. It is superempirical and transhistorical without being foundational. For it is the contingent effect of that which it conditions. ... The phase-shift of the substantial to the potential is the opening through which empirical contingency – the intermixing of already-constituted bodies, things, and signs – expresses itself as coordinated becoming. This expression is the effective condition of collective change (open-ended belonging). (76-77)

Indeed, the practice of village sociality persists in any form of society, even given the modern structural atomization characteristic of the market economies. With its potential to produce collective change in its dimension of "open-ended belonging," village sociality deserves specific analyses, to which I shall turn in the next section.

²⁸ Or, according to Massumi, "A bureaucracy participates in catalyzing the social or cultural" (2002: 83). To complicate things further, Deleuze and Guattari propose that "we want to think transcendence [the State] within the immanent [village sociality], and ... transcendence enters as soon as movement of the infinite is stopped" (1994: 47). It may be understood that the State is a component element of village sociality on the plane of immanence.

²⁹ This is a phrase often used by Deng Xiaoping to depict his idea of how to build "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics", a.k.a. Reform and Opening up China. It is put as 摸着石头过河 in Chinese.

II. A society of familiars 熟人社会

As I was moving into Ayi's house, I realized the immediate question for us was how to address (and thus position) each other. Growing up in my parents' work unit 单位³⁰ I had used the term "Ayi 阿姨," often translated as "Auntie," to address women who were one-generation older and unrelated to my family.³¹ 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 你那个阿姨." Through TV soap operas and movies, 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 生人社会," where there are many encounters among people who don't have 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 maintains a "society of familiars 熟人社会," where people always have some way to relate to each other via well-known connections.³²

³⁰ 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, Lu 2006, Lü and Perry 1997, Walder 1986, and Yang and Zhou 1999.

³¹ Similarly, Shu Shu 叔叔 or "Uncle" is used to address the non-related men who are one-generation older. Ayi and Shu Shu are still commonly used among urbanites, though less prevalently than in the past. Furthermore, 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 小," meaning "young," before "Ayi" to refer to their young maid, usually a migrant laborer from the countryside.

³² This concept of 熟人社会 is from Fei Xiaotong, who named 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

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, all share the same ancestor. This progenitor in the 14th century had five sons who formed the five different lineages of the village; each such line is called a “gate 门.” 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 14th century and their families gradually developed into natural villages, i.e., Wang Temple village and South Li Manor village.

Lihua, Ayi’s daughter, called me “Lili Jie 立里姐” as soon as we were introduced to each other. Jie means “older sister.” After our first supper there was a visit from Lihua’s uncle. Ayi introduced him to me, “this is Lihua’s er da 二大 (meaning second paternal uncle).” I followed Lihua’s lead and addressed him as “er da”; both he and Ayi were delighted, and I felt Ayi’s uneasiness in interacting with me dwindle significantly. Now in hindsight, it seems that it was necessary for them to regard me as a part of the family, given that Shang village is formed by related families. To be part of the family was important partly because I would be staying in Ayi’s house for a rather long period of

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. *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North Chinese Village*. Duke University Press, esp. page 32-38.

time instead of a brief visit. There was no proper role for a “stranger” in the daily life of this family and its network. Moreover, the very fact that I was paying for my food and lodging was a problem. It could have made an intervention into everyday life that was unusual and estranging. This consideration also relates to Ayi’s initial reluctance to accept Zhishu’s request to host me. Knowing that many urbanites perceive villagers as unclean, she made the excuse that her house was “awfully dirty.” A more pressing reason, which she didn’t reveal, was her anxiety over having to take in a complete stranger. She simply didn’t know how to treat a long-term “visitor.” All her social habits were adapted to a society of familiars, and especially kin.

“Ayi” became the only distinctive term of address that I used differently from others in Shang village. For all others in the village I followed Lihua’s usage of kinship terms, placing myself in the same generation as her. Except for direct kinship terms such as “Erda 二大 (second paternal uncle)” or “Sanjiu 三舅 (third maternal uncle),” when referring to older relatives it is common practice to add a suffix to their given names, such as “Shen 婶(auntie),” “Da 大(uncle),” “Jie 姐(older sister),” or “Ge 哥(older brother)”. Thus, an older woman named Hua was addressed as Hua Shen. Younger people, if in my generation, could go by their first names alone; if “beneath” my generation, they would be called by indirect kin terms such as “Shaomei’s daughter.” As individuals age, they gain significance in daily language, gaining more and more kin relations indexed by common forms of address. Usage depends on which generation people belonged to. “Generation” here refers to seniority within the family lineage 辈分 rather than actual age. It often happens that two Shangs who are of a similar age address each other as

grandparent and grandchild, especially if one is from the first lineage, or “big gate 大门,” and the other is from the most junior “fifth gate 五门”.

As mentioned in my village overview, besides the Shangs there are other fairly populous families such as the Wangs and the Lis living in Shang 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 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 五门, is often called only by his first name or his nickname Dark Face 黑脸, a reference to his dark complexion. But this usage too conveys a general sense of intimacy, especially among those of the same generation.³³

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. In the Zhaozhou County Chinese medicine hospital, I was called “Xiao Lai 小赖,” meaning “young Lai,” or “Lai Boshi 赖博士,” meaning “Dr. Lai.”³⁴ Calling people by their last name with either a prefix of “Lao 老 (old)” or “Xiao 小 (young)” to indicate an age difference, or a suffix

³³ 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.” For those who belong to the same generation in Shang Village, first names are clearly preferred to kinship terms.

³⁴ I’m used to being called “Xiao Lai,” as in the past when I worked at the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, and more recently at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a typical socialist work unit, when I had a position as visiting scholar to conduct my fieldwork. Also in China people often call doctoral students “doctor.”

that indicates one's social position such as "laoshi 老师 (teacher)," "daifu 大夫 (doctor)" or, even more frequently, "chuzhang 处长 (director)," or "shuji 书记 (party secretary)," has been a widely employed linguistic practice in urban work units since 1949.³⁵ These practices are still prevalent in the post-Mao urban world.³⁶ While in Shang Village, I only heard township officials call Zhishu "Shang Shuji 尚书记", or Party Secretary Shang; villagers never referred to him in this way.³⁷ 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 生人社会 and a society of familiars 熟人社会. By virtue of being conventional language practices, these differences are expressed in all the activities through which people position themselves and weave 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.

Such relationships are not superficial. In my conversations with villagers, for example, people would say things like "I call him uncle, how can he not help me? 我叫他叔呢，咋能

³⁵ Another important term much used in Maoist urban China but now mostly fallen out of use is tongzhi 同志. 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 Wah-Shan, "Homosexuality and the Cultural Politics of Tongzhi in Chinese Societies", in *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, eds. Gerard Sullivan, and Peter A. Jackson, Harrington Park Press, 2001, pp. 27-46.

³⁶ One can easily identify this form of address from the TV soap operas which are mostly based on mundane urban life, for example, *Yearnings* 渴望, an extremely popular series in the 1990s that has also been discussed by Lisa Rofel. Rofel, Lisa. 1999. *Other modernities: gendered yearnings in China after socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

³⁷ Of course it's 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.

不帮我?” or “Auntie this, auntie that, - she’s sweet-talking me so I’ll go over and help her make dumplings 婶儿呀婶儿的, 她就是嘴甜, 让我给她包饺子!” Xia, a retired teacher from the village elementary school, once expressed to me her frustration over a librarian position that Zhishu, the party Branch secretary, wanted her to assume.³⁸ 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 Luoyang³⁹, so I don’t have worries about them; as a retired teacher I have my pension, over 800 RMB a month, 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 好事, 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 “auntie” 喊婶儿的 and who therefore can say ‘no’ to him directly [because she is more senior than him], I am of the same generation 平辈 with him and he calls me sister-in-law 喊我嫂子. Whenever I want him to take my refusal seriously, he just jokes around and changes the subject 开玩笑耍滑头绕圈子. – I can find no way out 没法说.

Xinhua was the Director of Women’s Affairs 妇女主任. Retired in 1997, she is a well-respected woman in Shang village. Xinhua was in her sixties, Xia in her late fifties, and Zhishu was in his early forties. They are all from the fifth gate of the Shang family, but not directly related in recent generations. 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. A week after we talked, Xia reluctantly agreed to look after the library.⁴⁰

³⁸ To comply with the national policy of the “New Socialist Countryside,” 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.

³⁹ Zhengzhou 郑州 and Luoyang 洛阳 are the two biggest cities in Henan province. Zhengzhou is the capital city of Henan.

⁴⁰ Kipnis also makes a fine observation of the verb “to call” instead of “to be,” used by Fengjia villagers together with a kinship term when introducing someone as “She whom I call *gugu* [father’s sister]” rather than “she who is my *gugu*” (1997: 37). However instead of following him to interpret the way of using kinship terms as “a practice of *guanxi* [relationships] reproduction” (37), I think the way 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 the expression of an unconscious habitus.

Kinship ties, especially within a gate 一个门上的, 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 labors, and many come voluntarily. 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 a same front path that connects to the main road.

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. From the beginning, when the bride’s parents came over to inspect the house 看家, through to the post-wedding banquet that accommodated the new daughter-in-law’s visiting relatives, the Li family helped out. As a matter of fact, house and marriage are usually closely interrelated as larger life projects, and house is usually taken as a site of generating a future (of the family). In his ethnography of Fengjia Village, Andrew Kipnis has also indicated the complex social calculus involved in the larger life projects of house building and marriage which, as he rightly put, “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] 七拐八拐
总是一家人。”

III. Everyday sociality

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.⁴¹ Also, despite the popularity of TV ownership and the fact that some individuals engage in a lot of TV viewing, for the majority of Shang villagers, watching TV happens only after dinner and before bedtime.

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 construction⁴² while women get together for various projects such as sewing quilts, making baby clothes, or knitting sweaters and long underwear for family members (and friends from time to time). The fallow season is also a busy season for important events such as holiday celebrations, weddings, and baby's

⁴¹ And in cities, many of them live in dorms with others, and couples just rent their own room in the same dorm-like building or house. In my follow-up research visit to five Shang villagers who work in a shoe factory in the suburbs of Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province, I noted that they live in a local villager's two-story private house, much smaller than the new-style houses in Shang village, which is however divided into about 10 rooms so as to be able to host over 20 people, all from Zhaozhou County. The monthly rent ranges from 100 RMB to 200 RMB per room, depending on the size and orientation of the room.

⁴² 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.

first month 满月 and first year 周岁 celebrations, all of which require collective effort and all usually include banquet preparation.⁴³ 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's 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 chat 拍话.⁴⁴ Women usually knit and men tend to smoke. An open gate is an invitation to whoever passes by. People passing groups at doorways will always stop and greet one another, and say such things as, "are you going to the [market] street 上街去?" or "where have you been 上哪儿了?" People at their own door always urge, "come on in and sit for a while 进来坐." These queries are not considered intrusive, and in general invitations to visit are usually sincerely meant. It would be awkward if villagers didn't 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

⁴³ There is always a distinct division of labor in banquet preparation: there are one or two paid male cooks and a group of women facilitators in charge of keeping the fire going in the stove, cleaning utensils, cleaning, cutting, and chopping meat and vegetables, etc. These latter are usually friends and relatives of the host and come to help without any payment except for sharing the meal. Some would leave after the preparation, too.

⁴⁴ 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 also to be easily carried around, such as to informal public gathering spots like the village store.

will slow down and extend greetings.⁴⁵ 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 the teahouse because one has to spend money there, even though it is very inexpensive.⁴⁶ More common places for social interaction include village stores and the crossroads at the center of the village where larger open spaces provide a place to sit away from car traffic.

Not surprisingly, the topics of conversation are mostly related to everyone's mundane life. The following episode from one afternoon I spent chatting in front of the old village store offers a lively picture of Shang villagers' everyday talk. It was a sunny afternoon in late February, a time when people love to sit together in the warm winter sunshine, killing time during the fallow season. Still, it was cold and everyone was bundled up. I joined a group of four in front of the old village store.⁴⁷ People put their small chairs in

⁴⁵ The only exceptions are the outsiders who are not from Shang village, 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.

⁴⁶ 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 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 the folks there to talk to me, a stranger and a young female. Toward the end of my fieldwork a Shang villager from the 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 a mixed group 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 didn't seem to mind.

⁴⁷ The old store was once the only "salesroom" in the village during Maoist times, when it belonged to the official "supply and distribution agency 供销社," an organ of the People's Commune in charge of villager's everyday commodities such as salt, sugar, paper, and cloth. Li Shu told me that the salesroom used to be in the same building with the village clinic, next to the old village committee courtyard. Since decollectivization in the early 1980s, the salesroom stopped being a branch of the state-owned agency and was contracted to the then manager, who was allowed to use the room for free and run his own business. In 2004 when the boss of the flour-processing mill bought the house where both Li Shu's clinic and the old salesroom were, the store moved into the northwest room of the old village committee courtyard, while Li Shu's clinic moved into the new village committee courtyard beside the paved north-south main road. The old village committee courtyard had occupied the Shang family ancestral hall during the Cultural Revolution (see picture). Now it has become temporary lodging lent to villagers who are building a new

the middle of the road where the sunshine wasn't blocked by houses along the road.

There was not much traffic anyway, even though we were seated by the crossroads at what had been the center of Shang village before the village committee moved their office to the new courtyard beside the paved north-south main road.⁴⁸ After sitting down on the small chair that Zhenbang, the store manager, offered me, I took out my digital voice recorder and asked for permission to record our conversations. My recorder briefly interrupted in the topic they were engaged in, and now it turned to:

Shilang: Is this a recorder? [You want to] record [our words] and take them to a foreign country? It's okay, we don't talk nonsense anyway 我们也没胡说. Where do you study abroad? In the US? Where is the US? Which direction? We couldn't manage over there, can't communicate in their language. Nor could we get used to their life if we did go. Aren't they used to having milk and bread for breakfast? What do they eat for lunch? Do you eat your lunch in your school's dining hall 食堂? Are their dishes the same as ours?

Zhenbang's mother: Wherever you go, people have the same brain. [Therefore,] they must have the same dishes.

Zhenfang: Do they have poor people there?

Jianbao: Oh it's the same everywhere, with some being poor and some being rich.

Shilang: The main thing about the US is that it is not reasonable, it talks nonsense. It refuses to pay its membership fee to the United Nations.⁴⁹

Just when I was about to respond, a villager passed by, greeting everyone. Someone in the group questioned him: "What are you doing here? Didn't you just get a grandson?"

house and need a place to stay, except for the one room taken by the old store. Nowadays there isn't much business for the old store; the new ones by the paved main road prosper with more customers thanks to the busy traffic, and accordingly the stores there are bigger with more commodities.

⁴⁸ This also signifies a changing pattern of Shang village. Instead of being self-centered as it was in the past, Shang village's central facilities such as the village committee, the major clinics and stores, and other village businesses are now located along the roads passing by the border of the village, the ones that connect to neighboring villages and the township and county seat. In a sense, this is a reflection of real changes in orientation, contributing to a sense of its being a "hollow village," which I will discuss shortly.

⁴⁹ In Chinese: 美国主要是不讲理, 它胡扯八道, 争着联合国的会费它不交.

Isn't your house holding a banquet now?" With an indistinct answer he left smiling.

Zhenbang, the store manager, steered the topic back to me, "So, you're staying at the doctor's house, are you getting used to it 住得惯么?"

After I gave a positive answer, the topic then turned to a villager who was sent to the People's Hospital of Zhaozhou County the night before. He was looked after for the first night by Hui, village doctor Li Shu's son, who had gone with the patient to the hospital. He was diagnosed with a mild stroke and hypertension. Everyone was concerned about their fellow villager, and I had a strong sense of being part of a big family. Soon Zhenbang started to report to the group, "I didn't feel well last night either; I had a stomach ache." This triggered an amusing round of debates about the nature of Zhenbang's illness, with fairly professional medical terms such as superficial gastritis 浅表性胃炎 and brain thrombosis 脑血栓 in use⁵⁰. Soon the talk turned to a recent higher rate of cancer and stroke in the local area. People thought it might be related to the prevalent use of chemical fertilizers and herbicides, among other things. When a young man riding a motorcycle passed by, people started to chat about changing marriage arrangements for young people. Their conversation gradually revealed that the young man was a fellow villager who had gone to the city to work as a laborer and had been back since the Spring Festival to get married. Obviously they knew him and his plans.

It was an enjoyable afternoon and I sat there for about three hours. None of us became bored and people always had so much to talk about, so much to be concerned with, from everyday meals to their views on international politics – with little doubt,

⁵⁰ We were amused by the guess of brain thrombosis, and one man responded quickly: "What nonsense, he said he had a stomach ache!"

politics is part of mundane. When we finally parted for dinner, I realized the battery of my recorder had completely run out quite a while before.

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 has joined with many other Chinese rural areas to become a “hollow” village, one with young people working outside and leaving their parents and children at home. For senior villagers, it is little wonder that their children 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 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 “drug stores (药铺 *yao pu*).” Villagers also referred to the clinic as a place “to get packets of drugs” (去包药 *bao yao*), instead of as a place to “look at disease” or “see the doctor” (看病 *kan bing*)⁵¹ which is how urbanites usually refer to the places where they seek medical care. There doesn’t seem to be a class difference between doctors and their fellow villagers, even though doctors, considered to “have a craft 手艺,” 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.⁵² 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

⁵¹ Farquhar has also pointed out the difference between the Chinese “to see disease” and the English “to see a doctor”. See Farquhar 1994.

⁵² The three doctors are all native to Shang Village, and all have their 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.”

Back Wang Temple 后王庙 and provides service mainly to its neighborhood. Most villagers go to Shijin's and Li Shu's for greater convenience, 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 then through Zhaoying Township, and all the way to Zhaozhou County town. For many villagers it's more convenient to go to Shijin's because it's on their way to the stores and tea houses on the market street. This with little 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.⁵³ 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 to take an intravenous (I.V.) drip, "transfusing water 输水" as villagers call it.⁵⁴

When I first visited Shijin's clinic on an early November day, there were three patients sitting together having their I.V. therapy: a four-year-old boy (for coughing), a middle-aged woman (for anemia), and an old man (for mild apoplectic sequelae, or post-stroke syndrome). The plastic I.V. tubes turned fairly visible in this dark room, connecting the veins in their left or right hand with the three infusion bottles, two hanging on a self-made wooden pole and the third on a big nail in the wall. The boy's maternal

⁵³ Shijin doesn't live in the clinic. His house is by 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.

⁵⁴ 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 I.V. 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 shots. 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 I.V. drugs used for post-stroke syndromes are understandably several times more expensive than those for other common ailments such as cold, stomachache, anemia, migraine, and high blood pressure.

grandmother was there with him: his parents, I was told, had been away working in Guangdong Province as migrant laborers for several years 出门打工好几年了. In fact, the boy had been 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 I.V. 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 parents, who sent money home regularly with their children in mind. Upon these remarks, Shaoli's father walked in 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 (小康, meaning a relatively comfortable life) by farming.⁵⁵ 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 labors.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ This 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 haven't 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 migrant labors. Since then, farming has become a way to maintain basic subsistence without making much extra-money. For reference, see a recent 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, which documents have greatly changed the rural policy, <http://magazine.caijing.com.cn/20080912/77580.shtml> Note that toward the end of the article, Du pointed out that due to the deep structural conflicts, especially between the industrial and agricultural sectors, and between the urban and rural, the rural reform could no longer be pushed further in 1986, which was the last year of the first five "Number One Documents".

⁵⁶ In Chinese: 说起来都是笑话, 说是农村人种庄稼小康, 小康什么, 都是在外打工寄回来的钱, 才行, 光指望种庄稼怎么行? 你看这盖房子的都是在外打工挣的钱。

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 I.V. infusions. Commenting on the diseases found 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 taking care of nor paying attention to it. The main reason is that we don't have the economic resources 没经济. If we had the economy, we'd follow what the state cadres do, who receive regular physical examinations regardless whether they are ill or not. A couple 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. 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.

It is possible that Shijin made this comment because I was considered as someone similar to a "state cadre", or, a member of a privileged class. His words also stimulated the others' memories of that villager's tragic sudden death, which had been much talked throughout Shang Village. The conversation shifted toward the preparations for his funeral, such as who was called upon to help, what arrangements were made and what remained to be made. Everyone was very engaged in this conversation.

Shijin's clinic used to be the east-end bedroom of this old-style courtyard house.⁵⁷ Like many other houses on the south side of the east-west main road, its door was made to be open toward the north in order to take advantage of the busy road. However the house itself was built to face the south, as people did traditionally, so there are no windows in the north wall; neither do the two side walls have windows. With the only windows in the south wall being completely blocked by Shijin's drug cabinet, the clinic

⁵⁷ Ref. my description of the old-style courtyard house in the previous chapter.

was always dark inside. And Shijin, like most villagers, was frugal about electricity expenses.⁵⁸ He seldom turned on the single light bulb in his small clinic. The combination of smallness and darkness seemed to limit the number of people gathering there, notably small, despite it being, I assume, an ideal spot to watch everyone passing by on the main road while sitting in the dark.

In contrast, Li Shu's clinic is light and twice as big as Shijin's. As mentioned in Chapter One, his clinic is in a newly built two-story house, combined with the family's residential area. 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. Li Shu's house is on the northeast corner of the intersection, facing the main north-south village road. The entrance, about twice the size of Shijin's clinic door, therefore opens toward the west. Beside the gate is a big square window as wide as the door, which lets much light into the room (See Figure 16).

Two benches are lined up alongside the counter and desk by the gate, on which patients/visitors take their seats. And whoever gets to see the doctor would sit right in front of the desk to converse with Li Shu who sits in a chair on the other side of the desk. Li Shu's son, Hui, also practices in the clinic, but people usually prefer to consult his father. Hui generally played the role of nurse, distributing the drugs and managing the I.V. infusion when Li Shu was busy diagnosing and prescribing. Hui doesn't claim a desk of his own; he simply moves around in the clinic. He sometimes sits on a bench talking to

⁵⁸ To my surprise, I found electricity in this rural area is charged at a higher rate than in Shanghai where my parents live.

people, sometimes goes to the back room to join his wife or his mother to do household chores. A sliding door in the back of the clinic separates it from the residential area, though the door usually stays open, because behind it the house's squat toilet and wash basin are made available for the patients. In my last visit in the summer of 2008, I noticed that Li Shu's family had added a wooden partition in the back room to further separate the washroom area from their living space, so as to gain more privacy.



Figure 16: Li Shu's clinic

On the other side of the entrance two other benches are against the south wall, and quite a few small chairs are scattered around in the clinic. A pair of reclining chairs is set by the examination bed and the adjacent desk, next to the sliding door. 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 chat 上药铺去拍话儿". 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 old folks 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 sat back and continued his treatment. Not wishing to interrupt the doctor, the two fellows 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 您二位上哪儿了?" 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 headache lately, he might as well get some drugs from Shu." At this point, his companion added, "I've been cautious of my headache because I have cerebral arteriosclerosis 我有脑血管动脉硬化. When you get old, you have to be careful 人老了要当心".

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 俺俩上小学是同桌!" 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: "you should eat more nutritious stuff 你要多吃点营养的

东西”。He continued upon hearing his classmate’s coughing, “There’s junk in your lungs. Now that you’ve gotten old, you’ve gotten more and more [health] problems. Any pains in your body? 你肺里有垃圾。老了，毛病多。你身上疼不疼?” His classmate responded, “My arms hurt, which makes it hard for me to sweep the floor. – You know, my body is ruined after building the new house 我盖房子把身体整坏了。”

Runhe turned around asking me: “how old is your father?” I told him my father was sixty-three. He said, “That’s not considered to be old [for an urbanite]; urbanites don’t look like the rural villagers, who always appear to be old. The same-aged urban and rural folks look as if there were more than ten years’ difference between them. You see, Hu Jintao [the Chinese president] is in his sixties as well, but on TV there’s no way for you to tell he’s at that age [because he looks so much younger].”⁵⁹

Runhe actually didn’t look like very old either; he seemed to be in good health. I then asked him what he usually did on ordinary days. He said he’d do some mild labor work to earn spare cash because, “otherwise I wouldn’t have money to spend 帮点小工挣俩闲钱，不然没钱花。” A middle-aged woman walked in, who came to chat as well. She seemed to know Runhe well. When Runhe introduced me to her, she responded in a jolly way, “Ah, wasn’t it you who was standing by the store talking to so-and-so a couple of days ago?” She was right. It was me. I was reminded again that villagers do seem to know everything that happens in their village everyday.

Guizhen is her name. After our brief introduction, the children’s medicine on display in the glass counter attracted her attention and she walked over to take a closer look. Then she bought a package of ready-made Chinese medicine that is used to help

⁵⁹ In Chinese: 不算大，城市人不像农村人显得岁数大。[城乡]同样岁数的人看上去要错十来岁。你看胡锦涛也六、七十，电视上看来哪有？

children's digestion. So I asked if she's living with her grandchild. Like many others, Guizhen's two daughters are both working somewhere away from the village, and one grandson had been left to live with her. She sounded fairly content with her daughters' situation in their faraway places: her older daughter had just bought a piece of land in the neighboring county at a price of 120,000 RMB, and she was getting ready to build a new house; her second daughter works as a supermarket cashier in Hainan Province, with a monthly salary of about 800RMB including three meals a day. Guizhen told me these things about her kids proudly.

Meanwhile Runhe started to chat with Li Shu after his classmate left in a hurry, remembering something he forgot to do. Sitting there face to face, sharing cigarettes, and looking relaxed, these two men formed quite an intimacy between them. A similar feeling went with their conversation:

Runhe: I've been feeling sluggish these years. Now that I'm in my sixties, my body is not as good as before. The only good thing is that I can still go to sleep at night. It would be real bad if I couldn't sleep 近几年真是懒了。过了 60 岁往后, 身体也不行了。好处是晚上还能睡觉, 睡不着就麻烦了。

Li Shu: I don't feel well either. Especially after I had that mild cerebral infarction, I have headaches from time to time. It's mainly because my blood is so thick; my blood pressure isn't very high 我也不行。尤其那个轻度脑梗塞以后, 有时会头疼, 就是血液浓度高, 血压也不高。

Runhe: What is your blood pressure 你血压多少?

Li Shu: It is only 50 to 60 mmHg [the diastolic arterial pressure] 就 50、60。

Runhe: That can't be good. What is your systolic blood pressure 那不行。你高压多少?

Li Shu: It goes between 110 and 80 mmHg 高的时候 110, 低的时候 80。

Runhe: That sounds all right. Last time I had Hui [Li's son] measure mine and the systolic pressure is 160 mmHg 那行。那回我叫慧给我量, 高压 160。

Li Shu: It seems seems alright. It's better to have low blood pressure. We don't want it to be high 还行。一般低比高好, [血压]不叫高。

I have found people are very familiar with certain medical terms such as "systolic blood pressure", as demonstrated in Runhe's talk. And Li Shu didn't give a second

thought in talking about his “mild cerebral infarction”, a term that is not supposed to be known to all. Moreover, there is no clear separation of doctor/patient roles in this dialogue: Runhe starts questioning Li Shu about his blood pressure as if he were the doctor – *That can’t good!*” – And Li Shu talks about his illness. The intimacy of this conversation shows vividly interdependence and informality of the immanent village sociality.

The above conversation between two senior villagers illustrates a typical concern among Shang villagers, including the doctors. Most people know the connection between high blood pressure and stroke. They often drop by the clinic not only for a chat, but also for the sake of a free blood pressure check, which is commonly offered in their village clinics. Besides the blood pressure check, village clinics generally don’t charge for diagnostic services either. Also, 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 usually do not enjoy any healthcare insurance in their work place.⁶⁰ This consultation is also free of charge. This may explain why villagers consider their clinic visit “to get bags of drugs” instead of to “look at disease” or “see the doctor”.⁶¹ 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

⁶⁰ People often call home to ask their families or friends to pass on their description of ailments to the village doctor. Once they got some advice, they would purchase the suggested drug in their local store. If the drug suggested by doctor cannot be purchased directly over the counter, their families at home will then get the drug from their village doctor and either send it over by postal parcel or ask someone in the area who by chance is going to the same work site soon to carry it.

⁶¹ The only charge beside drugs is for the I.V. 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 profit mainly from the price difference between wholesale and retail drugs; in his clinic the drugs are sold at a price about 15-20% more than the buying price he pays to the wholesale drug store, a mandate profit margin nationwide. This is indeed akin to the way in which drug stores run their business.

whose young family members are not around to help them move over 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 the New Year 好过年," they told me. According to Li Shu and others, including the village storekeepers, nobody failed to pay their account in time for Spring Festival, except for a few who took as long as several years to pay. As a matter of fact, doctors in the township hospital considered 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.

So far I have spent many pages addressing my primary concerns of village sociality, mainly trying to convey a vivid sense of interconnectedness among Shang villagers on everyday basis, seemingly trivial and beyond the state purview. Indeed, they are "effective expressions of the positivity of belonging [that] elude the State," as Massumi put it. In particular, 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 the immanent village sociality. Local credit is another example, I would argue, of the immanent interdependencies of village social life. And indebtedness is also a form of intimate sociality, which in Shang village is ritually recognized.

IV. Art of social relations

The routine enjoyment of all these social spaces in the village reveals that there is a persisting public and communal life in the village. I find it hard to imagine 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, as scholars have indicated for decades.⁶² In Shang village, though, described by sociologists 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. A Shang villagers’ everyday saying goes, “[if] you are well, [then] I am well, [and] everyone is well 你好我好大家好.”⁶³

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 flour mill. 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

⁶² Except 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.

⁶³ This phrase builds on and adds meaning to the ordinary – and almost “meaningless” – daily greetings of *nihao* 你好, a Chinese equivalent to “how are you”.

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 made many people fall ill. 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 near South Li Manor to the new house, found that their own space, extending from their front gate to the main road, was occupied by their neighbor's wheat, whose space was also the same size as the area in the front of Li Shu's house. Their neighbor was doing his winnowing alone.⁶⁴ 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 a 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 in their front yard.

This was truly a tactful way to handle 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 belonged to the Li family. Shang villagers, it seems to me, simply expect an interdependent social life. 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 their buckets for those who do raise pigs. Manzi, a woman in her fifties who lives alone at home 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 got up later than usual, her

⁶⁴ His children were working as migrant laborers in a big city. Only he and his wife remained at home.

neighbors would come 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. Considering again the story above, Li Shu and his son would not deny that help for their neighbor was also for their own sake. 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 which engendered much tension between these two families. The neighbor, according to Lihua,⁶⁵ had been living under great pressure from his fellow villagers because he was “not on solid ground 理亏” 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.

So far my description of village sociality has emphasized interdependencies and tactics of common life in Shang village’s social life. 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: *The Division of Labor in Society*). However this solidarity is not simply the relationship of belonging that embeds individuals in the group. Instead, it is a “differential mode of association”, 差序格局 *chaxu geju*, a term the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong used to describe a cultural mode of

⁶⁵ I only witnessed the fight when I visited auntie with Lihua in her village, not part of Shang village.

individual differentiations in rural Chinese society in his 1940s lectures.⁶⁶ By describing village life in these terms, I by no means suggest an unchanging and homogeneous rural Chinese society. And I will discuss changing 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 interaction rather than stratified by social and administrative structures. Here I turn again, then, to Ayi's "selfish" act, throwing dead chicken in the ditch, understood 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: "it is like the circles that appear on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it." While "everyone stands at the center of the circles produced by his or her social influence," "everyone's circles are interrelated" (1992: 62-63). Therefore, according to him, rural social networks are elastic and "the boundary between the public and private spheres is relative" (68). Now let's take Ayi's "dead chicken event" as an example. She was upset by the unknown person who threw the dead chicken near her gate. This was considered by her to be an inappropriate act. She walked all the way to the ditch to dispose of the chicken, and she felt she did it "properly" because no households live beside the ditch. Although her reaction could be interpreted as selfish by an outsider, an understanding of the shifting boundaries of public and private reveals otherwise. For Ayi the boundary is not between a universal public (the ditch) and the private (one's own house), but in relation to what is inside and outside one's neighborhood. By throwing the

⁶⁶ Although Fei described this idea in lectures given in the 1940s, I do not want to suggest that things haven't changed since then.

chicken away from her neighborhood, she actually contributed to the hygiene of *her* “public” place, that is, the immediate neighborhood. On two different occasions I asked Shang villagers who live outside of Ayi’s neighborhood their opinion on Ayi’s throwing 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. As a matter of fact, they were made uneasy by my hidden value judgment: “selfish? That goes too far 自私那谈不上.”

Indeed, social circles are flexible 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 water itself – the immanent sociality – 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. 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’s spinning in a rut. A truck with a heavy load of concrete had dug a deep ditch in the middle of the main village road and couldn’t go on. 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 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 his 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.⁶⁷ This event shows 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 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 Shangs who lived beside the road, but all villagers spontaneously gathered in solidarity to defend their "public", i.e. the village as a whole.⁶⁸

Fei's idea of differential mode of association makes clear that the social relationships emerge out of differential personal networks that are elastic with ever outward-shifting boundaries. It reminds us of the inadequacy of an all-encompassing moral judgment of the social interactions among villagers. If we turn to relations within the family, particularly the relationships between different generations, we can nevertheless perceive some important changes brought by the tide of migration and, earlier, the household responsibility system which privatized family production. How have "moral" relations changed among family members? In the following section, I will examine some new

⁶⁷ However, when I left Shang village the ditch 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, because this would not be a job for voluntary unpaid collective labor nowadays.

⁶⁸ A quick rationalization of this collective act, one that can be made easily, is that since all villagers paid their money to build the village road, of course they would stay together to condemn the truck driver and be concerned if they'd have to pay again to mend the road. However I would insist that the immanent village sociality goes beyond this calculation.

forms of family relations and explore some anxieties generated out of the overall restructuring of social relations.

V. Migration – a general background

As I have mentioned Shang village is, like so many others in China, a “hollow village 空心村,”⁶⁹ a village in which younger adults are almost completely absent. Many or most between the ages of 18 and 45 have gone out to work as migrant laborers, leaving their parents and children back in the village. According to villagers, the first tide of migration started around the early 1990s; by now this has become a established pattern of family life in Shang village.

Let’s 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 of “Nine Years of Compulsory Education” 九年义务教育 since 1986, encouraging an education through junior middle school for every child.⁷⁰ However many Shang village children stop after the eighth grade without

⁶⁹ A literal translation of the two characters, 空心(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.

⁷⁰ Rural education is another important topic in China’s rural research, one which goes beyond the range of my dissertation. A useful general review can be found in Emily Hannum, “Political Change and the Urban-Rural Gap in Basic Education in China, 1949 - 1990” in *Comparative Education Review*, 1999 43(2): 193-211, among many other studies by education researchers. Other case studies can be referred to, for example, Suzanne Pepper 1996. *Radicalism and education reform in 20th-century China: the search for an ideal development model*. Gao Mobo 1999. *Gao Village: a portrait of rural life in China*, Han Dongping 2000. *The unknown cultural revolution: educational reforms and their impact on China's rural development*. Rachael Murphy 2002. *How Migrant Labor Is Changing Rural China*. One consensus reached in these studies is that basic education in rural China has 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

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 7th through 9th 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, the only secondary school for a township with a population of 80 thousand. 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. With three grades all together, the number of students added up to about 4,000.⁷¹ I was amazed when she told me her dorm held 48 to 50 students in one room. Second, the courses in middle schools are mainly set up to prepare for the college entrance examination, a highly competitive national exam which is almost impossible for village children to pass. Moreover, the courses – physics,

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 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 relegated 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 laborers who, not surprisingly, meet the demand of the world labor markets.

⁷¹ Though Li Shu also told me the number of students was larger than usual in his daughter's school years, 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 as usual. But still, an national investigation has shown a rather low ratio of teachers and students in rural schools (at 1:23) compared to the urban schools (1:18), see <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/68294/72286/72287/4946917.html>

chemistry, mathematics – are felt to be especially hard for students from village schools to study. Students needing help don't receive sufficient guidance due to the low number (about 120) of teachers and poor teaching facilities. Further, these courses, oriented toward a style of "elite education" 精英式教育, in which 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 much to do with manual labor.⁷²

Knowing perfectly well that going to college is the best way to "jump out of the fate of being a peasant" 跳农门, parents seldom encourage their children to halt their studies for labor migration to the cities. Rather, it is usually the child who decides to quit school or stop pursuing further 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.⁷³ When young people start to work early they can at least reduce the family economic burden 减轻家庭负

⁷² The plain fact that a learning habitus needs to be acquired is greatly taken for granted by the school system. Teachers don't ever 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 prevalent 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 outside readings in the village.

⁷³ In 1985 the central government decided to shift the burden of basic education to local governments, mainly at the county level, while the latter then turned to the peasants to charge the "additional tax for education 教育附加费" to support the school education. Since then, villagers had been seeing ever increasing charge of high school tuition. For a scholarly review of the unequal rural and urban education, see Zhang Yulin, "分级办学制度下的教育资源分配与城乡教育差距——关于教育机会均等问题的政治经济学探讨 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" at http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wk_wzdetails.asp?id=1863, retrieved on October 20, 2008. 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 5,000RMB. While the average annual income for a Shang villager in 2005, according to the document I found in the village committee office, was about 3,400RMB.

担, as Shang villagers often said to me. If a child goes to primary school at the age of seven, after the six-year primary school education s/he will be 13 or 14 years old. After spending two to three years in junior middle school they are 15 to 17 years old. Some may stay at home for a year or two after dropping out of school, while others go to work as migrant laborers with the help of relatives or neighbors. In general, youngsters migrate to the cities to work at an age ranging from 15 to 18, usually following in the tracks of their brothers, sisters, or other fellow villagers. During their working years, they may move from one place to another, but they always tend to shift within family networks; only a few adventurers might move along a network they build on their own from relations established on the job, far from Shang village.

When young people reach the age of 18 to 20, their parents start to consider their marriage and ask the village match-makers to find a partner for their child. The difference from the procedures involved in arranging marriages in the past, however, is that before making any move, the parents consult over the phone with their children, who usually call home once a week or every other week. Even if young people have agreed to the arrangement, nothing significant will take place until they come home, usually during the spring festival, the high season for marriage. The matchmakers are supposed to know both families well, and during these home visits the intended spouses are introduced to each other. Only if the young ones feel interested in each other will arrangements continue. Negotiations over bride price, dowry, and gifts follow an expression of willingness by the young couple to allow marriage arrangements to move forward. These issues are usually more of a concern for the parents than the young couple, though they do matter in deciding whether to continue the marriage arranging process.

Villagers call this preliminary process “kan jia 看家”, literally meaning “to see the 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, as I have depicted in the previous section. Before Xusheng, Li Shu’s neighbor’s son, finally got married, his in-laws did a literal inspection of his house during the “kan jia” process. I was at Li Shu’s clinic when Xusheng’s in-law-to-bes came over to compare the neighbor’s house with Li Shu’s. I was surprised that they were so particular about the housing conditions, from the quality of house materials such as the concrete and paint, to the infrastructure including the floor, stairs, and toilet. Furniture usually is not a major issue for the groom’s family because the bride’s family generally would offer to buy a whole new set of furniture as dowry unless they are extraordinarily poor.⁷⁴

Marriage is still considered to be a linkage between two families, not something simply “private” between two young individuals. And the matchmaker plays an important role in this process, because s/he is responsible for conveying his/her knowledge of the two families as completely as s/he can. A matchmaker can be a relative, a neighbor, a friend, or a fellow villager. S/he need not be, any longer, an expert in fortune telling. But if the matchmaker does not know fortune telling, villagers would usually consult someone who can “suanming 算命” (calculate the fate) of the young people after the potential marriage has been proposed (“*ti qin*” 提亲). Runhe, Li Shu’s “elder brother” with whom I had conversed at the clinic, is the most popular yinyang xiansheng 阴阳先生 (master of yinyang) in Shang village. Even those involved with the Christian community

⁷⁴ Shaoli’s family provided nothing for her marriage.

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.

In the process of “kan jia”, 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 seasoned parents can learn much about the personalities and lifestyles of their counterparts. The banquet is therefore considered a very important factor in decision making.⁷⁵ The next step, then, 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: 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 reflect well on the promise of the groom.

There are many rules involved in wedding ceremony, which I will explain more in the next chapter, which deals with local culture. Here the point at issue is that villagers, both old and young, emphasize the importance of “looking for a family” (找个人家 zhao ge ren jia). They see this as a shared collective process that goes far beyond the potential relationship between the two people to-be-married, invoking much wider networks.

I talked once with Shang Sheng, Li Shu’s neighbor’s son, who came home in the Chinese New Year holiday to kan jia (see a family or house). Sheng had left home at the age of 18 and had been working in a big umbrella factory in Hangzhou for over three

⁷⁵ I will describe the wedding banquets in Chapter Three.

years after leaving his first job in a factory in Dongguan.⁷⁶ He would turn 24 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 5 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, but with an explanation that “most 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 my parents would know her parents and her whole family better. I would feel more secure.”

After the wedding the young couple may spend a month or two at the groom’s home, and then both go back to the city to work again as migrant laborers. They usually leave together. Then the wife will return home when she is expecting a child. After staying home for another year or two, the wife will often go out again to join her husband, leaving their child with the paternal grand parents, coming 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 going out as second-generation migrant laborers in cities.

⁷⁶ 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 electrical appliances.

VI. Migrant life – Reproducing belonging

In this section I am going to describe the communal life of young villagers who work in cities, and particularly Juan and her relatives and fellows (同乡) in Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province. Once again, I will go into some detail about their living space and everyday encounters. I hope these depictions capture the feeling of migrant life as transitional for those young villagers, as well as showing how their experiences far away can produce and reproduce a sense of belonging to their home villages. I argue that in this unformalized migrant society, where there is no governmental intervention or protection for the basic living situation such as housing and health care, immanent village sociality plays a significant role in everyday life. Certainly, migrant life has inevitably changed villagers' vision of their future lives both for those who remain in the village and those who temporarily migrate out of the village. In this sense, village sociality is open to different understandings and imaginations of a desirable or attainable life. Such vision and aspirations are constitutive of an ever forming village sociality, an open-ended belonging.

I tried to call Juan through her cell phone, the number of which was given to me by her mother in Shang Village, before my trip to Wenzhou to visit her and other Shang migrants. It was a Sunday, a day I assumed she would have some spare time. She didn't answer the phone. I then sent a text message to her phone to introduce myself and ask when would be a good time for me to call her. No reply either. When it reached 11pm, I started to worry because Juan was the only contact I had in Wenzhou area, and I expected to meet others through her. It was after 11:30pm that she called me. It turned out that she'd been working from 7:30am to 11pm, with only a one and a half hour break in total

for lunch and supper. She had not had time to respond to me until after work.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that we had never met before, in this very first phone conversation Juan warmly welcomed my visit, and offered to let me stay with her while I was there. This was because I was considered to be someone from home 老家来的, Juan said.

On an early Sunday morning I arrived at a suburban district of Wenzhou city, where the shoe factory Juan worked at is located. She told me to wait for her in the shopping center near to her factory, namely the “neighborhood center 邻里中心”. As planned beforehand, Juan would ask for a short leave right after their daily morning assembly at 7:30am, to take me to her apartment. However she didn’t 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.⁷⁷ Obviously factories operate on different schedules: though Juan and her fellow workers didn’t have their weekends off, many other workers had come 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 mandarin. 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; I didn’t encounter any local people, who could have been distinguished by their speaking Wenzhou dialect.

⁷⁷ Wenzhou is known for numerous shoe factories, mostly manufacturing shoes for overseas famous brands.

Finally at 11:30am I got to meet Juan outside the entrance to the supermarket. Juan came with Hao, her brother-in-law who works in the same shoe factory. 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 was more like a real “neighborhood center.” 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.



Figure 17: the other “neighborhood center”

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 which, 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 river bank. Secretly I was relieved that our tricycle-taxi didn't stop at any of these buildings but kept going.



Figure 18: The polluted river

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 didn't seem to be any 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 laborers. This seemed to be a very profitable business: local villagers had obviously tried 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 village” as well: many Wenzhou villagers have moved to live in the bigger cities, or places more central to the city, leaving only those senior villagers who don't want to go away still at home (and helping to collect rent).⁷⁸ Occasionally I did see old people chatting with each other, sitting in front of their houses, when there was such a space.



Figure 19: Old people chatting in the Wenzhou village

At last our tricycle-taxi reached the house that Juan 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-story house, but is definitely smaller than the new-style two-story houses in Shang Village. The first floor was taken by the landlord's aged mother, who lived there on her own. She also used the only kitchen, which had a stainless-steel double sink and gas stove – I could see the kitchen

⁷⁸ Many local villagers have made money also through doing business. Wenzhou is mainly known, however, for selling its manufactured small commodities, such as buttons, zippers, and later, shoes, on the global market.

through its windows by the staircase. On the other side of the stairs there was a public bathroom with only one sit-style toilet and a shower head allowing residents to take cold showers.⁷⁹ Obviously there hadn't been much maintenance in this windowless bathroom, where the smell was terrible. Up we went via the narrow concrete stairs. Juan's room was on the second floor by the stairs. Standing in the corridor, I could tell the house had been built for family use before it was converted to contain dorm rooms. Hao told me there were altogether about 20 tenants living in the 10 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 others workers weren't home yet. 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, Juan said. The factories do 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 don't 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.

I followed Juan into her room; Hao put down my suitcase and then went up to his room on the third floor to prepare our lunch. There was no window in Juan's room; she had to turn on the single hanging light bulb. The room was simple: one double bed, a small desk covered by a plastic table cloth, and a couple of stools with cardboard boxes sitting on them. I could see her clothes in the boxes. On the desktop was a bottle of face

⁷⁹ It was only recently that Chinese urbanites started to use gas water heaters and people could have running hot water at home.

cream, bottles of shampoo and hair conditioner, tooth paste and a tooth brush in a stainless steel cup, a facial cleansing milk, two plastic combs, a yellow hairpin, and a drinking cup. A small round mirror, hanging on the wall by the desk, completes the list of Juan's personal items in the room. Helping me to drag my suitcase next to the bed, Juan once again invited me to stay in her room during my visit, "staying in hotels costs money," she said. We had only met for less than 20 minutes, and she already treated me like a family member. "You are from home 你是家里来的," 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. He and Juan's sister met here in Wenzhou and got married two years ago. After giving birth to a son, Juan's sister went home to better care for their newborn baby.⁸⁰ She wouldn't be coming back until after the Chinese New Year. Hao's room was about the same size as Juan'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 (See Figure 19). 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 tooth brushes and tooth paste, shampoo and conditioner, facial moisturizer, bottles of soy sauce and vinegar, and a jar of salt. The plastic bags hold respectively flour, rice, dried noodles, ready-made steamed bread, dried chili peppers, etc. On the floor behind the door stood a plastic broom and a tin dust pan, beside which, and below the plastic bags, were two red plastic buckets stacked with several colorful plastic basins. Further inside, against the same wall, was a makeshift countertop converted from an abandoned school desk; a one-burner gas stove

⁸⁰ It is a common practice among migrants that young mothers go home to give birth or go back afterwards and stay with the baby until it's one year old. They then leave the child at home and return to join their husband at a factory site.

was on top of it and next to the window. The rest of this countertop was occupied by a big bottle of cooking oil, a pile of bowls, and a chopping board. Two small plastic baskets were mounted on the wall above the desk, one holding chopsticks and the other holding cooking utensils. On this side more plastic bags were hanging on the nails for various uses. The gas canister was underneath the desk, and beside it were a couple of pots, including a pressure cooker.

On the other side of the room, three items were placed against the wall; starting from the corner with the window, in order they were a plastic closet, a desk, and the head of a bed (whose foot reached the entrance). Much space on this side of the wall had been taken up as well: on top of the closet a cardboard box and a plastic storage bin had been stored; on the desk there were several popular history books, magazines, and a framed picture of Hao and Juan's sister posing in a photo studio; above the desk a plastic poster had been glued to the wall: it showed two symmetrically sitting baby boys both wearing a beret and holding a lemon; beside them another poster was hidden behind the mosquito net hanging above the bed.

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.



Figure 20: Dorm rooms

The room became even more crowded when Hao's brother Zheng and his wife Yu joined us. 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. She works in the same factory with Juan and Hao, and is even in the same department as Juan. Zheng had just quit his job a few days ago because he was not happy with it, according to him. At the moment he was jobless but looking for a new one in Wenzhou. 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 with already a bowl of noodle in hand – asking: what are you all having for lunch? – a remarkable 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 Liang, a school-aged boy who came to play with us while waiting for his lunch, which was being prepared by his father. Liang had come to live with his parents over a year ago, and he went to a migrant school in this area. Liang's father was the one who had lived in this house for the longest time and he had won the trust of their landlord; she let him to collect rent for her. They also lived in the biggest room, which had a balcony. So their kitchen was set up on the balcony, such that it looked as if they actually had two rooms. Liang and his parents stayed in the one indoor room; besides the two beds, there wasn't much space for other furniture. And they told me 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. One person had a TV in the room; others had more beer bottles on the floor. And Liang had a glass jar with several goldfish sitting on their table. Hao told me later that Liang's father paid the same amount of rent as he paid because of his special relationship with the landlord. Hao paid 200 RMB per month, and Juan's room was 100 RMB.

I didn't realize that they were going to cook a special meal to welcome me until I went back to Hao's room. Juan 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 don't 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

Juan came back with her purchases. Still being somewhat shy to talk with me, 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 coworkers, joined by Hao from time to time. Even in the same department, Juan and Yu didn't really see each other until their lunch time.

Juan was only 18 years old, but she had come to work here over a year ago. Zheng had also left home at about the same age to go to Beijing. Two years later he introduced Hao, his younger brother, to an acquaintance who knew a job vacancy in a factory in Hebei Province, not far from Beijing. But Hao didn't stay there for long, and he came to Wenzhou in the year of 2000, thanks to another fellow villager's help; the same hometown acquaintance also helped them to move into this house last year. He lives on the second floor. About three years ago, after their marriage at home, Zheng and Yu came to Wenzhou to join his brother. Hao had also changed jobs several times, and the factory he's now working for was actually the very first one he had worked in when he first came to Wenzhou City.⁸¹

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 didn't 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's also their village custom to treat visiting guests to good meal. Hao played songs the mp3 stored on his cell phone while we were eating, which I took as a gesture of

⁸¹ 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.

showing me they, as migrant workers, also have ways of enjoying the good life. The dishes Hao cooked were delicious, too.

After the meal there was not much time left, and all three of them went to work. Juan didn't forget to leave 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, to which I hadn't paid attention before. The 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, now I saw faucets surrounding almost every single house. Simply looking at the faucets outside a house, you could get 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 Juan 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 narrowed alley, we saw many houses besides the local village-style residential buildings; these were simple cement cubes, clearly short-term projects meant to accommodate migrant laborers. During my visit there, such constructions was still on-going, together with smaller projects such as adding rooms on the outside of older houses, which made the paths narrower and

narrower. Zheng reminded me local residents other than the migrants often lived differently. We passed by a house with a porcelain tilefloor which, 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 21: A line of locked faucets

If I had not been told, 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: provisional buildings, lines of faucets, trash heaps, blackened water, vegetable stands, mini markets, small construction sites, tricycle-carts, etc. Nevertheless a conspicuous sign, painted on the side wall of a hut, caught my eyes; it said “Clinic from Zhaoying of Zhaozhou County, with pharmacy and dental reconstruction services.” I went into the hut but the guy sitting there told me it was only an advertisement for someone else, about whom he had no idea. Zheng told me they usually found a medicine man like this through personal relations.

When the drugs purchased in the drug store couldn't help with their ailments, they would go to this kind of "underground" doctors who had practiced medicine at home and later came here to work in factory jobs just like the others. The official medical services are expensive for migrant laborers, who don't get any medical benefits from their employers: their factories only compensate for the extreme cases of industrial injury that may lead to amputation or even death. I call these doctors "underground" because their practice is considered illegal, lacking certification from the local health bureau. But it would be nearly impossible for those doctors to be certified anyway, since an official local residency is a precondition. In addition to the lower cost, migrants prefer to go to these underground doctors because, as Zheng said, they feel more comfortable talking with their laoxiang 老乡 (fellow-townsmen), and feel as if they are better understood there. Everyone knows one or two such doctors through their own networks. On the other hand, as I have mentioned above, the village doctors at home are another resource for the migrants, especially those who are willing to manage, long-distance, chronic disease conditions such as stomach troubles.

On our way back, we bumped into two of Zheng's fellow villagers who didn't have to work on the Sunday, unlike Juan and Hao, because their factory wasn't doing much business. Most migrant laborers in these factories earn their wages on a piece-work basis. When the factory is not doing well, their work is accordingly reduced and their earnings shrink. Although they had more spare time, Zheng's friends didn't consider this a good thing. They were out looking for new jobs. Zheng then spent quite a while exchanging information with them. This conversation confirmed what I had learned elsewhere as well, that most jobs were acquired through personal networks, mainly via information and

referrals from fellow villagers who were working in factories that by chance had job vacancies. Zheng said to me,

We migrant laborers 打工的 are like this: we like our factories to be running well so we workers are kept busy. We'd become anxious if we stayed idle 闲着就会着急, because that means we would not only make less money but also spend more money [in killing time] 不挣钱反倒花钱. 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.

Doubtless this is a classic phenomenon of the capitalist strategy to squeeze surplus value out of an underprivileged (and unprotected) “reserve army” of cheap migrant laborers. Rather than going into this much discussed topic in terms of political economy, here I try to take the standpoint of Zheng and his fellow workers, which is focused on the explicit goal of making money, – money that will ultimately allow a better living back home.

As described above, for Juan and Hao and Zheng, and many other fellow villagers, their migrant life is experienced as transitional. Looking at their make-do dorms as busy factory workers, I couldn't help but compare them to the new houses in Shang village, with nice furniture and modern electric appliances such as washing machines, DVD players, and even air conditioners, all of which are paid for by young married couples working as migrant laborers away from their home village. Hao and Zheng had such a house back home, and Juan was going to have one when she got married.⁸² Everyone has a practical goal that can only be realized at home: getting married, providing a child a good school education, saving enough money for a future business in Zhaozhou, and living a comfortable life after all the hardships endured in the first couple of decades of

⁸² In a phone conversation with Hao during the Chinese New Year in 2008, I was told that Juan was going to be married to a guy from the neighboring Zhaoying Village within a month.

adulthood. As mentioned before, in today's Shang village, an apparently stable pattern of village life has been formed: after the nine-year (sometimes less) of school education, work as migrant laborers, returns home to get married and have children who are cared for by grandparents, workers who have saved money in urban factory districts may come home to build a comfortable house for themselves and their children, and eventually be able to stay home for good. All these conventional strategies are made possible through a dense weave of village-based networks.

Here I hasten to add that the very clarity of migrant workers' aims for an eventual decent life at home in a rural area is strongly conditioned by the fact of the state's near absence in their migrant life.⁸³ Without a concerted state policy toward the social needs of the millions of migrants, appropriately known as "the floating population", it is almost impossible for them to live a desirable life in the places where they are employed, and where they are clearly categorized as "外来人口 strangers". The only place where their household registration, a foundational legal status for Chinese citizens, allows them to build a permanent family life, is at their home villages.⁸⁴

Although the Zhaozhou villagers I met in Wenzhou are away from their home villages, many details of their everyday life that I describe here display the indispensable village ties that are constantly being produced and reproduced both at their home villages

⁸³ 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.

⁸⁴ This is a complex practical problem for ambitious young migrants. Hao and Zheng are among them. After working in the shoe industry for several years, Hao once quit his job and went to a local professional school in Wenzhou City to learn shoe designing, where he earned a certificate. From then on, he has been working in the designing departments of different shoe factories instead of as a manual worker like Juan and Yu. Zheng is also a skilled laborer. A couple of years ago the brothers tried to open a small business on their own in this area, without quitting their jobs. It failed quickly. Zheng told me, as strangers here, they'd encountered many difficulties that were beyond their capacity to solve, among which were that the workers – no longer only familiars from the home village – were hard to manage: "they never finished the ordered items," Zheng said.

(e.g. marriage arrangements) and in their work places. Given the high degree of fluidity of migrant jobs, it is little wonder that the home village is the most reliable base for developing useful connections with people in a new place. This network building far from Zhaozheng meanwhile re-enhances village ties and renders them more complex. Village networks are also a means of self-protection. As described above, closely-related workers managed to live together (or at least close to each other), they go to an “underground” doctor who is from the hometown and more congenial to talk with and charges less, and more importantly, they get jobs through fellow villagers. When occasionally there is some leisure time to enjoy, such as the national holidays when factories often give one day off, the most enjoyable thing for them, I was told, was to get together with their “fellow countrymen 同乡”, cook, eat, and chat, updating each other on news and gossips relating both to things around them and to their home villages, because this is the only occasion for everyone to have a break from work at the same time.

The so-called “hollow village,” it now seems, may not be truly empty inside once we take account of these extensive village networks elsewhere. Although most young adults leave their village to work in faraway places, they stay closely connected with home both virtually (with regular phone calls, and the letters, photographs, and money sent home) and physically (making home visits in harvest seasons and the Chinese New Year, getting married at home, etc.). Village networks are constantly woven back and forth between home villages and work places, following every migrant’s footsteps, and making the village a more open horizon of social relations.

With migrant laboring becoming an indispensable component of villagers’ life spans, the substantial amount of time spent in other places has made, without a doubt, a

significant impact on everyday life back home. What does it mean to Shang villagers to gain a better living, after all? In the concluding section that follows, I will illustrate different understandings and imaginations of a desirable life between the younger and the older generations. However different these imaginaries are, I will also emphasize, they are nevertheless all constitutive of village sociality, immanent and infinitely moving.

VII. New Families, New Village

As described above, the living conditions of Shang Village migrant workers were much worse than at home, and the sense of temporary living 权宜之计 was acute. On the other hand, back in their home village, it was the money earned by those migrants that built most of the new houses. Most Shang villagers consider new-style houses to be an investment not only for their own future but also for their children's. They have greatly changed the face of Shang Village, giving it in some respects an air of prosperity. The most obvious result, nevertheless, is “hollow houses” at the heart of the “hollow village”: young couples – many of them absent – occupy the new-style houses, while their parents either continue to live in the old family house, or they stay on the first floor of the new house where the old furniture (and an older way of living) is kept. This demographic phenomenon is figured significantly in the prevalent new form of family life in the village, one in which the older generation no longer enjoys higher status in kinship arrangements. In particular, the old pattern of a main house for the elders and side rooms for the children has been reversed.

Though these inter-generational tensions capture something of the transition currently under way, it would be too reductive to associate them with the rise, however

economically determined, of “the uncivil individual” (Yan 2003). I prefer to speak here of the reactivation of a modernist individualism, which actually depends upon an ethics of subjective identity, i.e., an active individual with collective obligations. Instead of drawing on the moralistic critiques of the “deteriorating rural ethics,”⁸⁵ in this section I aim to take seriously people’s own interpretation and rationalization of this situation.

Most villagers insist that the older generation (over 55 in the 2000s) *willingly* accepts the new family housing situation: older people don’t have a common vocabulary or vision with the middle-aged and youthful generations. More importantly, people understand perfectly the necessity of working away from the village, and they are well aware of the difficulties the young migrants have been facing in this new economic and social order. Given the legal and economic situation where there aren’t many alternatives for rural villagers, former leaders of extended families have to a certain extent accepted being cut off from influence over the plans of their children and grandchildren. This transformation in patriarchal hierarchy has also played out in village affairs in ways that concern both kinship power and the state administrative system, as was evident in the project to restore a village ancestral hall, for example.

In what follows, I will first describe two families’ housing situations in Shang village. In these two families, the older generation lived separately from the younger generation, and their arrangements suggested experiences of a cultural generation gap. Meanwhile, however, people did not feel that this new form of housing necessarily suggested that family and communal life were falling apart. Instead, there were continuing interdependencies and even satisfactions in the new form of family life.

⁸⁵ Also refer to Note 12 of this chapter.

Afterwards, I will expand my discussion of the changes in kin-based power at the village level, by telling a third story about senior Shang villagers' effort to rebuild their ancestral hall. It shows a general decline of kin-based power on the broader general scale of the village, which was related to a more significant influence from the authoritarian party-state system. On the other hand, the interesting dynamic that intertwines patriarchal and official bureaucracy, I would argue, is also organic to the ever-forming base of village sociality.

The first story is about Ping's family who live on the south side of the main east-west country road, between the village store and Shijin's clinic. There are nine people in the family: Ping and his wife, their two sons and their wives, and three grandchildren.⁸⁶ Both young couples work as migrant laborers⁸⁷ and the three grandchildren (one girl, two boys) stay at home with Ping and his wife. Ping is a nice old man in his sixties,⁸⁸ who retired from a provincial coal mine and came home in 1998, so Ping holds a "non-agricultural household registration 非农户口" and he seems to be pleased with that, along with his retirement pension. No such resource is available to his fellow villagers who are registered as "agricultural household 农业户口", including Li Shu and Shijin the doctors.⁸⁹ When I first visited them, his wife however told me that their standard of living might

⁸⁶ Ping's eldest child is a daughter, who had gotten married to another village in Zhaoying Township. In Shang village, once the daughter has married, she's not counted a formal family member any longer.

⁸⁷ Their elder son and daughter-in-law were in Guangzhou City while the younger son and his wife were in Wenzhou City.

⁸⁸ I first met Ping in an 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 经常在一起玩". Curious I asked him what he meant by "play." "Chatting 拍闲话么," in local dialect he replied as a matter of course.

⁸⁹ These are the two major categories of the Chinese household registration system. Urbanites are registered as "non-agricultural household", though the latter is more often called by Shang villagers as "the household that eats commodity grains 吃商品粮的" in contrast to themselves who don't have to buy their daily grain.

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 hadn't 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 didn't go back to work but stayed to build a new house on the site of their main house.⁹⁰ Everything went smoothly: soon the new house was erected and Ping's son left again to make money as migrant laborer. The daughter-in-law stayed to look after miscellaneous moving details. One day on my way to the market street, with surprise I noticed Ping and his wife hadn't actually moved into the big new house but were still staying in their old side house, now dwarfed by the newly erected two-story mansion (See Figure 22). 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 *their* money and we don't really have a say 那是人家的钱, 我们没什么好说的." 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 味重 while we prefer a bland diet 吃得淡 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

⁹⁰ This way is much cheaper because they own the land. Ping told me it cost them 4,000RMB for a building permit 建房证, issued by the township administration, much cheaper than the 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 recently in the summer of 2008.

operas. The [living separately] is fine. [Anyway] we built the new house mainly because our old house doesn't follow the current style 撵不上形势.

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

That person 人家 goes to bed late [because of watching TV] and gets up late. We don't watch TV after 7:30pm 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] son also lives with us because he's been used to being with us, plus he likes our cooking better, and his mother comes over to eat from time to time as well.



Figure 22: Ping's old side house and the new house

It is interesting that Ping's wife referred to her daughter-in-law as “that person 人家” instead of addressing her by a kinship term or even by her name. A certain distance might have developed here. 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 (分家 family division) might have been made, supposedly by the daughter-in-law, of which the marked sign was the

separation of stove (fenzao, 分灶).⁹¹ What to be noted here is that this form of family division is not the traditional way that a son received a share in the family assets, mainly from the parents, to start his new home/house 家 *somewhere else*: the parents would not leave their own residing house. 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 for 25 years – Ping and his wife nevertheless seemed to be acceptable to this disadvantaged situation of living in their old side house instead of moving (back) in the new house. And the main reason, shown above, was the new house is built on 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 doesn't 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. Not only in the case of building a new house, 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.⁹² Another senior villager, whose two sons lived across the lane from her simple two-room hut (kitchen and bedroom, see Figure 22 below), made a similar

⁹¹ Family division has long been major topics in the Chinese kinship anthropology classics. Early studies show that family division throughout Han Chinese society generally follow customary procedures such as the calling in of witness or mediators and the working out of a division settlement (Buxbaum 1979; Johnston 1910; Fei Xiaotong 1939, etc.). In Shang village, though, it seemed to me most family divisions took place informally in an ad hoc manner when the 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, "Family Management and Family Division in Contemporary Rural China," in *China Quarterly* (130): 357-377.

⁹² As discussed in Ch2, this is also out of the consideration of the increasing request of privacy from the younger generation. Yan Yunxiang has extensively discussed the issue of private life in a rural village in northeastern China, see Yan 2003.



Figure 23: The mother's house across the street from her two sons' houses

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.”

This is not only the case for families with migrants. When I lived with Li Shu's family, I also noted an undercurrent of tension between the younger couple (his son and daughter-in-law) and the older one (Li Shu and his wife), even though by the time I left the village nobody in his family had yet migrated outside the village to work. As mentioned in the last chapter, Li Shu and his wife slept in the old house at night and came to the new house to spend the day. I also noted that Yan, though she had stayed at home, did little of the agricultural manual labor; their field work was mainly done by Li Shu's wife, while the two males ran the clinic. She never made breakfast either: that was

usually done by Hui, her husband, while Li Shu and his wife ate their breakfast before they came over to the clinic. Yan's everyday chores were helping her mother-in-law to cook the other two meals and taking care of Xuan, her one-year-old son, who with little doubt was the center of attention in the Li family. Yan also did laundry, but usually only for the three members of her small family, leaving the rest to her mother-in-law, even though almost all the laundry was done in the new house using the two-tub washer and rooftop clothes lines. Meanwhile Li Shu's wife did more cleaning of the new house than Yan did and she fed the chickens that were kept in a shed on the rooftop of the new house. Yan on the other hand watched a lot of television and often sat outside chatting with neighbors. All these habits made Yan an unpopular figure in the talk of the old folks.⁹³ Shared commentary was that Yan should have been grateful to her parents-in-law that she didn't have to leave home to "eat the bitterness" of working as a migrant laborer to support her family, thanks to Li Shu's successful clinic. But "lucky as she was, she didn't acknowledge her good luck 身在福中不知福". She was considered a slothful daughter-in-law.

Yan wasn't unaware of the older generation's disapproval. About a month after I moved in with them, Yan found a chance to come to talk to me. She told me she was unhappy about not being able to migrate outside the village to work in the cities, as most of her friends had. And she felt imprisoned in the house, "*meiyou ziyou* 没有自由 (having no freedom)". Then she went on to explain to me,

Yes I know our drug store 药铺 [the clinic] brings us enough money so that Hui and I don't have to go out to work. But it's also not easy by staying home doing nothing. I feel anxious 着急 because this life bores me. I'm only 22; I don't

⁹³ I knew this because from time to time my participation to the chatting group would turn the topic toward the doctor's family – it was known that I'd been staying with them. But I never heard people talk about it in Li Shu's clinic.

want to surrender myself to housework so early. I know Xuan's grandmother [Li Shu's wife] doesn't like me to be idle, but there aren't that many things to do in this house. If she wants to do things, why should I bother? Plus she often sees things that I don't pay attention to. I'm not interested in tilling land; no girls of my generation grew up being expected to till the land. I really don't like her attitude as if I ought to do as much as I can. I know I'm expected [to work harder] because Hui and I aren't contributing money to this family; instead we very much rely on Xuan's grandfather [Li Shu] –people come here to see him, not Hui. It actually worries me: when eventually the day comes that Xuan's grandfather dies, people will stop coming to this clinic because they don't trust Hui. That will make our life really difficult. Now everything is earned by Xuan's grandfather. I once joked with Hui that, "when your son grows up, how will you tell him: the house was earned by your grandfather, the furniture was earned by your grandfather, - everything was earned by grandfather?"

Lately, Xuan's grandfather hasn't been feeling well. It seems impossible for Hui to leave him alone in the clinic, which makes it even more difficult for me to go out to work. Still I will consider it when Xuan is older. I'm still young; I can't let my life go on like this. People also say my life won't be as easy as at home and it's foolish for me to want to be a migrant, since I already have the life that those migrants are working toward. But I won't give up the idea unless I encounter unbearable hardship like that described by some who have come home. I want to see the outside world; it's worth giving it a try. I'm also doing it for Xuan because eventually I want him to go to school in the county seat instead of here in the rural village. Also, all my friends have left home 出门 to work in cities, there's nobody left to talk to - That's also the reason why I come to talk to you, because now you seem to be the only one, besides Hui, that I can speak my mind with 说心里话.

Yan's words speak of the perceivable cultural generation gap from her younger generation's point of view. Her complaint of *meiyou ziyou* (having no freedom) is especially interesting. With little wonder, for those who were critical of her, she would have been instead *tai ziyou* (having too much freedom), without fulfilling her expected duties as a daughter-in-law. Yan's expression was typical of a new generation that is, to a certain extent, more attracted to autonomy, and individuality. Three points here are noteworthy: First, younger generation doesn't feel obliged to work on the land, and apparently they were not expected by their parents to do agricultural labor when they grew up. After many years of ideological and practical urban/rural disparity, agricultural

work has been deemed worthless and a waste of time, if not by the older generation, certainly by the younger generation. Most migrant workers that I talked with planned to “do business 做生意” when they eventually settled at home, rather than till the land.⁹⁴ In other words, despite their official registration as “agricultural household”, to end up farming the land has become the least desirable option among younger villagers.

The second point is the preference for an urban education for their children, as Yan expressed above. According to my observation, many migrant couples had moved back to the village once their children reached the age to go to junior high school. Even if they couldn’t get their children into a better school in the county town, they would do their best to encourage the next generation to get more education than themselves, at least to finish the ninth grade. And, once again, their children are not expected to end up doing agricultural manual labor.

Last but not the least, is Yan’s emphasis on earning her own money because she didn’t feel comfortable with her and her husband’s reliance on the parents-in-law. This deeper concern echoes the way in which Ping’s wife accepted her daughter-in-law’s separation because the new house was built on the young couple’s money. One may call it a new form of subjectivity stemming from the predominant free market economy and a national culture of “getting rich first.” For rural villagers, I would argue, this acceptance of greater youth autonomy is more like a reluctant but realistic adaptation to the ubiquitous demand for “money”, nowadays a catchword in Shang villagers’ everyday conversation.

⁹⁴ In a recent phone conversation with Hao, for example, he told me that in his home visit during the Chinese New Year, he had spent over 130 thousand RMB to buy a house on the market street for his future business, which he plans to open in about four to five years when he finally stops working away from home.

Nevertheless, interdependencies are still much anticipated in the new form of family life. Despite of her complaints of *meiyou ziyou* (having no freedom), Yan stayed because she couldn't just leave without considering the whole family. On the other hand, Ping and his wife, living in the side house, continued to take care of their grandchildren. Even more important, if less immediately visible, is the common practice of children sending money home to their parents. And for the parents, money may become an everyday concern but it is never an end in itself. Li Shu told me explicitly that he never thought of the money he earned as his own property, "It'll all belong to them [Hui and Yan]". It's common among the elders to save up the money their children have sent home, not for their own use but for their children and grandchildren. Ping and his wife lived on his pension (600 plus RMB per month) and their land; they didn't even use the money their children sent home for the grandchildren. They were raising the grandchildren at their own expense. As Ping said, "they have to build their new house, which is a big thing 大事. We're old now; we have no need for money."

When I asked Ping and his wife what would be their vision of life in the future, he said, "We are quite content with our present life. People at our age, if the children are all married and their families all have money and grain, then there isn't much for us old people to worry about. We have food to eat, wine to drink, and money to spend, and the only thing we have to do is take care of the grandchildren, - don't you think we are bound to have a happy life 快活?" Meanwhile, on the other hand, they noted to me that they knew it well that the burden of life has now shifted to their sons and daughters-in-law. And they took it as their responsibility to look after the new house when their daughter-in-law left for the city to meet her husband about a month later.

Certainly, changes have occurred in family relations. The older generation does not claim the power to direct the lives of their younger kin any longer. Even Li Shu, the economic pillar of his family, didn't really assume an authoritarian role. Later I was told that after I left Shang Village, Yan also left for a city in prosperous Guangdong Province to work in a private clinic as a nurse, with the agreement of her family members.⁹⁵

Generally speaking, it seems to me that family priority has shifted downward to the next generation, even in some respect to the grandchildren and under. This is closely related to the undesirability of an agricultural life. If, as I discussed above, the young migrants work hard to earn a better living at home, "home" to them is not literally their farming village any longer, but an approximate place that is nevertheless close to their kith and kin.⁹⁶ And the hope of this middle-generation for a "better" future, learnt through their migrant life involved in the global market and consumerism, tends to be deferred to the third generation and even further, down several generations. While for the older villagers, as Ping pictured, "once you have passed the age of half-a-hundred, you become useless. Like the old saying goes, at 60 it's like being buried alive."

These fundamental changes in the structure of sociality are taking place not only within families. Shang village, in a general sense, has also experienced a shift of patriarchal power from village elders to the official administrative hierarchy. The following story shows clearly an organic dynamic, influenced by the political economy of the reform era, between senior villagers and the village branch party secretary, Zhishu.

⁹⁵ But she worked there for only half a year, leaving home in July of 2006 and coming back in February of 2007 for the Chinese New Year. One main reason was that she didn't have a nursing license and she planned to stay home and pass the certificate examination. However she stayed on since then, and just gave birth to her second son in July, 2008, for which they paid a fine of about 2,400 RMB.

⁹⁶ One may say they also *have to* go home because of the household registration system. In agreement with this, but I don't want to lose sight of the importance for them of coming back to a familiar place where their habituses are formed and social networks are centered.

It was February 12, 2006, the fifteenth day of Spring Festival, the Chinese New Year. The newly rebuilt village temple, the Temple of the Yellow Dragon 黄龙庙,⁹⁷ had just held its very first temple fair since it had been torn down in 1957 during the national mobilization of “irrigation systems 水利化”⁹⁸. This was quite an exciting event, though mainly it was Shang surnamed families who attended because this was the temple their ancestors had built in memory of their successful arrival from Shanxi, a neighboring province, during the Ming dynasty. I didn’t see many Lis, Wangs, or others at the temple fair.⁹⁹



Figure 24: The Temple of Yellow Dragon

⁹⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the Temple of Yellow Dragon, see Conclusion: Discerning the cultural.

⁹⁸ Villagers considered this campaign a prelude of the Great Leap Forward, when many trees were felled to build an unnecessarily large number of wells, and finally the campaign came to dismantle all the village temples such as smaller temples of the earth god, and the major temple of Shang Village, the Temple of Yellow Dragon. Most of the wells turned out to be a waste, without water. – “Just for the sake of appearances 就是个样式,” people told me.

⁹⁹ Of course, both Lis and Wangs have their own temples somewhere else.

Then I heard Jianzhou, a villager retired from his job in a county liquor factory, who is now in charge of the Temple along with other two senior Shang villagers, announce a meeting to be held in the afternoon in the meeting room of the Village Committee courtyard, “concerning the rebuilding of our ancestral hall.” He concluded his brief remark with some excitement. Zhishu was in the crowd, but he was not in the position to announce this meeting, he told me later, because it was “house affairs 家务事.” However, it is significant that the “house affairs” meeting was allowed to take place in the Shang Village Committee’s meeting room. Most male seniors were asked to come to the meeting, and Jianzhou was presiding. Upon the commencement of the meeting, Zhishu was invited to give a talk. He gave a report to the elders of his achievements during the past year. Zhishu’s talk didn’t seem restricted to the issues relating to Shang families; he not only talked about the temple, the ancestral hall, but also his project of building a *Wenhua Guangchang* 文化广场(culture plaza), which is to be located in a site that belongs to the whole administrative village. The dynamic between Zhishu and the senior Shangs was interesting: mutual respect out of the intertwining of patriarchal and official bureaucracy.

The elders didn’t seem to care about the *Wenhua Guangchang* and Zhishu’s other projects. After Zhishu’s talk, they started to discuss strategies for raising funds to restore the Shang ancestral temple, such as how to send out letters to family members who now live outside of the village but who have more money. Zhishu left the meeting room while they were still engaged with this topic; for him, to build an ancestral hall belonged to the category of “folk activities 民间活动”. It would have been inappropriate for him, a Party branch secretary, to participate in such “house affairs”.

One month later, when I asked Jianzhou about the process of fundraising for the ancestral hall, he sighed and told me that this kind of activity *has to* involve Zhishu's active participation and that by rights he could participate as a legitimate member of the Shang families, instead of as Party branch secretary. Because "the Shangs who live elsewhere outside the village will listen to him 他讲话外边的人能听, that was how we managed to rebuild the Yellow Dragon Temple." Jianzhou explained to me, "but now his mind is so occupied by that *Wenhua Guangchang*, leaving only us seniors to make arrangements 张罗. Without his lead, I'm afraid we will end up getting nothing." Jianzhou is three generation above Zhishu.

Obviously, the official administrative responsibilities outweigh "family affairs". Village sociality suffuses Shang villagers' everyday life, and state forms, as discussed above, are diagrammatic features of this plane of immanence. They are important, but they do not replace the many forms of interdependency and cooperation that continue to make life possible in the village. In the chapter that follows, through my account of Zhishu's project of building the *Wenhua Guangchang*, I will discuss how the state makes its presence felt among the most mundane necessities of village life.

Chapter 3: Wenhua Guangchang, the culture plaza

In previous chapters I have depicted the contours of everyday life at Shang village, people's daily practices in their persisting collective life, their lived relationships to space (house, land, market, and communal space), their situated conceptions of hygiene, and the immanent social relations in Shang village. I also described the newly formed family relations and anxieties generated out of the overall re-structuring of social relations, especially focusing on the impact of the tide of migration on village life.

This chapter deals more explicitly with local politics and explores how different actors (including ordinary villagers, retired village cadre, the village Party branch secretary, and township officials) are situated in the national discourse of development and urbanization/modernization. I will start with an account of Shang village's *Wenhua Guangchang* (culture plaza) project, positioning it in the specific Chinese discourses of *wenhua* (culture)¹, *wenming* (civilization), and *suzhi* (population quality), all of which

¹ In classical Chinese *wenhua* denotes the state of *wen* or aesthetic cultivation in contrast to *wu* or military prowess; it connotes an acquired learning and refinement that has little to do with the "peasantry". "Culture" on the other hand, in its early use in European languages such as Latin, French, and English, referred to "husbandry, the tending of natural growth" (Williams 1977: 87); by this definition one may argue that in Euro-American languages "peasants" are inherently related to "culture".

According to Raymond Williams, even though the modern sense of "culture" has gone beyond the physical reference, regarding a more abstract "general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" and the "works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (Williams 1977: 90), it also refers to a way of life, a material process of human development thanks to the influence of the German concept of *Kultur* (also ref. Norbert Elias) in late 19th century, which was "decisively introduced in English by Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1870)" (Williams 1977: 91).

It was at the turn of the twentieth century when *bunka*, the Japanese *kanji* translation of the English word "culture" was borrowed back by Chinese intellectuals, such that the Chinese term *wenhua* started to carry the modern notion of "culture," as Lydia Liu indicates in *Translingual Practice*. Liu

have taken on new significance in the newly implemented national initiative of “building a new socialist countryside.” I will show how under the hegemonic discourse of “lack” in rural areas, *wenhua* has become an alienating concept for villagers while at the same time a fashionable word for those who perceive villages and villagers as lacking.

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* (population quality). The concept of *nongmin suzhi* (peasant quality) has become salient in various accounts of the “rural problem” (Chen 2002).² In a sense, *suzhi* can be considered by and large 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 those who can purchase the commodities that express their “good taste” (Anagnost 1997, esp. Ch.3). As Woronov has described in her 2003 dissertation, drawing on Mo Yan’s 1988 novel *The Garlic Ballads*: “the bodies of urbanites – like the cities that produce them – are clean, modern, strong, and controlled, and are thus able to transform the nation appropriately. China’s rural people are literally made of different – and inferior – “stuff” than the urbanites,

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). Moreover, as Li Hsiao-ti explains in his discussion of “Making a Name and a Culture for the Masses”, in 1920s and 1930s *wenhua* with its modern meaning was “found” (or “made” according to Li) at the grassroots level by Chinese intellectuals, officials, and cadres. Along with the neologism of *zhong*众 (the masses), *wenhua* was thence invested in both “the mission of enlightenment and the function of entertainment” for a radical social transformation. See Li, “Making a Name and a Culture for the Masses in Modern China,” in *positions* 9 (1):29-68.

² A newly published book entitled *On Chinese Peasants’ Suzhi* 中国农民素质论, 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.

embodying the wrong kind of corporeality to transform the nation to modernity, wealth and power”.³

The *suzhi* discourse keeps positioning the 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 articulations about their own lives. In its own complex way, the *Wenhua Guangchang* project demonstrates this systematic deafness to actual rural life and concerns. And so 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.

Nevertheless, there were the “cultured” households of the countryside, at least prior to the wars,⁴ which were home to scholars, aesthetes, examination candidates, doctors, scribes, diviners, priests, and so forth. As a matter of fact, *wenhua* is literally “wen-ization”, meaning an acquired learning and refinement – indeed a meaning approximate to “civil-ization” or education. And it was understood as a process of moral transformation through the Confucian civilizing project, an educational process conducted by the literati elite and inherited through generations. Filled with history and memory, culture has a real presence in village life, even when it is seen as utterly refined and sophisticated.

In the last section, I will describe my encounters with Shang villagers’ very own “*lao guiju* 老规矩 (old ways)” and “*fengsu* 风俗 (customs)”, modes of expression that villagers

³ See Woronov 2003, *Transforming the Future: “Quality” children and the Chinese Nation*, diss., University of Chicago.

⁴ Ref. Duara 1988. *Culture, power, and the state: rural North China, 1900-1942*.

employed in lieu of the loaded word “wenhua.” The local process of villagers producing their very own village gazetteer 村志, 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)⁵. However, in the government-advocated plan for comprehensive rural development of “a new countryside”, economic development, narrowly defined, still occupies the position of highest priority in state policy. The notion that wenhua refers mainly to one’s level of formal education or degree of technical knowledge seems to be quite natural in village usage today.⁶ Likewise, well-intentioned urban intellectuals tend to orient their social research in the countryside to an economic needs-assessment approach that 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 Imposed from above in an official discourse and not an everyday term for rural people, wenhua has become a politicized label, so does tell some of the outcomes of Zhishu’s Wenhua Guangchang project discussed at the end of this chapter.

⁵ Ref. John M. Flower 2004, “A Road is Made: Roads, Temples, and Historical Memory in Ya’an County, Sichuan,” in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 3 (August 2004): 649-685.

⁶ The simple phrase *wenhua shuiping*, meaning level of education attained, has been in official usage written on most Chinese identification records, from the household registration card to passport application forms.

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 Descent into a Quagmire*, first published in 1998 (revised edition published in 2003). Despite loads of astounding facts collected from different kinds of media on socioeconomic inequality and injustice, the author insists that the existence of peasantry with its intrinsically low *suzhi* has blocked the Chinese modernization, or “Westernization” indeed.

I. A New Socialist Countryside

It was a cold Sunday after the spring festival, and the overcast sky made me reluctant to go out. I hid in my room, working on notes. It was not long before I heard my name called by somebody downstairs. To my surprise, it was Zhishu, the village Party branch secretary 村支书⁸ who had never taken any initiative to approach me before. Running down to meet him, I was greeted by this very first sentence: “Is your camera here with you?” After I said yes, he asked me to go on a trip with him to visit another village and take some pictures as his “data” 资料. “After lunch there’ll be a van coming to pick you up,” he said while walking out. Seeing my excitement about this unexpected invitation, my host Li Shu kindly reminded me that it would snow soon and I’d better get myself bundled up. It did seem unusual to plan such a trip in such bad weather. Why couldn’t Zhishu wait?

The van arrived. I noticed it belonged to the township government and thought to myself that the township officials seemed to be working hard, given that it was the weekend.⁹ Besides Zhishu, the head of the village committee 村主任 and the village accountant were also in the van; they are the other two most important personnel in the village administration. We stopped at the courtyard of the township government offices to pick up Mr. Tong, an associate party secretary of Zhaoying township, whom I had never met before. Zhishu didn’t bother to introduce me to him and Mr. Tong didn’t seem to care about my presence either. There had been a big reshuffling of all the township

⁸ 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. Ref. Feuchtwang and Wang 2001. *Grassroots Charisma: Four local leaders in China*. London and New York: Routledge. Huang 1989, and Kipnis 1997 also reflect this power structure.

⁹ This nevertheless would not be the case for village level cadres since there’s little distinction between weekdays and weekends in rural life.

officials across the county the previous December, as the government prepared for the national implementation of the historic first abolition of the agricultural tax starting from January 1 of 2006.¹⁰ Recently transferred from a position in a district of the county seat, Tong was new to Zhaoying township as well as to Shang village. It turned out that it was he who had arranged this trip. From his conversation with Zhishu I learned that he was impressed by Zhishu's achievement in improving the country roads within Shang village.¹¹ And he wanted to nominate Shang village to the county as the model village in Zhaoying Township. To achieve this, he told Zhishu that he nevertheless would have to have an even more impressive project than simply building paved country roads. If Shang village were to become a model village, he would be able to obtain 250,000 RMB in financial support from the county for a development project.¹² So that was the reason

¹⁰ To exempt villagers from agricultural taxation, in 2006 the central government planned to allocate over 78 billion RMB and the provincial/municipal governments about 25 billion RMB to administration and services in the countryside, which however would still leave a discrepancy of more than 10 billion RMB compared to the taxation revenues in previous years. For example, the total agricultural taxation revenue was about 120 billion RMB in 1998. To settle the discrepancy as well as to transform the grassroots' administration, the Chinese government started to promote a reduction in force at the township level so as to squeeze out "unnecessary expenses". Ref. Chinese Government's official web portal: http://www.gov.cn/xwfb/2006-02/22/content_207097.htm. In Zhaozhou county, my field site, there however didn't seem to be a substantial reduction of administrative staff, but a reshuffle of officials instead.

¹¹ 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" 村村通 and added to the "roads between households" 户户通. According to the published documentation, by 2010 the Chinese government aims to have paved or concrete roads in 80% of all Chinese villages.

¹² At the end of 2004 the central government announced that China's development had reached the stage of "industry rewarding agriculture and cities supporting the countryside" (ref. the Chinese Central Government website: http://www.gov.cn/xwfb/2006-02/22/content_207097.htm). Since 2005 the countryside has witnessed an increasing infrastructural investment. For example in 2006 the central government claimed to have spent 40.4 billion RMB in rural area, an increase of 12.42% 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. Ref. http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2005-12/30/content_3990833.htm

why we were taking this trip: to learn a model village's experience, to collect "data" from a successful example.

It had started to snow shortly after we left the courtyard of the Zhaoying township government offices. It was a long drive. When we finally arrived at Meng village the whole world had turned white, and big flakes of snow kept falling. Compared to Shang, Meng village was relatively small. Since our goal was to see the layout and infrastructure such as the ditches and roads of the village, we kept our eyes open on our way to the courtyard of the village committee offices. The houses by the road were all painted white, making the whole village look tidy, especially in the snow. Zhishu didn't seem to be impressed, however. He commented on Meng village's predominant old bungalow-style houses in comparison to Shang village, where two-story new-style houses dominated the main country road. On the occasions when we saw one or two new-style houses, he would point out that "it has only a single story." Finally an artificial pond with concrete sidewalls and bottom caught his attention; he mentioned to his two colleagues that it was cleaner looking than the mud-bottomed lotus pond back in Shang village.

We did not stay long in Meng village. It seemed to me that Zhishu had come here mainly out of polite deference to his superior official Tong's arrangements. Except for asking about the concrete pond, Zhishu didn't say much to his counterpart, the Party branch secretary of Meng village. Because of the snow I didn't fulfill my task as photographer, which no longer seemed to matter anyway. But I did take quite a few pictures in the meeting room of Meng village committee, where the four big portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao hanging on the front wall arrested my attention right away.

On our way back Zhishu assured Tong, “I can do it.” I could almost guess the second half of his sentence, “not a big deal.”

At this point, I should provide some background for this trip. It was February 26. Five days before, the Chinese central government had issued its No.1 document for the year 2006,¹³ in which “building a new socialist countryside” was put as the government’s primary task. A central government official explained at the press conference sponsored by the State Council Information Office on February 22, 2006 that,

[T]he widening gap between urban and rural areas should be dealt with in real earnest. Since China is a populous nation with rural population making up the majority, bridging the urban-rural gap is bound to be a long process. However, top concern should be given to this process, as the gap tends to grow wider against the backdrop of accelerated industrialization and urbanization at present. The farmers’ per-capita net income and the urban dwellers’ disposable income were 3,255 yuan (US\$402.8) and 10,439 yuan (US\$1292) respectively in 2005, with the latter figure 3.22 times the former. Meanwhile, the rural-urban divide is more compelling in terms of infrastructure and social undertakings such as education, health care and wenhua, a drawback that greatly hinders the improvement of farmers’ quality.¹⁴

It seems that the government is determined to “bridge” the discrepancy between the rural and urban areas, not only from an economic perspective but with a whole package of development policies that involve both infrastructure and superstructure. According to the published documentation, “building a new socialist countryside” means “an all-inclusive, systematic whole that includes the following five aspects: enhanced production 生产发展, comfortable standard of living 生活宽裕, civilized social atmosphere 乡风文明,

¹³ Published annually by the Chinese central government, the No. 1 document shows what issues concern the government the most and therefore it is considered the most important document for the year. See Introduction for more details about history of this crucial policy document.

¹⁴ Note here the translation is original from the official English website. See Chinese Government’s Official Web Portal: http://english.gov.cn/2006-02/23/content_208437.htm. See discussion below about the changeability of the wording from “peasants” to “farmers”.

neat and clean villages 村容整洁 and democratic management 管理民主¹⁵”. It would be hard to make sense out of these euphemistic phrases without referring back to the earlier statement in this Number One Document that China’s development had reached the stage of “industry promoting agriculture and cities bringing along the countryside” 以工促农、以城带乡. That is to say, rural China is expected to reach the level of its industrialized urban counterpart in all respects, from production to civilization. Clearly, the urbanites have gone ahead and are now waiting to be caught up with. Meanwhile, on the other hand, it is also made clear that

*A new socialist countryside is an essential requirement for expanding domestic 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 percent of the total retail sales of consumer products in China were realized in counties and rural areas under counties in 2005.*¹⁶

This passage shows that attention to rural issues has not yet strayed away from the viewpoints of those in power, the elites and urbanites who, as fuller participants in a national economy would gain benefits from increased peasant consumption. On the other hand, as the Chinese sociologist Sun Liping has underscored, this position reflects the politico-economic social tensions due to the increasing gap between urban and rural. He criticizes this “cleavage” in Chinese society, with its high potential for social instability.¹⁷ The “building a new socialist countryside” policy, it seems, is made mainly to secure the industrial sector which counts for more in the national economy, and the urban

¹⁵ Retrieved from <http://china.org.cn/e-news/news060222.htm>, March 20, 2007.

¹⁶ Ibid. Note here in this official English translation, *nongmin* is rendered as “farmers” instead of “peasants”.

¹⁷ A professor of sociology based at Tsinghua University, Sun Liping explicitly discusses the “cleavage” in Chinese society since the 1990s, pointing out there is a perceptible discrepancy between the 1980s and 1990s, during which period 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, esp. Chapter 5.

enterprisers/middle class who cannot afford political instability. Despite increasing attention from the state, therefore, the rural issue is still “symbolically central but practically peripheral” (Stallybrass and White 1986: 20).

Granted, the rural-urban divide is by no means a phenomenon unique to China. This policy mirrors Deng’s “let a part of the population get rich first and then everyone will get rich together” policy, which some see as symptomatic of a general neoliberal state orientation (Anagnost 1997, Harvey 2005, Yan Hairong 2003, etc.). In particular, the policy might be seen as an application of a “trickle-down” approach (Harvey 2005: 64-65), in this case not only from the wealthy to the poor but specifically from the industrialized sector to agriculture, from urban elites to rural peasants. I however want to concern myself with the state’s claim of “a socialist countryside”. What value does “socialist” hold in this national policy, if it is indeed structured with a neoliberal orientation? Is this a form of “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics,” as David Harvey has paraphrased Deng’s “socialism with Chinese characteristic”?¹⁸ Is this phrase mere lip-service?

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 countryside” 新农村, a mighty slogan promoted by the current leadership. The fact that the narrative of “wenhua” and “new” continue to matter in the 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

¹⁸ David Harvey 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

home a fundamental question of the politics of culture in Chinese socialism. What immediately comes to mind is the unforgettable “Cultural Revolution,” wherein the slogan of “learning from the peasants” was in vogue. This is not the place for a genealogy of the rural –urban divide, but the legacy of this particular way of framing peasants is powerful, even though the meaning of “wenhua” has changed, both for the Party and for peasants themselves.

In my discussion, therefore, I will keep the concept of “culture” open to different understandings and interpretations, depending on who is using it and under what circumstances. At times, especially in official discourse, the notion of “wenhua” may be interchangeable with hegemony in the sense of a “whole social process” and in relation to “specific distributions of power and influence,” as Williams has explained (1977:108). Dirlik has also discussed the similarity between Mao’s emphasis on culture and consciousness and Gramsci’s contribution to Marxist appreciation of culture, which “made it into a constituent element of social life.”¹⁹ However on occasions the official definitions of culture also refer to literature and art, invoking while also in a sense betraying a long history of folkloric politicization of rural expressive forms.²⁰

II. Building the *Wenhua Guangchang*

The official Number One Document emphasizes rural economic development as the nation’s central task, and the rhetoric of “a new socialist countryside” seems to have

¹⁹ See Dirlik “The Predicament of Marxist Revolutionary Consciousness: Mao Zedong, Antonio Gramsci, and the Reformulation of Marxist Revolutionary Theory,” in *Marxism in the Chinese Revolution*, page 125-148. 2005.

²⁰ Li Hsiao-ti has shown this clearly in his analysis of the folkloric movement advocated by Qu Qiubai and other intellectuals in 1920s and 1930s, which I will discuss in the end of this chapter. See Li, Hsiao-t’i. 2001. Making a Name and a Culture for the Masses in Modern China, in *positions* 9 (1):29-68.

provided an even broader stimulus for local authorities. Soon after our trip, Zhishu started to fix the lotus pond, which was usually called the “Old Pit” 老坑 by villagers. Sitting on the northwest corner of the intersection of the two main village roads, the Old Pit is a medium-sized pond, roughly 30 meters by 40 meters. To me the Old Pit looked just like many other ponds in the village, with several trees scattered along the edge and filled with muddy water. After I moved into Li Shu’s house I found out that the Old Pit had been providing abundant lotus roots over the past couple of winters. Locally popular but relatively expensive (1.20 – 1.30 yuan per 500 gram at the local market) in comparison to potatoes (0.50 yuan per 1,000 gram) and turnips (0.50 yuan per 1,500 gram), the lotus root is a desirable vegetable food for banquets or important guests. Li Shu’s family was among the ones who especially benefited from living by the Old Pit. Every once in a while during the harvest season for lotus roots, which normally lasts from the tenth lunar month through the Spring Festival, Zhishu would drain the water in the pond and people in the neighborhood would come to gather the lotus roots; this had been a routine. We had a great afternoon just before Spring Festival when people gathered around the Old Pit to get their share of lotus roots. Having enjoyed dishes made with lotus roots, I was amazed to see the tasty roots being picked out of the slimy blackish mud. Meanwhile I also noted that people said thank you to Zhishu’s wife before they left with the roots. This surprised me: didn’t the Old Pit belong to the whole village? Later I was told that there were no lotus roots before Zhishu built his new house and a hog shed beside the pit.²¹ There was nowhere but the Old Pit to funnel the daily waste produced by Zhishu’s

²¹ Later I learned that Zhishu’s new house was built in the name of collective development. On the documents it was listed as a hog farm that was recommended by the township office. Compared to other villagers he therefore didn’t have to buy the land to build his new house and, in theory, his house is subject to any possible changes decided by the Shang village committee. In general, to build a house by the main

20 hogs; it was flushed down a concrete conduit to the Pit. And the Old Pit is connected to a ditch that goes all the way to the river further south.

It was after building their house and hog shed that Zhishu and his wife started to grow the lotus roots, which don't require any particular attendance other than the provision of a lot of fertile mud. And they had been generous, according to Li Shu, because they gave out the delicious lotus roots for free. Now the water in the Pit was drained out again, and people gathered once more for the lotus roots. But this time was perhaps for the last time. After the New Year the mud was dug out to expose the firmer earth underneath, and concrete was applied on the sidewalls to make the Old Pit "neat" and "clean." Moreover, the lotus pond was only part of Zhishu's project. His grand plan was to build a *Wenhua Guangchang* (culture plaza), which was to be located across the road to the south of the village committee courtyard. He was trying to efficiently accomplish three tasks at once: redoing the lotus pond, expanding and paving the gateway of village committee courtyard, and building the *Wenhua Guangchang* (from now on, except for necessary notifications I will refer to it as "the plaza"). All three projects were started almost at the same time. A bulldozer drove into the Old Pit, and later a front-end loader truck came to continue digging the mud out of the Old Pit after the bulldozer had worked its way to the front yard of village committee, where the muddy gateway was to be expanded into a concrete front yard. The yard was planned to connect the village committee to the plaza lying on the other side of the east-west village road. This project was a big deal, with the *Wenhua Guangchang* as its centerpiece. The plaza would replace 10 *mu*²² of wheat land.

road, a villager has to pay 10,000 RMB or more, depending on how big s/he wants his house to be. The land for Zhishu's house would have normally cost about 15,000 RMB.

²² One *mu* equals 0.167 acre, or 1 hectare equals 15 *mu*.

According to Zhishu it was the village committee's decision to create the plaza.²³ But everyone in the village knew it was his idea.



Figure 25: From the Old Pit to Lotus Pond

One afternoon I heard auntie, Li Shu's wife, calling her daughter-in-law to grab a basket for her to take to the wheat land, the land that was soon to be bulldozed for the plaza. It was early March, spring time, and the wheat was growing but still green. People had been grazing their pigs, sheep, goats, and cows there. Though the wheat would not mature to produce grain, the remaining stalks could still be taken as fodder for chickens, so women in the neighborhood gathered on the land, baskets or sacks in hand, trying to get as much as they could. Still, walking out the front gate with a big bamboo basket on her arm, auntie sighed to me: "Having experienced the hardship of 1960 [i.e., the great

²³ The land has been collectively owned since 1950s, soon after the land reform movement carried out by the then newly established communist government. Although since the late 1970s and early 1980s land has been distributed to households 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.

famine], I could have never imagined people today would not let the green wheat grow but cut it just to feed chickens. What a waste.”

The construction went very fast. The land for the plaza was leveled and colorful tiles were arranged carefully on top of gravel. Then one day four exercise machines arrived in bright colors of red, blue and yellow. These exercise machines were very common in the city parks all over China, but for me it was the first time to see them show up in the countryside. A pair of old basketball backboards were moved over from somewhere else and two concrete ping pong tables seemed to erect themselves overnight. Finally there were four pavilions left to be worked on, their still empty bases occupying the four corners of the plaza.²⁴



Figure 26: The Wenhua Guangchang

²⁴ When I left Shang village in late June of 2006, these four pavilions were still unfinished because there had always been a lack of laborers. When the weather got warmer and villagers became busier with their fieldwork again, Zhishu could do nothing but halt the construction and wait till the next fallow season.

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. On the main roads right beside the Old Pit and plaza villagers came and went, 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. Few except for Zhishu, the occasional village committee member, a few school kids, or I would stop to watch. Most people ignored these scenes of an emerging “new countryside.” Zhishu was the one who spent most of his time there, squatting, and silently watching the machinery work or having conversations with whoever came to approach him; cigarette in hand, his dark face, I felt, was always sullen.

What did villagers think of this *Wenhua Guangchang* project, anyway? Many thought of the plaza as a recreation area 娱乐场所, which, as a matter of fact, they did not see as a necessarily bad thing. One villager told me,

*In villages we have fewer collective entertainment activities than we did in the past when the production brigade would always hold such activities when there were some big issues [to be addressed]. Now [for entertainment] we just come to this spot [where we are now sitting around] to chat with others and happily laugh together, or to play poker, which is also just for fun. As for gambling, it never goes far in rural villages, it usually costs only 20 to 30 yuan to play half a day. It's just a diversion. Therefore, if there would be a recreation area and everyone gets to spend some time there, for certain that would be nicer. After all we would have something to do there, to kill time. Especially in fallow seasons like now it's not easy to pass the time. 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 said has three particular curative effects, for cold, hunger, and sleepiness. Because when playing poker you can forget the freezing cold.*²⁵

²⁵ Gambling has often been cited as an example of “deteriorating” rural mores, a dominant topic in mass media discussions of the “three-dimensional” rural problems 三农问题. In a recent article in People’s Daily <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40557/49139/49145/4702282.html>, asking “what’s wrong with my village?” the author concerned himself with his home village’s “big problem” of gambling. Having heard the villager’s comments here, however, to me it became understandable that in villages gambling very often is “just a diversion 玩意儿.” Perhaps card-playing is an important form of sociality and should not be seen as a waste of time. The stereotype of rural gambling as a sign of “non-civilization” 乡风不文明, by and large, is an urban-centric point of view.

This villager was not opposed to the idea of a *wenhua guangchang* per se. After all, there was not much collective life in the village compared to Maoist times, when people were always gathered together either to labor in the fields or to attend the obligatory assembly meetings.²⁶ A Yi, my first hostess, once told me that she knows fewer residents of Shang village now, because there had been so few village assembly meetings in recent years and as a consequence she had fewer encounters with the whole village except for those in her own team.²⁷ Very often residents go to team meetings only when it comes to the issue of land redistribution.²⁸ And this meeting, now lacking a public place, is usually held on the land (when the land is to be redistributed) or just alongside the village road (when the team leader is to be elected).

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 harder and harder for village governments to fulfill national mandates such as family planning, grain collection and various local projects initiated in the name of “developing” the rural

²⁶ In *Private Life Under Socialism*, Yan Yunxiang gives the strong impression of a negative privatization in Xiajia Village in Northeastern China, where he also notes the absence in the recent reform era of traveling entertainments like operas and acrobats and outdoor film screenings. See Yan 2003.

²⁷ Many have assumed the grassroots administration, after the dissolution of People’s Commune System, is now xian 县, xiang 乡, and cun 村. And indeed they are the official terms for the three levels of rural administration. As a matter of fact, however, the commune structure has remained the same size with only names of the units changed: in hierarchical order, the commune was changed into *xiang* or *zhen* (township), the production brigade was changed into *cun* (village), and the production team was changed into *zu* (team). For a detailed description of the historical change of the 3-level grassroots administrative units, see Gao Mobo, *Gao Village: A Portrait of Rural Life in Modern China*, 1999.

²⁸ The determination of when to redistribute the land varies among the teams in Shang Village, having to do with the population change within the households due to births, deaths, marriages, migration, etc. People also try to be fair so that in theory different families take the poor lands in turn. But it is no surprise that corruption may happen since the team cadres (mainly the leader and the accountant) are the ones who make the decisions, even though it is supposed to be based upon villagers’ requests. In general some teams do the redistribution once a year, some twice a year, some adopt a longer term. Villagers thought the rarer redistribution better, because they then would be able to attend to their “own” land more carefully. Also, a longer term of control encourages more improvements to the land (e.g. irrigation structures).

economy.²⁹ On the other hand, villagers understood the difficulty village cadres face nowadays in their work. This became clear to me when one sunny winter afternoon I joined the chatting group that was always sitting by the village store. After Shilang, the leader of the fourth production team dropped by for a pack of cigarettes, people started to talk about how the fourth team had gone 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 a while. 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.³⁰ [Plus] the state is not in favor of those 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 the collective projects, 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 would not. What's the problem here? There should be a policy that decides what is legitimate to collect money for and what is not.

I had heard Zhishu's complaints about getting money from his villagers to build the village roads before. 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 most villagers had reached an agreement, concurring that building the village road legitimately required collecting money. All the same, to them the issue of

²⁹ Also see Philip Huang's discussion in *The peasant family and rural development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350-1988*, Stanford University Press, 1990.

³⁰ 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 村民代表 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.

building the plaza now centered upon the legitimacy of collecting money for it: where would the money come from? As a matter of fact, this was self-evident to Shang villagers, who know the situation too well. In one of the occasions of chatting at the village store, one 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. Meanwhile it's not allowed to have compulsory labor for village business any more. The zhishu (party branch secretary) has to pay for it [building the plaza], otherwise everyone would say, "Why am I supposed to do this? I don't have to." In the past one day of compulsory labor was paid at 12 yuan, now the price has gone up to 15 yuan at least, because the ones who go out to work [for private businesses] as unskilled laborers even get over 20 yuan a day. He'll have to collect money from the masses 群众; there's no other choice. In this business, to be honest, the zhishu himself won't pay out his [own?] money either. The only solution, then, is for the production team to sell 8 or 10 mu of land to villagers for a year at a price of 100 or 120 yuan per mu [to pay for the labor].

According to Mr. Tong, the county-level government would not award Shang village the sum of 250 thousand yuan until the *Wenhua Guangchang* was finished and could be held up as an achievement. Where did the money come from? Soon I learnt that Zhishu did hire about 20 of his fellow villagers at 20 yuan a day. I still remember an unforgettable scene when I walked over to the construction site of the plaza one day: a group of grey-haired old men were paving the site – the young people of Shang village were mostly out of the village, either working far away in cities or in private businesses closer-by that would pay more than village “collective” affairs. The men worked silently, with Zhishu squatting alongside, supervising, sullen faced. “It’s like a labor camp!” I said to myself. I could not help contrasting this image with the ones depicted in Maoist posters of collective labor undertaken with heightened joy.³¹ On some other occasions I

³¹ For example, see Judith Farquhar’s discussion of “Wintertime Warmth” in *Appetites: Food and sex in postsocialist China*, where she discusses the realism of a Maoist-era poster of “healthy, active, committed bodies,” page 20-21, 2002. And Stefan Landsberger *Chinese Propaganda Posters*, 1995.

did see smiles and jokes among the old guys who were working there, and Zhishu who was standing aside with his arms folded joined in. Even though people joked with Zhishu at times, I had never seen him do manual labor. His insistence on “supervising” made this even less comparable to collective labor, where there was less of a commoditized idea of “getting the work you paid for” out of the workers.



Figure 27: Laboring on the culture plaza

Before our trip to the model village, Zhishu had actually mentioned to me his idea for the *Wenhua Guangchang*. 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 steadily by feeding dried peanut stalks into the brick stove, and not minding the smoke filling in the kitchen. He talked more than I expected,

given that he is known for his reticence.³² I ventured a question about what changes he perceived in Shang village, and he said,

Shang village hasn't changed much in these years. Talking about relations between people, however, they are getting shallower and shallower; they are not as genuine as before. ... Are rural villages pitiful? Indeed they are pitiful, 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 consciousness of the law 法律意识 and [concern for] inter-personal relations 人际关系. They don't even know what the most important thing in their lives is, what the consummation point is 什么是亮点. I really want to build a Wenhua Guangchang [to address this lack]. People now in the village only care about making some money, building a house, finding a daughter-in-law 说个儿媳妇, living a comfortable life, having one or two bankbooks at hand - that satisfies them. They don't care how society develops, how it goes for the public good 公益事业. They just don't care! It's very difficult now for the village [committee] to do something. You saw the road we are building, on which everybody will walk. But there are some who refuse to give their share of the money, with all kinds of excuses; they make [building the road] difficult.

It is noteworthy that he used the literary word *wenhua* 文化 (culture) together with *zhishi* 知识 (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 and other domains of absence on economic, social, and personal levels. Zhishu was aware of the “low social status” of peasants, including himself. And he made an implicit complaint about the vicious cycle formed between low social status and the consequent “low level of *wenhua* and *zhishi*” in rural villages. Furthermore, he expresses discontent with people's sole emphasis on money. To him, as he visualized the *Wenhua Guangchang* project, the meaning of *wenhua* goes beyond education and knowledge and reaches a higher plane of life, a “consummation point,” in his words.

³² Many villagers told me that they never felt easy talking with “dark face” 黑脸 Zhishu.

At the same time, Zhishu's remarks sought to legitimize his *Wenhua Guangchang* project by contrasting it with what he took to be people's indifference to a "meaningful" life. As what I have discussed in the previous chapter, the immanent village sociality differs from the sense of "collective" that concerns governing. Here Zhishu's complaint of the "shallow relations between people" is better understood from his position as a village Party secretary. It also explains why he quickly changed his tone from a general complaint about the social situation of rural villages to personal complaints about the difficulties he had encountered as a village cadre. By accusing his fellow villagers of being selfish or "short-sighted" in pursuing their own "life of limited comfort" without caring about the public good 公益事业, Zhishu distanced himself from them (assuming a higher moral ground?). Furthermore, the actual building of the *Wenhua Guangchang*, as exemplified in the scene of the "labor camp" I witnessed later, to a great degree turned his project for "the public good 公益事业" into a bit of a mockery.

At the beginning of the construction, in conversations most Shang villagers referred to the plaza as a *yule changsuo* 娱乐场所 (recreation area). On one occasion I chatted with two villagers by the roadside while they were moving saplings from the field so as to make room for the plaza to be built. One commented, "Recreation? We peasants work everyday from dawn to dusk; we don't need to exercise our bodies 锻炼身体." This cynical comment is mirrored in the remarks made by another villager in one of the village store conversations,

Being ordinary people, we are satisfied as long as we have work to do and food to eat; we don't expect to become moneybags, that goes beyond expectations. On normal days we don't have anything special as pastime; we just watch our TV or something like that. Now Zhishu (as the party branch secretary) wants to build a recreation area, but he won't be able to do it without collecting money.

Indeed for many villagers the idea of recreation makes little sense in the context of everyday life. It involves spending extra money that is already in short supply, as I was told from time to time. Toward the final stages of constructing *Wenhua Guangchang*, when more people had learnt of its formal name, they preferred to call it *guangchang*, i.e. the plaza, dropping the *wenhua*, or culture, in common use. In the year 2006, the feeling that *wenhua* has little to do with local everyday life had become ubiquitous in Shang village. I kept hearing people describe themselves (sarcastically?) to me in this way: we old peasants don't have *wenhua*.

It seems that the government shares this perception. This is demonstrated clearly in the “building a new socialist countryside” policy, which calls for “a new type of peasant” who “has *wenhua*”:

*Building a new socialist countryside presses for improving the suzhi of the whole peasant population, and cultivating a new type of peasant who has wenhua, understands technology, and knows management.*³³

These categories under the rubric of a “new” peasant imply assumptions about what peasants currently lack. According to the official *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, *wenhua* mostly refers to level of education or knowledge,³⁴ which may help us to understand what it means “to have *wenhua*” in the call for a “new type of peasant.” And the other two

³³ In Chinese: 提高农民整体素质, 培养造就有文化、懂技术、会经营的新型农民, 是建设社会主义新农村的迫切需要. See 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 peasants that are able to promote a new socialist countryside (加快发展农村社会事业, 培养推进社会主义新农村建设的新型农民).

³⁴ There are three definitions of *wenhua* (culture) in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* published by the Commercial Press 商务印书馆, Revised Edition, 1999. Page 1318: 1. the summation of material and spiritual wealth generated by humankind in the socio-historical process, particularly the spiritual wealth such as literature, art, education, and science, etc.; 2. archeological term that refers to a synthesis of relics a certain historical period, the same tools, utensils, and technology as 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.

categories of technology and management obviously refer to a certain form of knowledge that may be linked with post-WTO China. An article issued by the Xinhua News Agency shortly after the national policy of “new socialist countryside” being issued, for example, concerned itself with the statistics on the low degree of *wenhua* (education) of the “rural labor force.” Its title, “The relatively low *suzhi* of peasants has produced a bottleneck in finding a solution to the three-dimensional rural problem,”³⁵ turned out to be a quote from the Vice Minister of Agriculture. He asserts that “the core of the three-*nong* or rural problems is the peasant; the core of peasant problem is *suzhi*; and the core of the *suzhi* problem is education.” He also said, “peasant training/education 培训 is the fundamental approach to cultivating the new type of peasant.”³⁶ This is emblematic of a shifting of state responsibilities to individuals and therefore a shifting of morality and blame – “You are poor because you lack *suzhi*,” not because of insufficient government support or the effects of the market. And the training that was proposed, not surprisingly, is going to be oriented toward producing a more skillful labor force that can better enter the global market.³⁷ From the perspective of a social scientist like Harvey, this can be clearly seen as a case of neoliberal reorientation of the rural economy toward global capitalism.

³⁵ See my discussion in Introduction.

³⁶ Wei Chaoan, the Vice Minister of Agriculture, said on the 16th that, among the 490 million strong rural labor force only 13 percent have had a high-school-degree of culture [*wenhua chengdu*] and above, 36.7% percent have elementary-school degree of culture, and less than 5% have accepted systematic professional training in agricultural technology. The relatively low “population quality” of peasants has bottlenecked finding solutions to the three-dimensional rural problem. Ref. the official website of Xinhua News Agency http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2006-04/18/content_4438517.htm.

³⁷ According to the “one-million-technical-student 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 1 million technicians for work in the countryside. See http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2006-04/18/content_4438517.htm

The government, then, tends to relate culture to the economy as well. And the villagers' remarks quoted above, pointing out that recreation relates to income, reflect their perception that wenhua nowadays always has to do with "money." In the process of building the *Wenhua Guangchang*, what villagers cared about the most, was always the money: how much Zhishu could expend, how much he could pay for the labor. As stated at the opening of this chapter, one of the major incentives behind the "new countryside" policy is to expand domestic consumption to the countryside and encourage people to consume more. This emphasis on consumption has come along with the tide of the commodity economy. As A Yi once said to me, "now everything is about the money: every time you turn around, some business is coming to you relating to money." Villagers feel indifferent to the notion of "wenhua" seen as leisure because, compared to their everyday concerns, and especially in terms of maintaining everyday sociality, such as weddings and funeral, festivals and interpersonal connections, the so called "wenhua" is a secondary concern that can only be addressed with "extra" money 余钱. But the extra money, Shang villagers always told me, is always in short supply.³⁸ Now it is clear that when villagers said "we peasants don't have wenhua," what they truly meant was that their economic level was low, no matter whether wenhua referred to leisure or recreation or level of education. This differs from the official discourse of "having wenhua."

Furthermore, in the villagers' view that "we peasants don't have wenhua," the sense of lack is even opposite to that of the official discourse. Indeed, with economic development still holding the highest priority in state policy, the notion that wenhua refers mainly to one's level of education or degree of technical knowledge seems to be

³⁸ Almost everyone said their life would be better if they had more "extra money at hand," in their answer to my survey question that "how do you feel about your current life"?

quite natural in village usage, but from a rather different standpoint than the officials. As Zhishu has indicated, the low level of *wenhua zhishi* 文化知识 (education and learning) is due to the institutionally deprived rural situation. In other words, “we peasants don’t have wenhua” is a statement of effects or consequences, not essence. On the other hand, in the official discourse of the “new type of peasant,” the inference goes in a reverse direction: starting from the low level of wenhua in the countryside as a matter of cause, to the low *suzhi* of peasant population as a matter of fact, and thus reaching “the core of the three-dimensional rural problem.” The conclusion reached is that the rural population themselves are responsible for the “rural problem.” And a direct connection is conveniently drawn here between *suzhi* (population quality) and *wenhua* (education and knowledge). Indeed, most published reviews of the national policy predominantly paid attention to “the low *suzhi* of peasants.”³⁹

This is a reform-era departure from official positions on the culture of the rural masses. The Maoist concept of culture was known for its sympathy toward the masses, a.k.a. peasants.⁴⁰ *Wenhua* in the Maoist era was closely related to political consciousness with its “revolutionary character” (Mao 1967, also see Meisner 1999). In particular, Mao’s approach to culture was formally elaborated in 1942 through his “Talks at the

³⁹ 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 low *suzhi* of peasants. Major media include Xinhua News Agency, People’s Daily, Guangming Daily, etc.

⁴⁰ The Maoist firm belief in “the boundless creative powers” of the masses was also a radical departure from Leninist as well as the Western Marxist tradition in general (see Meisner 1999: 295-301). While Lenin believed cultural transformation of the people needs to be carried out through the urban industrial culture to the peasants in the backward countryside Mao on the other hand considered the countryside as the true repository of social and cultural creativity (Meisner 1999).

Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art,"⁴¹ In the talk, Mao raised the question of "literature and art are for whom," an issue which he thought fundamental and "a question of principle" (Mao 1967). Elucidating the answer that literature and art are "for the masses of people," Mao never assumed that the people do not "have wenhua" but insists they are the source of wenhua and at times represent a privileged kind of national wenhua. It was in the Dengist era that the party took pains to develop the Marxist dialectics of base and superstructure,⁴² which "reprivileged the power of the material base to determine the progress of cultural development" (Anagnost 1997: 84).⁴³ With the development of the market economy, the notion of "culture" has been reduced to culture as capital (Jing Wang 2001; Richard Kraus 2004), as leisure (Wang 2001; Kraus 2004), and as level of education. The sole focus on economic development, in these complex ways, has thus made a narrowed-down wenhua appear irrelevant in rural life.

Meanwhile the hegemonic discourse of the low *suzhi* of peasants has deeply influenced all walks of life. In Shang village, the implementation of a new socialist countryside policy lays bare the contested and redefined meaning of wenhua and *suzhi* at different levels of society. In the following discussion, the poplar planting project shows clearly a direct consequence of the hegemonic *suzhi* discourse with its unilateral

⁴¹ Although the talk is specifically about the literature and arts, it was also generally considered the guiding principle for culture which, after all, includes music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film, etc. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords* 1976, page 90.

⁴² Ref. Zhongguo Xin Wenyi Daxi 《中国新文艺大系 1976-1982 – 理论一集》 which has included all the important talks on culture by Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang, Hu Qiaomu, Zhou Yang, etc. since 1979, especially Deng's influential talk at the Fourth Representatives Assembly of Chinese Art and Literature Workers 在中国文学艺术工作者第四次代表大会上的祝辞 on October 30, 1979. 中国文联出版公司, 1986.

⁴³ Also see Liu Kang's discussion in "What is 'socialism with Chinese characteristics': Issues of culture, politics, and ideology," in *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China*, 2004, University of Hawai'i Press.

emphasis on economic development, as well as the systematic deafness to actual rural life and concerns.

III. Planting Poplars to Develop the Economy

I had heard quite often about “the Poplar Economy” before I went to Shang village. While I stayed in the county Chinese medicine hospital waiting to get transported down to the countryside, my friends in town often talked about the “poplar industry” 杨树产业, a recent project brought up by the current county Party secretary of Zhaozhou County. Historically the economy of the county relied almost exclusively on grain production, predominantly wheat. With so little profitable industry, Zhaozhou is now considered economically backward, a sense commonly shared by Shang villagers as well. Lao Han, my friend’s husband working in the county government, told me the idea of a “poplar industry” was believed to be able to bring along a series of businesses, from wood-selling 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 be undoubtedly positive, because compared to the value of poplar wood at about 100 *yuan* per tree, the price of wheat at 0.50 *yuan* per *jin*⁴⁴ was too low for farmers to make much of a fortune. When I was sitting in the clinic of Dr. Fang, a locally well known doctor at the Chinese medicine hospital, he often said enthusiastically and authoritatively to his villager patients while writing down his prescription that, “Plant poplars. It will not only bring you more money but also save you labor and thus alleviate your illness.”

Soon after, on my way from the county seat to Zhaoying township, the words
“Develop the Poplar Industry, Make the Zhaozhou Economy Flourish 发展杨树产业，振兴

⁴⁴ One *jin* equals a half kilogram.

赵州经济,” painted with whitewash on walls of houses along the road, kept appearing.

Together with the poplars growing alongside the road, the project seemed to dominate the scene in the countryside. Soon after my arrival at Zhaoying, the township office unexpectedly decided I should stay in Shang village instead of the one I had chosen before. It was afternoon already, with this very short notice, Zhishu asked Ayi, my first hostess to house me. Fortunately, she agreed to take me in. The news of my coming to Shang village spread quickly around Ayi’s neighborhood. Right 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 came here from Beijing to “investigate the local society 来搞社会调查的,” he assumed I might be capable of channeling Shang villagers’ complaints up to the central government. I explained to him my role and the purpose of coming to stay at Shang village. Somewhat disappointed by the fact that I did not claim as much power as he had assumed I had, he nevertheless couldn’t help talking about the poplar planting project. This version was rather different from that of my more urban friends. And the conversation did not take long to get 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 unfolded by Zhenke on my very first night in Shang village. He said,

The majority are averse to this [requirement to plant poplars]. Why? What the trees occupy is all good plowing land, which is [always] 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 fully. 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 little. By the fourth year you can’t do anything, nothing else will grow there. We figured the profit was not worthwhile, even if we wait for 15 years till the trees are full grown and sell them at 100 yuan each. [Not to mention]

over 15 years it may well only grow to this big with a circumference of 60 centimeters, that won't be worth much.

This is indeed a careful and reasonable (and practical) calculation. Villagers have been growing grain for generations; they know best their own land. For Zhenke and Ayi, who both belonged to the sixth team,⁴⁵ most of their land was along the road, therefore in Shang village the poplar project took up a lot of their land. According to them, in the beginning people were required to plant poplars as far into the fields as up to 20 meters from the roadside; soon the required acreage was expanded to more than 10 meters wider. Now they were worried the officials might still want more. In their team each villager gets only 1.3 *mu* of plow land. On this already limited land, it is little wonder villagers “make a move only when being pushed” to plant poplars, as Zhenke said.

After all it is villagers who farm on their land. They know clearly where poplars grow well and where they do not. In my later research I learned that the poplar project was started by another township located on the edge of the county. The land there, people argued, has a different quality of soil than Zhaoying township. Poplars were initially profitable there and this success inspired the newly posted county Party secretary, who came to office at the end of 2003. Soon the party secretary decided to extend the project to the whole county, paying no attention to 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 2 years. There were quarrels every time poplar-planting was assigned to villagers, I was told. And the year before, some planted trees had even been chopped down, drawing the attention of the police post.

⁴⁵ There are altogether eleven teams in Shang village, and each team has around 40 - 50 households.

I arrived in Shang village during wheat-planting season. I took the chance to go with Ayi to her land to take part in field work. Standing on the land, I could understand Ayi's affection for the "black soil 黑土," as Shang villagers called it, which reliably produces wheat, soy beans, sesame, and peanuts, year after year. We would also 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 finally destroy good plow land; the field can't possibly be returned to grain production. One might think 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) gotten out of 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 investment, yielding no "extra money" to work with?

983 *mu*⁴⁶ 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 of 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 didn't take it very seriously because they "are not interested in it," I was told. As one villager put it,

⁴⁶ 1 *mu* equals 0.167 acre.

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" 植树节? It was said [trees were planted] to "adjust the weather," now it turns 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 it [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 him. 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. 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." Indeed, trees might not have been a bad thing in the past when they didn't taken up too much plow land and merely had the purpose of "environmental greening 绿化环境." 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 won't 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"?

Chinese sociologist Cao Jinqing has noted in his ethnography, conducted in Henan province, that a predominant number of local economic development projects express nothing but "formalism" 形式主义⁴⁷ due to the vertical power structure. 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.⁴⁸

On a later occasion, I paid another visit to Zhenke and we talked at a greater length about the poplar project that always concerned him. After making his earlier points again, he went further and narrated to me a drama directed by 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. Those at the upper levels only pay attention to assigning tasks; they never come down to investigate [what the realities are].

For example, the year before last a county party secretary came along, who insisted on planting yellow ginger, a kind of medicinal plant from which it was said saponin could be extracted and exported to foreign countries at a market price of tens of thousands of yuan per ton. Planting that yellow ginger was popular on the other side of the Han River in Hubei Province.

⁴⁷ This bureaucratic phenomenon was first criticized by Mao Zedong as early as in 1930, See Mao "Against Bookishness" 反对本本主义, in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*.

⁴⁸ Cao Jinqing 2000, 《黄河边的中国》 *China Along the Yellow River*, 上海文艺出版社. In this well received book Cao offered a number of anecdotes concerning the 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 ever-failing planting-trees project because "the peasants 农民们 just go and pull them out [the saplings] on the quiet afterwards." Here Cao mainly concerned himself with the nowadays individualistic style of rural households by contrasting the communes-era when collective project was easier to be realized. While in the current household responsibility-era the projects are harder to carry out. He nevertheless did not seem to sympathize with the villagers' account that "trees will keep the sun off the crops and reduce the yield". See page 533-534.

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 thousand yuan if we didn't plant it. Later in the fall, everything got waterlogged, there was no harvest of yellow ginger at all. According to them, it would produce 2000 kilograms per mu, but after the rain, gingerroots didn't form, even the seedlings were rotten. 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, 3 bags of fertilizer were needed including at least 2 bags of compound fertilizer. The compound fertilizer costs at least 100 yuan 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 and weeding on it, because herbicides were not working they had to pull up weeds by hand – how could these people, who had waited till the harvest time of the yellow ginger, ended up running away to other places immediately when 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 belong to Zhaoying village. Those fields of yellow ginger are out of luck; they have been altered to tobacco land even though there is still lots of ginger in the land that hasn't been dug out – not worth it to dig them 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 policy-making. Note that the poplar planting 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? With their male family members out working in the cities, Ayi and two other women from the Sixth Team formed a mutual-aid group during the busy season of wheat planting. One afternoon when taking a break from hard labor on the wheat field, they once again picked up the ever unforgettable topic of poplars. One woman told us the night before she had gone over to the poplar land and pulled up the saplings, in their place planting some wheat seeds. "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.”

It is little surprise that 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 shows clearly 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 do? While the leaders have little confidence in the *wenhua shuiping* (cultural level) of “the masses,” villagers feel voiceless and often have to comply with policies they believe are foolish. They keep being committed willy-nilly to major projects that are pushed downward from all the levels above, without being asked their opinions. 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, in ignorance of local priorities and conditions.

Zhenke’s accusation made above that the local government does not “protect you” succinctly expresses villagers’ disappointed expectation for their leaders.⁴⁹ 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, first of all, were to secure socio-economic rights for disadvantaged groups. After 1949, in the Maoist era the masses

⁴⁹ See the idea of “protectionism” discussed by Andrew Walder in *Communist neo-traditionalism : work and authority in Chinese industry*, 1986.

continued to enjoy even more substantive socioeconomic entitlements such as land, health care, and education.⁵⁰ It is their sincere belief in the Party, founded itself on a mass-line policy, that accounts for Shang villagers' ubiquitous faith in the national (but not local) leaders up till today.⁵¹

These poignant stories, on the other hand indicate a profound transformation of the local practice of governing. As Wen Tiejun, a leading Chinese scholar in rural studies, maintains, the "great (household) contracted responsibility (system) 大包干" was not meant to "liberate" the peasants from the collective economy, but rather it enabled the government to withdraw from its role in the unprofitable agricultural sector.⁵² From the early 1980s into the 1990s, according to Shang villagers, they did enjoy a relatively better-off living situation during that period they could concentrate on their own land,

⁵⁰ Here I found illuminating the late political scientist Tsou Tang's insights on 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 socio-economic structure. They are to be mobilized and organized by political activists." (2000: 217)

Against this theoretical background, Tsou argues that these 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, "Marxism, the Leninist Party, the Masses, and the Citizens in the Rebuilding of the Chinese State," in Stuart. R. Schram ed., *Foundations and Limits of State Power in China*, page 257-289. And Tsou 2000, "Interpreting the Revolution in China: Macrohistory and Micromechanisms", in *Modern China*, 26(2): 205-238. Also see Dirlik 2005, Dutton 2005, Meisner 1999.

⁵¹ After the Tian'an Men Event 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.

⁵² See Wen Tiejun 2006, "We are still in need of Rural Construction", retrieved from <http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Class19/200611/11692.html>, June 24, 2007.

start businesses, and have more free time during the fallow season.⁵³ But this relative improvement did not last long. Today most Shang villagers' living standard, their supplies of food, clothing, and housing,⁵⁴ is almost at the same level as in the first several years of the household responsibility system, which was about 20 years ago.⁵⁵ One decisive factor, which I will discuss later, is the tax-assignment policy of 1994. Since then, as I was told, the cadre-villager relationship has worsened.⁵⁶ To put it directly, it seems to me that the neo-liberal economic policy, adopted in fiscal reforms since the mid 1990s, has re-positioned local officials so that they are no longer "of the masses" but above them. Wen Tiejun attempts a "deconstruction" of the Chinese government 解构政府. He argues that rather than being regulative and supportive like a government, the Chinese government is more like an economic entity (or enterprise) 经济主体 in itself; its governing serves foremost to pursue and maximize its own profit.⁵⁷ 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.

⁵³ I was surprised to learn that in the collective era villagers had only about 5 days off, when spring festival came, for the whole year. At other times there were always collective construction projects or assembly meetings.

⁵⁴ 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 everywhere. The other three, listed in descending order of degree of improvement, are housing, clothing, and food. For villagers' extremely simple everyday meal, see my descriptions in Chapter One.

⁵⁵ Li Shu recollected, "Come to think of it, we ordinary people didn't have that many good years 要说起来我们老百姓没过几年好日子."

⁵⁶ Some villagers even thought the decollectivization wasn't truly started until then, since there had been small-scale collectively owned village enterprises before, e.g. a carpet-weaving 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 the enterprise taxation. This is from my interview with Shifa, the former village chief, and Li Shu, the village doctor.

⁵⁷ Original Chinese text: 假定我们认为政府是经济主体, 政府就不可能承担调控和守夜人的责任, 它首先为自己追求利润最大化来服务的. Translation is mine.

What interests me here is the moral standard embedded in Wen's charges. It seems that Wen, an intellectual in his 50s 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 poplar project has shown, in local politics too, the conception of the masses still holds sway, but there is not much confidence in the principle of "serving the masses" any more. Furthermore, these socialist values frequently (and inevitably) contradict with the increasingly individualized and privatized social relations in the countryside, starting from the 1980s and deepening since the mid 1990s. Without enjoying many socio-economic 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? Isn't it quite natural that they would resist poplar planting?

It is exactly at this point, I would argue, that the discourse of *suzhi* 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 level. And "wenhua," with its meaning changed (and at times individualized and privatized) and according with the now different status of the masses in official discourses, has become the core of *suzhi*.⁵⁸ Insofar as good order fails in rural areas, *suzhi* has come to summarize the hegemonic discourse of qualitative "lack"

⁵⁸ See Kipnis 2006, "Suzhi: A Keyword Approach", in *The China Quarterly*, 186 (1): 295-313, where 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 the necessity for all either to participate in or to resist desires to cultivate *suzhi* (and most likely both at different moments)" (313). I will discuss this shortly.

in rural areas. 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, and Foucault 1978: 146).

Nevertheless, I do not intend to make value judgments about conceptions of “suzhi,” “the masses” (and “the peasants”), and “wenhua,” which after all are the domains in which social actors (including me) confront and define each other, and such terms help to provide the dispositifs in terms of which our inter-actions are defined. Comparing the now-prevalent use of such terms with the Maoist slogans (the little red books 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 interest, often distrust the local cadres, accusing them of having low suzhi in implementing the national policies; while local cadres on the other hand also justify their leadership positions by considering 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 works in Shang village.

Meanwhile, the most often heard complaint from Zhishu that villagers “demand only their rights while forgetting their duty 只讲权利不讲义务,” reveals a profound discrepancy between local cadres and villagers in their deployment of 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? Let me turn to the next section.

IV. Interpreting the “Scriptures” from Above

The evening I spent at Zhishu’s house, mentioned above, we had a pleasant dinner with five other village cadres.⁵⁹ Earlier, Saozi, Zhishu’s wife, told me that Zhishu likes companionship 喜欢热闹, and there are always dinner parties going on in their house. Perhaps the “thinner” 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”⁶⁰ to see the progress of the *Wenhua Guangchang*, 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

⁵⁹ People who are called village cadres 村干部 need not be members of the Communist Party. This category includes (production) team leaders and accountants, village committee members, and the village accountants.

⁶⁰ 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 文化下乡.

some villagers to be nothing more than one village head's efforts to gain recognition in a "higher" political arena.

After our trip to the model village I got to know Mr. Tong, the associate party secretary of the Township office, a little better. Having graduated from a teachers' college in the prefectural city, Mr. Tong, in his late thirties, 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 4 different township offices starting right after college, having 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 shared, being situated between villagers and upper level (county and above) officials. Tao started out by expressing an opinion on national policy,

Hu Jintao⁶¹ brought up [the policy of] "building a new socialist countryside." 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 better 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 yuan per mu,⁶² which is really good. But before the exemption [was passed] those experts should have made an investigation: can the agricultural taxation be exempted? What if we were to charge 1 yuan 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.

⁶¹ 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.

⁶² In a recent phone conversation, Li Shu told me that the subsidy has increased to about 40 yuan per mu in 2007. But the cost of fertilizer and pesticide has increased significantly as well, he said.

Why would grassroots administration be paralyzed? It seemed to Tao that with the agricultural taxation exemption now in place, the local officials would not have much to do. Some intellectuals also expressed their hesitancy about this seemingly benign policy. The main concern, according to them, is that it could damage the structure of local level administration and, after all, it is the army of local level cadres who have really been doing the job of implementing policy.⁶³ On the other hand, villagers such as Li Shu, the village doctor, and Shichen, the retired village cadre, told me that starting from the 1990s the local administration did nothing but collect money. Scholars have published many discussions of the predominant phenomenon of “charging random fees 乱收费现象” in the countryside.⁶⁴ According to the research, one main reason for these fees was the fiscal reform of 1994, which featured the tax-assignment system 分税制 that replaced a previous upward-sharing with a downward-sharing form of tax collection.⁶⁵ Since then the local

⁶³ 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 March 30, 2007.

⁶⁴ Among the most well known publications is *China's Descent Into a Quagmire* 中国现代化的陷阱 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, page 269-308.

⁶⁵ The old financial system was called “eating in separate kitchens” 分灶吃饭. It was carried out in 1980 as part of the package of the “reform and opening” policy 改革开放政策 and did provide 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 now claimed less financial power than the provincial government. (Ref. Andrew Walder 1995, *The Waning of the Communist State: Economic origins of political decline in China and Hungary*) According to Wang Shaoguang, the major promoter of the 1994 Tax-Assignment System, from 1978 to 1993 the Chinese economy grew six fold 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

administration was encouraged to be financially self-supporting and the burden was added onto the peasants' shoulders. Villagers told me in the year of 2002 the levies reached as high as around RMB 200 per person.⁶⁶ When taxes were calculated together with the investment on seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, farming became almost impossible for many people. In one of my walks out to the land, an old guy from the neighboring village 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.

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, support for local administration has to be found through other (and perhaps more "random") means. At the same time, now the "building a new socialist countryside" policy seems to expect rural cadres to do more despite the agricultural taxation exemption. Thus, according to Tao and Tong, new pro-rural policies added more difficulties to the local practice of governing.

Reform: An Initial Assessment" in *Asian Survey* (September, 1997), which is also available online: http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/gpa/wang_files/1994.pdf

⁶⁶ This is an estimated figure, because villagers didn't turn in cash but grain harvested in the same year. Li Shu told me that in the year of 2001/2002 Shang villagers were required to turn in about 150-kilograms of wheat per person. The price at that time was around 0.3 *yuan* per kilogram, so along with the expenses for fertilizers and seeds, the tax was about 200 *yuan* 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 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. "Harsh rule is crueler than a tiger 苛政猛于虎," a well known formula about extortionate governance by a Tang-dynasty scholar Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元, 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, one-*mu* of land could generate about 550 *yuan* net income for the year.

In 2006, Zhaozhou County was selected to be one of the 60 counties in the nation to try out the New-style Rural Cooperative Medical-care System (NRCMS).⁶⁷ According to the NRCMS, each villager is expected to pay 10 yuan per year, which is put together with 40 yuan allocated to them by the central and provincial Ministries of Health. This sum of 50 yuan will form an annual basis to finance the medical care for villagers who need it. Officials consider this as a great effort of the government to improve the rural health care situation. And to be selected as one of the 60 pilot counties to test the program was considered by the leaders of Zhaozhou to be a big achievement. Local officials were required, and motivated, to get all villagers to pay the 10 yuan individual contribution in a very short period of time.⁶⁸

Collecting money has never been an easy task; and this program 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 yuan? Why not simply give the 40 yuan to 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 “willfully blind” 闭门造车 because they are too difficult to implement in practice. But we cannot help it; these are things that have to be done.

⁶⁷ In my personal interview with him, Mr. Chen Xiaohong, Vice Minister of Public Health, told me that the state plans to cover 80 percent of rural areas with the NRCMS by 2008 and the entire countryside by 2010. Personal interview, September 18, 2006.

⁶⁸ 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 to turn in the collected money to the township office on a strict schedule while the head of the township office was responsible to turn in the money from all the villages to the county government by a certain time. Whoever failed to fulfill this task would lose their post right away.

Tao was concerned about the gap between upper level policies and the difficulties of grassroots administration. He argued that the policy made at the upper levels did not address the local situation, and therefore was not practical. From this point of view, local cadres too, like the peasant, are voiceless as they face the “willfully blind” upper-level policy. They have no option but to get the work done.⁶⁹

But villagers may not want to identify with the 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, not our place.”⁷⁰ Villagers plainly told me they do not trust anyone who “secures an official position 当官儿的”. As for the 10-yuan 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 惠民政策.” They always said to me that they believed the intentions of the central leadership were good and benign; the only problem is at the local level.⁷¹ One phrase captures well the feelings Shang villagers hold toward local

⁶⁹ 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 defer this designation to someone even “lower”. Such identification and recognition practices are obviously highly contingent on routines and rituals of state. See James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, 1998. Yale University Press.

⁷⁰ Yamen 衙门 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 with whom they have a closer personal relationship) 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 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.

⁷¹ 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 Two: Immanent sociality.

cadres: “the scriptures from above are a good canon, but down here they are always interpreted awry 上面的经是好经，只是到下面就念歪了”.

This understanding is taken by Tao to be a reflection of the discrepancy in the course of implementing central government policies; together with other local cadres he also used this well-known phrase. 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 government “scriptures” 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 of the “scriptures from above,” according to him, is nothing but a practical way for cadres to get required work done. Tao had been consistent in his discontent about the gap between upper-level policy-making and the local circumstances of implementation. If anyone is to be blamed, it seems to him, first of all it should be the upper-level and their insensitive policy and secondly 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* (population quality) 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 "actually" 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 lower population quality, and so on.

But his concern is understandable as a product of the difficulty he and other township heads encounter in their attempts to fulfill 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"⁷²), it has become much harder at the grassroots level for this ideal to be realized by local Party organs. As

⁷² The "three represents" of the CCP were first raised 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. Ref. Liu 2004, and Dutton 2005.

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 policy-makers.⁷³

V. “Culture” in the village

As discussed above, most villagers didn't seem to consider themselves as the ones who “had wenhua,” especially when they talked to me, a PhD student who was supposed to be highly “cultured”. Nevertheless, when I first volunteered to help the Shangs resume a suspended village gazetteer project 村志, Zhishu silently withdrew his initial warm support for my participation after he had heard from Li Shu that I wasn't able to write in classic Chinese. I didn't meet his and others' expectations as an appropriate facilitator for compiling the gazetteer.⁷⁴ This experience suggested to me that despite being ambivalent about their own “wenhua” or, better, culture, culture matters 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 culture, the power dynamics changed dramatically. From time to time, I was pulled aside to be lectured on

⁷³ 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 adopted 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, page 580-681.

⁷⁴ This project was finally realized about two months before the end of my fieldwork in Shang village, after I proposed it to Zhishu under the name of the village committee's project of “building a new socialist countryside,” the national policy discussed throughout this chapter. Seeing that it might be one of his achievements along with the Wenhua Guangchang 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 genealogy of the local single-surname families.

things like “our habits 我们的习惯,” “customs in this area 这儿的风俗,” or “according to the old ways 照老规矩,” though these speakers did not literally use the loaded term, “wenhua.” For example, the locally specific rules for table manners at different kinds of banquets should include: what kind 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 gets to sit on the northeast corner of the table and who does not, and so forth. All these practices have a certain propriety 有规矩.⁷⁵

Wedding ceremonies were the most frequent occasions for me to receive such lectures. In Chapter Two I introduced the process of “kan jia 看家”, or seeing the house/family, as part in finding a marriage partner. Here I’m going to describe the local customs for wedding ceremonies, especially the wedding banquet. During my stay in Shang village, I attended two pre-wedding banquets hosted on the day before the ceremony, in which Shang families were marrying out their daughters⁷⁶, and I also joined two complete wedding ceremonies for Shang sons on the wedding day. All took place during the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) season lasting from the last month on the lunar calendar until after the first month of the New Year.

In terms of wedding banquets, the banquets hosted by the bride’s parents on the day before are as formal as the official one on the wedding day on the groom’s side. The major difference, I was told, is the composition of the main guests 主客. For the pre-wedding banquet held in the bride’s natal village, the main guests are relatives from her

⁷⁵ Kipnis also discusses the local norm of proper behavior in a Shandong village. See Kipnis 1997.

⁷⁶ Instead of “dowry party” as Kipnis called it in Fengjia village, in Shang village it’s more a farewell party for the bride’s natal family because the dowry is going to be sent together with the bride on the wedding day.

mother's side, ideally including her maternal great grandmother, grandmother, maternal uncles and cousins. For the wedding banquet proper at the groom's village, the main guests, not surprisingly, are the bride's own family members and her patrilineal relatives; this reflects, given the residential practices of a generally patrilocal society. Banquet manners generally follow cultural principles that govern the receipt of gifts or money, the seating of guests, the arrangement of dishes, manner of toasting with wine, etc. My description then conflates the two types of wedding banquets together to give a general impression. Particular differences will be noted when necessary.

Most village banquets are held at noon instead of in the evening. One reason, I was told, is because in the past when transportation was not as convenient as nowadays, the main guests from outside the village would need to go home before dusk. As for the wedding ceremony, the nighttime is saved for *naodongfang* 闹洞房 (stirring up the bridal chamber), an activity mainly involving friends and relatives on the groom's side in his own village.⁷⁷ On the day of banquet, therefore, guests start to arrive shortly after breakfast. In the courtyard or outside the main entrance of the host's house, there is always an accounting table set up with two men who are respectively in charge of receiving gifts/money and keeping a record of each (who gave what gifts) on a piece of red paper. Common gifts are bed sheets, quilt covers, blankets, and amounts of money ranging from 20 to 100 RMB per person. Usually someone who has nice calligraphy is asked to be the bookkeeper because writing down the gift list 礼单 with a brush 毛笔 is a

⁷⁷ Kipnis has also described this in the Shandong village. Instead of leaving the bride alone in the chamber to be "stirred" by the village youngsters, in Shang village those who came to *naodongfang* didn't seem to be only "teenaged boys," as Kipnis described in Fengjia, but from all ranks including both adults and youngsters, elders and middle-ages, male and female. Only groom's family members stayed outside, talking with other guests who might have come from afar and decided to stay over, and meanwhile preparing a late night meal for the *naodongfang* folks after their efforts at making fun of both the bride and groom. Tricks in *naodongfang* include making the couple stand on a narrow bench to kiss each other, etc.

must. The two accounting men take their task seriously and always compare the gifts received against the recorded lists at the end, to make sure they correspond. Meanwhile, the accounting table is often shared by other guests as more people coming in. And people sit together chatting during the intervals between gift giving.



Figure 28: Accounting table in wedding ceremonies

Clearly, as Kipnis also mentioned, the lists are meant to be known to the public. This is also a chance to learn who has a close relationship with the host (reflected in a big gift) and who does not. Both Kipnis and Yan have discussed the importance of the gift lists in terms of lasting exchange networks (Kipnis 1997) and commemoration (Yan 1993). In Shang village the gift lists are meanwhile kept as reference for the hosts as they decide what to give in future, since a giver on one occasion will certainly be a host on another.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Indeed, to remember to return the gift 回礼 is very important for village networking. Failing to do so will be considered a withdrawal from the relationship with others. Ayi told me more than once that she unintentionally cooled down her family's good relations with Li Shu, when she was too busy to attend his grandson's full-month banquet but asked a neighbor to bring some gift for her, seeking to return his kindness (when her husband was gravely ill) and the gift money he contributed for her husband's funeral. However it was obvious that the gift had not been passed on at Li Shu's banquet because, Ayi told me, he

Another immediate use of the records is for the host to know the number of people who will attend the banquet and who they are, so as to proceed to make arrangements for all the proprieties mentioned above.

When it gets closer to noon, the hosts check the gift lists and then rank the guests according to kinship hierarchy and social relations, often with help of the two “gift managers” at the accounting table. (Obviously this position requires considerable social expertise, a “high cultural level” in a sense.) The main guests are accommodated by the host family, while other guests are ushered to their tables by *peike* 陪客 (host representatives) to sort out their seating among themselves, following the banquet norms that everyone knows well. Similar to Fengjia village in Kipnis’ description, Shang villagers also use square banquet tables arranged for group of eight, with a similar system of ranking the seats (See Figure 29??). As mentioned in Chapter One, most tables, together with plates, bowls, and chopsticks are rented from the village business. I never saw any round tables used in these banquets. There are always at least two host representatives as well, serving as banqueting facilitators. They are usually chosen to match the most honored guest at each table in age and sex. The most senior *peike* is seated next to the most honored guest on the northwest side, while other *peike* take the less honorable seats.⁷⁹ Men and women sit separately and people from the same family or place are grouped together.

and his family became distant afterwards. On the other hand, according to villagers, not to return the gift is considered a simple sign of no longer making an effort to maintain mutual indebtedness 行情; it may not be taken personally. Ayi still goes to Li Shu’s clinic and chats with him and his families. Moreover, there is a differentiation between generations. Once-discontinued networks can be (and often are) renewed by the next generation, whenever they are willing to restart the gift exchange on special occasions, including the Chinese New Year.

⁷⁹ This is different from the Shandong village in Kipnis’s ethnography, where the host representatives always sit in the least honorable seats regardless of their rank. In Shang village, to arrange the *peike* to sit

In a pre-ceremony wedding-out-daughter banquet, Zhenbang made a special effort, coming from another room to my table, to explain to me the importance of seating. He said even the direction of splits between the splats (to form a tabletop) require consideration: they aren't supposed to be perpendicular to the side where the two most honored seats are located. If such a careless arrangement occurred, Zhenbang said, the honored guests would be entitled to knock over the table and leave. Once the seating is settled, food starts to be served but no one may eat until the most honored guest takes the first bite, which should be after the *peikes* stick out their chopsticks, holding them in the air without touching the dish, and invite guests at the table to eat. According to Zhenbang, it is important for the *peike* not to be the first to touch the dishes when they make the gesture of invitation. Nevertheless, he also informed me that the rule is nowadays not as strict as before, and I did see that young kids often got priority: the grandmothers (I could only sit with women guests) always hastened to choose the food requested by their grandchildren without paying much attention to table norms, and everyone seemed to be accustomed to this exception.

When I went over to see the preparation for Zhenke's son, Xiaobin's wedding on the day before the ceremony, Zhenfang, one of the main cooks⁸⁰ explained to me the norm of dish arrangements for wedding banquets, as below:

together with the *zhuke* (main guest) is considered a better (and more intimate) accommodation for the most honored guest at the table.

⁸⁰ Usually there have to be two cooks in charge to ensure the smooth preparation of a big wedding banquet. Every natural village has such cooks, i.e., there are cooks among the Shangs, the Lis and the Wangs. And their cooking skills are usually inherited from family tradition. Zhenfang's father was a cook in Shang village before 1949, for example. Cooks don't make a living out of cooking, even though it does require special skill to make the whole set of dishes for big crowds, as well as the knowledge of some special banquet dishes. I also met a cook who had gone outside the village to cook in a restaurant in the county town and had now retired back home. As discussed in Chapter 2, just as the medical services are free of

A wedding usually lasts for three days, during which time streams of guests pass through the doors 三天门上不断人, so the host must prepare plenty of food. And a proper wedding banquet should include 36 dishes and four or six or eight soups, depending on the host. This applies to both the banquets that marry out daughters and those that marry in daughters-in-law 接姑娘送姑娘这都是一样的. The 36 dishes include vegetables, pork, chicken, fish, steamed dishes; and the soups should involve four different flavors that are sour, sweet, bitter and spicy, such as seaweed soup 紫菜汤, egg-drop soup 鸡蛋汤, sliced beef tripe soup 肚丝汤, white fungus soup 银耳汤. There are ways of matching courses, as well as certain standards for banquets – the selection of ingredients and the number of soups – depending on how much money the hosts want to spend. But the standard courses to finish a banquet must be there – these include a whole fish, a chicken dish, and several steamed dishes; the head of the fish must be placed toward the most honored guest at the table. All in all, the formality is the same as in those banquets that take place in the restaurants in town. But here we make it ourselves, with larger portions and more economically. It would definitely cost more money to make reservations in restaurants. We [cooks] only do this as a help [to the host] since we belong to the same gate [lineage].

Thirty six dishes and at least four soups are certainly a complicated banquet meal. If it is required to serve every single table with such a feast for the wedding ceremony, one can imagine how overwhelming the efforts of preparing the wedding banquets can be. Of course, many villagers came to help several days ahead of the wedding day. And the yard of the host's house came to be filled with pre-processed food such as washed vegetables, marinated meat, cleaned whole chicken, and youmo 油馍(deep-fried bread sticks) and guozi 馃子(deep-fried wheat flour slices), etc.

Drinking as a matter of course is an important component of all banquets. As in many other parts of the country, in Shang village banquets men drank *baijiu* 白酒 (spirit or liquor, often sorghum based) while women and youth drank *huangjiu* 黄酒 (a yellow wine made from millet). To persuade guests to drink more is another important task for the host representatives, who always initiate rounds of drinking by saying *heqi* 喝起, local dialect for “drink up”. And the hosts come to each table to propose a toast in the middle

charge in village clinics, catering services for the banquets are inexpensive, about 50 RMB per day, though the host provides all materials.

of the banquet, which is not supposed to be declined by the guests. In the Zhaozhou area people use *die'r* 碟儿 (a small round shallow dish) instead of liqueur glasses for drinks. To perform the toast, hosts come to each table and stand in front of each guest – following the order of the seating hierarchy – to ask the guest to *heqi* and then refill their *die'r*; however the hosts don't usually drink with the guest while performing the toast, but move on to the next guest. People told me this local custom could be traced to the time when everything was scarce and people could rarely afford to drink. With a limited supply, therefore, the host would save his portion but let his guests drink first. Indeed, the local dialect for a toast is literally “pouring wine” 倒酒 and a common saying goes like this: “come on, let me pour you a [dish of] wine 来来我给你倒个酒.” This is a way to show respect to guests, I was told.

The host's family members also take turns coming to each table “to pour wine” for every guest. At Xiaobin's wedding banquet, when his maternal uncle, who was from the Front Wang Temple 前王庙, a natural village belonging to Shang Village, came to my table to pour wine for everybody, he took the opportunity to tell me more about their customs of banqueting:

The banquet usually lasts from noon until dark for about four to five hours. In rural villages we usually start to eat at around 2pm, [so] we eat until about 6pm. [When it gets dark], guess what kind of lamp was once used on the “送亲桌 sending-daughter table” [the main guest table for the bride's immediate family]? It's called a “dark lamp 黑灯” made from bamboo and kiln-baked clay. It was filled with sesame oil and there was a lamp wick inside, that was the lamp to be used after dark. Then we started to use kerosene lamp, and then came the [more expensive] candles. Alas, this is society 这就是社会呀! You see I'm in my fifties, and this is the experience that the society has gone through. Gradually, science has developed more and more. Now we drink liquor, in the past we had only yellow wine. What is yellow wine? It's simply made from the same millet that we cook in the pot for our meals. Nowhere could one find liquor in the past. Now we even drink bottled yellow wine. But the bottled yellow wine, like this kind [grabbing a bottle on the table], is fake. It says it's yellow wine but it's actually

watered-down liquor, it can't compare to our own yellow wine made of grains, which you have never seen or drunk. Talking about the dark lamp, the chance for you to see that is even rarer. You go ask Sansao 三嫂 (the third sister-in-law) over there, about the sort of lamp made from the waste of the flax 麻杆灯 that they once used when they had to spin cotton at night. That lamp was even weaker, you could barely see anything. Now it has disappeared.

What an interesting comment. At times he seems to favor the predominant ideology of a progressive society, which to him comes along with a doubtlessly ever-advancing science, making examples of the dark lamp and the yellow wine that is now manufactured in factories rather than made at home. In the next moment, though, he denounces the bottled wine as fake, its quality not comparable to the good, old home-made yellow wine.

I had hardly a minute to ponder whether to take his complicated feeling as nostalgia or as a feeling of good riddance, when his remarks invoked a wave of recollections among the guests. At this point, the banquet had been going for a couple of hours and people had started to chat more since our stomachs were already full. And more men had come into our room of women's tables to offer toasts. With the table full of ample food, older people couldn't help but start to talk about their recent past, i.e. their life in the 1960s and 70s. Sansao, mentioned by Xiaobin's uncle, came over to sit by me and said,

Let me tell you one more thing: when we had the collective dining hall 集体食堂, three production teams of us, number five, six and seven team, we shared the same big stove 大灶. 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 [the "wedding banquet"]! You know, at that time, the ration for everyone was only "yiliang erqiansan" 一两二钱三 (0.13 jin⁸¹) of grains per day - thinking about it, how much was that per meal? This was the 1960s, when the bride only got an additional scoop of food to celebrate her marriage.

All of a sudden someone remembered that the room we were in now was exactly the location of the collective dining hall that Sansao had just talked about: "Ah! Yiliang

⁸¹ 1 jin equals 0.5 kilogram.

erqiansan, it was right here! We ate in this dining hall until 1961, just before harvest time.”⁸² While I was being impressed by the freshness of everyone’s memories, Shilang joined in and continued their 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. 端起稀饭碗, 想起照相馆; 要想照个全家相, 全家站在锅台上.”⁸³ - 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 to boil the “gruel.” That life we villagers lived was miserable. And it was poignant that we got only yiliang erqiansan (0.13 jin grains), even at harvest time. Many people starved to death. That was the 1960s.

As for the 1970s, there was another jingle 顺口溜: “Looking like a cadre, wearing smelly pants; seeming very chic, really dirt-cheap 看着大干部, 穿着尿臊裤; 看着怪拽, 不值一块.” The two parts of this jingle have to be interpreted separately. The “smelly pants” refers to those were 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. You know back then everything was scarce, and nylon was considered a nice cloth with a quality similar to silk. So someone figured out that the nylon bags could be made into pants. But at that time only cadres had access to fertilizer sacks, one was allocated to each. Also, one bag was only enough for one leg. Therefore to make a pair of nylon pants required two cadres - 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 didn’t require a cloth ration ticket 布票. You know at that time you couldn’t buy any cloth without ration tickets, which were always in short supply. But one chi⁸⁴ 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 1980s, there was a saying about our diet: sweet potato soup, sweet potato bread, no life without sweet potatoes 红薯面汤红薯面馍, 离了红薯不得活. At that time our life was already much better than the 1960s, with 80 jin of wheat flour per person per year on average (after turning in the wheat required by the state), which of course was still not enough. So all the rest of the food came

⁸² And it was the later period of the nation-wide three-year famine from 1959 to 1962, which struck Shang village the hardest since the winter of 1959 and reached the peak in the spring of 1960.

⁸³ In order to better capture the jest, I’m taking a liberal translation here. Same strategy goes with the next one.

⁸⁴ 1 chi equals about 1.0936133 feet.

from the sweet potatoes; we ate them all year round. Nowadays every household has at least over a thousand jin of wheat each year. Back then, how could we have eaten these many dishes [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 the previous hardship to the recent comfort 多学学原来的苦处到现在的享受.

To me these truly were history lessons, “people’s history” indeed. To prepare this dissertation fieldwork, of course I’m required to have sufficient background knowledge of China’s recent past, especially what happened to the countryside during the collectivist era. What I was learning there, in the house belonging to Xiaobin’s grandparents but once appropriated as one of the two production brigade’s dining halls, is how people remembered their past without political judgments. Even though this conversation was about memories of hardship which had been inscribed on people’s bones and hearts (*kegu mingxin* 刻骨铭心, a Chinese expression), villagers nevertheless seemed to take this process as a kind of given, – “this is society!” as Xiaobin’s uncle remarked above, or “society is always on the move 社会总是在走着,” as Li Shu once said to me. Particularly those jingles, amusing in a bitter-sweet way, with their incisiveness and rich connotations, are clear marks of a history, and indeed, a culture locally owned.

To state the obvious, people speak languages, live with histories, make places, and inhabit memories that define their cultural differences and condition their mode of being. Shang villagers have long been coping with rapid “modernizing” sociopolitical change, enduring much hardship, but not letting go of “our customs and our old ways”. Even the extra scoop of gruel in the collective dining hall, was still an explicit cultural gesture toward a wedding celebration.

Putting up *duilian* on the front door posts for the Chinese New Year is another example of local cultural creativity. It also reveals villagers’ positive attitude toward their

life ahead, a nice parallel with their humorous undertaking to their recent past, as illustrated above. A literal translation of *duilian* is “antithetical couplet”, which is a pair of lines of poetry, written on paper, pasted on the sides of the doors leading into people's homes. The two lines correspond in their metrical length and some properties of each character are parallel as well, such as meaning and tone. *Duilian* as a genre has its special rules: to compose or appreciate on properly requires a certain grasp of classical Chinese language.⁸⁵ Many of these couplets have been used for generations and express traditional hopes for health, wealth, and longevity.. Others reflect more recent concerns, as the *duilian* by Zhenrang of Shang village, which I will introduce shortly, too.

In Shang village it was on New Year's Eve that every household glued *duilian* onto their main door and every door frame inside their house. The *duilian* are usually purchased a few days before; most are hand-written with calligraphic brushwork. Some in the village write the calligraphy on their own; and those who are good at it are often invited over to write for others, whereupon they get treated to a good meal. In the neighboring market town there are also several specialists who make money by devising *duilian* phrases and writing them on two sheets of paper. Despite the strict rules of the *duilian* genre, these phrases are fairly universally clear, with hopeful meanings such as prosperity, bounty, and happiness. An example is, “贺佳节富贵吉祥 celebrating the joyous festival of good fortune and wealth,” paired with “迎新春平安如意 welcoming the fresh spring of peace and fulfillment.”

⁸⁵ An explanation provided by Wikipedia is sufficient and worthy to be quoted here: a *Duilian* is only considered as such if the following rules apply: 1. Both lines must have exactly the same number of Chinese characters. 2. The lexical category of each character must be the same as its corresponding character. 3. The tones need to be in order. Usually, this means if one character is of the first or second tone, its corresponding character must not be of the first or second tone. 4. The meaning of the two lines need to be related, with each pair of corresponding characters having related meanings too. [And] the ideal for a *duilian* is to have few words but deep meaning. Ref: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duilian>



Figure 29: Putting up Duilian

Zhenrang, a senior Shang villager, always writes about the national leaders in his New Year *duilian*. Despite his incomplete elementary school education – he told me many times “I began life as a grass-collecting boy 割草娃出身” – Zhenrang likes to read; his favorite readings include self-health books and Mao’s poems.⁸⁶ He takes pride in using his own calligraphy for the household’s New Year *duilian*. For the year 2006, in honor of the new national policy to exempt the farmers from agricultural taxation, Zhenrang wrote his New Year *duilian* as: Chairman Hu governs for the people (胡主席施政为民), Premier Wen reaches out to China (温总理功扬中华); and on top of the gate, pasted horizontally, was: The People’s Leaders(人民领袖).⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Posters of Mao and Mao’s poems dominate the main wall of Zhenrang’s living room that faces the door. In my first visit to him, he asked me to read out the poems written in Mao’s famous cursive style. I had been wondering if it was his test of me to see if I was qualified as an “intellectual” to his standard. Luckily I passed his test. And we became friends, especially after I bought him a collection of Mao’s poems in Shanghai at his request.

⁸⁷ Although the new tax policy is not favored by local officials, as I discussed in the previous section, Shang villagers wholeheartedly appreciate the national government’s recent turn to meeting the needs of

It is not surprising that phrases developed to respect labor migration and rural industry are also popular, such as “fortune comes to hand upon going out to seek a fortune 出外求财财到手” and “business prospers at home upon starting a home business 居家创业业兴隆”. Usually the couplet posted on the main entrance is the most conspicuous one, much bigger size than the smaller ones on the doors to the hall room, kitchen, and storage room. Often there are even smaller ones pasted on belongings such as the farm tractor (with “ri xing qian li 日行千里” meaning “go a thousand Chinese miles in one day,”) on trees in the yard (with “shu mu xing wang 树木兴旺” meaning lush growth), and the well (with “chuan liu bu xi 川流不息” meaning continuous flow). I even saw a pair of *duilian* posted by the two sides of an outlet in the wall, with one saying “Gong Xi Fa Cai 恭喜发财⁸⁸ (May you be happy and prosperous)” and the other one warning “An Quan Yong Dian 安全用电 (Using electricity safely)”. With those small couplets, at New Year’s time the whole house seems to be filled with vigor and vitality. They suggest great enthusiasm for life, and an attitude that always looks forward.

Duilians are put up on the eve of the first of the new year at a specifically designated time, usually after lunch. Going around the village at that time, I saw almost every household was engaged in this special activity, a collective (and exciting) reminder of the imminent New Year. The task requires a collaboration of at least two people. The first requirement is the cooking of wheat flour gruel, to be used as glue. Then a ladder is taken out for the male member to reach the top of the house entrance, while his collaborator, a

the peasants. One emblematic saying was, “we old peasants have been paying tax since ancient times, [as the phrase tells,] ‘imperial grains and national tax.’ Now the Communist Party exempts even this [agricultural tax], which was unthinkable in the past. 我们老农民自古以来都是要交税的, “皇粮国税”么. 现在共产党连这个都免了, 这在过去想也想不到的事.

⁸⁸ The Cantonese pronunciation of *Kung Hei Fat Choi* may be more familiar to the Western readers.

female or a senior family member, holds a big bowl with the paste. Kids are often around too, watching the new *duilian* being mounted, excited by this prominent sign of the New Year coming close. Neighbors often help each other, sharing the fun (see pictures). Quite a few new-style houses have made the *duilian* a permanent decoration on the doorframe of their main entrance, by using the special tiles that are glazed with characters (see picture). For those houses, people put up smaller ones on their door (instead of the doorframes) to replace the old pair from last year. Once put up, *duilians* are not supposed to be taken off until the next New Year, even though people know that over the year the color will fade away and the paper will become shredded and tattered. The color red is used for their *duilian* by normal families who haven't had any family members die over the past three years; white *duilian* shows that the family lost a member in the year just past, yellow means the death occurred the year before, and green signifies that it's the third year of the family's memorializing of the lost family member.⁸⁹ Accordingly, both the white and yellow *duilians* are taken to express family members' mourning of the deceased one and the green *duilian* expresses wishes for a peaceful life for their relative in the other world. I also saw quite a few normal (red) *duilian* that adopted a Christian phraseology, since nowadays many people in the village have adopted Christian beliefs.

During the Spring Festival, gift exchanges among family members were quite a phenomenon: buying and transporting of goods increased so much during the festival that there were frequent traffic jams on the main country roads, the horns of tractors, motorcycles, and automobiles blaring, all vehicles piled high with boxes of fresh eggs, instant noodles, canned milk powder, and much more. After the arrival of the Lantern

⁸⁹ Here the range of family includes all three generations 三服 of the patrilineal family.

Festival,⁹⁰ colorful shows began to appear, with all kinds of temple fairs and local opera performances going on throughout the countryside. On these occasions, I got to see a happy village life, especially participation in cultural performances and avid appreciation of live local operas.



Figure 30: Spring Festival

VI. Everyday Life and Travels of “Culture”

I have noted that the practices I discuss in the last section – the banquets, the *duilian*, the Spring Festival traditions, and the celebration performances – were not called “wenhua” by the people of Shang village. Instead they were called “play things” 玩意儿 or “playing around” 跑着玩. As I have argued, explicit appreciation for the everyday local culture of Henan villages is in short supply because of the nationally hegemonic

⁹⁰ It is a traditional festival that falls on the 15th day after Chinese New Year day.

discourse of the “lacking” peasant and the official emphasis on the solely economic needs of the countryside.

In general, new understandings of culture can be seen in an equation of urban consumer culture with “popular culture” 大众文化, a formation of discourse that is in cahoots with the hegemonic economistic discourse that denigrates the rural while paying tribute to the cultural industry and consumerism. Neglect of the rural population has been predominant in academic “cultural studies” that has embraced “popular culture,” seeing it as almost exclusively urban, and this bias is shown in many scholarly discussions.⁹¹

As Li Hsiao-ti explicates, in his discussion of “Making a Name and a Culture for the Masses”, in the 1920s and 1930s there were historical moments when wenhua, with a renewed 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 left intellectuals decided “they were the masses” (Li 2001: 44).⁹² And the neologism *zhong* 众 a.k.a. the masses (read the peasants), was conceptualized as a new historical agent capable of making and narrating a history of its own. As Li also recognizes in his discussion, this development directly relates to Maoist cultural policy which always emphasized the great potential for revolutionary agency of “the masses,” from the late 1930s up through the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Now, however, in the twenty-first century, wenhua seems to have departed again from villagers’

⁹¹ Likewise, most discussions from outside China on the topic of “Chinese pop culture” concern themselves with urban culture as well, e.g., Wang, Jing. 2005. *Locating China: space, place, and popular culture*. London; New York: Routledge. Liu Kang has also critiqued the phenomenon of focusing exclusively on urban youth-oriented, highly commercialized popular cultural production in China’s popular culture arena, see Liu 2004, especially Chapter 3: The rise of Commercial Popular Culture and the Legacy of the Revolutionary Culture of the Masses.

⁹² The Chinese scholar Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 has also discussed “the great discussion on wenhua” 文化大讨论 in the 1920s and 1930s. See Meng 2005, 传媒与文化领导权：当代中国的文化生产与文化认同 *Media and Hegemony: the cultural production and cultural identity in contemporary China*.

everyday life. It always has to be imported from above, as is stated explicitly in government policy. I quoted below from the Number One Document on measures to bring wenhua into the countryside. Note the frequency of using “wenhua” here:

*[We shall] develop the rural wenhua projects and make them thrive. All levels of administration shall increase the fiscal investment on rural wenhua development to improve the facilities for public wenhua activities such as the 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 peasants' physical fitness project.*⁹³

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; this at least appears more concrete than the buzzword of wenhua.

Then Zhishu’s project of the *Wenhua Guangchang* seems to have closely followed the national policy, 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 the government’s sole focus on economic development has effectively vacated the meaning of “wenhua.”

Following the national policy in 2006, the Party secretary of Zhaozhou County called for a better use of all the village committee courtyards: he sought to reform them into “wenhua courtyards”文化大院 and open them to ordinary villagers. He was no doubt thinking of their central location and the large amount of space they usually occupy, as

⁹³ See the Chinese Central Government website: http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2006-02/21/content_205958_2.htm, and the original Chinese text: 繁荣农村文化事业。各级财政要增加对农村文化发展的投入,加强县文化馆、图书馆和乡镇文化站、村文化室等公共文化设施建设... 构建农村公共文化服务体系。推动实施农民体育健身工程。

well as of the decline in administrative affairs in the villages. Soon, all over the county different sizes of billboards – saying “wenhua courtyard”文化大院 – appeared above the main gates of village committee courtyards. However no further steps were taken and the meaning of “wenhua courtyard” remained ambiguous.⁹⁴ In Shang Village, residents were still unwilling to join village cadres in their card games inside the courtyards. These billboards produce an even louder cacophony of wenhua-as-lack, clearly reminding people: you don’t have wenhua out there where you live; here it is inside this courtyard.

Now that wenhua has become such a buzzword, Shang village’s eleventh team⁹⁵ recently opened a “wenhua teahouse”文化茶馆, which has been doing a very good business thanks to its location by the main road. Youcai, the team leader, had a huge signboard fastened over the road, anchored onto two telegraph poles, on which two lines of characters tell it all. Villagers going to and fro on the busy road are unfailingly confronted with the official discourse of wenhua: the first line reads “*Shang Village Keji [science and technology] Wenhua Teahouse* 尚村科技文化茶馆”⁹⁶; and the second line reads “*Stews and Pork* 卤肉大肉”. It appears in the final analysis that stews and pork outrank keji and wenhua, science and culture. This fits perfectly with the principle advocated by the post-Mao leadership for nearly thirty years: the economic base shall decide the superstructure 经济基础决定上层建筑.

⁹⁴ Some local cadres replied to my question that there was no substantial support from the county for this change, but the program mainly aimed to provide a public space for villagers which had been scant since the dismantling of collective economy. As I have discussed in the previous pages, however, villagers are reluctant to spend time at the *yamen* by any means; whether their reluctance will be changed with time, remains a question.

⁹⁵ Although terminology has changed at higher levels of social organization, i.e., the “production brigade” has become the “village” and the “production team” has become the “team”, the administrative structure remains largely unchanged in the post-collectivist era.

⁹⁶ In official discourses, *keji* (science and technology) and *wenhua* (culture) have always been spoken together.

But anthropologists have long held the idea that culture is the whole way of life (Tylor). 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 I depicted in the previous section, history and memories, with their distinct local characters, are indispensable components of everyday life, and culture. To Zhishu, the village Party branch secretary, as has been evident in his *Wenhua Guangchang* project, the idea of wenhua persistently refers to a higher plane of life, “a consummation point.” I would argue this is an attitude inherited from the Maoist era. Zhishu’s explicit expression of his agreement with a now outmoded Maoist policy in the following comment is especially illuminating:

Yes, now the importance of education has been so much heightened that no one [in the village] dares to oversee the teachers’ business. However, as a salaried teacher paid by the state, does s/he fulfill his/her duty of teaching? It is hard to tell. In the time of Chairman Mao it was advocated to be “red” before being expert 又红才能又专. Though Deng Xiaoping talked about “white cat or black cat, it’s a good cat whenever it catches the rat,”⁹⁷ this does not convince me. To be honest, I don’t believe one is naturally going to be “red” simply by being expert 专了就能红; instead I insist one can only become expert by being “red” first 红了才能专.

By invoking the socialist ideal in these Maoist terms, advocating both expertise and redness 又红又专, Zhishu made a not-so-indirect critique of the hegemonic Dengist economic determinism. In the recent past of Chinese history, “red” gained a distinct political flavor symbolizing the revolution, the Chinese Communist Party, standing with the proletariat, and building the socialist system. The term “both red and expert” was a historically specific term deployed especially in the Cultural Revolution as the

⁹⁷ This is a famous aphorism stated by Deng first in the 1960s and highlighted in the reform-era, known as a declaration of Deng’s pragmatism.

prerequisite of any true knowledge. Here being “red” may be roughly translated as a political stance that attends to the Maoist ideologies of revolution, mass democracy, and egalitarianism. It also continues to privilege “wenhua” as an aspect of service to the people. Hence, on this occasion Zhishu was discontented with the teachers’ narrow concern for their own salaries. Undoubtedly, he understood the *Wenhua Guangchang* as a selfless and “expert” service to the villagers.

I paid a post-fieldwork visit to the Shang village in December of 2006, when it was fallow season again. To my surprise, people were still working on one of the four pavilions of the *Wenhua Guangchang*. Zhishu told me he had re-designed this last one, deciding to install a round instead of an octagonal roof. He was proud of designing the whole plaza on his own. A trip I had taken with him and others to the county seat was still vivid in my mind; we had gone to learn about what city parks looked like. Indeed, as the vacated wenhua is symbolized by the empty *Wenhua Guangchang* (the culture plaza), the plaza at the same time embodies a well-organized space as tight and clean as that of a (imagined) city. In contrast, the muddy “old pit” that had been delivering lotus roots to villagers for free, despite being more personalistic, was destined to be transformed into a concrete good-looking pond.

Zhishu had added a cement ditch that goes right around the plaza. “Afterwards I’ll let water run around the plaza and it will bring good *fengshui*,” he told me, despite the fact that he, being a Party branch secretary, was not supposed to practice anything based on “feudal superstition” like *fengshui*. Obviously he had invested much effort on this plaza, and had developed a strong emotional attachment to the project. One day soon thereafter I met him by the roadside. 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* 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 expense on the *Wenhua Guangchang* project had gone far beyond the 250 thousand yuan awarded by the county government and, much grouchiness among villagers had been heard.

But Zhishu has stayed on as Shang Village Party Secretary anyway, and life goes on as usual. In an even more recent phone conversation with Li Shu I was told that Zhishu did sponsor quite a few social (collective) activities on the *Wenhua Guangchang* during the recent Spring Festival. Youngsters have been playing basketball and ping pong on the plaza, and the school kids take it as their playground, going there all the time. But older people still prefer to hang out in the village store or the clinics or someone’s front yard, to sit around and chat.⁹⁸ According to Li Shu, since the land adjacent to the plaza has been sold for housing, once the houses are built next to the plaza, people will probably get more used to spending time on the *Wenhua Guangchang*. At this point it is still too far away from the neighborhoods. As for the “wenhua courtyard”, Li Shu insists, “it is [still] a *yamen*.” Just as I earlier observed in the village, nobody goes to the village government courtyard, not even Zhishu himself. He has moved the big TV provided by the county government, which was supposed to use for “educating the Party members on the progressiveness of the Communist Party 共产党员先进性教育,” into his own house.

After all, Shang village did acquire its model village status, thanks to Zhishu’s *Wenhua Guangchang* project, and the county Party secretary has come to visit the plaza a couple of times. One night Zhishu appeared on the local television news as the model

⁹⁸ There is no place to sit on the plaza, and the pavilions have only four pillars supporting the roof.

village Party secretary, praised as having practiced in an exemplary way the Party's recent policy of "Three Represents 三个代表"⁹⁹. He is now famous.

⁹⁹ It was in November 2002 that the "three represents" was written into the Party policy, saying the "three represents" embodies the advanceness of CCCP. They are: to represent the advanced productive capabilities of the Chinese nation, to represent the nation's advanced civilization demands, and to represent the fundamental interests of the broad mass of the population. Note the order here, "productive capabilities" goes the first, then comes the "civilization demands", while "the fundamental interests" is the last one to be represented by the Communist Party. Also see note 68.

Conclusion: Discerning the cultural beyond the rural/urban divide

In the previous discussion I made it clear that the government's emphasis on economic development has effectively vacated "wenhua" of any meaning. Instead of considering what culture in rural areas is, the official discourse employs rhetoric of a "lack" in rural areas that needs to be filled: wenhua is something to be transported to the countryside from the city. "Sending wenhua down to the countryside 文化下乡"¹ has become a standard phrase frequently found in published government policies, official talks and news reports. The urban is the standard against which to judge the rural, and the source for improving the rural.

As a matter of fact, it was after the county seat built its very first *Gucheng Guangchang* 古城广场 ("old city plaza")² in 2005 that Zhishu had his idea of building the culture plaza in Shang village; even the process was somewhat similar to the one that the *Gucheng Guangchang* had gone through. It was the Party Secretary of Zhaozhou County who initiated the building of the old city plaza, the same person who has been promoting the project of Developing the "Poplar Economy 杨树经济", the highly contested issue discussed in Chapter Three. To build the plaza in the center of the county seat, a whole

¹ The phrase is also often used along with science and technology, and health care. Together these are called "three sending-downs to the countryside 文化科技卫生三下乡."

² According to the County Gazetteer 县志, it has been over 4,000 years since the place, named Zhao, first appeared in written records, starting as Zhao State in the Xia 夏 Dynasty (2070 B.C. – 1600 B.C.). Zhao has always been an important strategic place due to its location that connects central China to the south (Hubei Province) with the northwest (Shaanxi Province) China.

group of old houses had to be pulled down to clear the land. This was a big controversy and upset many of the residents who were to be relocated: they had been living in this excellent location for generations. On the other hand, those houses in the county seat, like the ones I describe in the opening of Chapter One, were old-style courtyard houses, all built together in a sort of jumble without any plan; in addition, the old town moat running near by was heavily polluted.

Opposition notwithstanding, after the *Gucheng Guangchang* was finally built, all my friends in the county seat were excited. Their enthusiasm contrasted with the Shang villagers' original indifference toward the culture plaza.³ One friend said to me, "Finally our county seat has the look of a real city 我们县城终于有个城市的样儿了". I'm not sure how the plaza changed her town's outlook in my friend's view, but the space was certainly tidier, cleaner, and more orderly, and it included urban planning-like projects, such as flower beds, sculptures, neon lights, and a line of musical fountains installed in the water of the cleaned-up town moat. The billboard erected on the side of the street displayed the next step: a shopping center to be built around the plaza. *Gucheng Guangchang*, the old city plaza, became a popular gathering place for all kinds of people, a welcoming place open to anybody, people could go there without having to know each other – a remarkable difference from Shang Village's *Wenhua Guangchang*, the culture plaza.

While the *Gucheng Guangchang* succeeded in its goal of representing and reinforcing "urban" aesthetics and sociality, the *Wenhua Guangchang*, being such a spectacle, embodies the local intimacy of the rural-urban divide: All three major issues that I have

³ It is also not surprising that none of my friends lived in that part of town and had to be relocated.

developed in this thesis can be located here: hygiene (the clean, tidy, supposedly desirable plaza – in comparison to the messy, muddy, but reliable "Old Pit" that had been supplying villagers lotus roots for free); village sociality (the supposedly centered, visible, and thus controllable “public space” – in comparison to the scattered places all over Shang village where people socialize everyday as always); and lastly, the discourse of wenhua it conveys in local politics – in comparison to the locally practiced and owned customs and cultures, recalling an anthropological sense of culture.

Moreover, my anthropological inquiry into the three aforementioned aspects of the rural-urban distinction is consistent with an effort to discern the cultural: I have shown, for example, that there is a coherent set of principles governing the domestic practices of hygiene, including the spatial and hierarchical organizations of the ritually significant, on the one hand, and dirt and waste on the other. These spatial and hierarchical organizations affect where everything in-between is put/practiced. These practices are certainly “cultural” with their distinctive local character (everything specific to this particular place and time). The forms of village sociality discussed here are another instance of the locally characteristic “culture” that goes beyond the regulatory activities of the State: how villagers live their social life on a daily basis, what kind of bonds have been formed both among the young migrant workers and between them and their home villages, including continuing engagements between the migrant generation and their stay-at-home parents.

Another thread of my argument has been to converse with the hegemonic discourses about rural “problems” that continues to keep the rural-urban divide alive in China. As I discussed in the Introduction, one problem with mainstream Chinese scholarly engagements with rural society has been a heavy reliance on abstract structural categories

to capture meaning in everyday life. In contrast to this sociology, Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the "multiplicity of planes of immanence" helped me to convey the image 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 here the 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, though it is clearly visible to everyone, may find no place in the official discourses of wenhua.

Official "wenhua," though not explicitly defined, is closely intertwined with the State's vision of what is meant by "modern;" in other words, it is defined in accordance with a social policy committed to modernization, signified by phrases such as "advanced socialist wenhua 社会主义先进文化" in the most recent national policy for "promoting rural reform and development," issued in October, 2008. In this document, it states,

*[we should] insist on using advanced socialist wenhua to seize the battle-front of rural villages, promoting peasants to uphold science, abide by the law with integrity, resist superstition, and transform habits and customs.*⁴

Here "to seize the battle-front" turns the rural-urban divide into a war-zone, a cultural battle with those backward rural villagers who presumably have not yet "upheld science" or "abided by the law," but instead follow superstition and practice outmoded habits and customs. The rhetoric of cultural battle immediately reminds one of Mao's Cultural Revolution, whose full title "the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" seems to

⁴ 坚持用社会主义先进文化占领农村阵地, 倡导农民崇尚科学、诚信守法、抵制迷信、移风易俗. See: http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-10/19/content_10218932_1.htm

demonstrate a rather different intention than this 2008 “advanced socialist wenhua.” Yet, Mao’s Cultural Revolution had also been trying to cultivate a “new socialist countryside”⁵ with the attack on “the four olds 四旧,”⁶ including “the lingering influences of superstitions inherited from old China’s feudal tradition” (Meisner 1999).

Nevertheless, while it is clear that both projects have ‘modernizing’ intentions of moving away from ‘the old’ way, it would be premature to dismiss the state’s arrogant enactment as the moral educator out of hand. In Chapter Three I discussed the importance of wenhua in official discourses, relating Mao’s emphasis on culture and consciousness to Gramsci’s contribution to Marxist appreciation of culture (hegemony), which “made it into a constituent element of social life” (Dirlik 2005: 125).⁷ On the other hand, “wenhua” in Chinese is literally “wen-ization,” enculturation, a term that always connotes active cultivation. In older Chinese traditions the Confucian civilizers who conducted the moral educational process also assumed the moral authority and power to transform others. As Feuchtwang points out, “every state acts within a tradition of abstraction that is or was a cosmology, a mapping of the world” (2004: 20). To a great extent, the long Chinese tradition of emphasizing the moral foundation of the state and

⁵ The Party started to employ the saying of “new socialist countryside” in its policy documents in 1950s. Ref. the People’s Daily: <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40557/49139/49143/4096993.html>

⁶ The Four Olds are old ideas, culture, customs, and habits.

⁷ 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 masses, viewed as members of social segments, possessing not abstract, legal, or civic rights but substantive socioeconomic entitlements, and accordingly expected to actively involve and perform duties. This, according to Tsou, is rather different than the notion of the citizenship found in “the modern West” which underscores rights rather than duties of the members of society. 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).

the notion of the unity of governance and moral teaching cannot be totally obliterated by the Marxist notion of “scientific laws” (1987: 287). The party-state’s arrogation of “advanced socialist wenhua” to itself can be situated, following Kipnis, in “a historically deep tradition of debates about the comparative value of redesigning political institutions in relation to that of improving the morality of the people” (2007: 394).⁸ As Tsou Tang argues, “The state was and still is the institution of civilization” (1987: 287).

Thus “superstition” has become such a strong word that whenever Shang villagers introduced some old customs to me, they would often add “but it’s a superstition.” That afternoon at Li Shu’s clinic when I first met Runhe and asked him what he usually did besides farming, he was too embarrassed to tell me that he was actually a locally popular yin-yang master. Li Shu also tried to lessen his embarrassment by saying it was “just a hobby 也就是个爱好.” This clearly reflects the normalizing attempts of the State. In other words, villagers, in their own discourses and practices, contest the state’s arbitrary regulation of what is proper and what is not; they meanwhile, in part, materialize distinct, embodied ways of life.

There are many officially pronounced words, such as “superstition,” that are as empty as the vacated “wenhua,” as demonstrated in Chapter Three. Like the word wenhua, these judgmental phrases seem to have little to do with villagers’ everyday life, at least for now. In practice, though, the so-called “superstition” (such as temple worship, fengshui and divination practices, and burning paper money for deceased family members) and “outmoded” or “backward” habits and customs (such as the complicated principles and

⁸ Thøgersen also discusses the issue of legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in local rural areas, especially when the party started to redefine itself as an elite party, “whose cadres are better educated, more cultured and civilized, and have better organizational abilities than the rest of the rural population” (200). See Thøgersen 2002.

procedures of banquets, ceremonies, and festivals) are all constitutive of people's sense of propriety and well-being.

The Temple of the Yellow Dragon is such an example. Even though it was demolished in 1957 during the national mobilization of irrigation systems 水利化, 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 Yellow Dragon Master 黄龙爷. This is called "reporting to the temple 报庙," a requirement as central as compliance with the household registration system, I was told, except 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 practiced the ritual in that plowed and planted wheat field, no matter whether the death occurred in the daytime or nighttime, in scorching summer or freezing winter. Seeing a villager kneeling on the muddy ground in the rain to perform the ritual of reporting to the temple, a county high school teacher who was home visiting his mother in Shang Village began to propose rebuilding the temple by pooling everyone's money together. However the money raised was not enough to rebuild the original grand three-hall temple, so the village ended up with a small one-room Daoist temple (See Figure 24). "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.⁹

⁹ Jianbao is an ordinary villager who retired several years from the township Rural Credit Cooperative 农村信用合作社 as a cashier. So are Jianzhou, whom I mentioned in Chapter Two, and Zhenxian, another ordinary Shang villager. They are in charge of the temple mainly because of their seniority in Shang 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; neither are 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, i.e., the Yellow Dragon Master.

This Temple of the Yellow Dragon was rebuilt in early 2005 at an expense of ten thousand RMB.¹⁰ One year later, Zhishu started to build the *Wenhua Guangchang*, with a direct investment from the county government of 250 thousand RMB (and the final expense was over 400 thousand).

There is little doubt that people in Shang village have been stubbornly adhering to their “outmoded customs” all along, in quiet defiance of secularizing pressure from both the Maoist and the reform-era state. I have found Feuchtwang’s insight on *fengshui* in Chinese history to be helpful for understanding the significance of the domain of “superstition” to villagers. According to him, superstitions such as grave-worship, ancestral halls, genealogies and temples, and fengshui (the art of siting dwellings and graves), are “a breakdown of the privileges of noble families in imperial China” because for local villagers, “gods in their temple palaces are imagined to be as powerful as emperors [and] could enhance the well-being of those who [live] in the territory that it and its festivals centered” (2004: 23). The superstitious practices of ordinary villagers, therefore, “could be as auspicious as any other, even the emperor’s” (original in Feuchtwang 2002: Chapter 2, quoted in Feuchtwang 2004: 23). In other words, even though the state makes its presence felt among the most mundane necessities of village life, its regulatory system does not (or cannot) replace the many forms of local cultural production that continue to constitute people’s sense of being and belonging in the village.

¹⁰ 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 out of the donated money. But for this temple that is built exclusively for the Shangs, not even for the Wangs and Lis in Shang Village, which also only opens on the first day and the fifteenth day of each lunar month, the donation is rather skimpy. 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 the local temple politics, see Chau 2005, “The Politics of Legitimation and the Revival of Popular Religion in Shaanbei, North-Central China,” *Modern China*, 31(2): 236-278.

More importantly, the Temple of the Yellow Dragon has also been acting 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 could I guarantee your happiness, longevity, health and peace if you haven’t shown mercy [to others]? Hasten to do good works! 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. — Straightforward yet poetic, this is indeed an exemplary form of “folk culture”.



Figure 31: The Yellow Dragon Master

The couplet was composed by Shixue, the school teacher who initiated the rebuilding of the Yellow Dragon Temple, and who teaches Chinese in the county high school. Shixue told me later that he recently developed an interest in the *Book of Changes*, and divination in particular. I also heard that he gave some advice to Zhishu on the *fengshui* of the *Wenhua Guangchang*.

The Temple of the Yellow Dragon stands by the main village road that leads to the neighboring market village. 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 in our car and made a comment right away: that's illegal. He didn't get it wrong; it is a tangible proof of villagers practicing "superstition" and possibly an unauthorized use of agricultural land. However this tiny temple does not seem to have bothered the local police and Zhishu too went there during the temple festival. As a matter of fact, Zhishu has 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, held annually in the neighboring market village.

I was there for the temple fair held in late February, 2006. It was a remarkable event. The preparation had started over a month before, mainly to train the elementary school kids of Shang village. 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 毛泽东思想宣传队 of Shang Village) drilled the school kids in performances for the parade. The only exception in this group was Shaoli's father, who in his seventies was a master of the lion dance and of a locally-developed martial art (called *meihua quan* 梅花拳, plum blossom boxing), both of which he had learnt before 1949 when he was a child. The training became more and more serious after the Spring Festival, and in Shang village we heard the sound of the rehearsal everyday. At that time the *Wenhua Guangchang* was yet to be built and the rehearsals were sometimes held in the big yard of the village wheat flour mill, or sometimes on the west-end (西头) of Shang village where the paved east-

west village road ends. Even the rehearsals were a big and happy event for everybody, with many gathered around the place for rehearsal, making all kinds of suggestions.



Figure 32: Paozihui – preparation

Finally the show day came. The performing school kids were the center of attention: their costumes had been purchased from a professional opera troupe in the prefectural city, paid 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 ball and the lion for lion dance, and other decorations for the performance, had been made by experienced villagers several days before. And Zhishu had gathered 10 vehicles from villagers, including one car, one truck, and eight farm tractors. When everything was ready, along with other villagers I hopped onto a tractor. The entire population of Shang marched grandly toward Tanglou village, where the temple fair was held. The parade procession made a stop at the Temple of the Yellow Dragon to show

respect and report to the Yellow Dragon Master and the Shang ancestors. After setting off a huge pile of firecrackers outside the temple and worshipping the Master by performing a lion dance in front of him (this time it was performed by Shaoli's father and two other elders), we proceeded to Tanglou village. The street was already filled with crowds coming from all over the county, as well as many from the adjacent township that belongs to Hubei Province. I was told that this temple fair is claimed to be one of the biggest in this area. Even on that teeming street of Tanglou village, Shang Village was the center of attention.¹¹



Figure 33: Paozihui – the show day

That was truly a glorious day for the Shangs. And I had never seen so much solidarity among Shang villagers. Notably it was Zhishu who made it happen, successfully. And it

¹¹ A sensible anecdote: when the Shang parade arrived at the destination, the Temple of Fire God 火神庙 in Tanglou Village, the three school girls who had been performing the land boat dance stood in front of the crowds and started to sing. Supposedly they should be singing some local folk songs but to everyone's surprise, amusingly, they sang a song from a popular Korean TV soap-opera 大长今. Zhishu told me later that, nobody in the village could teach them to sing an aria from a local opera; meanwhile there is no music teacher in the village elementary school. The three girls picked the song themselves.

was exactly at that moment that I was reminded that local culture and the officially defined “wenhua” are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the boundaries keep being crossed over by a variety of social actors like Zhishu, the village Party secretary. Had he reached his “consummation point” on that day? Or did he think he had brought the whole village to a “consummation point”? I wonder.

Even so, the excitement was only temporary. After the glorious parade everything in Shang Village seemed to go back to normal. With the Spring Festival season fading away, younger villagers kept leaving for their work in the cities, while the elders who stayed behind once again started their complaints about the poplar-planting project since the spring was approaching. With the commencement of the new school term, Li Shu was again greeted every morning as he swept his front yard, because the grandparents had again started to escort their grandchildren past his house to the village kindergarten and elementary school. But there are also changes happening. In my last visit to Shang village in 2008, 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 at home to take care of; and all her children persuaded her to leave her small piece of land (1.3 *mu*, 0.068 hectare), which required too much labor and generated too little income. No one in the village even knew when she would return.

Life goes on with teeming social cultural activities; but I have to stop my story-telling at this point. Before I end this thesis, however, I would like to quote a comment on country 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 with whom I 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 after I get 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 Zhao Benshan have a performance called "What is happiness, happiness is nothing but enduring hardship 幸福是什么, 幸福就是受罪"?¹² [Laugh] If I go to live in the cities, I'd have to stay in a tiny room all day long, with nobody to talk to or play with. I'm joking, but this speaks for a lot of people and a lot of situations."

¹² Zhao Benshan is a nationally known comedian, whose performances are mostly based on rural areas in Liaoning Province, Northeast China.

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