

# QUESTIONING THE SELF

## The figure of rural woman in *Girls from Outside*

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*After accession to the World Trade Organization in 1999, China has been further incorporated into the global track. The national policy of economic development requires a continuing exploitation of natural resources and intensive labor from the rural sector, and over the last few decades there has been a ceaseless wave of rural women going to the cities and working mainly as assembly-line workers, domestic helpers, and sex workers. Developing a subaltern and feminist perspective, this paper attempts to invoke a spectral figure of the subaltern as the rural woman demonstrably haunting dominant regimes of representations of modernization. Through a textual analysis of the television series *Girls from Outside* (1991), this paper examines how a rural woman peasant worker is represented as a model of the imperative to "develop the self" as a marker of social upward mobility, in the dominant discourse of development. Yet, this paper also reads against the grain of the texts, in which there are contradictions and ambivalences in portraying a rural woman as an actor of modernization. The self here is haunted by the other, as exemplified by rural kinship, a strike, and the women "left-over" in the job market.*

KEYWORDS self/other; rural; subaltern; representation; development

### Introduction

I have been a volunteer with a Hong Kong non-governmental organization (NGO), China Social Services and Development Research Centre (CSD) for the past 10 years.<sup>1</sup> In July 2001, we conducted a 2-year gynecological checkup program with two working partners in Jiangxi province, China: Luxia-Wanli Women's Mutual Aid Credit Union (LWCU) of the Yongxin Village and the Women and Children's Health Unit of Wanzai County. As we were promoting health care, we showed video tapes on health education for members in the conference hall of the three-storey center of LWCU. We also played different entertainment programs like cartoons, comedies, romance, and action films. The screenings on a 29-inch color television attracted the local people, and it transformed the conference hall into a mini-cinema for social events in which we can understand how culture is in the making of meaning. As Turner observes, "film is a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself" (1999, p. 3).

Looking into a society's way of life and system of values, I chose to screen *Girls from Outside* (1991), a melodrama series made for television about rural women migrants. I had

bought the ten-episode serial on VCD at the Beijing International Airport. The audience of approximately fifty people included mainly middle-aged men and women, with some elderly people and children. The young people had all gone away to work in the cities. We showed the serial at eight o'clock every night. On the first night we finished three episodes, the second three more but, on the third night, they all desperately wanted to watch the ending. In the end we stayed up watching until midnight in order to finish the series.

Some of the women who were in their thirties and forties told me that they liked the protagonist, Zhao Xiaoyun, very much as "she is smart and intelligent. One person can do two persons' work." A scene in the second episode particularly caught their attention, in which the female workers were sitting on either side of the conveyor belts, assembling products, when one of Zhao Xiaoyun's colleagues, Zhao Lingmei (more like a sister as they were from the same village) went to the bathroom without asking for permission from the leader of the production line. Xiaoyun immediately pitched in for Lingmei. She would oscillate between Zhao Lingmei's seat and her own, coming and going, coming and going. As a result, the production line never suffered. Lingmei was penalized for violating the factory law. In contrast, Xiaoyun had not only finished her task but had also helped in maintaining the production to flow smoothly. Her crisis management ability and her sympathy for village sisters were highly appreciated by the rural audience.

One morning 35-year-old Huaying,<sup>2</sup> an executive member of the LWCU, told me, while she was washing clothes for her family, what she felt about the *Girls from Outside*. She said she really wanted to "go out" (i.e. out of the village) to work, in order to earn money to meet her daily expenses. However, she had given up the idea because she had to take care of her children. After complaining about the hardships of living, heavy taxation, and expensive school fees, Huaying suddenly shifted her attention to a 15-year-old girl who was passing by. The girl had finished her primary education but then dropped out. Now she loitered around the village or did some housework every day. Huaying criticized the girl: "you loiter the whole day, and do not study. You see, someone like Xiaoyun, she has got high school education, and gets recognized by the boss. Now even if you want to go out to work, you should be educated. No culture, no knowledge, no one wants you." The girl began smiling with embarrassment and then quickly left.

To Huaying, "culture and knowledge" not only meant qualification from the formal school system, which these days increasingly stresses industrial skills training, economic development, business experience, and profit-making, but also referenced the prevailing value system of negating rurality, as it fosters inequality between the city and the countryside and perpetuates rural subordination. In a seminar on "Displacement: Contradictions Between Peasant's Needs and Institutional Arrangements," held in December 2001 by the Universities Service Centre for China Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, a group of sociologists, economists, rural experts, and development workers discussed a diverse range of problems related to rural life. Some sociologists criticized the explicitly urban-centered national education which promotes the notion of "a piece of bread and a glass of milk for breakfast" as a normal city lifestyle in a primary school textbook. This ignores the diversities of food and living patterns in different rural areas. For example, we have congee and steamed buns for breakfast in the village. Chen Xin, associate professor of the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), pointed out in the seminar that one of the negative effects of the existing education system is that "our textbooks make rural children feel that there is no dignity in rural living, so they have to leave the 'backward' place."

Huaying's identification with the desirable Xiaoyun contradictorily reveals her frustration about the reality that subsistence farming and domestic work such as washing clothes are considered trivial jobs which do not allow her to earn money and gain dignity. Huaying realizes that the social status of a peasant is considered to be very low and that manual farm work cannot be counted as real "knowledge," but rather as what Foucault refers to as "disqualified or subjugated knowledge" (Foucault 1980, pp. 81–82). Huaying's experience highlights the fact that in contemporary China a peasant earns practically nothing from subsistence farming and he/she has to pay a lot to meet all the expenses. The only possible way of earning money is to migrate to the city to work, but the requirement is then that you should have "culture" and "knowledge," and not just a supply of physical labor; otherwise, you will not be successful. There is no doubt that this value system embedded in formal education is very urban-centered and it produces rural people as ignorant objects because of their lack of urban culture and knowledge. Thus, when a rural subaltern has access to lines of social upward mobility, s/he is forced first of all to accept that s/he is inferior, and has to "develop the self."

"Grasp opportunity, develop the self, and above all develop the economy" is a famous remark made by Deng Xiaoping when he visited southern China in the spring of 1992. Since that time, "develop the self" has become a popular slogan. Deng made his visit to the southern coastal areas to reinforce the national policy of rapid modernization, elaborated under the catch-phrase, "market socialism with Chinese characteristics." This slogan intended to invigorate the economy and open China to the western world, in order to shake off the shame of "poverty and backwardness." Thus, the principle of "develop(ing) the self" is supposed to be understood as referring to "the *modern* self," that is, a subject of modernization, or an economic (wo)man.

In what follows, I examine one of the significant models of "developing the self," that is, Zhao Xiaoyun, the protagonist of the *Girls from Outside* television serial, who is publicly recognized as one of the successful models of rural women migrants. Since fiction and fact are not opposites of each other, both of them have something to tell us about those systems and processes of "culture" that Williams designates the "whole way of life" of a social group in his famous article, "Culture is Ordinary" (2001, p. 11). In this perspective, making sense of the world is the constitutive element of culture understood as a network of practices and representations shaping our society. As Turner argues, our access to reality is also through representation: "representations of the real world are like any other language system, saturated with ideology" (1999, pp. 183–185). The portrayal of Zhao Xiaoyun in *Girls from Outside* discloses an aspect of the mainstream "way of seeing" in present-day China. I will demonstrate how the models are represented, and then I want to argue that there are incongruities in their construction of the modern self.

### Zhao Xiaoyun: On the Path to Success

In the early 1990s, the size of the audience going to the cinema in China gradually declined. According to the official statistics, the cinema audience in 1991 decreased 11 percent when compared with 1990, and it sharply dropped a further 26.4 percent in 1992 (*Chinese Filmmakers Association* 1992, pp. 243–245; *Chinese Filmmakers Association* 1993, p. 221). In contrast, television was becoming a popular and fashionable durable consumer good at that time. According to sociologist Huang in 1985, there were about seventeen color television sets for every one hundred households in urban areas; by 1993,

there were eighty sets per one hundred households. The number of black and white televisions increased from around twelve for every one hundred households in 1985 to seventy sets in 1993 (Huang 1997, p. 105).

*Girls from Outside* was produced by the Production Centre of TV Series of Guangzhou Television Station. There were ten episodes, and the production cost of the series amounted to 500,000 RMB; a big budget at that time. The program was first screened on Guangzhou Television Station in 1991. It then generated a tremendous response through screening on China Central Television (CCTV) soon after the spring festival (February). According to CCTV's statistics, the number of viewers reached a record-breaking 300 million. In the next year, Deng Xiaoping visited southern China, and the drama was repeatedly shown on other local television stations (Wen 2000, pp. 757–770). *Girls from Outside* was one of several television dramas about reform and the open-door policy in the early 1990s, but it was anomalous and pioneering in the ways in which it places migrant workers at the center of the stage, looks into the relation between capital and labor, and recruits a Hong Kong actor (Zhang 2004).

*Girls from Outside* was very popular among audiences in big cities and even in small towns, winning the Golden Eagle Award by popular vote. It also won such official honors as the First Honor of the Flying Heaven Award, and the Five-One Achievement Award given by Central Department of Propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party. Members of the Flying Award panel, such as the Chief of Department of Broadcasting, Film and Television, and the General Secretary of the Association of Television, all recommended it highly. They considered that it would

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

According to Ruan, the director of CCTV's Production Centre for Chinese TV Drama, among 2,000 television series shown on CCTV from 1978 to 1992, over 60 percent were about the reform (1992, pp. 1–8). Yin, Professor of Communication at Qinghua University in Beijing, highlighted the complicity between state ideology and mass culture in the "main melody" television series, *Girls from Outside* when he noted that "only those melodramatic TV series which adopt a negotiated 'political stance' between forces of market and state, interests and accountability have produced widespread social effects" (2001, pp. 20–27).

*Girls from Outside* was directed by Cheng, who was also one of the screenwriters, along with his female classmate Xie. Both graduated from the China Central Arts and Performance Academy. Cheng later worked at the Guangzhou TV Station, and Xie became the director of the editorial board of *China TV* magazine. They spent 3 years preparing for *Girls from Outside* by doing extensive research, writing scripts, and even asking the performers to live and work with factory workers in Shenzhen. Discussing the idea of the serial, they clearly embraced "the main melody" that the reform policy has contributed towards China's modernization:

The reform and open-door policy has allowed us to distance ourselves from a homogenous kind of life-style in which the whole country learns only one model and wears clothes in three colors (blue, grey and military green), and it has made our lives colorful. People are suddenly discovering that everyone has a lot of potential and so many desires; and life has disclosed tremendous possibilities . . . Only by paying respect to that

life and by writing in a realist way can our work reflect the overall trend of social life, and accompany the progress of human history, that is, by approaching modern civilization. (Cheng Hao & Xie Lihong 1993, pp. 282–285; my translation)

*Girls from Outside* narrates a story of struggle and how a village girl becomes an entrepreneur in South China. This modern day fairy tale dramatizes a new kind of self-transformation in the age of globalization. The girls in the television serial come from the valley of Zhao, in Hunan province, and they go to Shenzhen together as factory workers. The main character, Zhao Xiaoyun, successfully climbs up the social ladder and later becomes head of the factory. Another girl, Zhao Fengzhen, refuses to marry a village man and goes off to Shenzhen again with a new group of girls. Zhao Yulan marries the owner of a small restaurant near the factory. Zhao Xiuying becomes a prostitute and is later sent to jail. Zhao Lingmei suffers a serious injury; her left arm is broken and she returns to her village home. A Fang becomes pregnant and is abandoned, and unfortunately she has a miscarriage and cannot bear a child again.

### The New Modern Self

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From the above comments, published in newspapers and magazines, we can see that *Girls from Outside* was highly recommended by officials, television drama critics, and urban audiences. The binding factor for the series' popularity with the urban people was the reinforcement of the assumed inferiority of rural people. In other words, the television series symbolically appropriated rural women's bodies to make capitalist modernization legitimate and reasonable, an appropriation based on the marginalization of rurality by such images as "closed mountains," "closed and backward," "poor and ignorant inland mountain areas," "only by moving out of the mountain, can you find happiness," in all of which the urban critics recognized "unquestioned nature" but not "contested culture," a site of confronting systems of values.

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

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

Xiaoyun's self-transformation from an ignorant rural girl to a modern businesswoman is not a smooth one. By going through struggles and contradictions, she fulfills her goal of becoming the favored subject of modernization with "taste," for example, discarding her pigtail, wearing a dark blue suit and black high heel shoes, carrying a black briefcase, and having a knowledge of English, karaoke, and popular songs from Hong Kong and

Taiwan like "Unspeakable Ending" or "It Is Just Like Your Tenderness." In addition, she gradually becomes an indifferent and calculating person, abandoning her "peasant consciousness" in the process of self-change.

### The Gloomy Ancestral Temple

The foundation of Xiaoyun's self-transformation is a violent cutting off of the umbilical cord of poor, backward and oppressive rurality. In *Girls from Outside*, the scene of Zhao valley appears only twice, that is, in the first episode and the last one. The rural scenes are similar, associated with layers of grey mountains covered in clouds, a secluded ancestral temple, a domineering father with a big butcher's knife, an ex-convict with a cow in the paddy field,<sup>3</sup> and a furious man beating a woman in public as he suspects her of infidelity. The rural settings seem to justify why the young people have to go to the city in search of work as the rural world is "hopeless" and it is not worth staying there, while the city is a beacon of hope. The gloom of the ancestral temple is a sign of the rural decay. Le Zuwang, the director of cinematography for the series, explains how they deliberately constructed an "oppressive" ancestral temple:

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

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

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

The assembly line actively reinforces Xiaoyun's determination to cut off her ties with the "oppressive rural world." Xiaoyun rearranges the positions in the assembly line but some workers complain that she offers the good seats to her sisters. Mr. Jiang, the factory head from Hong Kong, is represented as an ambitious entrepreneur and a family man who wears a fine suit and tie, and carries his mobile phone almost throughout the whole drama. In the third episode, there is a close-up of Mr. Jiang who is scolding Xiaoyun, who still has pigtails and is in her blue factory uniform, as she bows her head slightly:

A factory consists of the head, the manager, the supervisor of assembly line and ordinary workers. There is no longer any such criterion as "township". If you talk about township fellows, well, we are all Chinese township fellows. Miss Zhao Xiaoyun, I am very



disappointed that even you as a high school graduate have *such* a strong peasant consciousness! (my translation)

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

### Fascination for the Assembly Line

Xiaoyun is depicted not only as denying her rural ties, but also as being fascinated by the assembly line of industrial Fordism. An ordinary worker can no longer be the central subject of dominant discourse in contemporary China. Hence, Xiaoyun should have a spirit of modern managerial enterprise: to increase production and efficiency, that is, everything should happen at speed, accompanied by what the nineteenth-century economist Steuart called “a taste for superfluity” in industrial operation.<sup>4</sup> Xiaoyun’s taste for superfluity is explicitly embodied in the assembly line. When Xiaoyun is promoted to assistant supervisor of the assembly line, Mr. Jiang encourages her: “spend more time using your brain. I manage a factory, he manages a working floor, and you assist the supervisor and all of us are the same.” Here, “using your brain” implies that you should change your mind-set to adapt to industrial capitalism, and to “develop the self” with a taste for superfluity, or a drive for unstoppable production. Moreover, the logic of capitalist modernization is based upon the hierarchy of a manager, a foreman, a supervisor, and a worker, and upon an operation of continuously manufacturing products at speed. In the third episode, there is a long shot in which Xiaoyun is alone in the factory, but maintains the smooth functioning of the assembly line. She does research on the production by testing every procedure of the assembly line. Her hands are busily making components, while her body is fluidly moving along the line. Offscreen, we hear in her voice-over that she is writing a letter to her father. She mentions that she is encouraged by the boss and has started to think about how to further stimulate production. She cannot help going a little crazy about it:

Dear Dad, I am now *zhuli lazhan* (an assistant supervisor of an assembly line). “La” comes from the English word, “line,” which means an assembly line. I have been appointed to supervise 50 workers! The factory head trusts me and expects me to think of ways to increase production efficiency. Over the past two weeks, I have investigated every position on the assembly line, and tried to do it all by myself. Now I want to readjust a line, and I believe it will increase production. Am I talking too much? But I really get excited about it. (my translation)

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



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

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

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

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

The exclusion of the rural man here reveals to us that there is another side of Xiaoyun's fascination for the assembly line, further exposed by Mr. Jiang's casual remark: "you [women] only need to repeat the same gesture thousands of times every day." In the dominant discourse of modernization, the rhetoric of industrialization is gendered in that only women have "patience and delicacy," and are able to manage the precise and intricate assembling work required in toys, plastics, and electronics. The rhetoric is packaged by so-called advanced technology and scientific experiments. In the urban television producers' imagination, the assembly line symbolizes the possibilities of moving up the social ladder, but if we analyze Mr. Jiang's careless reference to "repeating the same work thousand times a day" against the grain of the text, we find that the assembly line, contradictorily, requires intensive and unbearable (female) labor. In other words, in the pattern of international division of labor, rural women's bodies are appropriated as sites for the production and extraction of surplus value; that is, female labor is commoditized for the capitalist use of exchange. Only a few rural girls like Xiaoyun manage to get promoted, so she is represented as teeming with bright ideas, and getting excited over the process of increasing productivity; meanwhile, the majority is repeating those monotonous tasks every day along the assembly line.

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

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

### The Left-Overs

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

However, Xiaoyun’s success could not be possible without the other rural women’s “failures” like that of the crippled Lingmei, the imprisoned Xiuying, and the unemployed rural women behind the iron bars of the factory. In the seventh episode, Mr. Jiang selects rural women workers for a new factory. He forcibly turns Xiaoyun around by her shoulders and pushes her to look up at the workplace bathed in floodlight, where the selected workers are working. Meanwhile, offscreen, we hear the begging voices of the excluded rural women. In a medium shot we can see tears on Xiaoyun’s face as it turns out that she agrees with Mr. Jiang’s teaching that it is a life-and-death competitive world and that they should be responsible to their workers first—even though she thinks it is so cruel to choose only 200 out of 1,000 workers who can find no more work in the old factory. Xiaoyun’s identification with the rules of the jungle cannot be separated from the suppressed voices of the other women outside the factory gate.

Furthermore, the imprisoned prostitute and the disabled girl in the village are also posited against the successful Xiaoyun. The imprisoned prostitute, Xiuying, is described as a greedy girl who always longs for a luxurious life but finally gets her punishment. Thus, the figure of Xiaoyun is designed to be in positive contrast to the figures of “failure.” In the last episode, a woman police officer stands in the middle of the screen which is split into two parts: Xiaoyun and two other sisters, on one side, and on the other side, Xiuying, in a dark prison uniform, is locked up behind the wire grid. On the other hand, Lingmei is forced to return to the country because her arm is broken. Sitting on the mountain, she watches Fengzhen gather a new group of girls to go to the city to work, and one of them is Lingmei’s younger sister. A close-up of Lingmei, with her hair obscuring her face and her arm in a white bandage, tells us of her sadness. An extremely long shot, in which Lingmei is seen silently receding into the far distance against the stretching mountains under the clouds, adds to the effects of gloom and depression.

The countryside is not only represented as a fiendish place through the figures of “cruel father and husband,” but also as a dumping place for the weak shunned by the city and the labor market. What will happen to “the left-overs?” The television drama puts the excluded majority in the remote and isolated countryside. Although the reasons for “failure”

are given as “personal misconduct” and “personal carelessness,” the appearance of “the left-overs” conversely challenges the producers’ belief that the reform policy provides people with “a lot of potential” and “tremendous possibilities.”

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

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

The groups disadvantaged in the drama are vanishing in the picture of the economic boom of South China. Yet, the desirable self cannot be presented *without* the failed others. The favored subjects of the domain of political economy exclude, but also paradoxically are dependent upon, these outside specters. “The left-overs” are the gendered specters haunting the current modernization, which precisely produces the very social conditions making them into “a greedy prostitute and a careless factory worker.” The irreducible marks of the imprisoned, the crippled, and the excluded entail the unresolved question of social redistribution.

### The Strike

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

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

On the other hand, Xiaoyun is shown to have sympathy for her township fellow, namely the “careless” Lingmei. After working 16 hours continuously to earn extra money before Christmas, Lingmei is knocked down by a lorry at the gate of the factory at midnight. Her right arm is broken. Xiaoyun has already been promoted as a production manager but she does not forget her sister’s sufferings. She intervenes and fights for social justice with her township fellows.

In the last episode, a *mise-en-scène* has Mr. Jiang surrounded by a large group of anguished women workers dressed in pink factory uniforms, with Xiaoyun, in short hair, wearing a white shirt and blue jeans, standing determinedly in front of the agitated women as a leader of the strike. The boss finally agrees to make concessions. Then the whole group of women workers lifts up Xiaoyun to celebrate the triumph. A sea of pink color overwhelms the screen together with their laughter. Xiaoyun at this time appears as a leader of the working class, or a militant of an immature trade union, or an avant-garde member of the revolutionary movement, or even a nationalist heroine refusing to cooperate with the Hong Kong capitalist. The solidarity of the women is based on the feeling of “we are sisters from the village.” The Hong Kong boss believes that rural women sell their surplus value for the capitalist, but now they are becoming a radical revolutionary force. Here, a once oppressive factory can become a revolutionary place, and Xiaoyun, once an obedient production manager, can also become the leader of the strike. “Peasant consciousness,” elsewhere negated as “a hindrance to modernization,” is paradoxically transformed into a tool for collective action against social injustice. Later, all the core members of the strike are dismissed by the Hong Kong capitalist and they disappear, except for their leader, Xiaoyun. The television drama portrays Xiaoyun as “the fittest survivor,” who still stays in Shenzhen and even becomes the head of another toy factory. The trace of “rurality” as a practice of mutual support cannot easily be erased in the modern self of Xiaoyun. This so-called “peasant consciousness” again has her writing a letter to ask other village fellows to the city to work once she becomes the factory head.

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

The popular TV series *Girls from Outside*, in fact discloses an important fact of the process of Chinese social reconstruction in the 1990s. On the one hand, a huge number of female workers in the large and medium-sized state-run factories have been laid off and on the other, the foreign and joint venture factories in the coastal economic development areas have employed a huge number of rural women workers (some of whom are less than 18 years old). Although this is not the theme of the TV series, it touches upon the tension-filled relations between capital and labor, and it also euphemistically presents an early stage of trade union struggle. Nevertheless, the “soap opera” form of the TV series has determined that it could be given an imaginary social picture of these tensions and struggles. Although it is an important fact that this highly plausible social conflict really exists in the process of class differentiation, such conflict is gradually disappearing in the “mass” media. (1999, p. 21)

However, I believe that this gradually receding “imaginary social picture” cannot fully vanish from any narration of Chinese society with a heritage of Communism and Socialism. It is presumed that there will be no strikes in a communist or socialist state which is governed by workers and peasants. A strike implies that the uncanny past of “proletarian struggle” is interrupting the dominant discourse of modernization. The series’ narration of a “small” labor movement is indebted to the legacy of the revolutionary period, so that the strike not only takes place but is “also euphemistically presented as an early stage of trade union struggle” (Dai 1999, p. 21)—implying that the (in)visible burden of “the past” still produces effects at the present.

“Zhao Xiaoyun” on the business card inscribes how, in the age of globalization, a rural woman enters the logic of patriarchal capitalism and undergoes a process of self-transformation through developing a fascination for the assembly line, acquiring a taste

for superfluity and efficiency, and then becoming a new subject of modernization. The names of Zhao Xiaoyun's sisters, like Lingmei, Xiuying, and others, are almost invisible, fragmentarily appearing only as the names of victims, fallen women, losers or scum, or (gendered) "specters outside the gates of urban factories" (Marx 2001, pp. 120–121). However, we cannot forget that the legacy of the revolutionary era has made Xiaoyun a strike leader fighting for social justice on behalf of the working class and her rural sisters. Here, the mark of "rurality" remains.

### Conclusion

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

The story of Zhao Xiaoyun is a fable of individualism in a capitalist society, in that she determines in being an entrepreneur. When a rural subaltern gets an opportunity to move into a specific privileged group, she has to reject her ties to rurality. In embarking on the process of "developing the self," these women are portrayed as ignorant, that is, a rural woman has to improve her *suzhi* (quality) because rurality is inevitably equated with backwardness and ignorance before achieving citizenship, which is the rhetoric of dominant discourse of development in contemporary China.

Yet, there are rifts and ruptures in the hegemonic ideology of "searching for the self." Huaying's frustration at having "no culture" is encapsulated in her identification with Xiaoyun, since subsistence farming and rural women's domestic work are considered as trivial jobs. Zhao Xiaoyun is depicted as an agent of transnational industry, but she appears as the leader of the strike on behalf of three marginalized social groups, that is, the working class, peasants, and women. Her sudden emergence as the strike leader implies that the residual experiences of a proletarian struggle during the revolutionary period have not yet vanished. Huaying's complaints, the begging voices of the unemployed, the silence of the disabled in the rural gloom, and the trapped prostitute behind the wire are impossibly resolved and rendered reducible in the making of the new modern self like that of Zhao Xiaoyun. "The left-over" or residue is embedded in the sign system of an assembly line, a name card, and a Boeing 767.

There are inner incoherencies and discrepancies within the legends of success. The image of the successful rural woman is mainly dependent on the excluded majority who stays along the fringes of the metropolitan society or lives on the land. The excluded continue to remain the underclass without access to the lines of upward mobility.

### NOTES

1. China Social Services and Development Research Centre (CSD) is a Hong Kong NGO, formed in 1993 by a group of concerned scholars, community organizers, health care professionals, university lecturers, and postgraduates. Through research and long-term community development projects, CSD aims at promoting a sustainable development of Chinese

society and an enhanced concern and involvement of the people, especially the young, for China's future development.

2. All of the names of the rural women of LWCU mentioned in this paper are pseudo names to protect their privacy.
3. An image of a cow plowing the field is always associated with the past, primitiveness, backwardness, and poverty. For example, the famous documentary of *He Shang* (1988), a six-episode television program about China's modernization, chooses the color yellow to be the sign of "backward" China: yellow earth, yellow river, and peasants. Whenever the narrator emotionally talks about poverty or backwardness, an image of a cow plowing the field appears on the screen.
4. In his famous *Inquiry to the Principles of Political Economy*, Steuart argues that trade and industry can co-operate well, depending on "a taste for superfluity": "both the one [trade] and the other [industry] however depend upon a third principle; to wit, a taste for superfluity, in those who have an equivalent to give for it. This taste will produce demand, and this again will become the main spring of the whole operation" (1805, p. 231).

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