Locating China
Space, place, and popular culture

Edited by
Jing Wang

Routledge Studies on China in Transition
Locating China

Locating China explores the political economy of space, place and popular culture in contemporary China. This multidisciplinary volume articulates the relations of local culture and consumer culture to the production of new spatial projects engaged by diverse local “agents.” China’s continuing drive toward urbanization gave rise to not only new cultural imaginaries but also new space and places, and new forms of spatial practices, thus destabilizing the older concepts of the “local” and “locality.”

The international group of scholars incorporate theoretical inquiries of space into grounded empirical work on multiple locales throughout China. Whether the point of interest is village discotheques or tourist villas in Guizhou, teahouses in Hainan or luxury apartments and architectural extravaganzas in Shenzhen, the contributors argue that local places and local cultural practices are not constrained within the local scale. The cultural identity of a place is thus unstable to the utmost. This therefore raises the question – how do meaning transfers between different scales (i.e. the local, the regional, the national, and the global, as well as the urban and rural) take place in socialist China today?

From the analysis of SARS and Beijing’s vision of rescaling the country’s administrative space, to the discussion of the pornographic city, tabloid papers and other pop cultural forms, this volume delivers ethnographic observations and theoretical speculations essential to our understanding of the link between spatial thinking and the production of consumer culture in China.

Contributors include Helen F. Siu, Peter Perdue, Carolyn Cartier, Tim Oakes, Louisa Schein, Tani E. Barlow, Hans Hendrischke, Wanning Sun, Feng Chongyi, and Jing Wang.

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I am grateful to the Henry Luce Foundation for a grant that enabled me to organize a four-year-long research program on Chinese popular culture. This is the second volume (in English) in sequence produced by the Luce Project. The first volume, titled Chinese Popular Culture and the State, was published in 2001 as a special issue in positions: east asia cultures critique (vol. 9, no. 1).

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Introduction: the politics and production of scales in China

How does geography matter to studies of local, popular culture?

Jing Wang

This volume takes on the challenge of exploring the political economy of place, space, and popular culture in contemporary China. Difang, the Chinese term for “place,” predictably leads us to other spatial conceptions such as diyuan and diyu, synonyms for “regions,” and to a mode of critical inquiry that privileges “geography” (dili) as the conceptual anchor for our discussion of the production and consumption of culture in local places. Throughout this book, there is an active engagement with the spatial problematic and paradigms of critical geography. Certainly, “the spatial turn” of scholarship, which has been much celebrated in European and American circles of critical social theories in the past decade, has been slow coming in the China field. It slipped in through transnational studies with a dominant contribution from anthropologists in Southeast Asian Studies.1 Turning to the trope of the Chinese diaspora and the cultural politics of mobility, those works bear the distinct mark of cultural studies, and more importantly, they crosscut with a central tension within human geography that stresses the relational notion of space and place.

Since the late 1990s, the influence of transnationalists has spilled over into Chinese studies and contributed to the field’s growing awareness of the paradigm shift from “time” to “space.” Spatial vocabulary peppered articles and books that examined China in the grid of transnationalism and globalization. But the concept of “space” remains in large part metaphorical. Only recently did scholars in geography begin to demonstrate ways of moving beyond a mere spatial vocabulary by spatializing problems and theories. Probing into problematics both old and new (for example, the diaspora, urban development, tourism and modernity, and imperial landscape creation), they introduced to the China field theoretical possibilities of examining place and culture in spatial terms (Cartier and Ma 2003; Cartier 2001, 2002a; Oakes 1998; Foret 2000).2 The contributors to this volume join those pioneers in the nascent field of Chinese geography to explore ways of developing a critical paradigm that puts the methodological question of space at its heart.
Spatializing SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)

Spatial thinking matters. Perhaps nothing illustrates this point better than the ongoing global SARS outbreak that not only stigmatized China – the home of coronavirus – but had an adverse impact on places like China towns in Canada and America which a wayward Western geographical imagination equated with China itself. The SARS scare has tremendous pedagogical value not least because it offers us a few lessons about scalar and spatial concepts. It also serves as a good showcase that demonstrates what it means to spatialize our approach to rethinking human geography today. We will start with the under-reported social tableau of SARS in China:

The Electronic Business Association in Beijing and the Municipal Commission of Business are promoting online shopping with credit cards. This year and next, related ministries in the city will hold monthly lotteries for credit-card users.

(Beijing News Group 2003)

A million students in Beijing turned on their television sets and radios to participate in state sponsored distance learning.

(Ibid.)

Primary and secondary school students in Beijing will be given individual, standardized email addresses.

(Ibid.)

China Basic Education Resource Network (WWW.CBERN.GOV.CN) will start its operation on May 6; Ministry of Education will disseminate one hundred thousand educational VCDs to primary and secondary school students. Individual home deliveries will be made; the Municipal Commission of Education has started a website “Online Classroom” (STADAY.BJEDU.CN) in collaboration with the Subsidiary School of People’s University, 101 Middle School, Huiwen Middle School, etc.

Subjects covered online include English, politics, physics, chemistry, Chinese, history, geography, and biology.

(Beijing Daily 2003)

The first virtual job fair for Chinese college graduates will be inaugurated in June by the Ministry of Education.

(Sina China News 2003)

The upscaling of social space from the corporeal to the virtual in May 2003 was an administrative order enforced by Beijing. Of course, as a remedy
for the sudden suspension of face-to-face contacts, e-commerce and distance learning was hardly a SARS-related phenomenon credited to China alone. The entire US travel industry had to cope with corporate America’s growing love affair with teleconferencing as a result of the executives’ fear of traveling germs. What was dramatic about the Chinese case during the epidemic was not merely a sudden surge of online shoppers in a land where cash spending is the norm. Nor was the drama a comic spawning of “virtual classrooms” (kongzhong ketang) on air and online overnight.\(^3\) If the volume of traffic in virtual space serves as a yardstick for measuring the size of a country’s democratic space, then the online congestion in China during the SARS scare has thrown this logic into confusion. In the meantime, the world held its breath, wishing the “lessons of prevention learned in a tiny, authoritarian country like Singapore be applied elsewhere, particularly in a vast, chaotic place like China” (Rosenthal 2003b). All of a sudden, the dominant Western representation of China as a bounded and poreless place penned in by the omnipresent socialist police was turned into a newly imagined “chaotic” place where boundaries were found to be too fluid and whose surveillance mechanism was seen to lag far behind Singapore. We found ourselves stuck in a paradox: a recharged iron-fisted authoritarian regime was the globe’s best bet for the eventual control of the epidemic.

Several theories of critical geography enter the picture. Contemporary theorists of space have invariably conceptualized the state as a powerful scale producer. SARS testified to the value of such insights, but with one caveat, however. Western conceptualization of scale, because of its deep ideological roots in economic and political neo-liberalism, invariably privileges the notion of process as central to scalar production, that is, the continual meeting and negotiations of conflicting social productive and reproductive activities and relations. This is said to be an “always” heterogeneous process riddled with contestation and compromises (Smith 1992: 66; Swyngedouw 1997b: 140; Cox 1997: 10). In other words, scales are products of processes and of social and spatial changes accrued through history. The Beijing SARS example was indicative of a different politics of scalar production. It demonstrates that a new scalar construction (i.e., popularized online classrooms and e-transactions) could skip the process of productive sociality altogether and be delivered abruptly by the state – in a matter of weeks – to the social agents as a given.

Interestingly, Beijing privileged the virtual scale at the very moment when its grip over the Internet cafés was tightened.\(^4\) That was a contradiction obviously attributable to the historical contingency of SARS. I say “contradiction” also because the Internet’s built-in capacity for fast domain proliferations may eventually overtake the state’s original pedagogical goal and evolve into a seditious life of its own. For the time being, though, Léfebvre’s worst fear about the arbitrariness of the ever-expanding “abstract space” of the state is looming large. SARS simply
gave Beijing world-approved legitimacy in imposing a new system of spatial management upon its population.

Thus, the surveillance of spitters in parks and at street corners was portrayed by mainstream Western media as one of the most commendable campaigns of the SARS control in China. And readers cannot but be humored by the imagined spectacle of little old ladies of the street committees (the infamous Malie zhuyi laotaitai) “busy stopping spitters in mid-stream instead of ferreting out neighbors belonging to the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement” (Rosenthal 2003a). It is said that the sidewalks are safer places now. But “safe” from what?

George Rosen’s notion of medical police, which Foucault used for his genealogical study of the birth of social medicine in Europe, is surprisingly relevant to our discussion of the state intervention of national hygiene and medicine in SARS-ravaged areas. In Hong Kong, chief inspectors and detectives took on a new assignment – tracking down the family members of patients infected with SARS instead of real-life criminals (Bradsher 2003). An increasingly tightened system of quarantine compartmentalized infected areas and broke down the integrated flow of people. Everyone was told to stay put. The “emergency plan” that Beijing and Singapore adopted bore uncanny resemblances to what Foucault described as the systemic control of leprosy and the plague by the European medical regimes at the end of the Middle Ages. Those measures included building special infirmaries outside the city, a house-by-house disinfection, and a centralized system of information that disseminated the latest statistics about new cases, casualties, and suspected cases (Foucault 1994: 145). The close scrutiny of the body as the most important site of SARS control, complete with electronic wristbands (of Singaporean style), testifies once more to the efficacy of the Foucauldian theory about biopolitics.

Other newsworthy scalar narratives were abundant. Another SARS-inscribed social landscape in China was the widespread rural panic about cities in April and May 2003. News of villagers blocking routes into their own hamlets came a bundle. Many rural communities such as Guchang, north of Beijing, hurriedly built makeshift barricades to keep out travelers from the stricken capital. The old scalar hierarchy – the urban as the privileged scale – had been turned upside down. Although such unusual spatial upset could be only temporary, it was instructive to see urban anxieties about rural migrant workers trivialized in the face of an all-out rural offensive against both the city and the trope of traveling itself. From California to Toronto, from Guchang to Moscow, bounded territories re-emerged as a viable concept and reality. Another SARS casualty was undoubtedly the radical global theories about the “end of geography.”

We will remember SARS for its lethal capacity of arresting the transnational flow of capital, people, and goods (pearls and garments for instance) for years to come. But potent as the virus was to continually mutate and jump scales – from animal to human hosts and from a localized
habitat to sites of different temporal and spatial zones – it alone could not have wreaked such havoc. The other culprit was the spatial logic of capitalism that banks on the seamless interconnections of spaces and places (cities and metropolises in particular) through a continual proliferation of roads and airports. SARS is an unexpected reminder of the tolls that any absolute space will extract from a human geography that has increasingly lost interest in differences and connections of an organic kind.

**Provincial China and the Luce Popular Culture Initiative**

This long preamble about SARS serves the primary purpose of directing us to several fundamental concepts of critical geography that contributors of this volume work with, namely, the production of scale and difference, the socio-political and economic character of spatial and scalar productions, relations of space and power – in short, spatial thinking in slow motion. SARS also showed us how easy it was to stigmatize a place and insulate it. And yet on the other hand, as I have shown through my discussion of Foucault, those border-sealing localized strategies of epidemic control also inherited a borderless, and indeed a global, character. One crucial question then is how we treat the concept of “local places and practices” in relation to the larger backdrop of an inherently contradictory orientation of contemporary spatial logic characterized by Swyngedouw as a *parallel movement* downward to the lower and smaller bounded scales, and upward, in a centrifugal motion, toward higher and larger scales beyond the bounded locale (Swyngedouw 1997b: 141).

The problematic of “local places and practices” takes us to the origin of this volume. In June 2001, scholars from two research groups – the Sydney-based UNSW-UTS Centre for Research on Provincial China and the Duke-based Luce Project of Contemporary Chinese Popular Culture – co-sponsored a workshop held at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, China. It was one of the few occasions in the China field where cultural theorists met with social scientists to brainstorm about the locality problematic. No less important, border-crossing of a different kind (i.e., exchanges between Australian China scholars and those based in the USA, Taiwan, and mainland China) energized our dialogues beyond the multidisciplinary scale.

Despite those differences, the collaboration of Provincial China and the Luce Project in 2001 was made possible in the first place because we agreed to meet at the middle ground, namely, our evolving interest in the “local” as a site of everyday life. Throughout the slow development of this volume, and despite our shifting editorial foci, we never lost sight of the epistemological weight we placed on the production (rather than the representation) of the “local,” hence our emphasis on the quotidian, whether we are speaking of cultural, socio-political, or economic practices. How to move forward with the “local” as a potent scale of analysis without
being bogged down by the “local” as a reified ideological signifier constituted the main thrust of exchanges which took place in Hangzhou. Eventually, “locality” understood in terms of process-based cultural and socio-spatial production came very close to the heterogeneous social space dear to the practitioners of critical geography. To wit, a locale is always caught in the process of its own production. And this process is embodied in intra-scalar traffic. A locale is the place where multiple scales traverse and articulate in relation to each other. China is a good case in point because its entry into the WTO in 2001 has brought to a head the reshuffling of scalar configurations and the emergence of new spatial practices that undermine fixed scalar activities.

The interest in the locality problematic was but one intellectual rationale that brought the two research groups together. Another axis of collaboration was our mutual commitment to the border crossings of academic knowledge production. I should note that in the West in particular, the Humanities are often segregated from the Social Sciences, and especially from disciplines such as political science, economics, and geography, albeit much less so from cultural anthropology. This volume draws together those distantly related disciplines in search of a common discursive ground. Many possibilities were brought to the table. Even those that were cast aside during the lengthy editorial process left a productive mark on what is eventually presented here. For the purpose of laying bare the process of this historical collaboration, I excerpt some of our earlier organizing guidelines:

The workshop is less interested in the examinations of the “local” as a deterritorialized sign that either validates or invalidates the “local” than in its relationship to the concept of China. We are interested in rearticulating, among the multiple spatial scales of analyses, the “global” and the “regional,” while recognizing that there is no authentic or autonomous space existing outside the circuit of the transnational or global. It has been fashionable to discuss the new places that are emerging, and the new spaces (both imaginary and symbolic) that are being created. We are equally interested in old [spatial] formations and old spaces/places, and specifically in how the historical and cultural geography of specific locales articulates with the emerging economic geography of a modernizing China.

Papers presented to the workshop will each examine a specific aspect of the process of local cultural production. In that exercise, each will necessarily attempt to generalise about the processes of social and cultural change, whilst at the same time ensuring that the study is contextualized in a specific locale.

(Goodman and Wang 2000)

What is our critical agenda for this workshop? . . . In retrospect, I think David Goodman and I started off with our curiosity about spatial con-
ceptions beyond the reductive “global” frame – i.e., spatial conceptions that may help us perceive how local culture and social relations are produced and consumed. This curiosity led me to the Chinese notion *di* (earth, ground). From *di* grew a spectrum of associative terms such as *diyuan, diyu, dili, and difang* (geo-origin, regions, geography, local place). To that list we may add *kua [di]yu xing* (trans-locality). The materiality of *di* in itself and in all those other terms provides us with a conceptual web that enables us to think about the *relations of culture to the economic geography of a place*. Are there ways of mapping the relations of place, space, locality, and culture *without making a simple return to geographical determinism* or spatial reductionism?  
(Wang 2001d)

And on the return flight from Shanghai to San Francisco, Tim Oakes, a geographer participant and a contributor to this volume, initiated a conversation with me on scale which led to yet another round of editorial discussions about the production of scale in capitalist societies.

[The production of scale] tends to emerge, in my mind, from spatially oriented Marxist critiques of capital. It focuses on the idea that *capital structures space according to the most appropriate scales of activity for maximizing capital accumulation*. Such scales become “fixed” by cultural practices, social institutions and actual landscapes. But in the meantime, capital is always shifting and producing new scales of activity that challenge the old ones (thus, “globalization” challenges the nation-state, for example) . . . Scale is essentially political, and producing scale can be viewed as politically contested. Scale is produced by political-economic power, and reified in popular practice.  
(Oakes 2001)

Among the concepts retained (italicized texts above), the examination of the “local” in relation to the concept of China imparts to this volume a deeply grounded understanding of a national cultural space that is both inward and outward looking. That this is not another exercise of parochial locality studies is borne out by the contributors’ engagement in relational mapping by which the boundedness of the “local” – before and after the SARS scare – is proven to be nothing more than an ideological affect. How we negotiate meaning transfers between seemingly contradictory scales and subject positions (the local, the national, the global, the regional, the urban and rural, the Center and the frontiers, and not least, the smuttly and the moralistic) construes the theoretical priorities of many contributors and marks one of the strengths of this anthology. What results is the breakdown of several familiar sets of *reified scalar binaries* such as the local–global (Cartier’s Shenzhen depicted as a world city of “transnational urbanism”); the local–regional (Siu’s fluid human traffic
between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta), the local provincial–
national (Oakes’s Guizhou ethnic tourism staking claims to natural cul-
tural heritage); the rural–urban (Schein’s rural peasants engaged in “imag-
inied cosmopolitanism”) and Sun’s Anhui maid seen as integral to the 
elaborate urban myth); the libidinous–rational (Barlow’s smut savoir 
faire); the past and the present (the continuity of empire to nation in 
Perdue’s chapter); and finally the pseudo “official” and “unofficial” divi-
sion of popular culture that nearly every contributor threw into question, 
especially Hendrischke in his chapter on the Guangxi tabloid papers and 
Feng Chongyi in his analysis of the teahouse culture in Hainan.

Another surviving editorial principle is the relationship of culture, espe-
cially popular culture, to the economy of place in broad terms. Cartier, 
Sun, Oakes, Feng, Schein, and Siu show us in various ways how the locals 
think “culture” into the “economy” and how they reinvent local economy 
in cultural terms. Regardless of place, the cultural turn of economic think-
ing is an inevitable trend. The mutual articulations between the cultural 
imaginary of a given place and the rising new economic conditions during 
the reform era have given birth to new spaces and places, and new forms 
of sociality inseparable from the trope of pastime and consumption. 
Tourist villas, museums and theme parks, luxury housing apartments, the 
Miao Xijiang disco, tabloid papers, Shenzhen’s new city center, teahouses, 
maid hiring agencies, and the Pornographic City are a few notable 
examples of the “cultural economy” in question. In the meantime, while 
capital flows converge on rich places (Hainan, Shanghai, and south China), 
we are also shown that no matter how poor a place is, social agents know 
how to concoct spatial strategies of getaways, whether by means of migra-
tion (Anhui maids), by activities of re-scaling the land (Guizhou locals), or 
by a leap of faith (Zhang Chengzhi’s Jahriyya Muslims in the northwest). 
You may ask: where have all the old places gone? Most likely, they will 
share the same fortune as Guizhou’s Yunshantun Village. Now classified 
as a protected area of cultural relics by the state, the village will always be 
cash-starved – judging from its meager 3 yuan entry fees. In stark contrast, 
tourists pay more than ten times this to visit Tianlong Village, a dressed-
up new major attraction in the neighborhood.

Indeed, the bind of poor, old places in the reform era seems too clear a 
reminder of the stubborn division between the rich (coastal areas) and the 
poor (inland) – one of the last ultra-stable bipolar scales that resist decon-
struction. If this observation smacks of a simple return to geographical 
determinism, we should note that Perdue, Oakes, and Schein provide us 
with many examples of how scale jumping can be seen as a means of sub-
version adopted by the locals to break out of such determinism. However 
transient, such imaginary jumping of scales helped deliver them from 
formidable spatial enclosure and geo-political constraints.
Rescaling administrative space: a policy debate

Furthermore, it is worth noting that official venues of intervention exist that can upset the structural determination of China’s rural–urban dichotomy. Truly, as any production-centered scale theorist would insist, “capital is always shifting and producing new scales of activity that challenge the old ones” (Oakes 2001). As a result, the Chinese state (local states included) has huge stakes about whither capital flows. How to direct and channel the traffic of capital and, in concrete terms, how to rescale Chinese administrative regions so as to facilitate such flows has become a central policy issue for Beijing. I should also add that this problem of the spatial restructuring of administrative scales coincided with the ongoing policy debate on urbanization (chengzhen hua). The shuffling and regrouping of economic zones and the resulting destabilization of China’s administrative scales is not only a palpable reality but a policy priority today. How should state socialism progress? This haunting question of Léfebvre’s reverberates in contemporary China as policy makers and analysts ask what kind of socio-economic spatial reorganizations would best enable the regime to cope with the rising disparities of living standards between the countryside and cities and to resolve the pressing issue of hidden social costs resulting from such inequality.

Tim Oakes’s observation that capital always “produces new scales of activities” is right on target when we examine contemporary Chinese social, political, and economic transformations since the 1990s. However, I would add that what makes China’s spatial management more conflict-ridden than that in the West is its age-old legacy of rigid spatial polity that harked back to the junxian (prefectures and counties) system of the Han Dynasty in the second century AD. While capital accumulation is restructuring space in contemporary China and is giving rise to patterns of a spatial economy similar to what we saw in the West, the Chinese socio-economic space has been historically structured around and constrained by xingzheng quhua (administrative scales). Roughly speaking, the vertical administrative hierarchy consists of four scales – the province, the district (di), the county (xian), and the township (xiangzhen) (Liu, Jin et al. 1999: 62–63, 182). That is a graded system of spatial-political hierarchy whose legitimacy is often maintained at the expense of the raison d’être of economic development.

This conflict between space-polity and economy has gotten worse in recent years. Economic reform since the late 1990s has intensified debates among different think tanks at the Center over the urbanization question. Since ideologies often translate into spatial organizations and practices, the competition between different planning visions of urbanization inevitably brought the issue of xingzheng quhua to the front burner. Not only was the field of administrative geography revitalized, but it entered a heightened phase of cross-fertilization with economic geography and
political geography in tandem. Proposed changes about administrative scales both at the lower county-level (xian) and at the higher level of the province (sheng) as well as the foregrounding of cities (shi) as a scale – so as to maximize the “horizontal” and areal expansion of capital – have all emerged as urgent topics for discussion among policy makers and analysts since the latter half of the 1990s (Zhou 1999: 113–128, 217–222; Hua and Yu 1997; Pu 1995: 116; Yang 1995; Lu 1995).6

Yindi zhiyi (“each according to its geo-culture”)

Before acquainting ourselves with those debates about space-economy relations, we need to take a longer look at the tradition of Chinese space-polity and ask: what are those spatial-territorial devices that have served to hold together a country as vast and heterogeneously composed as China? Policy makers of imperial times and the contemporary era have all observed one fundamental doctrine, i.e., *yindi zhiyi*, “each according to its geo-culture.”

Although China is known for its highly centralized political control, the Center has given scholar-gentry bureaucrats and their contemporary counterparts (i.e., the cadres) significant leeway to translate imperial decrees and central policy guidelines into actions appropriate for the particular locality in which they were appointed to govern. What is seen as “appropriate” for a locale usually boils down to the *di* factor (*dili* or *difang*) – a concrete reference to both the constraints and enabling factors inherent in the geo-culture of a place. Those heterogeneous, areal geo-cultures speak of characteristics of both the natural and human geography of a place and usually subject local officials to a high degree of localized policy implementation which presented a perennial problem of governance for authorities at the Center. Political geographer Joseph Whitney thus pinpointed the basic contradiction in the Chinese system as the struggle of China’s rulers to “prevent power from slipping from center to the periphery” on the one hand and to prevent the country from being “bogged down with the great volume of decision-making” (Whitney 1970: 166) taking place at the localities on the other. The problem was compounded, I wish to add, by the enormous administrative costs such polymorphic regional configuration demanded of both the central and local polity.

Historically, the bipolar vacillation between centralization (*zhongyang jiquan*) and decentralization (*difang fenquan*) has characterized the strategic imagination of Chinese rulers. In the contemporary era, the contestation of the governing power between the Center and *difang* is captured in two spatial metaphors – *tiaotiao* (“vertical,” centralized control) and *kuaikuai* (horizontal “clusters” of localized command). The actual subscription of policy analysts to the spatial idiom of *tiao/kuai* came into vogue only during the reform years even though what it described is a century-old phenomenon. I should also note that the specific terms of the
competition between the “vertical” and “horizontal” modes of governance vary from place to place and from one subject area of administration to another. But the spatial metaphors bring into sharp relief the tensions between centralized and localized command. Take the relationships between bumen (the ministries) and ju (bureaus), for instance. Tiaotiao refers to the vertical, lineal, and centralized rule that subjugates lower-level bureaus to the ministries at the Center. Kuaikuai subverts such a vertical pattern of hierarchical control. It conjures up a visual map made up of clusters of power concentration evolving around a local center of power that functions like a semi-autonomous decision-making agent. In such a scenario, the juridical power of the Center is often overridden by that of the local state. And the latter tends to prioritize local agendas and incentives over the administrative directives passed down to it by the higher-level governing unit. If there is any consensus reached among participants in the recent debates over administrative scales, it is that the struggle between the tiaotiao and kuaikuai modes of administration, each carrying its own drawbacks, constitutes a bottleneck of Chinese economic development (Liu 1996: 430; Pu 1995; Shu 1995).

The other precious consensus reached by Chinese policy makers is the continuing relevance of the historical doctrine of “each according to its geo-culture” to the Center’s planning vision for urbanization. Given the central place of the yindi zhiyi doctrine in both imperial and socialist China, a brief revisit of its historical origin is in order. Such an account will lay bare the intimate connection between the Chinese geo-cultural diversity and a policy culture that privileges locality and flexibility. This account will also help us trace the materialist parentage of the Chinese epistemology of dili (geography).

The materialist tradition of Chinese geography

The paradigm of yindi zhiyi was crucial to ancient Chinese geographical thinking even prior to the consolidation of the feudal system. One of the earliest occurrences of dili can be traced to the Xici chapter in the Book of Zhouyi around the fifth century BC – “Looking up, I observe tianwen (the patterns of Heavens); looking down, I examine dili (the logic of earth)” (Huang and Zhang 2001: 535). It is possible that this idealist strand of early Chinese geographical thinking developed side by side with the materialist view of earth seen as “productive.” One of the most articulate references to “geography” understood in terms of “material productivity” is found in the Record of Ritual (Liji), a cluster of documents dated from the earlier part of Zhou dynasty (c.1046–256 BC) to Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220). The passage reads, “What different seasons (tianwen) produced is appropriate to what Earth (dili) offers” (Chen and Pei 2000: 1352). In the Diyuan chapter of Guanzi (c.26 BC) and Huainan zi (c.139 BC) we saw the further development of this strand of materialist
thinking into the clear conceptualization of the theories of tuyi (appropriateness to the soil [of a place]) and diyi (appropriateness to [its] geography) (The Geography Section 1984: 28). After the Han Dynasty, theories of tuyi and diyi were largely channeled into dynastic agriculture manuals (nongshu) serving as primary guiding principles for agricultural production.

In the meantime, the doctrine of yindi zhiyi acquired a political connotation with the rise of a new genre of historical narrative named after dili zhi (Records of Geography), a writing tradition started by Historian Ban Gu (32 BC–AD 92) of Eastern Han Dynasty. Ban Gu’s Dili zhi documented the establishment and evolutions of the Han prefecture and county system. He paid specific attention to the geo-culture of each county government which incorporated local products, temples and ancestral halls, mountains and rivers, historical sites, and water conservancy (Zhao 1993: 30), thus linking the notion of administration to both the natural and cultural geography of a place. Since Ban Gu’s time, those “records of geography” which later evolved into the more genre-conscious yan’ge dilixue (evolutionary (administrative) geography), gradually developed into a tradition of studying the continuity and changes of territorial-administrative areas that accorded great significance to geo-cultural differences of places. The importance of administrative geography as a paradigm central to the Chinese geographical thinking was thus firmly established. And “each according to its geo-culture” was passed down to later generations as a political common sense to which every ruler deferred.

The historical associations of geographical space with administrative scales on one hand, and with agricultural practices on the other, sum up the materialist characteristics of Chinese geography as a field of knowledge that privileges the utilitarian ends of territorial control and productivity (or “material production” known as shengchan). This dual emphasis is a pure necessity, given the overwhelming need of food provision for a huge population and an equally formidable fix of a government that has too large a territory to rule. Because of the weightiness of such a pragmatic tradition, Western geography of the idealist bent carried little significance to Chinese scholar-intellectuals whose organic ties with society remained strong and whose sense of social mission was neither dissolved with the abolition of civil service examination in 1905, nor diminished by the decade-long Maoists’ persecutions. What this entails is that Henri Léfebvre’s materialist spatial theory resonates better to Chinese intellectuals and researchers than Edward Soja’s ontological geography, for example.8

Léfebvre’s double critique of the state’s and capital’s perennial drive to produce abstract space sounds more pungent than ever in the twenty-first century. What is even more relevant to this volume is his materialist take on the relations of space and mode of production. He asked, for instance, what kind of physical and social maps (i.e., spatial relations) the Asiatic mode of production generated and privileged? More importantly,
Léfebvre hypothesized that “the shift from one mode [of production] to another must entail the production of a new space” (Léfebvre 1991: 46). This brings us to our present concern about the spatial production of socialist China of the post-Deng era. If, as Léfebvre deplored, state socialism like the Soviet Union failed to produce a space of its own, this volume provides a rich spectrum of new spatial articulations in contemporary China. That is, the contributors of this volume raise different possibilities of theorizing the relations of cultural economy and the production of space in a socialist society. Invariably, new spatial formulations and practices in China at the turn of the new millennium bear imprints of a mixed mode of production that is neither socialist nor plainly “capitalist.” No spaces of everyday life, from the trivial to the sublime, are immune to the conflict-ridden processes of the functional integration (zhenghe) of planned economy and market economy, for better or for worse.

Indeed, the priority shift of China’s productivity output from subsistence agriculture to commerce and the tertiary sector has produced new spaces en masse and set in motion spatial practices as trendy as luxury house hunting and as old and instinctive as labor migration. It is important to note, however, that contemporary Chinese spatial executions and movements do not simply take place in a social space seen as external to the space of the state. On the contrary, trendy spatial practices are articulating with the emerging new stakes and new ruling technologies of the socialist government. Now that the GDP index has overtaken stark political control as the new means of legitimation for the state, scale economies (zuoqiang zuoda) drive various policies. From industrial to media sectors, the speed and volume of state-orchestrated mergers are tale-telling signs of a new governing vision of Beijing that has grown increasingly scale-conscious. Nowhere has the impact of this new concept of scale as a barometer of capital accumulation registered more acutely than at the scaled administrative hierarchy known as xingzheng quhua – the core of the planned space of the Chinese state.

**Space-economy, “megapolitan circles,” and the new spatial imaginary of the state**

We noted earlier how traditional and modern Chinese territorial scales have been constructed in accordance with administrative expediency and subject to the principle of central command at the cost of the rationale of economism. Up till the present day, Chinese rulers often gerrymandered administrative areas to “prevent a marriage between the areas of political power and the areas of economic power” (Whitney 1970: 140). Over the decades such normalized practices had given rise to conditions now considered detrimental to the economic reform in progress. Policy makers of different persuasions may have disagreed over how to rescale China’s administrative space, but there is a consensus that an organic economic region can only develop if it trespasses the arbitrary barriers set up by the
administrative areal government(s) to which it belongs and under whose jurisdiction commercial transactions are supposed to take place. The Yangtze River Delta is a good case in point. Swift as its development may have appeared, reform advocate Zhou Keyu argues it has not reached its full potential as an economic zone due to unavoidable conflicts resulting from competitive administrative interests that have to be constantly negotiated between three different local governments – the Shanghai Municipality, Jiangsu Provincial state, and Zhejiang Provincial state (Zhou 1999: 228–260). Clearly, the politics of administrative scale created regulatory practices that continue to block the organic flow of market forces. Capital failed to accumulate where comparative advantages abound but instead converged at the administrative center of a region. Regional economy is eclipsed by the economy of xingzheng qu.

Many policy analysts in fact argue that the devolution of power from the Center to the local since the 1980s has strengthened the local state’s control over sectoral economy. According to this line of argument, the affirmation of the greater autonomy of the local state further facilitated the aberrant development of administrative-areal economy (xingzheng quhua jingji), a trend considered detrimental to regional economic growth. This view holds that rampant local protectionism, a political behavior tied to territorial administrative interests, has impacted decision makings of local governments on resource allocation, circulation of raw materials, and infrastructural investment.

Many localists, of course, would rebut the partiality of this view by arguing that scape-goating local protectionism amounts to promoting recentralization. However, I would suggest that the policy proposal for administrative rescaling should not be mistaken for another reenactment of the old struggle between the Center and the local precisely because a third scale was introduced by the market principle – the “region.” To the extent that the state’s new spatial logic of “horizontal alliance” is meant to build and consolidate regional clusters, Beijing’s motion of administrative rescaling should not be assessed in terms of the old ideology of the Center–locality binarism. The scale issue involved is far too complex to be reappropriated into the logic of the age-long historical contestation between centralization and localization. That is, advocates promoting administrative rescaling have a point in saying that xingzheng qu economy is in essence a local territorialized economy which often expands at the expense of an organic regional economy.9

As I said earlier, this pattern of administrative-territorial economy is often conceptualized in spatial terms as the kuaikuai economy which is made up of clusters of disconnected and fragmentary capital accumulation. Predictably, such an areal market fragmentation was seen by policy makers as nothing short of obstructing the new policy of maximizing scales of economy. It is, therefore, a primary target for a reform spelled out on numerous occasions as a rescaling of administrative regions.
The hottest issue under discussion since the late 1990s has thus been the rescaling of regulatory zones from the province and the other upper scales downward to shi, “cities or urban centers” (Liu 1996: 170–206). In other words, it was believed that the interventionism of the state in the economy needs to take place not at the provincial, district, or county level, but at the scale or location where capital aggregates the fastest, i.e., the city. The notion of the city-state sounds nothing outlandish when we think of the municipalities in existence. But it has revolutionary implications if applied downward to other scales, such as province, district, and county. What the notion entails is nothing short of a hypothetical liberation of “cities” and “towns” from the vertical hierarchy to which they belong. It is a liberation that is bound to give rise to a transboundary concept of spatial coherence. Thus, proposals such as “administratively independent and trans-boundary networks of urban zones” characterize the general drift of policy recommendations emerging in recent years. The Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta were singled out by various policy makers as the testing grounds for this new spatial concept. Those proposals problematize earlier directives such as “cities governing counties” and “upgrading counties to cities,” directives that are said to be more preoccupied with statistical thickening (the size and number of cities) than with the actual degree and processes of urban growth.

How feasible, you may ask, is the networked form of space to China’s other geographical zones where the conditions for accumulation lag far behind the coastal areas? How would the doctrine of yindi zhiyi play itself out in the strategic regrouping of administrative scales in backward regions? Undoubtedly, even the most fervent advocates of networked, transboundary metropolitan space should recognize areal differences and the necessity of developing multiple urbanization models appropriate to the specific geo-cultures of different regions. We have now arrived at an intriguing intersection where two policy terrains meet. Since the “urban” permeates every administrative scale (i.e., municipalities, provincial and district-level cities, county capitals and cities, small market towns at the xiang and zhen scales), the policy proposals for rescaling city administrative space (dushi xingzheng quhua) are inevitably intertwined with the policy debates over urbanization (chengshi hua). More specifically, the intersection of those two policy domains yields the larger question: at which scale should Beijing invest its policy of urbanization – at the top, medium or bottom administrative scale?

Those who advocate grand-scale metropolitanization are pushing the “megapolis” (a networked spatial zone such as the Pearl River Delta) a scale above the province (Zhou 1999: 218–222); there are others who proclaim that metropolises with a population of between one and three million should serve as the new spatial signpost (Wang and Xia 1999). On the rest of the spectrum of that policy debate, we find provincial city enthusiasts, county-town advocates, and proponents like Wen Tiejun and
Li Tie who prioritize the market town (xiao chengzhen) below the county level as the most important spatial unit on which strategic resources of the new territorial and economic reorganization should be focused (Wen 2000; Li 2002). In this ongoing debate over the preferential model for urban development and spatial reorganization, yindi zhiyi often reemerged as the rule of thumb to justify the necessary flexibility of new spatial policies. There is a consensus that urban centers (regardless of their size and scalar location) should act as nodal points around which the spatial and economic buildup into a much larger region should be structured. Finally, it is interesting to note that although Beijing articulated a three-tiered vision of “controlling the growth of the metropolises, developing medium-sized cities at a reasonable scale, and aggressively pushing the growth of small market towns” (Liu 1996: 432), the policy proposal that created the most fanfare among policy makers is that of “metropolitanization.” In more specific terms, this is a proposal about establishing “megapolitan circles” (dadushi quan) to be governed by autonomous “megopolitan united-states” (chengshi lianhe zhengfu) (Liu et al. 1999: 230–231).

Transboundary space and networked space

It is not my goal to get sidetracked into a discussion of China’s urbanization policy. I will direct my inquiry to the conceptual interface between space-polity and space-economy so as to bring into sharp relief the new spatial logic of the socialist state. This spatial logic, I argue, is the natural outcome of Beijing’s policy drift toward scale economy in the wake of China’s accession to the WTO. In the process of “strengthening and supersizing (China’s sectoral economy)” (zuqiang zuoda) so as to combat infiltrating multinational corporations, Beijing pushed the logic of spatial restructuring beyond translocality to incorporate a “networked” notion of transboundary coordination (“boundaries” here refers to both the sectoral and the geographical). This logic not only gave impetus to ongoing policy reforms such as administrative rescaling, but has also served as the working principle underlying a series of grand-scale state-orchestrated mega-mergers taking place in various sectors since the second half of the 1990s. A noticeable example is China’s media sector where administrative constraints previously laid down powerful blockades to local media’s attempts at transboundary and trans-sectoral business mergers.

The media sector’s breakthrough in the transboundary management of economic resources illustrates a perfect example of Beijing’s prioritization of the space-economy coordinate over that of space-polity. As I mentioned above, the turning point came with China’s accession to the WTO. But to further refine my argument, I should emphasize that the threat of the entry of foreign media constituted only one of the factors that drove China’s new media policy toward tearing down old boundaries in favor of scale economies. The shift toward media conglomeration also had to do
with the percolation of the “networked” spatial logic through every policy domain. What ensued was a chain reaction. The policy created twenty-six press conglomerates, six publishing house conglomerates, and eight Broadcasting and Film Groups by June, 2002.

Note that although those state-orchestrated mergers were still confined primarily to single localities, trans-areal media networks began to mushroom as the principle of scale economy gained a life of its own. In 2002, a new form of a “networked” alliance called “Advertising Association of Provincial TV Stations” came into being. This alliance enabled twenty-nine provincial stations to play the same commercials during the evening segment of CCTV’s National News Broadcast starting on January 14, 2004 (Editors of *Meijie* 2003: 25–26). This strategic move offered Chinese corporate clients an alternative to the CCTV. It is likely that the latter’s monopoly over prime-time TV advertising revenue may be broken as a result. An equally energizing transboundary media alliance was the formation of the “Coalition of Five Northwestern Provincial Metro-Papers.” This novel coalition demonstrates that the notion of a transboundary media market is working not only in the affluent Pearl River Delta but in areas waiting to be developed.¹¹

Many Chinese theorists of administrative geography used the term “horizontal alliance” (*hengxiang lianhe*) as the scalar metaphor for the still-unfolding transboundary vision. A more appropriate scalar adjective, I suggest, is “relational,” “networked,” or “meridian.” As mentioned above, rescaling administrative regions was a powerful means for the socialist state to remap China’s economic zones. Although some transitional policies (for example, “cities governing counties” or “counties upgraded to district-level cities”) seem to indicate a rescaling effort conceived in the directional terms of downward or upward movement, the kind of ideal rescaling promoted by the state since the 1980s has been rooted consistently in the non-linear concept of the “sphere of influence” (i.e., any of the pathways in a given urban center along which its energy flows), a fundamentally networked concept of space. Of course, theoretically, the greater the size of a city, the larger will be its sphere or network of influence, and the “more vigorous will be the circulation patterns that develop” – an insight of Whitney’s (Whitney 1970: 54) that coincides with what the “megapolitan circles” theorists are advocating today.

A reconfiguration of scales in transboundary and relational terms has indeed characterized the general policy drift of Beijing in the last two decades. First came the “Temporary Regulations on the Promotion of Networked Economy” way back in 1980. Stipulated by the State Council, this directive planted the seeds of networked relations by encouraging organizations to cross areal, sectoral, and ownership constraints. Four years later, in a central document that laid down the formula for the reform of economic systems, the Party re-emphasized the importance of breaking down existing barriers between towns and villages, regions, and
sectors that blocked the development of “horizontal economic networks” (Zhou 1999: 95–96). Now, more than two decades later, kongjian zuzhi chuaxin (reinvention of spatial organization) and kongjian fen’gong (spatial division of infrastructural construction) have slowly evolved from catchy policy slogans to tangible reality.

But one may ask, what kind of changes would eventually take place with the ascent of this new spatial imaginary? Would the extension of the urban produce a lifeless “rurban” where the old oppositions between towns and the countryside are not so much overcome as neutralized (Léfebvre 1996: 120)? Would the organic urban – heterogeneous social spaces – disappear even more quickly once the new spatial-scalar model of the “megapolitan circles” was adopted? A decade from now, when China is finally “catching up” with Western developed countries, would the century-old folk wisdom of “each according to its geo-culture” survive the planning vision of the new generations of urban engineers and architects?

**Space, place, and popular culture: the volume**

A volume attempting to address the triple tropes of “space,” “place,” and “popular culture” from multidisciplinary perspectives faces many challenges. But our contributors have built ample common ground to support such a collective agenda. First, “popular culture” is understood in the broad terms of new forms of sociality rather than as a generic category external to socio-spatial and economic practices. Second, both the production and consumption of social practices are investigated as spatial activities. Third, “popular culture” of post-1992 China is all about cultural economy, i.e., how governmental agencies and local human agents think “economy” and “culture” together. This volume places emphasis on the examination of culture understood as spatial economic activities, but is not confined within them. For instance, Perdue’s chapter highlights the age-old association of “culture” with “politics.” The cultural discourse of the frontier from the Qing till the contemporary era is seen primarily as a political activity. Finally, this volume follows the analytical tradition of the UNSW-UTS Centre for Research on Provincial China by grounding the socio-economic and political processes of local cultural production in specific locales. Such an emphasis brings into sharp relief our commitment to examining the “local” as the site of everyday life rather than a place frozen in time and space. However, such an analytical move by no means leads us to the conflation of “locality” with the trope of the “local.” As this volume demonstrates, place productions and local cultural practices are not confined within the local scale. The place-bound logic attached to the old notion of locality has been thrown into question by the increasingly busy trans-local and transboundary movements and activities.

In much the same way as the “local” and “locality” has been destabilized, the “urban,” too, has crossed its original scaled boundary. Urbaniza-
tion has indeed become both a rural and an urban phenomenon. Nowhere else was this phenomenon better exemplified than in the remote, poor areas of China. At first sight, Tim Oakes’s Guizhou in the “Land of Living Fossils” seems to lie far beyond the reach of the “urban” and to be little affected by the current debates over rescaling administrative hierarchy. But all bipolar spatial scales (i.e., the local and global, the national and local), including those of the periphery and the Center (and for that matter, smut and law), are mutually dependent upon each other in their continual reproduction of their own scalar imaginary. Thus, not surprisingly, the eight “megapolitan circles” envisioned by strategists at the Center include the “Guizhou Highland Megapolitan cluster” (Yang Jianrong, quoted in Zhou, Keyu 2000). And likewise, Oakes’s chapter maps out how the remote Caiguan Village in peripheral Guizhou repackaged its tunpu culture as one of the last remnants of a displaced, but authentic, jiangnan culture of the Central Plains. This local act of scalar translation, which involves active participation of both the villagers and the Guizhou officials of Culture and Tourism Bureaus, entails more than just a nostalgia for cultural reconnection or, as the inclusive urban planning vision of the megapolizes indicates, desire for comprehensive cataloging. Precisely because of the politics of scale, i.e., the unequal power equation between the Center and the periphery, tunpu culture’s claim to central cultural heritage is analyzed by Oakes in terms of the jumping of scales. The stakes of such a jump can be understood only by those fixed by the dominant scale at the margins. What the jump accomplished is no less than “the subversion of the core-periphery framework” which long froze Guizhou into a living fossil.

An ideologically motivated scale jumping tells us only half of the story, however. While we can never underestimate the will of the villagers to challenge the hegemonic cultural geography of the Center, an equally important, but an alternative explanatory possibility for the scale jumping in question is provided by the author’s analysis of ethnic tourism. Oakes reminds us, not without ambivalence, that tunpu culture cannot merely be seen as a politically correct, scale-subversive culture, because it is, after all, a tourist culture. This brings us to the phenomenon or the paradigmatic thinking of “cultural economy” (wenhua jingji) that had grown indispensable to the Chinese development discourse in the reform era (Wang 2001b: 71, 86). Once the Chinese public policy makers came to embrace the understanding of “culture” as a profitable economic activity, they started integrating policy discourses that would transform cultural capital into economic capital (“local cultural development strategies” (difang wenhua fazhan zhanlu), so to speak) and thence into local development programs at the municipal, provincial, and other sub-provincial levels. Tourism naturally became a pillar of such developmental strategies. Back to Oakes’s Guizhou, it was the locals’ vision about a lucrative tourist industry that motivated various scale jumpers in Anshun to participate in
village-wide re-landscaping projects. Oakes’s fascinating multiple accounts of the planned visions of those active scale producers bring us to different sites – an ancient theme park, a museum of liquor culture, tourist villas and resorts, a riverside inn, and other cultural places old and new – and to a spatial construction built on a paradox. That is, the politically progressive connotation of upscaling or rescaling is always in danger of being reified by the economic overdetermination of scale production. In the case of Caiguan and other villages, overproduced sites of tourist attractions may eventually cancel out the inherently liberatory potential of scale jumping. Oakes’s solution to this scalar paradox of contestation and reification is to show us how peripherality is struggled over in everyday practices. Besides, he envisions that the very possibility that local cultural production is not confined within the local scale provides us some hope that a scaled boundary is never written in stone. New scales will continuously be constructed because the struggle over the meaning of the local place never ends. Perhaps what we can be certain is that locals confront and negotiate scaled processes in their daily lives with enduring commitments to the place where they belong. Those commitments themselves, as Kevin Cox claims, are human resources of competitive advantage that a deterritorialized new world order can never tame nor expropriate (Cox 1997: 5).

The spatial significance of the “region” is revisited in Carolyn Cartier’s chapter “Regional Formations and Transnational Urbanism in South China.” She is less concerned than Tim Oakes with the implication of “regionalism” understood as a powerful means of constituting China’s spatial polity. The “regions” on her theoretical map relate less to the bounded concept of “China” than to the notion of transboundary “spatialities of complex global processes” captured in the metaphor of transnational urbanism. Not surprisingly, Shenzhen in south China, one of the most privileged locales under the reform era policy, serves as the target region for her inquiry. Cartier traces the relationship between cultural economy and urban built environments through a detailed account of Shenzhen’s transformation from a manufacturing zone to a global city. The “transnational urban” provides a place where the state meets capital to produce an ultra-abstract space crystallized in Shenzhen’s signature plan for a new city center. Designed by a New York-based architectural firm, this new center would evolve around a gigantic city hall, complete with modern cultural amenities such as a music hall, youth palace, and other showcases of cultural symbolisms. Cartier shows us how domestic and global cultural practices, and the systems of official and unofficial representation, fruitfully intersected in the production of this much-hyped built environment. The production of new spaces matters to a city like Shenzhen that has to live up to the challenges that any new “world city” of cosmopolitanism has to meet. But the new space that matters is already deeply inscribed by old popular cultural practices both in architectural terms
(pavilion roofs and the spatial logic of cardinal directions) and in terms of folk beliefs (i.e., fengshui). Thus, architectural symbolisms of traditional Chinese imperial cities are wedded to high fashions of international design; and the representational space of national power is sometimes subject to the unofficial cultural ideology of fengshui. Mindful of our search for “alternative landscapes,” Cartier named the fengshui practice and ideology – a powerful spatial principle that guides architects of old times and realtors in modern times – as the locale where a Chinese minjian practice “reaches to connect rural and urban realms in ways that potentially elide the anti-fengshui ideologies of the state” (Cartier’s chapter in this volume).

What other possibilities exist that may poke holes in the totalized abstract space of such an artificially built environment? Cartier ends her chapter with a speculation on “places of their own” created by women migrant laborers. Once again, she reminds us that the social character of space is organic. Space embodies social relationships. The built environment of the new city center is only a conceived space that mystifies but which cannot obliterate the lived places of those located at the bottom of the labor scale, however overdetermined their space is by the aggressive regime of production. What kinds of spatial strategies can those underprivileged laborers and migrants resort to? This is a topic that Louisa Schein and Wanning Sun will revisit in their chapters.

Shenzhen, we know, is a city of many guises. The abstract totalized space planned by local state capitalists and technocratic programmers constitutes only one of the multiple geographies of the political economy of the Pearl River Delta. Shenzhen returns in Helen Siu’s paper as a fluid social space traversed by the bustling border-crossing human traffic between Hong Kong and the nodal cities in the Delta on daily and weekly bases. What drives the regional economy and culture that bridges Hong Kong with Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Zhuhai to form an ideal trans-boundary “megapolitan circle” in flesh? It is none other than the acquisition of private space (i.e., real estate properties) and the lifestyle consciously adopted by the new property owners of luxury housing districts. Siu walks us through the borders between Guangzhou and Hong Kong, and back and forth between satellite cities near Shenzhen, occasionally lounging at the cafés at the Times Square near Guangzhou Train Station, imagining herself to be “already in Hong Kong.” Her chapter is adorned with ethnographic details about a regional cultural style in the making. A large number of the agents actively engaged in the production of this regional cultural scale and space are apartment-hunters from Hong Kong where space is both cramped and unaffordable. This migrational shift to the Delta for better living space is both an instinctive choice and a natural course of action induced by a state-directed housing development craze that started in the early 1990s and which gained a second life in the late 1990s. Siu’s unconventional multi-sited ethnography reconstructs a regional pastime of property shopping. She became “part of the fluidity”
of the circulation of people, meaning, and capital, conversing with those various potential buyers, both Hong Kongers and Mainland professionals and upstarts in the Delta. And like them, she indulges herself in the rhythmic spatial movements enabled by trans-local express trains and subways, witnessing the busy flow into the region, as the result of the luxury housing boom, not only of upscale Hong Kong-style design culture and leisure culture but also of new spatial models such as the superstores. Owners of those stores pride themselves in “using an ordinary space (a supermarket) and mundane activities (daily grocery shopping) to do extraordinary things” (“cultivating the tastes of China’s emerging middle class”). Have the new housing choices changed the buyers’ notions of place-based identities? Siu asked. Nobody who travels with Siu during those vicarious excursions would deny the fact that an inter-cultural space is being produced and that identities, like the act of physical border-crossing itself, are blurring place boundaries. The status change of those Hong Kong buyers now settled in the Delta is a case in point. Moving “north” may entail a less prestigious scaled movement in geographical terms. But the ownership of a modern luxury apartment almost certainly guaranteed an upscaled move on the social ladder and a hybrid cultural practice.

South China owes its hybrid cultural economy to the comparative advantage of being contiguous not only to Hong Kong but to the ocean. The Northwestern border, the locale of Peter Perdue’s chapter, enjoys no such advantage and benefits from no laissez-faire policies. Instead, the vast region continuously called for stringent territorial maintenance because its multi-ethnic space is conflict-ridden and historically contested. As a historian, Perdue is methodologically keen (and successful) in thinking space through history. He asks particularly how China’s spatial imagination was carried over from empire to nation. The space examined under his analytical lens is the geopolitical space of the modern state and its various canonical projects, each paired with an imperial precedent serving to legitimate controversial territorial claims. He discusses three such hegemonic projects. Each project produced orthodox historical narratives to support the vision of a unified national space, leaving little room for autonomous space or alternative histories of ethnic minorities to emerge. From the PRC’s contestation over the sacred Tibetan method of selecting lamas, to the state-sponsored academic research on China’s frontier regions, and finally to the policy of developing the West, we are taken on a discovery tour to scrutinize, case by case, how those seemingly diverse state projects, historically all traceable to the Qing period, are, in fact, spatial acts fed into the socialist state’s geopolitical agenda of “one country, one territory.”

This geometrically defined space of abstraction was hegemonic because it was rarely challenged by alternative histories and alternative mappings. Two rare possibilities of subversions were discussed by Perdue. One is the Hui fiction writer Zhang Chengzhi’s epic attempt to recount the spiritual history of the Jahriyya Islamic community in Gansu province. In his
*Xinling shi* (History of the Soul), the “frontier” is dematerialized and transformed from a physical space, a prey to conquerors, to a mental space – a “source of an alternative history,” a space whose very immateriality renders the land inviolable by the territorial police. Perhaps a more open-ended option to such an idealist religious philosophy of resistance (the second possibility of subversion, so to speak) are global alliances forged between inland lone fighters like Zhang, Chinese religious communities in exile, the global Hui diaspora, and other transnational sympathizers of Tibetan Buddhism and Islam. Here Perdue echoes Tim Oakes’s critical strategy of understanding “scale jumping” as a means of self-empowerment for those located on the bottom scale.

The oppressive and ideologically inexorable Chinese state in Perdue’s chapter is equated with the emporium or Beijing, the central state which is under constant pressure to maintain a unified front in its self-representation. In the next chapter, Hans Hendrischke leads us on an excursion into a local state’s operation in local tabloid papers. He insists on the importance of differentiating the central state from the local (Guanxi provincial state, in this case) in our analysis of China because the latter is seen to enjoy a greater degree of ideological flexibility and thus, unlike Beijing, is not compelled to project the image of a “unitary central institution.” Through his examination of the history of rivalry between the official *South Country Morning Post* and the now obsolete semi-private *Guangxi Business Daily*, Hendrischke provides us with an intimate view of the competing interests of the Guangxi Press and Publication Bureau and the Guangxi Trade Office in their respective sponsorship of two Nanning tabloid papers. The evolving relationship between the local Party-state and local popular media serves as an entry point for his discussion of the structural changes in the newspaper administration in Guangxi on the one hand, and the link between popular culture and local culture on the other. He interprets the “popular” as *tongsu*, a culture driven by market demand. But neither “pop” nor “local” culture is, in his view, content exclusive. He blurs not only the distinction between commercial and political content in the pop offerings of the tabloid press (citing the popular demand of investigative journalism as an example), but the scalar differentiation between the local, the national, and the global in the presses’ strategic appeal to readership. While “locality” inevitably plays a crucial role in shaping local identity, Hendrischke emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between the reference frames of different scales. What he finally concludes reminds us of Tim Oakes’s observation, i.e., there is no absolute equation between “place” and “scale.” Thus, a Nanning local may be geographically rooted in Nanning, but the Nanning tabloid papers cultivate “a local identity that is not exclusive of other localities” nor of other scales. A local place is by no means constrained within the local scale.

A significant problematic suggested in Hendrischke’s chapter is the potential link between the growth of a local public sphere and a local
media thriving on exposé journalism. But what this emerging “local political culture” would be like is left unsaid. Feng Chongyi takes on this topic in the next piece “From Barrooms to Teahouses: Commercial nightlife in Hainan since 1988.” He argues that teahouses constitute a social space “not only for cultural consumption but for social and political interactions.” Instead of condemning the commodified leisure culture in Hainan as decadent, Feng sees in Hainan’s teahouse culture a seedbed of proliferating leisure cultural communities where people come together as a “public” not only for fun but also for discussions of issues of common concern without a conscious political agenda. He modifies Habermas’s theory of the public sphere by emphasizing the emergence of those new social, public spaces in China whose existence and development, like the various social organizations he cites, are intricately tied to the Leninist Party-state. He claims, however, that because the state has a “limited capacity to dictate lifestyle choices,” a booming commercial nightlife will have the potential of depoliticizing the everyday life and encouraging new forms of sociality not easily contained in a homogenous, abstract space of the state. However, he also warns us that commercial nightlife and leisure cultural consumption are promoted by the state. In as much as economic liberalization does not necessarily lead to political liberalization, public sentiments voiced in teahouses are not identical to public opinions.

What is closely scrutinized in this chapter is not only the question of the public sphere but a parallel question: Whose is Hainan culture? Is this tea drinking culture local culture? To answer that question, Feng recounts the ethnic history of Hainan, tracing respectively the cultural heritage of the Li minority, the equally underprivileged old Han mainlander settlers, and the new mainland immigrants who brought to the island new cultural practices such as the art of tea drinking. If we toss the issue of “class” into the equation of the unequal social relations between those three ethnic communities, it brings into sharp relief Feng’s argument, to wit, the popularized tea culture in Hainan is a fundamentally “white-collar” fad affordable only to the new mainlander diaspora. It is, therefore, not an organic part of Hainan culture but is constructed as a “local” culture as such. He thus gets himself into an interesting bind: critiquing and privileging a mainlander cultural form and practice at the same time. If in time the teahouses on the island do breed public communities as Feng has hoped, we should perhaps ask, in his own voice, whose “publics” are they?

Louisa Schein’s chapter “Ethnoconsumerism as Cultural Production?” pursues the same line of investigation that foregrounds consumption as a productive act and consumers as cultural producers. The locale she looks at is Guizhou. And the subjects under discussion are the Miao minorities. Although Guizhou is located on the margin of Chinese modernity, it is participatory, Schein argues, of an imagined cosmopolitanism made possible by trans-local experiences in the everyday life of the Miao. Such experiences can be both virtual – through their consumption of traveling
images transmitted by satellite TV – and real, as villagers come into contact with migrant returnees from the cities. What blows life into Schein’s trope of translocality are vignettes she takes from her field work observations. All consumers are imaginative as postmodern theorists like John Fiske proclaim, but ethnoconsumers are more privileged because they have a larger wealth of creative resources to draw from in their improvisational act of consumption. The creative practices of the Miao consumers Schein examined include fashion making, grooming, on-stage performances, and cruising in disco bars. They tell us that the cultural identity of a place, like one’s sense of style, is unstable to the utmost. Thus hyper-ethnicization and de-ethnicization co-exist. Miao consumers are by no means stereotyped passive recipients of modern consumer culture. And Miao places are not stuck in a cultural backwater because they are “nodes in the network of translocal flows rather than endpoints of ‘development.’” Those who have resources to jump scale, like the elegant fashion designer Wei Ronghui whose career is now trans-local, can afford to reinvent the traditional minority beauty culture in a celebratory light. But Schein’s point is that all the young Miao consumers she encountered are in one way or another cultural brokers who, like Wei Ronghui, take and pick the urban style and eventually make it into something Miao, a process of re-ethnicization of culture that is not to be conflated with the simple notion of hybridization. This is quite an upbeat take on consumer culture and marginalized locality. Schein rediscovers the roots of popular culture as “people’s” culture, celebrates the ethno-consumer as an agent of change, and bails Guizhou out of the Han imaginary of lack.

Schein’s chapter is filled with rich implications about how we may free ourselves from our fixed sterile imagination about the periphery. Wanning Sun joins her in interrogating the place-identities of “poor places” on the periphery. As indicated by the title of her chapter “Anhui Baomu in Shanghai: Gender, class and a sense of place,” Sun examines how Anhui as a place is imagined in national popular culture through the trope that makes it infamous – the Anhui maids. To highlight the constructed nature of our sense of a place, she brings Shanghai into the equation and complicates the question of spatial imagination by presenting to us voices of maids, airport cleaners, Shanghaiese employees, each speaking from his or her nested socio-spatial position which determines their identification with a place and their own trans-local subjectivity. “Place” as a category is thus destabilized because she asks: who is defining the place? Whose place is it? What particular spatial relationship do those who are defining have with the place defined? Sun pays specific attention to the representations of Anhui in film and TV drama because she believes that space or place building is not only a socio-economic project but also a discursive project. She rightfully attributes the vicious cycle of our association of Anhui with poverty to the triple facts of the image production (and reproduction) of a poor place through popular media, the stark reality of its uneven development, and the
nation-state’s development policies. All those factors feed into each other to reinforce the cultural stereotype of Anhui. The rich interviews Sun conducted with those maids and their employers provide us illuminating perspectives on how people at different socio-spatial locations construct place and how they put themselves “in place.” Perhaps the saddest message delivered by her interviewees is that the Anhui maids in Shanghai themselves are participating in the construction of a social imaginary that propagates the clichéd binarism of the “poor” Anhui versus the “cosmopolitan” Shanghai.12

Tani Barlow’s chapter comes last, following the same sequential logic as the previous Luce volume. In Chinese Popular Culture and the State (Wang 2001a), she reminds us that desire and pleasure cannot be written out of sight in a critical framework that emphasizes the structuring capacity of the state to inscribe the social (Barlow 2001). Her subversive voice cracked open a theoretical space named desire, irreducible to the state effect. Now Barlow returns with a project on smut in similar critical spirit. She delivers us a poetic spatialization of wanting which scatters to the winds concepts of place and lived geography. She anchors the “economy of smut” at the metaphoric space of the “pornographic city.” This is an anonymous and generic city that discriminates neither locales nor scales. It is the unconscious domain of everyday life, liminally situated between the legitimate and the forbidden. Barlow is no less interested in exploring the “smutty ways of knowing” than in directing our attention to the only scale (in her view) that is relevant to smut, i.e., the human body. This approach, which she herself places between Léfebvre and Bachelard, raises many fascinating methodological questions about how to study contemporary Chinese popular culture through a genre that not only does not have an archive but which is continuously subject to the gaze of censors. Even more intriguingly, there is a “rationality” of smut to speak of. In a paradoxical twist, Barlow’s reconstruction of such a savoir faire is, in the end, highly subversive of her own analytical point of departure, namely, that the smutty space is highly resistant to state control.

The twist in question came from Barlow’s insight that the liminal and smutty ways of knowing are not only sexual and criminal, but legalistic and normative. In so far as contemporary Chinese smut is legalistic to the point of sheer didacticism, it “popularizes the new legal culture” rather than challenges it. Her essay implies that the socialist state plays a rather complicated role in the popularity of smut. Official anti-smut campaigns tell only half of the story. The predominant trope of law and order in the current “semi-yellow” literature, while continuing the Confucian legacy of taming the pornographic (Wang 2001e), has imparted to contemporary smut a schizophrenic drive toward eroticization of violence and moral edification at the same time. Perhaps the cohabitation of those two opposite drives is predictable, given that the cultural meaning of porn and smut is inseparable from their emergence as categories of regulation.

Eventually, one needs to ask: is our utopian fantasy about smut
rewarded after a reading of the examples of “vulgar obscenity”? This may constitute another paradox that has risen from Barlow’s tension-riddled creative subversion. Because of smut’s disregard for any geographical, scalar, cultural, and even bodily differences (i.e., all bodies are interchangeable), its space seems so formulaic and tautological that it eventually turns into a tyranny of its own kind.

**Conclusion**

Edward Soja attributed the anti-spatial traditions in Western Marxism to the tendency of materialist dialecticians to treat spatial consciousness as reified false consciousness inseparable from the geographical expansion of capitalism (Soja 1997: 76–93). If we look at the Chinese spatial projects showcased in this volume, they may yield similar impressions that the production of space in China is reducible to the simple reflection of the economic base and is driven by pure economism. Indeed, from rural Guizhou to the Pearl River Delta and all the way to Beijing (where rescaling was well under way), it is difficult to spot any spatial visions and relations that exist outside the logic of capital. As we have seen, the spatial problematic is almost identical to the urban problematic. This is clearly shown in Cartier’s chapter on Shenzhen, Siu’s multi-ethnographical accounts, my analysis of the spatial policy of the PRC, and the trans-local experiences of those rural subjects depicted in Sun’s and Schein’s chapters.

We face several options at this point about how to assess such a phenomenon. We could, like good old liberals, vouch for the universalist impulse that celebrates the economic turn of China’s new spatial logic, or condemn it like old-style Marxists, or search for liberatory spaces outside market-driven and market-organized spatiality like jovial postmodernists. Each ideological position makes some sense. But it is interesting to note that none of our contributors fall into the first two camps. The third option is the most alluring one, subscribed to by several authors. But does that option tell us more about our own fantasy as Western academic intellectuals entrenched in dichotomous thinking (i.e., domination versus resistance) than about the real stakes of the locals or local states in their struggle over various spatial projects? Indeed, the haunting question as to “where lies the Chinese socialist spatial problematic” appears more compelling than ever after we finish reading a volume that unwittingly validates several universal theoretical premises dear to critical human geographers. First, we are shown that the relations of production and consumption are simultaneously social and spatial; second, other than the SARS example, the production of scales is a process, and most likely a contested process; third, local places and local cultural practices are not constrained within the local scale; and fourth, the relational mapping between different scales holds the key to our understanding of “place.” But I am tempted to ask: is that all there is to the new spatial project of post-1992 socialist China?
Tapping into the rich resources this volume provides, I would like to offer a few speculations not so much as concluding remarks but as points of departure for future inquiries into the Chinese spatial problematic examined from the disciplinary vantage points of human, administrative, political, and historico-cultural geography. Each of those vantage points was addressed in this volume, gravitating one way or another toward the trope of economy. Emerging economic forces have indeed thrown old scalar configurations into disarray. In general, China is moving toward a spatial imaginary that emphasizes the concept of networked space, scalar transfers, and boundary transgression. Old vertical boundaries were being torn down. What is in the process of being formed – as a result either of scale jumping or of transboundary movements and activities – is much too new and experimental for us to assess its full social impact in any definitive sense.

Most of our contributors turned their gaze toward scale producers in the “social” domain with a default ideological assumption that such scalar production can be subversive, or at least resistant to the appropriation, of the authoritarian Center. But several contributors, among them Barlow, Siu, Perdue, Feng, Hendrischke, and myself, gave a noticeable acknowledgement to the Chinese state (both Beijing and local states) as a creative scale producer as well. I would caution us against treating all organized and planned spaces in contemporary China as devoid of transformative potentials. This is not just a theoretical issue. In real life, the Chinese have a saying, “The most invisible place is the spot right underneath a light.” Translating this metaphoric saying into plain language, it means that no place is safer than the place of danger. That is because, paradoxically, under the surveillance of the Party-state, it is easier to carve out “breathing spaces” (shengcun de kongjian) within the planned space than create them outside it. Ordinary Chinese people pride themselves in finding their own space and place in what seems to be a poreless, planned space. What matters to them are practices not theories. In practice, I should note, the state and the people subscribe to the same spatial practice. The latter performs “scale jumping” while the former is busy experimenting with “transboundary” policy directives. This leads us to another observation spelled out indirectly in this volume: The scalar crossovers between the “local” and the “global” – an imaginary project for a Chinese commoner – tell us only half of the story about mobility in China. The other half is manifested in the inland, transboundary traffic that is taking place between villages, towns, counties, districts, provinces, and among metropolitan centers.

This emphasis on practice and locale immediacy inevitably turns the quotidian into the most important scale for the Chinese. Deng Xiaoping’s famous catchphrase “crossing the river by groping for the stones in it” says just that. Practice is everything. And flexibility – on which the principle of yindi zhiyi is based – is the Chinese panacea for survival and optimism. It is in the quotidian where their struggle over space is improvised, where the
inevitable embeddedness of a place is lived and the production of differences taken for granted.

September 2003

Notes

1 I am referring to the pioneering work written by Southeast Asianists. Two such examples are: Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism (1997), co-edited by Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini; and Ong's Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality (1999).

2 I wish to add to this list two other projects in the making. The first is Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein’s co-edited volume Translocal China: Linkages, Identities and the Reimagining of Space. The manuscript is now being prepared and will be published by Routledge in the China in Transition Series edited by David S. G. Goodman. The second project is currently undertaken by the Urban China Research Network overseen by Carolyn Cartier and Si-ming Li (Geography, Hong Kong Baptist University). That multi-year project, named “Urban Transformation in China and Reorganization of the State in the Era of Globalization,” examines the understudied issues of space economy and the reorganization of China’s urban administrative scales in the larger context of globalization.

3 China’s information industry gained a tremendous growth of 29 per cent in the first quarter of 2003. At the end of April, sales of personal computers and displays had increased by 60.1 per cent and 53 per cent respectively over the same period last year. A spokesman of the Ministry of Information Industry attributed this record to the SARS outbreak which boosted both online businesses and online teaching. See SST’s Semiconductor Weekly, June 9, 2003.

4 In June 2003, the Ministry of Culture granted ten firms licenses to run national Internet café chains. The government was said to want to squeeze independent operators out of the market.


6 The policy that attracted the greatest attention from policy analysts and policy makers has been that of xian gai shi (“counties upgraded to city status”). It is a controversial policy deemed by some to be a transitional measure at best. It was an effort made by the central government to cut down the large number of counties and to give “market towns,” “county level towns,” and “district level cities” greater administrative power over the county governments so as to speed up urbanization in rural China and to gradually relieve the problems created by the rural–urban divide. Another ongoing policy debate was focused on whether the number of provinces should be reduced. The proposal to do so was stalled because sheng as an administrative scale is too weighty a tradition to tamper with. For detailed discussion of both policy debates, see Liu 1996, Liu, Jin et al. 1999.

7 I owe my understanding of the tiao/kuai leadership to Michael Dutton.

8 A selection of Henri Léfebvre’s work was translated by Bao Yaming in Xiandaixing yu kongjian de shengchan [Modernity and the Production of Space], Urban Studies Series 2, Shanghai: Shanghai Education Publishers, 2003.

9 I owe this discussion about the complexities of the issue of local protectionism to Hans Hendrischke.

10 “Cities governing counties” was a policy implemented in 1983 with the purpose of consolidating resources around prosperous market towns and cities
(zhongxin cheng) at both the district and county levels. A large number of such county towns were upgraded to district-level cities (diji shi) which were then made to govern neighboring county towns that used to fall under the jurisdiction of the districts in question. And some original district-level cities absorbed surrounding counties to form a Greater urban area such as the Greater Wenzhou. For detailed discussions on the pros and cons of this policy, see Liu, Jin et al. 1999: 216–221.

11 In 2001, editors of five provincial-level metro-papers (dushibao) met at Lanzhou, Gansu Province, for the first time to discuss trans-local business ventures. The papers are San Qin Metro-paper, Lanzhou Daily, New News, The [North]western Metro-paper, and Xinjiang Metro-paper. It was agreed that a trans-provincial coalition will be formed. See Zhang Jibing (2002) “Dushibao de dushi shenghuo” [The City’s Lives in Metro-papers], Meijie [Media], 11: 19. Nanfang Metro-paper based in Guangzhou has been frequently cited as a successful example of “trans-local” business operation since it gained market shares in Shenzhen.

1  Land of living fossils
Scaling cultural prestige in China’s periphery

Tim Oakes

Confucius said: Lost rites can be recovered from the remote peripheries.
Han Shu, Vol. 30, Yiwenzhi no. 10 (cited in Weng Naiqun 2001)

Introduction: inverting the periphery
Along the road to Caiguan Village, nestled among the stony karst hills of the central Guizhou plateau near Anshun, one sees “Long Live Chairman Mao Thought!” freshly painted in bright red characters on the stone walls of several village houses. That such “lost rites” of the Cultural Revolution might be recovered in the remote peripheries of Guizhou’s countryside presumably would not have surprised the Great Sage. But the above epigraph also suggests a long history of ambivalence regarding “the periphery” in China. China’s peripheries have at various historical moments been represented either as barbaric wastelands at the edges of humanity itself, or as mysterious realms of lost rites found, utopian lands revealed anew, and national vitality rediscovered. This chapter focuses on the ways Guizhou localities have made use of the ambivalence of the periphery in order to assert claims of cultural prestige. Put in more abstract terms, I examine alternative cultural constructions of social space that seek to invert the dominant Chinese association of the periphery with backwardness.

The residents of Caiguan are descendants of soldier-settlers sent from the lower Yangtze region (jiangnan) to be stationed in central Guizhou over 600 years ago at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. They have been called by many different names throughout their long history – fentouji, fengtouniao, erpu, daxiumei, dajiaomei – but these days they, along with some 300,000 others like them, spread out in several hundred stone villages throughout central Guizhou, are known as tunpu people. One of the distinguishing features of tunpu culture is a particular form of nuo (exorcism) drama known today as dixi and typically performed during Spring Festival celebrations. Because of Caiguan’s proximity to Anshun, dixi performances there gained some notoriety during the cultural fever and
roots-searching of the 1980s, and in 1986 a group of villagers was invited to France to perform *dixi* at the *Festival d’Automne à Paris*. The Paris culture and arts festival that year was featuring ancient Chinese performance art, and the story told by the villagers is that, upon viewing the performance, President Francois Mitterand’s wife pronounced *dixi* “a living fossil of Chinese opera.”

But what makes this story most interesting is how Caiguan’s villagers have appropriated it, turning the ambivalent label of “living fossil” into a mark of cultural prestige. *Dixi* is but one of numerous folk cultural productions among Han people in Guizhou that have come to be represented as attributes of what I would call an inverted periphery. By the 1990s, all of *tunpu* culture – not just *dixi* – was being promoted as the “living fossil” of Ming Dynasty *jiangnan* culture, and throughout Guizhou one could find instances in which Han cultural production was represented through narratives of ancientness that carried with them the mark of spatial centrality and its associated cultural prestige. Folk cultural production among Guizhou’s rural Han, in other words, actively subverted both the region’s common association with peripheral backwardness and its most common form of popular cultural production: the “exotic” customs and practices of its ethnic minority population. In an odd replaying of Cohen’s (1994) notion of the “peripheralization” of traditional Chinese cultural identity, the geography of Guizhou as a remote (*pianpi*) and backward (*luohou*) periphery was transformed into the geography of an ancient displaced center (*zhongyang*) (see also Tu 1994). *Dixi*’s status as a “living fossil” has been mobilized not as the calcified impressions of a backward culture in a region languishing beyond the pale of civilization, but as a key feature of China’s glorious civilization “recovered” in the “remote peripheries.” As a region of *dixi*, then, Guizhou’s peripheral geography is subverted and repositioned in a way that addresses centuries of political and economic marginalization. Although economic benefits are not forthcoming for Guizhou’s rural localities as China’s contemporary modernization recapitulates an older pattern of internal colonialism for the region, popular cultural production can still be mobilized to metaphorically center Guizhou in the heart of China’s core heritage (Spencer 1940; Goodman 1983; Oakes 1999a; Lee, J. Z. 2000).

**Scaled social relations**

My interpretation of Guizhou’s inverted periphery draws on the idea of space as a social product, and on the idea of scale as a fundamental feature in the social production of difference (Léfebvre 1991; Smith 1992; Massey 1994; Swyngedouw 1997a, 1997b). Scale, in these terms, refers to the spatial constitution of particular social processes and their associated social relations. According to Erik Swyngedouw (1997a: 169), scale expresses the “grounding” of social relations “in the sense that they regu-
late (but in highly contested or contestable ways) control over and access to transformed nature/place, but these relations also extend over a certain material/social/discursive distance.” Scale emerges, then, as the dynamic manifestation of the ordering of space through social relations. “The theoretical and political priority, therefore, never resides in a particular geographical scale, but rather in the process through which particular scales become (re)constituted.”

Center and periphery mark the differentiations of China’s imperially and nationally produced space (Goodman 2000; Hostetler 2001). These represent not simply a spatial binary, but an active production of scales as well, in which localities in China have been defined as such according to a hierarchical nesting of administrative scales historically conditioning the flows of political power and social control. On an imperial or national scale, the periphery is produced as a result of the center’s ability to dominate the political and economic conditions of China’s spatial polity. Yet peripherality is also a result of the center’s active differentiation of that polity into the spatial scales necessary for maintaining political and social control. Centers and peripheries thus may be found all along a continuum of scales, from the national or imperial to the local. In so far as scale may be seen as the product of social power, struggles over the extension, legitimacy, and maintenance of that power are inherently spatial struggles over the social production of scale. It could even be argued that the scale of the province in China is itself a result of the negotiation of political power between the center and localities throughout history (Fitzgerald 2002). The point, though, is that the scales at which political and economic power are exercised in China are open to contestation, and in constant need of maintenance. In this vein, we may speak of ideologies of scale. The scales that order social phenomena, in other words, are generally taken as existing outside the social relations which in fact produced them.

Peripherality is struggled over, then, not simply at the national scale (for example, Guizhou negotiating more favorable fiscal relations with the center), but also at more local scales, often through everyday practices, in which the taken-for-granted ideologies of scale are both reinforced and challenged (Smith 1993). This approach entails viewing cultural practices simultaneously as spatial practices involving some sort of encounter with or struggle over the production of scale. This has implications for how we think of “the local” in popular cultural practice. Local scale expressions of popular culture should be seen not as confined by scale but rather as components in the on-going production of scale. In Guizhou, the promotion of local culture as “living fossil” seeks to reinforce an ideology of the bounded and isolated locality, while, paradoxically, “jumping” from the local to national scale by asserting a direct link to central cultural heritage. The reproduction of *tunpu* culture, in other words, both appropriates dominant scale productions (Guizhou as periphery and therefore backward and cut off) and subverts them (Guizhou’s Han localities represent...
not exotic isolated culture, but are rather sites where “national culture” may be recovered).

The ambiguity of the periphery

That *tunpu* offers this paradoxical combination of reinforcing and subverting China’s dominant scale constructions speaks to the ambiguity of the periphery mentioned at the outset of this chapter. This ambiguity in fact speaks to the more fundamental roles of political regionalism and local cultural practice in constituting the imperial and national scales of China.

Regionalism has had a long and ambiguous history in China. On the one hand, it is clear that, historically, a great deal of regionalist politics has come about due to the local-scale and self-serving interests of militarists (Shen 1936; Whitney 1970: 84; Duara 1993: 17; Goodman 1994: 7–8). On the other hand, however, regionalism has also been a crucial part of the project of building the spatial polity of China at the scale of an imperial or national state (Lary 1974; Goodman 2002b). Certainly prior to the twentieth century the state was compelled in many ways to build upon, rather than erase, local cultural practices and regional identities in order to construct some sort of coherent unity at the scale of the empire (Watson 1985; Thornton 1996). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, native-place associations (*tongxianghui*) played a key role in both local economic development and modern nation-building, indicating that regional and place-based identities did not confine themselves to a regional administrative or local cultural scale of expression (Ho 1966; Schoppa 1977; Skinner 1976). As Bryna Goodman (1995: 12–13) argues, native-place identity, in being derived from one’s mobility beyond the native place, came to be grounded in the larger political ideology and spatial scale of national identity: “love for the native place was virtuous because it helped to constitute and strengthen the larger political polity of China.” This larger polity of China, Prasenjit Duara (1993: 10) suggests, “is shaped by the play of other frames of identification” such as region, locality, and ethnicity. Indeed, Duara argues, the play of these other frames – particularly in the Federal Self-Government Movement of the 1920s – enabled the weak and prostrate Chinese nation to be imagined in alternative and empowering ways.

The Chinese Communist Party was similarly forced to mobilize rather than erase local scales of cultural practice and identity in its nation-building efforts. Along with their more general anti-urban rhetoric, the Communists sought to articulate their own version of national identity based on the parochial folk, and on the peripheral provinces. Along these lines, Joseph Levenson (1967: 279) argued that the Communist state’s “indulgence of local expression” represented a kind of “nationalist provincialism” in which local culture was promoted for “central and modern” rather than provincial and traditional reasons. The “provincial folk,” as a familiar space of “the traditional,” were thus re-deployed (in Levenson’s
case, by the theatrical productions sanctioned by the Party) in the service of a distinctly more modern concept, the nation. What Levenson recognized, then, was the inescapably powerful force of regionalism in constituting China’s spatial polity (Goodman 1994; see also Holm 1991: 20).

The importance of regions and localities in constituting the broader spatial polity of China indicates an articulation of multiple scales of identity and cultural practice in China. Culture and identity are not necessarily constrained by a local scale of practice and expression. This has implications for the production of central and peripheral spatial differentiations as well. While the relative isolation of the periphery has most commonly been associated with backwardness, it has also served as an idealized space of recovery. Drawing on historical narratives of backwardness and recovery, the localities of the periphery today participate in the production of broader spatial scales that constitute Chinese society. These narratives are briefly discussed below before moving on to an analysis of the ways they are appropriated in Guizhou in local cultural practice.

Narratives of backwardness – Yelang Zida

The dominant historiography of Guizhou offers numerous variations on backward remoteness in terms of geography, culture, politics, and society. Historical accounts almost invariably repeat two sayings meant to illustrate the region’s social and cultural geography: one is the well-known tian gao huangdi yuan (heaven is high and the emperor is far away) and the other is the witty little tian wu san ri qing, di wu san li ping, ren wu san fen ying (no three days are clear, no three li [of land] are flat, no person has three cents).

Descriptions of Guizhou’s cultural geography invoke the region’s unique environment and topography to explain a history of isolation, backwardness, and parochialism (Xin 1996: 326–384; Chen 1998: 416–467; Huang 1998). Straddling a karst limestone plateau, with deep river canyons spilling off on three sides toward Sichuan, Hunan, and Guangxi, ancient Guizhou was dominated by a loose collection of isolated bazi cultures (bazi wenhua). A bazi, or simply ba, is what Guizhou people call an alluvial basin (pendi) of relatively flat land suitable for the intensive irrigated agriculture that has defined Chinese civilization since it emerged from the loess soils of the Wei River Valley and began its great seep southward (Lattimore 1951: 33–42; Weins 1967). Guizhou geographers note that a mere 3 per cent of the province’s territory is classified as bazi, the rest being mountains and hills. In fact, they claim that there are only nineteen bazi capable of producing any significant agricultural surplus beyond the needs of the farming population itself (Chen 1993: 9–10). One of the largest of these is the generally level region – interrupted by numerous conical karst outcrops – around Anshun, the principal region of tunpu culture.

Anshun emerged as a center of political power that came to dominate, between the Warring States and Western Han eras, most of what today
constitutes Guizhou province. The environment of isolated bazi wenhua was ripe for the establishment of little states that ruled their local worlds in a loose confederation which was ultimately united under the banner of Yelang (Zhu 1990). This name is well known throughout China today because of its association with the idiom Yelang zida (Yelang conceit – parochial arrogance). The popular story behind the idiom recalls the foolish king of Yelang who was not only unaware and unconcerned that he lived in the shadow of the great Han, but indeed boasted of his own greatness when greeted by the emperor’s emissaries. The story comes from Sima Qian’s Shiji, which documents that in BCE 135 Han Wudi sent emissaries to Yelang and Dian to find a route to India and establish counties and prefectures along the way. When they arrived for an audience with the proud Dian king, they were greeted with the question, “Han shu yu wo da?” (Is Han as great as us?) (Huang 1998: 3–4). The question was again repeated by the Yelang king, who unfortunately got stuck with the infamous label of conceit, now immortalized in the popular idiom.

Periphery as recovery – utopian self-sufficiency

“Parochial arrogance” (that is, peripheral backwardness) thus becomes a key theme in Guizhou historiography. And yet today Yelang remains a reference point of cultural pride in Guizhou. For the shiji also notes that of all the states in the southwest during the Warring States period, Yelang was not only the largest, but, along with Dian, was the only one to have received the imperial seal and be recognized by the emperor. It was thus the most “civilized” in the eyes of the Han. Recent archaeological findings in Guizhou in fact confirm a great deal of cultural exchange between Yelang and the central plains culture to the north. Yelang thus symbolizes not peripheral backwardness per se, but the ambiguity of peripheral space. In Guizhou, popular narratives of provincial history both reject the association of Yelang with backwardness, and affirm the positive aspects of isolation: preservation of China’s ancient and noble heredity (Long 2003).

Thus, the isolation of bazi wenhua also meant self-sufficiency: if there was little knowledge of the outside world, that is because there was little need for such knowledge. In the book Human China (Renwen Zhongguo), for example, the chapter on Guizhou and Yunnan exclaims that “an ancient wind is still preserved in the southwesterner” (gufeng youcun xinanren) (Xin 1996: 326–336). This is followed by a claim that southwest China is one of the hearth regions of all humanity. It goes on to describe the plateau country as a guarded, secretive world, inhabited by “China’s most well-preserved people” (zhongguo zui baoshou de yi qunren). In such a world, people lived simply, never strayed far from home, and worked hard. If they suffered from a bit of parochial conceit, this was perhaps forgivable given the high value they placed on self-sufficiency.

Such utopianism carries with it a considerable cultural legitimacy in
China. There has always been an ambivalence regarding commercial integration and market development in China. For along with regional patterns of commercial trade, particularly from the Song era onward, there has been a counter-narrative of peasant utopianism, illustrated most clearly in Tao Qian’s classic “Peach Blossom Spring” (taohuayuan). There is also the implicit claim that self-sufficiency was in fact a basic Confucian ideal, this being the underlying message of the chapter’s opening epigraph (see also Xin 1996: 346). Thus, in reference to Guizhou, the phrases: “A man’s craft is cultivation, a woman’s custom is spinning and weaving; they don’t pursue long distance trade” (nan shi gengyi, nu xi zhifang, buzhu moyuan shang), and “The good man is not a merchant” (haonan bu jingshang). At the same time, however, this link to Confucian orthodoxy is also subverted by another source of legitimacy: early twentieth-century modernizers and reformers who regarded the people of the southwest plateau country as freer and less inhibited by Confucian morality than most of China (Xin 1996: 336; see also Oakes 1995; Schein 2000: 113). Thus, while the counter-narrative of ancient virtue is not necessarily consistent in its sources of legitimacy, it nevertheless subverts the popular image of Guizhou’s backward parochial arrogance by seeking alternative forms of cultural prestige.

Of course, the most prominent markers of ancientness in Guizhou – virtuous or otherwise – are found in the province’s large minority minzu population. If the plateau country is a cultural landscape of ancientness, it primarily owes this status to the significant presence of ethnic minority groups in the region. They not only predate the Han in Guizhou, but are also said to have held onto their ancient heritage more than the Han (Xin 1996: 329; Huang 1998: 6–9). This is particularly true in the realm of cultural production for tourist consumption. Thus, “at one Miao ethnic tourist village in Southeast Guizhou, villagers were told by a visiting delegation from the state cultural bureau in Beijing that they are the ‘Chinese of the Tang Dynasty’” (Oakes 2000: 681; see also Oakes 1998: 193–204). Indeed, ethnic tourism in Guizhou is, in part, promoted as a project of remembering the nation’s heritage. Miao villagers displaying themselves for tourists have been reminded by numerous visiting delegations (most of which are themselves high-ranking Miao officials) that they are responsible not simply for maintaining Miao customs in the face of modernization, but for recalling what Chinese culture once was. Finding the myths of the nation in contemporary Miao culture is also illustrated by the historical comparisons that were made between the so-called “Miao borderlands” (miaojiang) of southeast Guizhou – a region which resisted direct imperial administration under gai tu gui liu well into the nineteenth century – and Tao Qian’s “Peach Blossom Spring.” To those who commented on its passing, the miaojiang was, like taohuayuan, a completely enclosed, self-sufficient utopia (Taijiang Xianzhi 1994: 1). Although it was known officially as a space of intransigent “ranness,” official constructions of
knowledge about the *miaojiang* also perhaps satisfied a deep Chinese longing for the ideal of agrarian simplicity and self-sufficiency.

In her analysis of Miao historiography, Louisa Schein (2000: 38) has observed a similar positioning of the ancient Miao among core, rather than peripheral, narratives of Chinese identity. Discussing, for example, historical links between the legendary “San Miao” and the Miao of today, she writes:

> Identity with the San Miao of old imparts a legendary stature to the present-day Miao, positioning them as important players during the formative period of the Han people. This identification also bestows the dignity of great antiquity and a firm standing in the documentary record.

This positioning is further reflected, Schein argues, in the numerous geographical theories of Miao origins, which often found them inhabiting the core regions of China long before Han power emerged. Such historiography is, for Schein, merely a prelude to a much larger project of “reconfiguring the dominant” in Miao cultural production, in which a range of different local actors participate.

Yet, despite such positioning, in which the Miao achieve a certain prestige as inheritors of lofty origins, they remain burdened by an ethnic identification marked as inferior relative to the Han (Harrell 1995). Despite few differences in terms of actual standards of living, local Han still have the option of drawing on narratives of prestige at the expense of their non-Han neighbors. Through the state’s ethnic identification process which has situated non-Han groups within a broader modernist narrative of social evolution, groups like the Miao are further called upon to narrate the nation by reaffirming their primevalness within it (Yan 1989). But for local Han in Guizhou, minorities are often viewed in terms of narratives of backwardness in order to bolster Han efforts to link themselves to more prestigious narratives of ancient recovery. For all the ways that minorities are enlisted to serve the nation, then, they ultimately remain subject to a marginalizing narrative of exoticism and backwardness. Self-conscious appeals to ancientness among Han groups are not constrained by an ethnicity that is already fixed as inferior along a continuum of social development. For the rural Han in Guizhou it is not their ethnic status that marks their fossilized practices but rather their displaced location at the edges of civilization. Claiming status as a “living fossil” among Han groups, like those in Caiguan Village, entails a politics of scale, a framework in which the legitimacy of cultural prestige is more readily available than for Miao groups who must, in addition, overcome the burden of a primeval ethnicity that equates them, socially, with poverty and backwardness.
The “old Han” – *tunpu* as living fossil

About twenty kilometers from the city of Anshun, nestled among knobby karst cones, are the villages of Yunshantun, where some of the families retain genealogies that document over 600 years of continuous settlement in this place (Li 1995). But the villagers today will tell you that they are not Guizhou but *Jiangnan* people. Unlocking the creaky door to the ancestral hall, the head of the Jin clan will tell how his ancestors came to Guizhou in the second year of the Hongwu reign in the Ming Dynasty (1369). Cultural officials in Anshun call Yunshantun a “typical *tunpu* village” (*dianxing de tunpu cun*), and a “museum of *tunpu* culture” (*tunpu wenhua bowuguan*). Indeed, in 1995, one of the villages was given state-level recognition as “Guizhou Tunpu Cultural Village” (*Beijing Review* 1997), and in 2001 the whole group of eight villages was given state-level protection as a cultural relic of national importance.

This is the region where the infamously parochial Yelang state was founded, yet *tunpu* recalls a very different and more recent heritage that pointedly counters any association of Guizhou with “Yelang zida.” *Tunpu* emerged from the soldier-settler garrisons (*juntun*) established around Anshun as a result of Ming-founder Zhu Yuanzhang’s campaign to subdue Yuan loyalists and secure the southwestern frontiers in the late fourteenth century. Zhu sent some 300,000 soldiers to conquer Yunnan; they traveled the ancient trade route via Hunan and Guizhou, rebuilding it as an official post road (*yidao*) along the way. The Anshun *bazi* was recognized as a key strategic point along this route, earning the evocative titles of “spine of Guizhou” (*Qian zhi jibei*) and “throat of Yunnan, belly of Guizhou” (*Dian zhi hou*, *Qian zhi fu*) – indicating not only its importance in controlling access to Yunnan, but its relative wealth as one of the few *bazi* regions along the route capable of supporting a front line of soldiers laying siege to the west (Gui 1999). As the old post road leaves this region, it passes through a notch protected by a stone gateway which, according to the peripatetic Xu Xiake (1928: 28–29), was later named by the Kangxi emperor “lock between Guizhou and Yunnan” (*Qian Dian suoyue*).

The soldier-settlers sent to Anshun to secure this strategic gateway were not sent, according to historian Weng Jialie (2002), as a “civilizing” force (see also Weng Jialie 2001). Their settlements were built as fortresses against earlier inhabitants who no doubt resented the military appropriation of what little productive agricultural land the region had to offer. To ensure their separation from the indigenous population, soldiers were required to bring their families with them to the frontier. If a soldier was not married, the government would arrange a marriage in the soldier’s home town before he was sent to the frontier. About a third of the settlers remained on permanent military duty, with the rest serving as a battle-ready militia of farmers. Over the ensuing centuries, however, as their strategic position diminished in importance and as imperial attention in
Guizhou focused increasingly on colonizing the indigenous population rather than keeping rival states in check, the *tunpu* settlements came to be regarded as just another piece of the exotic cultural mosaic of Guizhou. This is because the system of military defense and overall frontier policy changed during the Qing from the soldier-settlers (*wei suo tun tian*) of the Ming policy to the more direct colonization of *gai tu gui liu*. The military system of *juntun* settlements such as those of the *tunpu* was transformed into a civilian system of administration. The Manchus did not want to leave frontier defense in the hands of Han villagers, nor did they want to maintain the increasingly powerful *tusi* system which had grown during the Ming.

Thus, with the rise of Qing-style frontier rule, the *tunpu* people came to be regarded as another indigenous group requiring direct (Manchu) administration. Their most common ethnic label – *fengtouji* – was turned into *fengtoumiao*, that is, “Phoenix Head Miao” (Huang 2000: 307–357). Ironically, “Fengtou” had emerged as a result of settlers distinguishing themselves from the local Miao by identifying themselves as “Fengyang” people (Zhu Yuanzhang’s home town in Anhui). But it came to be viewed as a descriptor of the unique headdress of their women, who wore their hair up in a bun thought to be shaped like a phoenix head, and in time, *fengtouji* was replaced with *fengtoumiao*, indicating just one of the many styles of “Miao” in the area. Even the notorious “Miao Albums” (*Bai Miao Tu*) of the late Qing contained drawings of these curious “turen,” or “locals,” preparing to perform *dixi* (Gui 1999: 81; see also Hostetler 2001: 174). And today, in popular accounts of *dixi* distributed by Guizhou tourism authorities, exoticism is often emphasized by attributing *dixi* to minority culture. The promotional booklet *Guizhou Anshun* thus reads (in English), “The ground play, often referred to as a ‘fossil drama,’ is an ancient folk play popular among the Bouyeis, the Gelos, and the Miaos” (Luo 1993: 51; the passage, it should be pointed out, is inaccurate in stating that the Miao also practice *dixi*). Such accounts infuriate those in Caiguan and other *tunpu* villages, who point out that their ancestors brought *dixi* from downstream China, introducing it to the Gelao and Bouyei hundreds of years ago.

Yet the isolation of the periphery that over the centuries turned Zhu’s soldiers into “just another kind of Miao” is also called upon to explain *tunpu*’s current reinvention as “living fossil.” Sparked by the compelling idea of *dixi* as living fossil, *tunpu* culture is now said to be the culture of *jiangnan* in the early Ming. A recent *China Daily* article on *tunpu* culture indicated that such claims are becoming reproduced as a popular image of *tunpu* emerges for tourist consumption: “Living in a relatively isolated environment, the soldiers’ descendants preserved their traditions and customs well for more than 600 years” (Zhang 2002). The ability of *tunpu* to remain “fossilized” for some 600 years is attributed both to Guizhou’s distance from the center, its topography of *bazi wenhua*, and to the
fortress-quality of the settlements themselves (Zheng 2002; see also Zheng 2001). Fossilization due to the same walled-off isolation that is used to explain the backwardness of the periphery also becomes a way of explaining 600 years of cultural continuity that legitimates tunpu as a prestigious Chinese culture.

Dixi remains the most spectacular marker of tunpu’s claims of fossilized prestige. According to Tuo Xiuming, dixi is one of many kinds of nuo (exorcism) drama performed in China (Tuo 1998). Tuo identifies four broad categories of nuo: official court nuo (gongtingnuo), folk nuo (minjiannuo), temple nuo (simiaonuo), and military nuo (junnuo). Dixi is a type of military nuo, as is guansuoxi, which is still practised by the descendants of Zhu’s army in Chenjiang, Yunnan. Some historical accounts suggest that nuo was practiced as many as 4,000 years ago, and despite gradually dying out in central China after the Song, remained actively practised throughout the southern and southwestern regions, where it gradually spread as Chinese settlement in the region expanded after the fourteenth century (Hua 1989). Today, at least three distinct regional forms of nuo are practiced in Guizhou: folk nuo in Weining (bianrenxi) and Tongren (nuotangxi), and the military nuo of Anshun’s tunpu villagers (dixi). These have developed into a highly stylized drama form, incorporating bizarre masks, costumes, and a minimalist form of staging. According to one historian (Gui 1999: 81), a description of dixi recorded in Guizhou Tongzhi (1693) reveals that the drama form has changed little in the past 300 years. Today’s dixi also closely resembles historical accounts of “yiyangkong” performances held in Jiangxi in the early Ming.

In recent years there has been a surge of popular interest in nuo drama throughout China, with many of these accounts referring to nuo as China’s most compelling “living fossil” (Hua 1989; Lu 2002; Wang 2002). Yet to call dixi a living fossil of early Ming Chinese opera is also a highly misleading claim. Tuo Xiuming (2002) argues that dixi is by no means a replica of jiangnan opera as it was practised during the early Ming. Junnuo was a crude soldiers’ version of that opera, one performed far from home in military settlements during New Year’s celebrations and mixed with other nuo-inspired ritual forms. But performing dixi reminded the tunpu settlers of home, and of the common stories, myths, and legends that made them Chinese. While dixi helped remind the soldiers of who they were, displaced on the edges of civilization, it was never meant to replicate the refined opera forms practised in Suzhou, Nanjing, and other urban centers of the delta.

Tunpu villagers themselves refer to dixi as tiaoshen (“leaping spirits”). It is usually performed during Spring Festival and in mid-summer as part of tiaohuadeng ("dancing flower lamps") festivities. During the huadeng festival, tiaoshen is held in the daytime, while at night, comedic dramas of love are performed under colorful flower lamps while groups of young men and women might serenade each other with “mountain songs.” Thus,
villagers say, during tiaohuadeng, night-time is devoted to love while during the day tiaoshen dramatizes military heroes, great generals, and famous battles. There is currently a repertoire of some 23 different tiaoshen dramas, performed in over 300 different villages scattered throughout the Anshun bazi. As one of the closest tunpu villages to the urban center of Anshun, Caiguan was the first among these villages to perform an abbreviated version of tiaoshen any time of the year whenever a tour group would show up.

As indicated in the tourism promotional materials mentioned above, dixi is also practiced by some of the Bouyei and Gelao in the region. Especially since the mid-Qing, there has clearly been considerable intercultural exchange among the different ethnic groups living in the Anshun region. That the Bouyei and Gelao claim dixi to be part of their own cultural heritage makes for an interesting study in ethnic politics. But whether these groups practised something like dixi prior to the arrival of Zhu Yuzhang’s soldiers is not known. Indeed, there are scant records of dixi in any village of the region prior to the mid-Qing (Zheng 2001: 59). Echoing the Miao claims of central Chinese origins discussed above, it is worth noting that the Bouyei also claim Han ancestry, specifically asserting “that they were descendants of Chinese troops sent to garrison the frontier areas” (Hostetler 2001: 108; see also Clarke 1911: 97). This claim is also supported by the Xie Sui version of the Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributaries (Huang Qing Zhigong Tu), which mentions that the “Zhongjia Miao” (Bouyei) are descendants of soldiers who came to guard the frontier during the Five Dynasties era (tenth century) (Hostetler 2001: 42 and 108; see also Chuang 1989: 585). In the years since dixi’s popularity as a living fossil has grown, it has become increasingly important for tunpu villagers to insist that dixi is Han, not minority, culture. This perhaps explains why – as discussed in the following section – tunpu culture is being reinvented in ways that suggest a replica of displaced jiangnan culture itself, rather than the culture of the frontier that it actually was.

Local cultural and tourism officials now claim that studying tunpu in Guizhou is the best way to understand the history of jiangnan culture far downstream in the Yangtze Delta. By the mid-1990s, their claims were being supported by national and even international sources of legitimacy. In 2001, the same year that the eight Yunshantun villages were selected for state-level heritage protection, the tunpu village of Longli was selected as Guizhou’s third “living eco-museum,” part of a $650,000 Norwegian-sponsored cultural heritage preservation project. According to the project’s initiator, Su Donghai, of Beijing’s Museum of the Chinese Revolution, “Han culture that featured in the Ming and Qing dynasties has been well preserved by the local people” of Longli (Zhang 2002).

Such claims establish the displacement of core Chinese culture to the frontiers of civilization where it becomes fossilized to be rediscovered long after it has been lost and forgotten in the region whence it came. But in
Guizhou itself, fossilization tends to be claimed in order to actively subvert the core-periphery framework and, in fact, invert it, so that tunpu now preserves the fundamental elements of a Chinese culture that is completely unique, and completely “Chinese” in relation to the West and its powerful yet identity-robbing seductions of popular culture. The jiangnan of today, then, becomes a new kind of periphery, a frontier where an alienated China meets the powerful West. Guizhou’s fossils help keep that frontier tethered to a distinctly Chinese cultural identity.

Return to the past for a day – promoting ancientness through tourism

Looking at locally initiated tourism promotion offers a lens for viewing how locals package their popular culture for consumption by outsiders. Tourism, in other words, directs our attention to the discursive reflexivity among locals themselves toward their popular culture. In several cases among the rural Han in Guizhou, there is a common theme of ancientness that develops as locals make choices about how to present themselves to the outside world. Such choices are guided by a desire for the cultural prestige of an inverted periphery, of living as a fossil. In addition to discussing tourism promotions of tunpu culture, this section will also discuss briefly two other examples of local efforts to garner cultural prestige through the theme of ancient China displaced and fossilized in the periphery: “liquor culture” in Maotai, and a planned reproduction of ancient jiangnan culture in the town of Chonganjiang.

Tunpu tourism

Tunpu tourism was initiated in Anshun as a result of events which started in 1984, when a French scholar studying ancient opera forms around China was brought to Caiguan Village by a local scholar to see a dixi performance. Caiguan was conveniently located just outside the city on the road to Dragon Palace (Longgong), a collection of scenic pools, waterfalls, caves, and underground rivers that is Anshun’s most prominent tourist attraction. Seventeen Caiguan villagers were subsequently invited to perform dixi two years later at the Festival d’Automne à Paris. The Caiguan villagers stayed in Paris for eighteen days and also visited Madrid for five days. The Paris festival featured two kinds of traditional opera that year: Kunqu from Nanjing, and Yueju from Shanghai. There was a collection of “teahouse performances” (chaguan or spectacles dans une maison de thé) in the style of Chengdu tradition: puppet shows, traditional instrument ensembles (guqin, pipa, erhu, guanzi), and singing performances (troupes from Beijing, Xi’an, Chengdu, Suzhou), and even a group of Dong women from southeast Guizhou (Festival d’Automne à Paris 1986). That dixi was included among these generally more well-known performance styles
perhaps offered the Caiguan villagers the most tangible illustration of dixi’s legitimacy and prestige, as well as impressing them with a sense of dixi’s scale-jumping qualities. In Europe, their identities jumped scale from local villagers in a backward periphery to important keepers of culture on an international scale. It is also significant to note that by featuring dixi along with Nanjing and Shanghai operas, the festival’s program established the connection that had inspired Madame Mitterand to proclaim dixi’s “living fossil” status in specific relation to the traditional jiang-nan performance culture that was also on the festival’s bill.

Back in Guizhou, investments from the provincial cultural bureau began trickling into Caiguan, some 20,000 yuan by 1990. These funds were used to maintain good costumes and props for the performers, as well as to convert an old house in the village into an exhibit hall, which was opened in 1988. Then in 1991, Caiguan received 120,000 yuan from the Guizhou Tourism Bureau to build a new fort tower (gubaolou), a 140-square-meter performance area, a reception hall, and a parking-lot. While other villages in the region have also been the beneficiaries of cultural bureau funding, Caiguan was the first village to be transformed into an on-demand performance site for tourists who would stop for a couple of hours of “ground drama” on their way to Dragon Palace. This probably explains why Yunshantun and Longli were later selected as heritage sites by non-locals from Beijing; by the mid-1990s, Caiguan’s authenticity was already being regarded as compromised by tourism.

Caiguan started receiving tourists on a regular basis in 1987. By 1993, the village could organize a performance at any time; it took them only half an hour to get ready. The troupe-leader was very proud of this achievement, as it marked his village with not just the prestige of ancient Chineseness, but up-to-the-minute modernity as well. “We’re the most efficient troupe around,” he beamed. Typically the village would be given advanced warning of an impending tour group arrival, but a group occasionally arrived unannounced. The troupe-leader or village head would then make an announcement over the village PA system, and the twenty or so people needed for a performance would drop what they were doing and run to the museum, where all the costumes and props were kept.

In the early to mid-1990s, in addition to promoting Caiguan dixi, Anshun officials also sought to create two additional tunpu tourism attractions. One was the transformation of Panmeng Village into “Guizhou Laoahanzu (Tunpuren) Lüyou Cunzhai” (Guizhou Old Han (Tunpu) Tourist Village). Old structures would be preserved, water and electricity provided to the village, and the environment “beautified.” In addition to this, a tunpuren’s typical house would be built, along with a tunpu culture museum, a folk clothing photo studio (so tourists could be photographed in tunpu clothing), a performance area, and a reception hall. In addition to dixi, performances would include flower lantern songs, wedding ceremonies, arts/crafts and storytelling. The other attraction would involve
transforming one of the Yunshantun villages into a sort of ancient China theme park. The park would draw together the Tunpu village and a neighboring Miao Village, along with the Buddhist temple located on one of the two karst cones flanking the villages. The villages would be significantly rebuilt, as would the temple, to restore their Ming Dynasty landscapes. Conveniently situated near the highway linking Guiyang with Huangguoshu Falls (Guizhou’s premier tourist attraction), Yunshantun would be a “one of a kind attraction” in China, where visitors could return to the past for a day.

Envisioned in 1993, the Yunshantun park was shelved when state heritage officials instead selected the Yunshantun villages for protected status as cultural relics. Today, a ticket booth does stand outside one of the villages. The charge for entry is 3 yuan. And the Buddhist temple has been restored with a 10,000 yuan grant from the province. Tourists do regularly come to Yunshantun, but tourism had by 2001 been significantly diverted to the more accessible nearby village of Tianlong, where a joint stockholding tourism development company had been established. By the summer of 2002, an average of 100 tourists per day were visiting Tianlong as well as a nearby temple made of stone sitting atop the karst pillar of Tiantaishan. For a flat fee of 35 yuan per person, tourists could visit the temple and the village, enjoy yicha (post road tea) at a reconstructed yizhan (post road station), see villagers wearing their fenyang hanzhuang (Fengyang Han clothing), have a Tunpu meal in the village, and enjoy a dixi performance (see Shen 2002). The village also featured a traditional paper-cut shop, a sanjiao si (three-religions temple – Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism), and a silversmith’s shop. The silversmith, ironically, was a Miao, hired by the company, from a completely different region of the province.

The company had cleaned up the lanes and alleyways of the village, posted signs (in Chinese and English) throughout indicating directions to key sights, restored much of the architecture, cleaned up the canal passing through the center of the village, and rebuilt the bridges which crossed the canal. The company’s director indicated that Tianlong was an ideal site because of this canal, since this would reinforce Tunpu’s connection to Jiangnan as a “water village” similar to the spectacular village theme parks of Zhouzhuang and Xitang. Toward this end, the village’s older wood-plank bridges over the canal were replaced with stone gongqiao of Jiangnan-style, even though graceful arched bridges of this type had never been seen before in a Tunpu village. The company was, in other words, gradually transforming Tianlong into the traditional Jiangnan village that tourists looking for “living fossils” of Jiangnan culture might expect to find. Tourists entering the village were invited by young company guides to “return to the past,” and see what Jiangnan was like before it became developed and modern.
The innkeeper's return-to-the-past resort

This inversion of the periphery is not limited to tunpu cultural productions. It may be a broader theme of rural Han identity throughout much of Guizhou. I have found it, for instance, in one local entrepreneur’s plans for tourism development in his home town in eastern Guizhou, far from the plateau country of Anshun (Oakes 1999b). In late-imperial times, Chonganjiang was one of Guizhou’s most active river ports. As one moved west into Guizhou and toward Yunnan, it was located at the point furthest upstream one could travel by junk before having to transfer goods to some form of land-based transportation. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was one of Guizhou’s two major opium ports. A town of river traders, Chonganjiang’s merchant population came from Jiangxi, Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei, Guangxi, forming one of the largest concentrations of Han merchants in southeastern Guizhou. They established elaborate regional guild halls, one of which, dating to 1755, still stands in the town. Vigorous trade also contributed to one of the most stable local political regimes in the region. The Yanmen tusi, just east of the town, was established in 1468 by a general from Chongqing and was not disbanded until 1935. The tusi for the town itself, also established in the fifteenth century, was not disbanded until 1928 (Huangping Xianzhi 1992).

Located at the edges of a Miao region historically known for its resistance to direct imperial rule, Chonganjiang was perhaps regarded by its earlier inhabitants as a foreign outpost in an indigenous wilderness of uncooked barbarians. Though they were not juntun settlers sent to Guizhou, as the tunpu ancestors were, the town’s ancestors were similarly isolated from the world of China proper from which they came. Capitalizing on the “culture fever” and “roots searching” trends which reached a peak in 1988, a Dragon Year, Chonganjiang’s leaders began putting together a tourism development plan that explicitly sought to rekindle the town’s older links to the downstream world of China proper, and to river culture specifically. 1988 saw an explosion of studies, films, documentaries, magazines and other forms of popular culture focusing on, among other things, the dragon-cults of China’s rural folk (Su 1991). Celebrations of duanwu festival began to reappear on rivers throughout China, and it was in this context that the townspeople saw in their river a way to meet China’s desire to search for its “roots.”

It was thus appropriate that the town’s elders association should be a major force behind Chonganjiang’s tourism development plans, which included reviving the annual duanwu dragon boat competition, memorializing a nineteenth-century chain-link bridge across the river, and rebuilding a local temple. But while the elders association made use of the town’s river-oriented heritage as a potential tourist attraction, the centerpiece around which tourism was in fact developing in the area was a small riverside inn and restaurant owned by the town’s wealthiest entrepreneur. His
inn was called *Xiaojiangnan*, literally the “Little Jiangnan,” and he regarded himself as the visionary founder of tourism development in the area.

As he dreamt about his town’s future as a tourist’s paradise, the innkeeper’s vision was directed toward a deep and scenic gorge just upstream from Chonganjiang. For some time, tour groups had been taking small wooden boats through the gorge to view the cliffs and rock towers, but the innkeeper saw in the gorge a landscape of great symbolic value, one in which to emphasize the contrast between the primeval wildness of Guizhou and the town as a beacon of downstream civilization. Specifically, his vision for developing the narrow chasm as a tourist attraction was inspired by the fifteenth-century landscape paintings of a *jiangnan* ancestor, Tang Yin (Cahill 1978: 193–200; Clapp 1991). In his office one day, he spread out a worn and tattered book of Tang’s paintings across his desk to convey to me his vision for the gorge. Here, in these 500-year-old paintings of gnarled cliffs, twisted trees, waterfalls, quiet pools, contemplative thatched cottages, pavilions, and bridges, was his vision of Chonganjiang’s touristic future. He wanted to create a “return to the past” (*fangu lüyou*) resort in the gorge.

Using the paintings as inspiration, the innkeeper would build a small lodge in the gorge, serving food as it was prepared for the elite of *jiangnan* in Tang Yin’s time, and a number of resting stations along the river, where tea and wine would be served. At the lodge, everything – the rooms, the decor, and especially the food – would be, as he put it, “authentically traditional.” A teahouse would offer evening concerts of traditional Chinese music. There would also be pleasant trails along the cliffs, up side canyons, all inspiring the kind of feeling one gets from Tang Yin’s paintings. Guests and workers alike would wear traditional robes (the guests would put them on before boarding the boats which would take them into this dream world). He would recreate a completely ancient landscape. “The gorge would be perfect for it,” he exclaimed. “It has never been lived in, a completely untouched landscape.” Unlike the “fake” Tang and Song Dynasty tourist villages popping up around China, his venture would be completely separated from the contemporary world, a separation reinforced by entering a primeval landscape within the gorge, cut off from the outside by steep cliffs and dense jungle.

As the promotion of *tunpu* tourism sought to emphasize how Han culture had been displaced to and fossilized in the periphery, the innkeeper’s vision of an ancient cultural landscape, recreated within the gorge, was meant to reinforce his town’s own legacy as an outpost of migrants in a wilderness frontier. Chonganjiang was inhabited by the descendants of people who had brought their traditions from somewhere else. While there was clearly a sense of civic pride exhibited by the town’s tourism promoters, they drew their sense of prestige not from the local environment but from distant places and times. Tang Yin was but the most
obvious embodiment of this kind of appropriation: a Suzhou native who had perhaps never even heard of Guizhou. As with dixi among the tunpu, tourism offered a means of jumping scale for the innkeeper and his townspeople. Their river and its landscape would be reinvented at a broader scale of higher prestige.


dixi

tunpu

Maotai and ancient liquor culture

One final brief example of inverting the periphery through narratives of fossilized ancientness is found in the town of Maotai, in northern Guizhou not far from the Sichuan border. Maotai is, of course, famous for the brand of liquor that bears its name. Maotai has been the drink of choice in China for occasions deemed sufficiently momentous. Zhou Enlai toasted Richard Nixon with a glass of Maotai back in 1972 to mark the beginning of a new era in Chinese–American relations. Perhaps no other liquor in China suffers as many counterfeits: inferior liquor is served and sold in Maotai bottles so often that the usual assumption when someone pulls out a bottle of Maotai these days is that it is fake (Drinks Buyer Asia Pacific 2001; China Daily 2002). In fact, the problem of bootleg Maotai was one of the primary motivations for the establishment, in 1999, of China’s first law protecting “genuine origin products.” By 2001 Maotai was one of only three place-based products to enjoy such protection, the others being Shaoxing wine and Xuanwei ham (China Daily 2001).

Having been influenced by bashu culture for centuries, the region of northern Guizhou, located near Sichuan, and centered on the province’s second-largest city of Zunyi, has a significant battery of cultural features upon which to draw in asserting claims of spatial centrality and cultural prestige. Most of Guizhou’s jinshi degree holders came from this region, and it has always been the wealthiest part of the province. Zunyi was also where Mao Zedong finally asserted his paramount leadership of the Communist Party during a fateful meeting in the midst of the Long March. In some respects, Zunyi marks the place where the Chinese Revolution finally became a truly “Chinese” revolution, after Mao managed to usurp the power of the Party’s Russian “advisors.” Popular regional geographies, such as Qian Gui Wenhua (Guizhou Culture), that seek to redress the popular conception of Guizhou as a backward and cultureless place, tend to focus on these aspects of the Zunyi region: its revolutionary pedigree, its heritage of Confucian learning, its wealth, and its ties with cultured elites in Sichuan. Expressed within Zunyi and surrounding counties themselves, however, is a far more popular claim to the region’s importance to China: “liquor culture.” The city of Zunyi has established a museum of Guizhou liquor culture, where displays and tour guides point out that Guizhou’s liquor culture has, in its long isolation from China’s rapidly changing core regions, maintained the rituals of drinking long forgotten in the rest of China.
Meanwhile, the town of Maotai has vigorously promoted itself as a hearth not just of Guizhou liquor culture, but of Chinese liquor culture displaced to the periphery. In Maotai, behind an enormous “National Liquor Gate” (guojiumen), an 800-meter “liquor culture street” has been built for tourists, with replicas of old wine shops and seven halls – each devoted to a different dynasty, beginning with the Han – displaying figures and scenes of China’s liquor culture through the ages (Guojiu zhi Xiang 1997: 40–62). Here, one can taste the “essence of Oriental culture,” and study the “foundations” of China’s unique liquor heritage (Li 1997b). In Guizhou, not only does liquor culture welcome tourists back to a world gone by, but it also offers one of the province’s greatest hopes for attracting external development capital (Chen and Tan 1997). “Liquor culture” was nothing if not entrepreneurial, and this implied message offers an additional element of Guizhou’s desire to subvert the uneven geography of prestige in China. Core China may have forgotten its traditional values, now fossilized here in Guizhou, but it still managed to keep most of the wealth, and now Guizhou wants some of that too.

Living as a fossil

Jing Wang has recently argued for breaking the conceptual habit of locking the study of “popular culture” into the binaries of high–low and official–unofficial (Wang 2001c). An additional binary from which such studies should be dislodged is that of the local–national or even local–global. There has been a tendency, in other words, to reify scale when culture and meaning are equated with locality and when political economy is equated with the broader scales of the nation-state and, more recently, global capital. Just as Wang argues that the state is intimately involved in the production of popular culture, this chapter similarly argues that such production need not be conceptually confined to the scale of the locality (Wang 2001b, 2001f). Cultural production is a spatial practice, and necessarily part of the dynamic process of the production of scale.

Yet what remains most compelling in the examples discussed in this chapter is the ambivalent and even paradoxical nature of cultural production as a scaled process. Scale has been conceptualized by a number of geographers as constituted through the dynamic of social power relations (Smith 1992, 1993; Swyngedouw 1997a, 1997b; Brenner et al. 2003). Scale can thus be a means by which powerful social institutions and actors, such as the state, assert and maintain control over social space. The scales of China’s administrative hierarchy, as well as the unevenness of these scales in terms of centers and peripheries, have emerged as a result of such projects of spatial control. The study of Chinese popular culture within this spatial context is significant for at least two reasons. First, while geographers have focused for some time on the role of the state (as well as supra-state institutions) and of capital in producing scales of social control
and capital accumulation, the role of cultural production in both maintaining and challenging scale has received less attention. Second, a focus on the localities of popular cultural production helps us see the complexities of what happens when people confront and negotiate scaled processes in their daily lives. Villagers promoting themselves as “living fossils” of a culture that references broader scales of prestige and identity are actively working with the broader social relations of power that produce scale. Yet while some of their actions may be interpreted as subverting those scaled social relations (by inverting the periphery as a site of cultural prestige, of “lost rites recovered”), others reinforce the dominant scales of power by appropriating Guizhou as a peripheral, backward and isolated space in order to claim status as a living fossil.

Finally, it is worth considering the sustainability of the living fossil idea. The final example of liquor culture is offered primarily to illustrate the broader desire to link the cultural prestige of ancientness to commercial gain. Such a desire, however, is seen clearly in the efforts of Chonganjiang and Anshun officials too, even to the extent that it puts them at odds with the center regarding preservation and heritage. Liquor culture by far offers the greatest promise in this regard, even while its claim to ancientness is also the most contrived of the examples discussed. Liquor is one of Guizhou’s most valuable export products, and it remains the focus of provincial development strategies. But in the case of tnpu, and in Chonganjiang, commercial gain is a distant dream, a long-term objective that most locals faithfully believe will eventually come.

But among younger generations in these sites discussed above, there may be little interest in living as a fossil for a cultural prestige that carries with it few financial benefits. For them, inverting the periphery would be best expressed in the act of conspicuous consumption, not cultural production. More than their elders, they display a new kind of subjectivity, one that is increasingly the object of state cultural and economic policy: leisure culture as capital (Wang 2001b). And to the extent that material consumption is recognized as the new language of “being Chinese,” life in Guizhou remains frustratingly peripheral to those metropolitan places where the new China is being built in the arcades of Wangfujing and Nanjing Road (Dai 1996; Davis 2000b; Zhang 2000). In the Miao village of Langde, where visiting delegations have told local farmers that they had a responsibility to preserve their culture because it was part of China’s heritage, the most popular place for youth to be every evening was the one house that had a pool table and karaoke machine. Long into the night, as village elders met to talk about improving the reception routine offered to visiting tourists, village youth would belt out a cacophony of karaoke tunes that virtually silenced their fathers’ meetings. The elders would then shoo the youth off to their homes, muttering to themselves about the poor quality of village kids these days. But the deeper message was clear: few in the younger generation were willing to turn themselves to stone when what
the nation really needed was someone who could sing the Cultural Revolution classic *Dongfang Hong* (East is Red) to a disco beat.

That the conflicts over living as a fossil in a place like Langde play themselves out along generational lines is important not simply because it reveals a gap in how elders and youth negotiate their relationship to the Chinese nation. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that it reveals a shift between an older era when *xuanchuan* (“to promote,” “to propagandize”) could ennoble the cultural production of fossilization, and today’s commercial-oriented modernity, where *xuanchuan* no longer calls on people to propagate the nation through the formalized routine of traditional cultural production (Schein 2000: 176–179). While living as a fossil may narrate the nation – including whatever prestige that may entail – it will not transform rural Guizhou into a space of material modernity that resembles in any way the metropolitan world of urban China. And the youth who understand this simply leave to try their luck in the city for a while, hoping they will not have to return. Their absence increasingly renders a place like Caiguan more and more the fossil that its leaders have always seen it as, a forgotten fortress of “old Han” culture.
2 Regional formations and transnational urbanism in south China*

Carolyn Cartier

Introduction

Ideas and realities about place and space in China have rich historical and contemporary contexts. The extraordinary history of place-based institutions (administrative cities, temple associations, huiguan), place-constituted cultural ideas and social formations (ancestor worship, surname villages, the guxiang), and associated spatial practices (imperial rites, the ketou, fengshui) in state and society suggest some scope for accommodation of a richly geographical past and how it inflects contemporary places and spatial practices, without, of course, determining them. From the forms of imperial cities and tombs (Wright 1977; Steinhardt 1990) to the architecture of local temples and common houses (Knapp 1986, 1989, 1999), the built environments of diverse Chinese landscapes have represented discerning placements in particular concerns about site, situatedness, and spatial arrangement. Social conventions have taken form in embodied spatial practices, ways in which ideas about culture have been displayed, reenacted, and legitimated (Zito and Barlow 1994; Kipnis 1996; Zito 1997). In China under reform, the activities of place-based institutions (including local temple associations and transnational provincial associations) have become invigorated in new ways (Dean 1993, 1998; Wolf 1996; Liu 1998; Tsai 2000), amalgamating symbolic elements of past traditions with contemporary values generated in the commodity economy so as to produce social formations with complex representational positions. From debates about globalization’s cultural arena (Appadurai 1996; Jameson and Miyoshi 1998; Ching 2000), we might also consider how in places – the contexts of cultural practices – we find the fusions and the tensions between local cultural complexes and cultural ideas moving through transnational spheres. In contemporary China, urban areas in the coastal zone are reliably centers of these processes. In this chapter I suggest readings of these contemporary cultural-economic forms in south China through the idea of transnational urbanism – places and the spaces of cultural symbolisms represented by the new built environments in the reform era city.
The context of this exploration is the transboundary region of southern China centered in the Zhujiang Delta and its major cities. The focus is on Shenzhen, the regional and transnational reach of its economy, and the production of its built environment. Shenzhen has been widely known in terms of its origins as a manufacturing zone on China’s southern rural frontier, but its municipal government is currently engaged in a formal project to build Shenzhen into a “world city” (Friedmann 1986; Knox and Taylor 1995). The planned leap from industrial zone to a city of international significance would appear to ambitiously contravene the essential processes of city formation and historic urban development. Shenzhen, though, has been nothing if not unprecedented on the Chinese urban scene. Its economic successes and relative freedoms to institute reform measures undergird its leadership’s present bid to use state planning measures and the built environment to transform Shenzhen into a city that ranks at least with the country’s leading urban centers, especially Shanghai and Hong Kong. This assessment of transformations in Shenzhen uses concepts of place and space to examine how the city’s built environment reflects regional cultural formations and as a means of illuminating the emplaced conditions of evolving popular culture in the city and its transnational spheres.

A related conceptual goal of the discussion is to raise questions about the use of concepts of space, place and region in China studies. This is a theoretically important exercise if we accept that the widespread scholarly engagement with geographical themes of space and place that emerged in the late 1970s – with the “spatial turn” – began to reliably appear in the China area studies literature only in the 1990s (see Anagnost 1994, 1997; Yang, M. M. 1999; Oakes 1998, 2000; Cartier 2001, 2002a; Zhang, Li 2001b). If institutions and cultural practices in Chinese society have been distinctively spatial in particularly interesting ways, then we might ask why a more promising line of inquiry between spatial themes, geographical theory and ideas and realities about place and space in Chinese state and society have not more substantially evolved. This intellectual disjuncture arguably has a context in the China area studies literature.

**China studies and location theory**

From the 1960s and 70s through the 1990s, most local research on modern China has used or been influenced by two spatial approaches: the marketing systems (Skinner 1964, 1965a, 1965b) and macroregion (Skinner 1977b, 1977c) models. Both of the models are used to conceptualize the location of settlement, social life and economic activity in premodern and modern China. They are in fact based on early-twentieth-century applications of geographical location theory to European industrial landscapes, and positivist spatial science from the 1950s and 60s. Based specifically on ideas from regional systems theory, the macroregion model is really a mapping
of watersheds in Han China and has been the more enduring of the two approaches. Studies of local society have widely used the macroregion model especially for establishing regional space economies as well as simple spatial location (see for example Schoppa 1982; Rowe 1984: 8–9; Naquin and Rawski 1987; Dean 1993: 21–23; Esherick and Rankin 1990: 17–19; Spence 1990: 91–93; Leong and Wright 1997: 19; Wigen 1999: 1185). After the 1970s, with the poststructural shift in the academy, such structural models in spatial science lost influence in social and cultural studies, but the macroregion continued to be used in China studies without much question, substantial modification or replacement. In a longer analysis of these issues, I have argued that this condition reflects a lack of engagement between China studies, paradigm shifts in theoretical geography and contemporary concepts of space, place and region in related fields (Cartier 2002a).

Debates over the relation between disciplinary theory and area studies research are well known among area specialists in the academy. In the case of China studies, lack of earlier theoretical advances in space and place concepts arguably owes to loyal investment in these older spatial paradigms, which were directly, widely and unilaterally promoted as China-specific approaches. About the marketing systems model, Skinner (1964: 3) stated, “an adequate interpretation of developments since 1949 in the Chinese countryside must rest on a prior analysis of premodern peasant marketing,” which urged use of the marketing model for both contemporary and historical research. The macroregion was also introduced as a singular approach: “physiographic macroregions are the proper units for analyzing urbanization. To consider units that cover only part of a macroregion is to wrench out of context a more or less arbitrary portion of a systemic whole” (Skinner 1977a: 217). Even as the models have continued to be used, scholars have lost sight of their theoretical origins in neoclassical economics – which does not conceptualize human and cultural differences (the famous rational economic man in the drama of European industrialization). Such models are unable to capture contemporary and especially cultural ideas of space and place.

**Theorizing space, place and region**

Contemporary scholarship on space, place and region has produced concepts that emphasize how space matters in cultural contexts and how social, economic and political processes combine to create place-based meaning. Similarly, economic geography has experienced a “cultural turn” and advanced concepts of region that recognize locally important cultural symbolisms, institutions and knowledge systems, and their articulation with processes constituting regional and global economies. These approaches allow us to assess the production of located meaning, the human importance of place and the ways that space is not merely a stage
on which events take place, but rather is dynamic and matters substantially in the production of cultural forms and political economic power.

The ideas of Henri Léfebvre on the “production of space” provide ways of understanding the relationship between the space and place, and, specifically, how in the course of capitalist development, space is abstracted from human meanings of place (Léfebvre 1991). Léfebvre set forth a “conceptual triad”: spatial practices, representations of space, and representational space or spaces of representation. Spatial practices are located and embodied human activities of production and reproduction, including ritual activities. Spaces of representation are lived spaces of cultural systems, produced through common use and practice – the *places* of daily life. Representations of space, by contrast, are conceived spaces born of the activities of modern planning and land ownership, spaces that planners and land owners have abstracted from place for productive uses. Léfebvre located the difference between actual lived space and conceptualized space at the heart of understanding how the state and society appropriate space and produce new spatial forms.

These ideas resonate with Doreen Massey’s conceptualization of place, and through concepts of scale. Massey’s (1994, 1995b) understanding of place as the “spatial reach of social relations” concerns actual located places. She also demonstrates how the meaning of place encompasses the formation of social processes across spatial scales, from local (whether “local” is the person, household, neighborhood, town, etc.) to regional, national, and global scales, so that place cannot be thought of in a traditional sense as local, bounded, and fixed in character. Rather, place must be thought of in terms of the location of dynamic spatial linkages to sometimes quite distant places. Such places are dynamic, contested and multiple in their representative identity positions, buffeted by political and economic events that people negotiate and resist (Massey 1994: 5; see also Pred 1984: 280; 1986: 6–7). From these perspectives, place is conceptually much more than a place on the ground: it is the located constellation of social interactions and the intersection of sites at multiple scales in which meaning is constituted. If we consider aspects of identity formation among Chinese migrants, ideas about place identity depend on multiple perspectives and experiences, from a *guxiang* of ancestral ties, to orientations at the level of the county, city, province, nation, and, among Chinese overseas, transnational ties.

The Lefebvrian concepts, in concern for embodied spatial practices at the basis of place-based experiences, also complement contemporary philosophical treatments of place. Philosophical theorizations of place by Jeffrey Malpas (1999) and Edward Casey (1996, 1997) treat place as the ontological basis of human existence. Malpas’ (1999: 176) inquiry into place finds identity formation and its basis in human subjectivity as “necessarily embedded in place, and in spatialised, embodied activity.” This view of place depends on understanding an interplay of interconnected concepts,
including agency, spatiality and experience, in which embodiment is “one’s extended, differentiated location in space . . . [and] essential to the possibility of agency and so to experience and thought” (Malpas 1999: 133). So to be embodied is to be emplaced. These relations are necessarily historically constituted: “To have a sense of the past is always, then, to have a sense of the way in which present and future conditions are embedded within a complex history that is articulated only with respect to particular individuals and concrete objects as they interact within specific spaces and with respect to particular locations” (Malpas 1999: 180). This view, even as it is tied to a phenomenological legacy, accommodates material perspectives and the realities of political economic conditions.

Casey’s (1997: 239) philosophy of place ultimately depends on understanding the body as “the very vehicle of emplacement.” This view assumes a perspective of place relationality (rather than place uniqueness): “the concreteness of place has its own mode of abstractness: that is, in its relationality (there is never a single place existing in utter isolation) and in its inherent regionality (whereby a plurality of places are grouped together)” (Casey 1996: 46). On these terms, regions “affiliate” places, which is not a definition of geographical contiguity but rather a recognition of the interplay of diverse and sometimes disparate actual places in regional formation. Thinking about regional formation in this way encompasses diverse places, bound by the mobility of people. This perspective suggests how we might understand the emplaced contexts of people and social relations in a transboundary region, the “Greater China” of south China.

In related work, I have suggested that these ideas about place, space and the transboundary region are expressed in the idea of the regional cultural economy (Cartier 2001). In the regional cultural economy, an emphasis on transboundary scaled processes of place and space breaks open conventional political administrative geographies of nation-states, provinces and planning regions to examine questions about transboundary processes and their causal roles in regional formation. The idea of a regional cultural economy encompasses the “cultural turn” in economic geography, in which political economy has been reconceived so that it “must employ cultural terms like symbol, imaginary, and rationality if it is to understand crucial economic processes such as commodification, industrialization and development” (Peet 2000: 1215). The regional cultural economy also recognizes, after Arjun Appadurai (2000a: 13), how “regions also imagine their own worlds.” In the regional cultural economy, “economic imagination derives from the cultural history of a people” (Peet 1997: 38), which means that ideas characteristic of regional populations take social forms and contribute to the invention of particular economic strategies. Thinking about the regional cultural economy works to overcome the legacy of the culture–economy split in social thought (which also characterizes the macroregion model). Contemporary social thought
about globalization has also coalesced around the importance of regions, as the geographical spheres most suited to framing the spatialities of complex global processes (Storper 1997).

The regional cultural economy in south China

Ideas about regionalism, in the rise of regional economic power, power relations between regions and the capital and distinctive regional identities, have been enduring subjects in China, and they have resurfaced under reform (Goodman 1989, 1997; Goodman and Segal 1994). The rise of the south China coast under reform has yielded new perspectives on the role and meaning of regions in the national order. South China’s new significance has provoked the rewriting of its regional history (for example Peng 1990; Friedman 1994; Lary 1996). Such scholarly exercises reflect the consequences of complex changes under reform, in economic activities, cultural ideas and political events, which have reaffirmed the importance of localities, provinces and their transnational relations. These relations, in turn, are implicated in the restructuring of regional economies, especially in the rapid growth of the coastal provinces and cities, their significance in the national order and their articulations with larger-scale constellations of globalizing processes.

In the early 1990s, for example, ideas about the economic strength of the Greater China transboundary region gave rise not only to ideas about new formations of political power but also to the speculations that regional tensions could lead to the fragmentation of the Chinese state. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the publication of Nanbei chunqiu: Zhongguo hui bu hui fenlie? (The History of the North and the South: Will China Disintegrate?) (Qin and Ni 1993) appeared to suggest a break-up of the country. But written as a collaborative project of the state Historical Materialism Institute, the book really engaged a different subject: the traditional leading region of the north has fallen behind, and northern ways are the root of the problem. Further, fear of China’s collapse is unwarranted; rather, China’s historic inter-regional relations are the continuing basis for national coherence. The book’s comparative regional analysis surveys various changes in the provinces under reform, successful examples of reform leadership practiced by cities and provinces in south China, and historic events that facilitated the rise of the south. The authors’ definition of south China is, in step with current spatial thought, a discontinuous region and an affiliation of places: “the south lies below the lower reaches of the Yellow River and below the middle to lower reaches of the Changjiang, and the north is all the area outside the south” (Qin and Ni 1993: 46). By this definition the south includes Hainan, Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, Shanghai, the southern part of Jiangsu – and Shandong. Shandong, a northern province, has enjoyed a rich reform experience in high rates of foreign investment and economic growth, and
so must be characterized as one of the leading provinces of reform. Analytically, here the “south” becomes a discontinuous region and a regional trope for the successful reform experience, while the “north” represents all regions that have lagged behind. Throughout, Nanbei uses popular ideas about the two regions through paired comparisons that depict the “north” and “south” as the two essential geographical regions of the country.

In historic accounts, northern officials, travelers and merchants “othered” the south and viewed encounters with southern regions as nothing less than a civilizing process (Schafer 1967). However, the rise of the south China coast has not put an end to the transhistorical portrayal of southern regionalism in disparaging terms. Popular discourse about regions is represented in the new terms of commercialism and diverse symbols in its prototypical centers, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. In a study of contemporary Guangzhou, Charlotte Ikels introduces regional perspectives about the north and south through enduring regional stereotypes: whereas “Cantonese have always thought of themselves as adventurous, clever, willing to take risks, and open to new ideas,” “Northerners view the stereotypical Cantonese as slippery, cunning, materialistic, reckless, and rebellious” (Ikels 1996: 21). Ackbar Abbas (2000: 780) has written about the south in related terms, from the perspective of Shanghai: “Shanghai today is not just a city on the make with the new and brash everywhere – as might be said more aptly of Shenzhen, for example.” In this quotation we can assess how even in contemporary times, in a geography of cardinal directions, in which Shanghai is reliably the “south,” ideas about the south as unruly and uncultured, pace Schafer, are deployed ever further south.

While ideas about regionalism have a long history in China (for example Young 1988), contemporary discourses about regional ideas are also elements of popular culture, through which people negotiate ideas about place identity and difference. These ideas also have purchase in “place-making” and forming institutional character, in the way that the repetition and circulation of ideas contributes to meaning and societal formation. As Raymond Williams (in Heath and Skirrow 1986: 5) has suggested, the “very active world of everyday conversation and exchange” is one which we ought to consider more substantially among forms of popular culture, and how such idiomatic exchanges relate to other forms of social and cultural interaction. The idea of Greater China and its multiple representations – whether the transboundary economic region between southern coastal China, Taiwan and Hong Kong; the larger notion of it that includes Singapore; or its global representation in Chinese overseas and scholars of China worldwide – is indicative of the impossibility of fundamentally mapping new complex cultural economic regions (see Shambaugh 1993; Cheng 1993–1994; Harding 1993, 1994; Uhalley 1994; Ong and Nonini 1997). In the portrayal and circulation of regional stereo-
types and tropes, including the different iterations of Greater China, the
significance of regions emerges not primarily in symbolic discourses, but in
reflections of geographical processes, their representative spatialities in
dynamic and shifting regional formations, and spatializations of such
regional imaginations.

Transnational urbanism

To frame processes producing regional geographies of popular culture in
south China, we can assume that cities are reliable sites of cultural forma-
tion and then think about their formative processes in a scaled spatial
logical, that is, their ties to diverse local, regional, national, and inter-
national spheres. Here I adopt the idea of transnational urbanism to assess
how the contemporary city is the site of an array of articulations – ideo-
logical, institutional, infrastructural – with transboundary and trans-
national spheres of culture and economy. The largest cities of the south
China coast have been the centers of transboundary processes and so they
are reliably places of regional transformation. Transnational urbanism is
also the set of ideological and material processes that underpin the pro-
duction of the new built environments in south China, and as settings for
diverse social and cultural processes. The built environments of trans-
national urbanism are the spaces and places, including architectural and
planning sites, where the state and transnational elites are engaged in
implementing new internationalized cultural forms, often with Chinese
characteristics (Cartier 2002b). These new spaces are the elite’s abstracted
spaces of planning and design, and potential settings or representational
spaces for displays of popular culture. At the regional scale encompassing
Hong Kong and Taiwan (what has been known as “Greater China”), I
conceptualize the regional geography as a transboundary cultural
economy (Cartier 2001). The transboundary cultural economy is the
larger-scale empirical setting for transnational urbanism’s cultural eco-
nomic interests, as they circulate across territorial boundaries and into the
larger Asian region, signaling the globalizing cultural conditions of eco-
nomic activity.

Critical research on contemporary urban cultural geography often
focuses on contested site-specific issues and their representative political
action groups (for example Mitchell 2000; Kong and Law 2002). These
issues include ideological contestations over urban development projects,
often concerning privileged projects of the state-capital alliance and the
effacement of vernacular landscapes destroyed in the process of urban
transformation. The new urban cultural geography has drawn on the work
of Raymond Williams, Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart
among others to theorize how situated decision-making practices over
space and landuse are saturated with political economic power relations.
Geographical analysis of urban cultural landscapes tends to overcome
problematic binaries in earlier work on urban cultural forms, in which, for example, Williams suggested we pursue distinctions between popular and mass culture, and popular and elite culture and their spheres of articulation (Williams in Heath and Skirrow 1986: 3–6). About mass culture, Williams pointed to demonstrations and mass meetings, and especially the less technological forms of communication, including marches, physical assemblies and verbal shouts and exhortations – all of which have important spatial and embodied contexts. But in the contemporary urban sphere, ideas about maintaining such distinctions have generally collapsed; and for China, defining the realm of the popular is an ongoing project, in which binaries like those Williams suggested do not maintain (Wang 2001c: 3–7). The case of the 10,000-strong Falungong sit-in in Zhongnanhai in Beijing in 1999 was a particular challenge to the state because of its apparently mass appeal and popular condition as well as its distinctively embodied and emplaced qualities. In this example, the mass and the popular are transcended in cultural practice. Assessments of contemporary cultural forms recognize their production in the context of dialectical processes associated with differentiated and related arenas, including shifting class positions, state positions and the commodity economy.

Where music, television, print media, film, sport, dance, fashion, literature, and other predictable forms of popular culture are concerned, the likely setting for their production, dissemination, consumption, and discussion is the urban sphere. Yet popular culture is not just synonymous with urban life; its distinctions owe in part to underlying spatial processes, in which popular culture spreads as a result of human agency and mobility combined with information technologies and their spatial reach. What is reliably constituted within the urban sphere is the state’s role in the originating production and transmission of cultural ideologies. From the increase in nationalistic pageantry television dominated by aiguo (patriotic) musical compositions after 1989 to Jiang Zemin’s extolling of the technical merits of Titanic, and campaigns promoting leisure time activities (Wang 2001b, 2001f), ideas about what should be popular culture emanate directly from discursive positions of the state. Where the state contends to circumscribe forms of popular culture, it also deploys its powers through spatial strategies, in Lefebvrian terms, to maintain the abstract space of the state and its symbolic dominance over the places people may seek to carve out in localized cultural practices. This contending drama has played out repeatedly in Tiananmen Square where agents of the state have stood ready guard over the formidably modern space to whisk off Falungong practitioners attempting to emplace themselves, however fleetingly, through cultural practices alternative to those sanctioned by the state. Certainly the places of popular culture are all those sites where people engage its representative forms. In a large state, and where the state is influential in the production of culture as a staple of nation-building, forms of popular culture are reliably expressed in local and regional contexts. Pur-
poseful preferences for speaking regional dialects in south China instead of Mandarin or the critical journalism of the newspaper *Southern Weekend*, published in Guangzhou, reflect this kind of positioning.

Speeches Deng Xiaoping made on his famous Southern Excursion in 1992 had the effect of staunchly promoting both industrial and commercial development in ways that loosened remaining didactic reins on the state’s relationship to the cultural sphere (Goodman 2001: 247). Instead, culture became capital: policy makers, planners and business people all found new interest in the uses of culture as a basis for economic development. Jing Wang (2001b: 86) notes the example of the “so-called Guangdong Phenomenon,” which emerged in 1994 as an unprecedented program of cultural events. The urban cultural landscape played host to these events in an array of new facilities in the built environment, especially theaters, concert halls and the like. In the process, the new cultural economy emerged in forms of popular culture, their commoditized representations – and unprecedented real estate development. By the middle of the 1990s, the new urban landscape began to reflect an explicit policy of cultural economy in Guangzhou and Shanghai, and soon in Beijing (Wang 2001b: 87–88). Against this backdrop, I am interested in the post-1992 urban cultural landscape of southern China as both the site and contextual milieu of the new urban cultural economy.

Transnational urbanism in China, then, is a set of cultural economic processes that are constituted in particular places and landscapes, at work across the transboundary cultural economy, and connected or scaled – via a variety of agents, from individuals to the state – to the global arena of transnational and transregional activity. Transnational urbanism, as urban forms and practices that transcend national borders and bear distinct global influences, results from contemporary economic processes in the world economy. Its forms crystallize especially in the constellation of globalizing service sector industries including land and real estate development, architecture, engineering and international finance, as well as through commercialized arts including popular music, Internet culture and fashion. Its key collective agent is the transnational capitalist class (executives of transnational corporations, bureaucrats, politicians and professionals who work transnationally, and consumers, merchants and the media with global reach), its priorities and its tastes (Sklair 2001: 17). In the Asian region, Chinese cities under reform have become prominent settings for the activities of the transnational capitalist class; and city officials – in the context of instantiating the cultural economy – are using high-profile internationalized building projects to enhance the significance of their cities domestically, regionally, and globally.

A number of distinctive development projects and architectural designs in the major coastal cities and environs are emblematic of these kinds of social and economic relations. For example, Suzhou has a Singapore-style residential industrial estate whose operational and design characteristics explicitly promote the “Singapore model,” admired by Deng Xiaoping and
his entourage on a state visit to Singapore (Cartier 1995). The visit of Shenzhen officials to Orange County, California, inspired plans for the Nanshan district of Shenzhen. Shenzhen officials initiated a design consultancy similar to the Irvine Spectrum complex in Orange County, a sprawling high technology industrial park complete with multiplex cinema and themed shopping center (interview 1999). The idea of an Orange County–south China connection even reflects similarities in regional economic development: as Edward Soja (1992: 97) has observed, Orange County has a “transaction-intensive economy, deeply segmented local labor markets, regressive labor relations, and high-tech defense-related industries. Growth has been exponential.” Under reform, the Pearl River Delta has been the country’s highest growth region, based completely on low wage labor and in part on electronics assembly. In both regions, time-space compression (the speed of globalizing economic activity that shortens the turnover time of capital and results in more rapid production of the built environment) has propelled sprawling developments in ultra-planned total built environments, sometimes designed like spectacular theme parks, constructed in exacting detail on greenfield sites. Developers described the potential plan for Nanshan as “a state-of-the-art city in a blended image of Hong Kong and Southern California” (Lee 1992). The site, at 2,500 acres along the shore of Shenzhen Bay, was at the time billed as the largest joint venture development project since 1989. Official interest in the project fizzled out when financing collapsed – except for the construction of the Nanshan Global Movie Museum, which retains at least symbolic transregional notions about Southern California and south China as centers of the motion picture industry (Reem 1994).

The reform economy on the south China coast opened up sprawling sites for new urban development on agricultural land along the urban fringe. Planners and officials, in their efforts to demonstrate reform leadership, looked to international models from Singapore to Southern California to introduce planned development concepts with global reference points. Yet, as the case of Nanshan demonstrates, many of the projects have been relatively short-sighted, speculative real estate development projects rather than landmark international landscapes. Such “fast architecture” lacks credibility in the international arena and by comparison to the major architectural projects that have been built in Hong Kong and Shanghai. In the context of these tensions over treating the built environment as a barometer of reform legitimacy, Shenzhen municipal authorities have focused on building a new city center designed by leading international architects and planning firms.

The new world city: Shenzhen

Shenzhen’s short history, as an unprecedented city of migrants and economic fortune, belies its current plans to become a contender among
world cities. Its official leadership has planned its transformation into a city of high-technology industries distinguished by international-standard architecture and urban cultural amenities (Nan 1997; Zhang and Qiao 1997). Its overall design and its central government building are bold, international modernist designs combined with elements of traditional Chinese architecture and imperial urban morphology. Reflecting their confidence about the project, Shenzhen authorities compare the city’s future profile to Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and, in its symbolic urban space, to the national capital. City planners and municipal authorities portray images of Shenzhen’s future in the coded language of transnational urbanism, as a “world city,” an “international city,” a “global city” and even an “ecological city” (Zhang and Qiao 1997; SUPB 1990).

Planning consultations from major international architecture and planning firms reiterate these representations. The master plan for Shenzhen City Center by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, one of the most globally prominent architectural design and engineering firms, compares the future of Shenzhen to Shanghai and Hong Kong, as well as to Chicago, New York, Amsterdam, London, and Paris. This consultancy unequivocally foregrounds the city center project as “the basis for Shenzhen’s evolution and emergence as the first, new world class city of the new millennium” (SOM 1999: 8). Such bold claims raise questions. How is Shenzhen’s official elite transforming the city? How does the city’s transformation inform the projects and processes of transnational urbanism? What are the articulations between the state and popular culture in remaking the reform era city? What can be said about the spaces and places of these transformations?

**The new city center**

In the 1980s, the Shenzhen Urban Planning Bureau identified the Futian district, west of the original central business district, as the site for the new city center in anticipation of continued urban and industrial growth in the special economic zone (SUPB 1990). By the 1990s, ideas about Shenzhen’s increasingly important regional role emerged in the context of planning for enhanced economic relations with Hong Kong after 1997. In 1996, the Shenzhen government invited international submissions for the city center design, and firms in Hong Kong, Singapore, France, and the US submitted proposals and models. An international jury recommended the design by John M. Y. Lee/Michael Timchula Architects, a New York-based firm with a modernist lineage, which focuses on a prominent city hall building and maintains open space in the central axis both north and south of the structure. It is under construction in Shenzhen, after having received approval from Beijing (interview 2000).

The distinction of the site for the new city center is its self-conscious cultural-historical plan and relation to the natural environment. The
orientation of the site to the cardinal directions inscribes in the topography – a gradual slope from the low-lying coast at Shenzhen Bay to Lianhua Hill, north of the site – the classic rectilinear grid of historic Chinese capital cities, including Beijing (see Wright 1965, 1977; Wheatley 1971; Steinhardt 1990; Xu 2000). Inasmuch as the design symbolizes historic capitals, it inscribes cultural “Chineseness,” political power and historic legitimacy in the landscape. Aligned to the cardinal directions on the slope above Shenzhen Bay, the site has perfect fengshui. Indeed, among the submissions for the Shenzhen city center project, Huayi Designing Consultants, with offices in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, explicitly interpreted the design through the fengshui qualities of the site (HY 1990). We could expect this perspective coming from Hong Kong, where fengshui is “extremely popular” (Ong 1999: 92) and where not only do developers regularly engage fengshui consultants for major construction projects but the local press enthusiastically reports their findings. Fengshui is not an element of imperial city planning, though it arguably plays a role in historic urbanism and landscape imagination. Yinong Xu (2000: 200), in a study of historic Suzhou, interprets its significance: “The chief mode of fengshui application was characterized not by actual practice in the physical construction of the city at the urban level, but by interpretation of existing diverse aspects of the city, ranging from its geographical location and natural setting to its form, space, and individual structures. In other words, the city was represented in fengshui language.” The popular expression of fengshui reentered south China through transboundary connections with Hong Kong and transnational connections with the Chinese diasporic sphere. Now elites and bureaucrats in Shenzhen demonstrate interest in fengshui, which officials would have roundly condemned as a remnant of feudalism in the preceding era. Local interest in the fengshui of the city center plan also emerged from an official institution, the Shenzhen’s People’s Congress. In a series of interviews, local planners related to me how members of the People’s Congress pressed the municipal government for office space in the new city hall after several deaths occurred subsequent to occupying their own new building elsewhere in the city (interviews 2000). That this story or rumor – an element of popular culture in itself – circulated among communities of the region’s transnational capitalist class underscores how high-quality fengshui has evolved to mark popular discourses about privileged space. Predictably, the state’s official discourse about the city center project does not remark on the fengshui, and instead Shenzhen municipal plans recognize the site’s “beautiful surroundings” (SUPB 1990: 29) as the basis for its appeal.

Shenzhen officials’ open interest in fengshui might be contextualized in the debate over the concept of minjian or “(folk [cultural] space)” (Wang 2001c: 4). Specific reference to the rural sphere in min (the people) suggests that minjian reaches to connect rural and urban realms in ways that potentially elide the anti-fengshui ideologies of the state. Fengshui is unof-
ficial popular culture, which makes officials’ interest in it a form of engage-
ment in popular culture, and local people’s interest in it a form of resis-
tance to official state ideology. With its origins in the twelfth to thirteenth
century in south China, fengshui has been understood primarily as a folk
cultural practice for determining auspicious housing and burial sites; it is
also coded as southern. Contemporary fengshui practice provides an occa-
sion for the urban professional classes to enact a kind of spatial ritual of
wealth and opportunity, and one that distinctively draws on traditional
cultural motifs. As a spatial strategy, fengshui concerns the arrangement of
one’s personal space, including office and home space, and indeed one’s
embodied presence in and in relation to elements of that space. Fengshui
is also a scaled system in which the quality of the fengshui at the level of
the city, such as at Futian, holds sway over more local scales, such as the
site’s individual buildings, as demonstrated by the interest of the local
People’s Congress. In Shenzhen’s relatively recent emergence from
China’s rural periphery, the cultural logic of fengshui bridges the distance
between former rural times, the transboundary cultural economy tied to
Hong Kong, and global aspects of fengshui practice in diaspora.

The new city hall building anchors the city center site. The structure is a
complex of several buildings joined by a winged roof with a low arched
center and uplifted ends. In a language emblematic of Shenzhen, which
adopts the bull and the eagle as symbols, the roof “is designed to convey the
image of an eagle in flight. Its exterior has the abstracted smooth curvature
of gliding winds, while the metal surface is feather grey. This smooth curved
edge of the roof is streamlined to heighten the impression of flight” (LT
1996: 2). More fundamentally, the shape of the roof is a modern interpreta-
tion of the pavilion style; informants report that its design especially cap-
tured the imagination of officials and planners (interview 2000). As Jianying
Zha (1995: 69) has wryly noted about debates over contemporary architec-
tural projects in Beijing, traditional Chinese pavilion roofs are still “holding
strong as a symbol of ‘Chineseness’” and architects have perceived the
pavilion-style roof as key to winning official approval for new projects. From
the southern vantage, looking north at the front of the building and through
the roof, the open center of the roof frames Lianhua Mountain to the north,
where a bronze statue of Deng Xiaoping was installed in 2000 on the twenti-
eth anniversary of the city – and so Deng presides over this new “imperial
capital.” Large rectangular openings in the roof provide natural light for the
five-story buildings on both sides of the structure. Two dramatic pillars, the
western one round and yellow, the eastern one square and red – the sym-
bolic colors of imperial space – pierce the roof’s center arch. They are
glassed structures covered with painted metal exoskeletons, and both are
exhibition spaces, transparent from the inside, yielding views north and
south. A large plaza fronts the complex.

The design elements, including the pavilion roof and the character of
the overall site, wed contemporary interpretations to traditional Chinese
symbolisms and build notions of “Chinese culture” into the city. These new urban forms, modernist in architectural style, open up postmodern interpretations of the built environment. Whether or not this particular design is interpreted as “postmodern” is not at stake: the urban scene need not be obviously postmodern in style to demonstrate a postmodern interpretive sensibility, as David Harvey (1989, 83) has explained: “postmodernism abandons the modernist search for inner meaning in the midst of present turmoil, and asserts a broader base of the eternal in a constructed vision of historical continuity in collective memory.” This is achieved in part by what architect Charles Jencks has called a double coding, “a popular traditional one which like a language is slow changing, full of clichés and rooted in family life,’ and a modern one rooted in a ‘fast-changing society, with its new functional tasks, new materials, new technologies and ideologies’ as well as quick-changing art and fashion” (Jencks in Harvey 1989: 83). Harvey’s observation about the “broader base of the eternal in a constructed vision of historical continuity” is particularly apt: if Shenzhen, though a high-tech vision, can claim lineage to the imperial capitals, its place among leading Chinese cities is assured. Where the space of coding is concerned, architect Ma Guoxin, in presentations for his Olympic Center project in Beijing, also used “acceptable code language.” He compared the main auditorium of the Olympic project to the Temple of Great Harmony inside the Forbidden City, which symbolized “the national spirit, a modern expression of the Chinese heritage” (Zha 1995: 74–75). Yet even more than Ma’s project, in the way that it borrows forms, symbolisms, and cultural logics from the abstract space of the capital, the Shenzhen city center project seeks to inscribe the representative space of national power and leadership in south China. The plan for the new city center would appear to meld the legacy of China’s landed imperial cities with the maritime internationalism of the transboundary cultural economy in south China.

What is not part of Shenzhen’s internationalized planning discourse is the state’s spiritual civilization campaign. The spiritual civilization campaign began after the onset of reform as the human and cultural counterpart to economic reform (Su and Ding 1984). While it has been regarded by some intellectuals as propaganda it also has real effects, especially in more recent strains of the campaign that tap the new cultural economy, such as state promotion of consumption-based urban leisure culture (Wang 2001b, 2001f). Ostensibly the spiritual civilization campaign is aimed at moderating the excesses of new lifestyles generated in the commodity economy, which is the leading arena of popular culture in Shenzhen. From styles in clothing and popular music to the purchase of a flat, Shenzhen’s popular culture is largely about buying things. The effects of the housing reforms in the middle of the 1990s are a case in point. Like in neighboring Hong Kong, pursuing property has become a leisure time activity in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, where touring apartment buildings on weekends and holidays has become a common pastime (Xinhua 2001a;
Siu, this volume). In the country with the world’s longest unbroken urban tradition, Shenzhen has no Culture by comparison to other cities in China. Around the country, Shenzhen is widely referred to as wenhua shamo chengshi, the “cultural desert city.”

While the spiritual civilization campaign seeks to promote popular culture in tune with appropriate social and economic development, in Shenzhen much of what is economic development is the construction of the built environment. As the state widely publicizes the campaign on billboards and other signage with slogans like “Build a civilized citizenry, build a civilized city,” the meaning of “build” is a literal emphasis on new buildings and urban development. Shenzhen promotes the new city center through the local press as nothing less than a “civilizing” project, emphasizing its cultural amenities including a musical hall, a central library and a youth palace. Thus the city center project is instantiated within both the state’s spiritual civilization campaign and the elite discourse of globalization, which together seek to replace popular perceptions of Shenzhen as brash and culturally lacking with visions about the city as a showcase of Chinese modernity and international leadership.

In the Shenzhen built environment, the spiritual civilization campaign plays out in the cultural landscape through projects of neighborhood and community development. The campaign promotes directives to improve the built environment by urging local communities to construct parks, cultural and sport facilities, youth centers, libraries, health centers and more (Li, H. 2000). Critically, such public amenities also serve the state by imposing organizational logics on society. We find support for this analysis in Léfebvre’s ideas about the production of social space and how the state and capital interests transform space toward desired ends. Léfebvre noted the “condensation” effects of “the predominance of ‘amenities’ . . . which are a mechanism for the localization and ‘punctualization’ of activities including leisure pursuits, sports and games. These are thus concentrated in specially equipped ‘spaces’ which are as clearly demarcated as factories in the world of work” (Léfebvre 1991: 227). This observation points to how the production of leisure spaces also enhances the meaning of work spaces and gains the cooperation of the populace in industrial modernization by providing apparent alternatives to work. Shenzhen has as many as eleven theaters for live performances, all under the jurisdiction of a particular level of government – but they have not been regularly used. Critically, “according to international organisations like the World Federation of Architects, if Shenzhen wants to be considered a modern, international city, we have to have modern, international culture, so we build theatres. In that sense, how the theatres are used doesn’t matter” (O’Donnell 1999). The notion that “culture” could inherently exist in the space of a building underscores how much the state’s cultural economy has relied on the built environment as a basis for the definition of cultural development, or at the very least, real estate development.
Alternative landscapes

What is absent in the discourse of transnational elites are the landscapes of production in manufacturing zones which lie at the basis of Shenzhen’s unprecedented urban transformation. Like other industrial spaces in Asia, industrial zones of largely women migrant workers in China are located on the fringe of the city and socially coded as places on the margins, liminal places of disengagement from home-bound realities. In their sheer quantity, concentration, visibility, and mobility, these *dagongmei*, working girls and women, have also become subjects of contemporary popular culture (Ngai 1999). Shenzhen has earned yet another label as a result, *nü’er guo* (“kingdom” of women). New ideas about work, gender, sex, and consumption have formed across the transboundary region around the *dagongmei*, and various print media, including books, magazines, and newspapers, have explored those women’s experiences. The symbolic discourses constructed around *dagongmei* identity reflect the intensified patriarchal character of the evolving market economy, in which new sexualized identities have become heightened (Barlow 1994: 347–348). In this highly gendered economy, the bodily capital of young urban women has also been commodified, and has appeared in a new idiomatic use of the iron rice bowl icon as *qingchunfan*, the rice bowl of youth, “an urban trend in which a range of new, highly paid positions have opened almost exclusively to young women” for whom “youth and beauty are the foremost, if not the only, prerequisites to obtaining lucrative positions” (Zhang 2000: 94). In the context of a particularly patriarchal regime of production, the space of their bodies is one reliable site from which both young migrant women and urban women are able to deploy such forms of cultural capital. Even as the *qingchuntan* trend is visible across urban China, south China in Shenzhen, in its infamous role as a center of mistress culture, second wives, and commodified sex, is arguably the symbolic center of this highly gendered condition of the contemporary cultural economy.

Books such as *Nanxia nüren chao* (Waves of Women Going South) (Qiao 1993) exemplify the popular literature about the new mobile woman; this one recounts experiences of women working in the regional economy, and their concerns about the extremes of life in Shenzhen, including the marriage market and commodified sex. *Nanguo jiali* (Southern Beauties) explores the character of women from Guangdong and other places for a Taiwan audience (Zhou 1997). Such writings on the new mobile woman, however much they portray the difficulties of migrant women’s lives in the transboundary cultural economy, arguably serve to marginalize the importance of their labor contributions to the regional economy. The conditions of the labor regime are not the state’s celebrated subjects of the reform era city, yet they underlie the production of space – the construction of the new built environment. The surplus value generated in this economy serves as the basis of investment fueling urban devel-
opment; and the lower the women’s wages, the greater the surplus value. Theoretically and materially, “Urbanization has always been about the mobilization, production, appropriation, and absorption of economic surpluses” (Harvey 1989: 53).

Léfebvre leads us toward reconnecting the regime of production and the built environment. “The building effects a brutal condensation of social relationships…. It embraces, and in so doing reduces, the whole paradigm of space: space as domination/appropriation (where it emphasizes technological domination); space as work and product (where it emphasizes the product); and space as immediacy and mediation (where it emphasizes mediations and mediators, from technical matériel to the financial promoters of construction projects) (Léfebvre 1991: 227). Seen in this light, the built environment appears to be more than a set of forms: building it is a dialectical process of production in which technological domination masks surplus appropriation; in which space as product, or the building, masks its relation to the work that produced it; and in which the immediacy of experiential space yields to the abstraction of planners and developers. By contrast, from the perspective of the workers’ orientation to the city, social relations are forged at work places and people understand their identities in relation to a hierarchy of spaces and places. The “space of work” concerns not just productive places but also “position in the mode of production” (Léfebvre 1991: 288). Working as a migrant on the fringe of the city places the worker at a distance from its central built environment, whose regime of production has appropriated her labor contribution. The real and functional distance serves to mystify these relations. Léfebvre again has something to say about this: “And position (or location) with respect to production (or to work) comprehends the positions and functions of the world of production (the division of labor) as well as the hierarchy of functions and jobs. The same abstract space may serve profit, assign special status to particular places by arranging them in the hierarchy, and stipulate exclusion (for some) and integration (for others)” (Léfebvre 1991: 288). Workers understand these relations, and so, from the state’s perspective, they must be regulated and circumscribed.

Places of daily life for dagongmei are important sites of identity formation and potential resistance to the state-capital alliance of the production of space. Certainly the discursive sites of identity negotiation for women, in the popular culture media of magazines and talk shows, are important “spaces of their own” (Yang, M. M. 1999). Yet we also want to intervene in metaphorical deployments of the spatial so as to understand the dialectic between places of popular culture and material spatial practices. The walls and the gates of the factory compounds, the controls over identity cards, and other spatial strategies of capital supported by the state tell us that migrant mobility, and especially the mobility of women who would create places of their own, is fundamentally a threat to the organized, productive space of the regional economy. To the extent that popular
representations of regional commodity culture have become highly gendered and sexualized, they have substantially impacted local lifestyles, ideas about social change and the multiple meanings of Shenzhen – especially its role as the newest symbol of what is the “south” in the long history of popular representations of Chinese regionalism.

Conclusions

The spatial turn in social science and humanities has entered Chinese studies, and with good reason, since, arguably, distinctive concerns about human relation to place and the environment characterize aspects of Chinese society over the *longue durée*. My particular interest in the spatial turn is its opportunity to address complex lines of inquiry about simultaneously cultural and economic subjects. Interest in the spatial via relatively metaphorical as opposed to material inquiries has also emerged; but we should be alert to the ways in which the metaphorical analysis can work to obscure social and political realities about which we would otherwise affirm concern.

This exploration of changing theoretical perspectives on space, place and region provides some alternative readings of the regional cultural economy in south China and new landscapes in Shenzhen. Studies of Shenzhen have typically surveyed its unique character as the setting for the reform experiment. Now, into the third decade of reform, Shenzhen is at the center of a rapidly industrializing region that is centrally connected to the world economy. This regional economy is a center of cultural economic production. It is also a locale where we can observe how the state, advised by the transnational capitalist class, is instantiating “Chinese” architectural forms in the otherwise “cultural desert” of a manufacturing zone. In a combination of styles and priorities, of internationalist design styles combined with interpretations of enduring Chinese cultural forms, the dynamic urban built environment in Shenzhen reflects not only histories, cultures, and social and economic transformations, but also the ways in which the state is engaged with the material forms of cultural capital in south China.

Alliances between the state and capital interests, and in this case those between property developers and transnational elites, are propelling the processes of urbanization which bear noticeable similarities to the formative conditions of the built environment in major cities worldwide. Yet the continuing role of the state in the Chinese reform city requires a different approach, captured here through perspectives on transnational urbanism and its agents of the transnational capitalist class, including domestic elites. The concept of transnational urbanism encompasses the activities of political, economic and cultural networks in an era of globalization. Those networks operate in China, regionally in the transboundary cultural economy, and internationally. In its transboundary and transnational
capacities, Shenzhen may well become understood as an archetype of urban and regional economic development in the present era of globalizing cultural and economic forms.

If the representational role of Chinese women is an indicator of transformative modernity, as it was in Shanghai in the 1920s and 30s, then Shenzhen’s contemporary cultural economy may signal which cities are leading China into the next era. Shanghai grew in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a city of migrants; now Shenzhen’s population is made up overwhelmingly of migrants. But economic and planning analyses of Shenzhen rarely recognize the gendered conditions of the city-region’s transformations, as if these subjects – the role of mobile women workers in the regional economy, their activities and subjectivities, and their labor contributions to growth and development – are simply epiphenomenal. Their conditions are mystified in the larger economic agendas articulated by the transnational capitalist class. This assessment draws relations between women’s labor and the production of the built environment to reveal a critical spatial analysis of the reform era city that recognizes the emplaced realities of such significant social transformations.

Notes

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1 Interviews referenced in the paper were conducted in Los Angeles (1999), Hong Kong (2000), New York (2000), and Shenzhen (2000); I am grateful to my informants and retain their anonymity.
3 The cultural landscape of luxury housing in south China
A regional history*

Helen F. Siu

A question of space

In less than two decades, China’s pace of liberalization has accelerated beyond most expectations. The tens of millions of “floating population” highlight the breakdown of a system of household registration that has kept a rural population grounded since 1957 (Solinger 1999; Zhang, Li 2001). Market-based consumer revolution in China’s boomtowns and cities drastically reduces the dependence of urban populations on bureaucratic state allocations (Davis et al. 1998; Dutton 1998; Fraser 2000; Davis 2000a). The global flow of capital into China is evident in the form of industrial parks that are sites of joint-venture factories producing high-tech commodities for the world market (Fung 1997). There are the special economic zones along the coast stretching from Dalian to Shenzhen, where factories owned by Taiwanese and Hong Kong-based companies employ millions of young migrant workers from the inland provinces (Lee 1998; Pun 2000; Sung 1998). Market-driven media networks are finally encroaching upon state monopolies, and are giving China audiences a gendered public space (Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui 1997; Yang, M. M. 1999). The rush to embrace the world generates its kaleidoscope of domestic energies, as families engage with McDonalds and fast food on their own terms (Yan 2000; Jing 2000). Likewise, film-makers, novelists, rock musicians and their fans are offering alternative sensations in popular culture which are neither copies of things foreign nor fitting within state parameters (Zha 1995; Huot 2000).

Although the Chinese government has tried to be selective in its economic liberalization, the social, cultural, and political implications of introducing the market are profound. Scholars increasingly explore issues of liminal private space, public sphere, civil society, and flexible citizenship (Calhoun 1994; Perry and Wasserstrom 1994; Ong 1999; Kraus 2000; Chen et al. 2001; Dirlik and Zhang 2000). On the surface, it seems that after decades of state penetration and control, the common people are finally given leisure time and channels to engage with a world outside of China. Some scholars, however, have stressed the involuted presence of the state...
in everyday life and popular consciousness. In a special edition of *positions*, Jing Wang and others point to the continuing presence of state agenda in the promotion of leisure and the shaping of the culture industry.¹ State and society can hardly be viewed as dichotomous. The issue is how to analyze the interactive process and to appreciate the agency of those engaged in it.²

Translocal movements of people, their attachments and aspirations are not new in Chinese history, but the unleashing of desperate energies after nearly half a century of Maoist restrictions has a unique angle to it.³ This is not the first time people have been feverish (*re*) about particular fads and commodities in the post-Mao era. One therefore wonders about the recent housing craze. If the government at various levels is behind the manufacturing of a private housing market, and knowing consumers are feverish about acquiring real estate properties, what is revealing about the nature and the pace of China’s recent liberalization? At a micro level, to what extent is the power of state bureaucracies lingering in the minds of Chinese consumers who have been reeling from decades of deprivation and isolation? When an array of commodities is thrust upon an entire generation of unfamiliar consumers, are they producing new languages of family, social mobility, and identity? What stands between them and a tidal wave of global images? At a macro level, are China’s urban places, with their fluid population mixes, their booming private housing markets, their administrative restructuring, and their intercity linkages, becoming significant nodes for new regional political economies?

This paper attempts to use the “fever” for luxury housing in post-Mao Guangdong to highlight a historically specific circulation of cultural meanings in the making of a regional landscape. Many regions of China experienced a building boom in the 1990s. Overseas Chinese capital, particularly that from Hong Kong developers, has partially shaped the skyline of coastal metropolitan areas such as Beijing and Shanghai – luxury housing estates, shopping malls, five-star hotels, golf courses and clubs.⁴ Private housing markets in these cities have grown with remarkable speed and intensity, and a large portion of this growth is fueled by government *danwei* providing units for employees to purchase at subsidized prices. For the decade of the 1980s and early 1990s, most of the overseas private developers aimed at buyers and renters from international corporations and entrepreneurs setting up businesses in China’s metropolitan areas. The imagined market did not materialize, and many took heavy losses. In the last eight years or so, the government has introduced laws to give flexibility to urban residents. Developers adjusted by cultivating domestic demand.⁵ Where private developers enter the market to offer affordable choices, families have explored the “one family two systems” strategy in housing as they had in jobs. One member may explore entrepreneurial ventures while another holds onto state sector allocations for basic security. In pursuing their own intimate spaces in a more mobile housing
situation that allows residents to straddle state and market, are they redefining social hierarchies that have previously been shaped by bureaucratic agenda and political privilege? Have their notions of place-based identities/loyalties changed by the new housing choices?

These questions about the emerging cultural landscapes in the post-reform period share certain conceptual and methodological assumptions. In “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Place and the Politics of Difference,” anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson point to the constructed nature of space, place, and the identities attached to them (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Physically, space is continuous. What makes space into “places” with their distinguishing, demarcated character (such as localities, regions, nations) involves intense meanings and identities attached to them. The means and substance by which places are defined, naturalized and differentiated are largely based on power relationships among those involved in the construction. The politics of difference, as Gupta and Ferguson term it, alerts us to critically look at the assumed isomorphism of space, place and culture and their representation in the social sciences. This is particularly pertinent when one tries to conceptualize those who are at the margins of these defined places and who are mobile (Malkki 1992, 1995). To Gupta and Ferguson (1992: 6–9), and others such as Jameson (1984) and Harvey (1990), the post-modern condition does not make space irrelevant. Instead, spaces are re-territorialized by different logics and agendas. Sociologist Sharon Zukin, architectural historian Delores Hayden, and anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and James Holston have joined a multi-disciplinary group of scholars to highlight how culture and power are intertwined in the making of urban landscapes, and how these processes constitute complex mediation between the local and the global (Zukin 1991; Hayden 1995; Jameson and Miyoshi 1998; Holston 1999).

Applying their analytical tools to the south China situation, I pay particular attention to the political, economic forces, historically induced, that shape the hardening and softening of the “boundary” between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta. The historical process allows perceptions of difference to arise, which, in the present age of market-based fluidity, inform individuals and families to pursue their acquisition of privatized space. South China as a region is being re-territorialized, and this regionalized process is of great conceptual importance to the way we understand how previously constructed localities in China are refashioning themselves with real or imagined “global” market forces. In recent academic debates involving the ways global and local forces intertwine, the positioning of the “regional” arena might not have been given the attention it deserves. By “region,” I do not mean a geographic entity often taken as given, but one that is the product of conscious self-fashioning by those involved in its making. Their maneuvers are not random. The discursive powers of the state continue to set parameters. It is also important to appreciate the structuring impact of the developers, the real estate and marketing agents,
the banking and legal institutions, and a culture industry shaping tastes, styles, and aspirations. Equally influential are the historical experiences of locally situated agents. Their experiences may seem intangible, but they help define the imaginable.7

This paper treats “regional history” as a significant analytical layer mediating our conception of the encounter between entrenched local meanings and the fluidities of global capital. Permeating all three layers is the involuted presence of the post-reform state, in terms of both its ideological parameters and its institutional importance. Attention to state presence in this paper engages with broader theoretical discussions on urban spaces and globalization. Rather than seeing global forces eroding the nation state, it joins other scholarship in seeing the state as crucial player and facilitator. State capacities are concentrated in urban nodes that provide significant institutional locations for the global flow of commodities, populations, and images. However, by their inherently differentiated nature, these nodes are also arenas for intense contestations between state institutions and a broad range of stakeholders, and among the stakeholders themselves (Brenner 1997; Harvey 1990; Appadurai 1996, 2000b; Holston 1999; Sassen 1991; K. Sivaramkrishnan and Arun Agrawal 2003; Purcell 2003). The paper hopes to use an emerging cultural (and physical) landscape of luxury housing in south China to highlight the interlocking, mutually reinforcing and contradicting processes within the hierarchy of spatial scales, linking the local, the regional and the global. The spatial scale given particular attention here is what constitutes “the regional.”

The research agenda for capturing regional fluidity necessitates an ethnographic method quite different from the conventional, single site of intensive investigation. In a 1995 article, George Marcus discusses the emergent multi-sited ethnography, which is to “examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffused time-space” (Marcus 1998: 79). To understand the region as a contingent entity, the ethnographer needs to capture the narratives of local subjects whose perspectives, emotions and strategic positioning shift with the regional construct in the making. More specifically, “multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography” (Marcus 1998: 90). I intend to use this ethnographic method to culturally “map” the cross-border dynamics of the region being refashioned.

A regional housing buffet

The regional landscape of luxury housing is driven by the rapid re-integration of Hong Kong with southern China. Unlike those in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities like Tianjin and Wuhan, the cultural images produced
and consumed in this housing market are peculiarly fluid and mixed. There are three dynamic metropolitan areas, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Zhuhai, linked to Hong Kong and to one another by airports, trains, boats, and a network of highways.

For decades, Shenzhen was a sleepy border town between Hong Kong and the Mainland. Since the late 1980s, it has miraculously grown into a commercial and industrial city of nearly 4 million. The human landscape is not characteristically “local.” Instead, the city attracts migrant construction workers from as far as Heilongjiang, Hunan, and Sichuan. Dagongmei (maiden workers) fill the assembly lines in electronic factories. Speculators, drug and human traffickers, smugglers, and representatives of government agencies from every province converge there to capture the good life on the fast track. In the newer part of the city, magnificent office towers, high rises, and golf clubs catering to the new rich and foreign businessmen have edged out factory dormitories. A few recent landmarks are the CITIC tower, the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, and numerous luxury residential complexes. They line the wide boulevards that are jammed with trucks, buses, taxis, and luxury sedans.

In Guangzhou, with a concentration of entrenched government interests, danwei-built private housing shares the cityscape with non-government and overseas projects. Nonetheless, architectural styles of the new apartment complexes drift toward the tastes of those exposed to the Hong Kong market. The ultra-modern apartments with high-tech fixtures in Guangzhou are as ambitious as those in Shenzhen in capturing global

Figure 3.1 The CITIC Tower at the new Guangzhou train station.
themes designed to attract the cosmopolitan tastes of high finance in the twenty-first century (see Figure 3.1).8

Competing but tied to these metropolizes are municipalities in the Pearl River Delta that are magnets in their own right – Jiangmen, Shunde, Zhongshan, Foshan, Panyu, Dongguan. Massive luxury housing complexes flaunt the glittering indulgences of emperors of an imagined past. They cater to a class of Hong Kong buyers who might have been rural migrants from the area over the past decades but who could not afford comfortable housing in Hong Kong. With increasing physical and political integration between Hong Kong and the Mainland, weekly or bi-weekly commuting is no longer an expensive or inconvenient affair. Holiday homes numbering tens of thousands cluster around man-made lakes and “back to nature” organic farms, artificially created as refuges for city families. Prices are affordable for most Hong Kong families. A spacious two-bedroom apartment starts at 150,000 yuan. Yet nearby, tall furnaces from township-industries spew coal dust and chemical fumes into the air.

The housing buffet in south China is at once broadly transnational and intensely parochial, seemingly driven by a cut-throat market as much as it is entrenched in local political economies and Maoist baggage. Its offerings are hierarchically structured while chaotically open for consumers in search of their wildest dreams. Has this consumption revolution spun out of control from the political center, energized by global marketing forces that a decade or so ago were only remotely imaginable? Or has China’s recent worldly embrace enticed Hong Kong back into a national orbit? A political tug of war continues in the precarious balance of “one country, two systems” between Hong Kong and Mainland China. But culturally and socially, the blurring of the border has become an everyday reality. The formal approval of China’s entry into the World Trade Organization spurs another flurry of active positioning by global corporations eyeing the China market. In addition, local debates concerning the twenty-four-hour opening of the border between Hong Kong and Shenzhen add to some frenzied buying of properties in Shenzhen and to a further drop in house prices in the northern districts of the New Territories in Hong Kong.9 The fluidity of the situation is intense. A particular land auction sends price and profitability signals to developers, and the barometer of demand on both sides of the border fluctuates almost instantly.10

No strangers at the gate

In 1998, a local newspaper warned of the chaotic situation at the border crossings between Hong Kong and Guangdong, as a crowd numbering 220,000 crossed the border in a day during the Qingming festival. The number was 140 per cent higher than that in 1996 (Wenhui Pao 1998). According to Tai Kung Pao, in 2001, during the day of Qingming, over 200,000 crossed the border at the Lo Wu gate alone. Recent Hong Kong
government statistics report 50 million entries of Hong Kong residents into China in the year 2000. Thirty per cent were business in nature. Altogether, Hong Kong residents spent HK$29.4 billion in China that year (Mingpao Daily 2001). Increasingly, they commute to work in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and the Pearl River Delta. Large Hong Kong-based corporations (such as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, the Hang Seng Bank, Cathay Pacific Airline) are establishing branches and administrative offices in Guangzhou and Shenzhen to avoid the high rents in Hong Kong. For the week of the Chinese New Year holidays in February 2002, Hong Kong government departments anticipated 6 million border crossings (exits and entries), a jump of 11.5 per cent from a similar period last year (Mingpao Daily 2002).

When commuters initially caught the attention of the media, the situation involved an alarming rate of extramarital affairs by Hong Kong contractors, transport workers, and small-scale entrepreneurs whose work necessitated their operating in Mainland factories or work sites. Particular neighborhoods sprang up along the major transport routes that earned notoriety as “mistress villages.”11 In the last five years or so, technical/professionals and junior managers followed. In a conference organized by the Hong Kong Youth Association, a member of a service organization estimated that there are about 300,000 to 400,000 Hong Kong residents working in China.12 Anticipating China’s entry into the WTO, a survey conducted by the youth organization shows that 45 per cent of those interviewed are willing to pursue their careers in China, most of them educated professionals (Apple Daily 2001). The Census and Statistics Department predicts that by year 2029, Hong Kong’s population will reach 9 million. Migration will be the main source of growth for the territory, taking up 76 per cent of the increase. Mobile residents (that is, those living in China and working in Hong Kong, or vice versa) will increase from the present number of 179,000 to 313,000.13 Other surveys indicate that a million increasingly younger residents will consider buying property in Guangdong (My New Home 2000b).

The way the boundary between Hong Kong and south China is blurred is unprecedented. One may argue that historically, the border has never been a hard one. Hong Kong has absorbed waves of immigrants from China since it was established as a British colony in 1843. Traders, laborers and their families have commuted and networked. Even after the Second World War, when the political boundary hardened, refugees continued to pour into Hong Kong. First came the returnees after the Japanese surrender in 1945. Hundreds of thousands fled the Mainland in the wake of the Communist revolution in 1949. The famine during the Great Leap Forward (1959–1961) triggered another wave. So did the violence of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The one fresh in everyone’s memory took place in 1979–1981, when China began to liberalize after the death of Mao. By the time the Hong Kong government
applied strict border control by abolishing the touch-base policy and activating immediate repatriation of illegal entrants, over half a million had landed in the city. This single, male, migrant population was largely from three of southern China’s poorest rural regions (eastern Guangdong, western Pearl River Delta, and southern Fujian). Ethnically Hakka and “Hok Lo” (coastal fishermen from southern Fujian, Shanwei of eastern Guangdong, and Jiangmen), they went back to their home communities to seek spouses through the 1980s.\textsuperscript{14}

The 1990s saw a massive number of these “new immigrant” families using various channels to enter Hong Kong. Although the Hong Kong government has increased the quota for legal entry (the daily quota being 150), many have to wait for years.\textsuperscript{15} Where do these families live? How are the children cared for if the fathers work in Hong Kong and the mothers are waiting in China? Increasingly, one finds hundreds of commuting school children with the right of abode in Hong Kong. They live with their mothers in Shenzhen and in towns along the Kowloon–Guangzhou railway, and they attend schools in Hong Kong every day. Government officials finally began to consider policy suggestions that the border be kept soft, and that the Pearl River Delta should be systematically developed as a hinterland to the Hong Kong metropolitan area. It should be a source not only of quality labor, land, and industrial products, but also of affordable housing and services for increasingly large numbers of commuting families.

**Real estate euphoria**

Back in the early 1990s, the Chinese government initiated ways to unload social provisions (such as housing) to the market. The southern tour of Deng Xiaoping gave private housing development in Guangdong a visible boost. It went wild in 1992–1993. In 1993, I visited a new home in a housing development in Panyu county adjacent to Guangzhou. It was a refreshing sight. Hundreds of apartments in nine-story blocks clustered neatly together, with spacious and tasteful landscaping between the blocks. There were no elevators. The bare concrete interior walls displayed touches of rough workmanship that reminded one of colorless living during the Maoist era. However, the uniformed security guards in the lobby were generally courteous. The apartment complex gave visitors the impression that they were more than functional. A friend showed off the clearly marked parking spaces, none occupied at the time. A small, dimly lit supermarket was a novelty. There was even a pastry shop selling Hong Kong-style sweet buns. I soon found out that the developer was a publicly listed company in Hong Kong of which the Guangdong Provincial Government owned a large share. Despite a vigorous sales promotion in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, few units were occupied. A two-bedroom apartment was priced at 250,000 yuan, quite beyond the reach of ordinary
citizens. Bank mortgages for residential housing were hardly heard of. Property ownership was still unsure in many people’s minds, especially when the builders were not work-units or government bureaus. Public transportation was an extra concern. Private cars and taxis were few and far between. Nonetheless, my informant had just left the government sector to become a businessman. Despite the uncertainties, his acquisition was a target for envy.

At about the same time, in 1993, I attended an “Arts Festival” in a township (zhen) near Jiangmen, on the western edge of the Pearl River Delta. The festival centered on the deity in a community temple built during the late imperial period. While villagers believed in a religious revival, the organizers – town cadres and members of the native place association in Hong Kong – were promoting a new luxury housing complex to be built on the scenic northern part of the island community. They were also raising funds to build a bridge that would link the island to Jiangmen city. The cadres believed that the bridge would logically raise the real estate value of the entire township. The glossy promotional materials were targeting overseas Chinese buyers. The developers and architects from Hong Kong were feasted, while important municipal officials gave grand speeches. Many members of the native place association and business friends bought into the project.16

However, in Guangdong and elsewhere in China, the central government put an abrupt brake on the unplanned development projects. Fiscal tightening (hungguan tiaokong) started in the second half of 1993. Bank credits for housing schemes dried up as quickly as they had come. Developers who took deposits from buyers abandoned the projects, declared bankruptcy, or fled the area. Many buyers never saw their dream villas. Empty shells of individual “villas” and rusted pipes stood in the overgrown fields as ghostly reminders of a blind rush to get rich and comfortable. The more notorious cases involved projects in Danshui (Huiyang) on the eastern edge of the delta, home to a large number of Hong Kong’s “new immigrants.” Many bought into the housing market there for future retirement. Seven years after, frustrated working families who lost their savings are still venting their anger by taking to the streets in Hong Kong.17 (See Figure 3.2.)

Marketing life on the fast track

The housing market in south China was quiet from 1995 to 1998. A major reason was the political situation in Hong Kong. From the end of 1995, speculators in Hong Kong and China were pouring resources into the securities and housing markets in Hong Kong. Some luxury housing projects in the top end of the real estate markets were asking prices that exceeded HK$20,000 per square foot. Buyers kept coming and banks gave away enormous mortgages. All came to an end during the Asian financial
crises. Real estate prices fell by an average of 40 to 60 per cent and continued to slide. In addition to the “grievance buyers” who mainly came from working and “new immigrant” families, middle-class families and China speculators were badly hurt by the Hong Kong real estate crash. The new popular term “negative asset” has become daily parlance in the media and political satire. Many developers across the border who had hoped for the political changeover in 1997 to boost sales in south China finally left the market.

By 1999, however, I noticed a change in the mood. Many government units in Guangdong had allowed their staff to buy housing developed by the units at highly subsidized prices. A friend had an interior designer redo his living quarters, equipped with air conditioning, hardwood floors, and modern bathrooms. He and his family also spend weekends at a “holiday home” just outside of the city. The businessman who bought a two-bedroom apartment in 1993 has moved on to a newer one in the northern edge of Guangzhou. On the interior design alone, including Italian-looking chandelier and marble-lined bathrooms, he has spent tens of thousands. He now owns a medium-sized consulting agency, employing nearly twenty staff members with university degrees. He drives his own Japanese car, talks on his cell phone, and commutes between his offices in Guangzhou and other cities in Guangdong.18

Figure 3.2 Lan Mei Lou. Unfinished building in the Huiyang area, left from the period of fiscal tightening in the mid-1990s.
These individual ventures may have reflected the rising buying power of urban families in the Pearl River Delta. A report from Guangzhou described how the demands from Guangzhou residents boosted the real estate market of the surrounding municipalities. Following that of Panyu and Shunde, Huadu (formerly Huaxian, a less prosperous Hakka county northeast of Guangzhou) organized a group promotion of twenty-two of its high-end housing projects in Guangzhou during the summer of 1999. Developers were said to be confident of the future airport nearby bringing a new demand to the area. Local government stressed the importance of overall infrastructural planning and vowed to eliminate the phenomenon of the “lan mei lou” (unfinished housing projects). The report also quoted some government statistics: from January to July, the total area of advanced sales of housing jumped 1.5 times from a similar period the year before. It was also estimated that house prices rose at a similar rate.19

Developers and sale agents in Hong Kong also seem to have regained confidence. Since late 1999, increasing numbers have staged long-term marketing exhibitions in commercial neighborhoods in Kowloon (Hong Kong), aiming at medium-income households who have business and family ties in Guangdong. Marketing agents have also mounted massive promotion campaigns on local Chinese-language television channels, aiming at both Hong Kong and Guangdong viewers. On buses and trains, I hear middle-aged housewives (si nai) making plans with friends for mahjong games on weekend trips to their holiday homes in Panyu, Shunde, and Zhongshan. Others compare the schedules of the various buses and boats, and the prices of food and services. Occasionally, one hears complaints about children working for long weeks “up there” and spending less and less time in Hong Kong. On husbands, the conversations are often mixed with anxiety and disdain. If given a chance, the men would pick up “northern prostitutes,” and set up second homes across the border. Patrons in the “mistress villages,” these Hong Kong matrons claim, are no longer limited to truck drivers and site contractors.20

In a conversation in late 1999, a senior staff member of a real estate marketing chain in Hong Kong summed up the situation. He maintained that most buyers of properties in the Pearl River Delta this time were small businessmen who commuted between Hong Kong and Guangdong. They were not as affected by the financial crisis as those in the global finance sector. The gradual turnaround of the regional economy had allowed some to accumulate savings. The new buyers also seemed realistic about the Hong Kong housing market. The ones with potential for value appreciation were out of their reach. The value of low-end properties would only depreciate further. It was probably more secure to buy in China. Developers finished building the new housing complexes before they were put on the market. The “lan mei lou” phenomenon would not be repeated. Once a development was successful in attracting Hong Kong residents, potential buyers tended to take that as a guarantee for quality.21
The property market has also been increasingly packaged with an entire cultural industry of consumption that focuses on “eat, drink, and be merry” – specialty shops, disco parties, water sports, food streets, designer clothing malls, even artificial skiing slopes.22

In the summer of 2000, I joined a group of Hong Kong residents for a day trip to a holiday-style housing estate in the Pearl River Delta. The trip was a weekly one arranged by the developer and sales agent of the highly advertised housing estate. Interested individuals and families signed up for the trips to gain an on-site look at the properties. There was a busload of largely middle-aged couples with children. They were potential houseowners. Some had already bought the property in the exhibition sales office in Hong Kong, and were checking out their new units. A third of the group, by the end of the day, would have signed contracts with the developer at the sales office on site. Some, like me, were just scouting around.

The motivations for house buying varied within a small range. Most of the seventy-odd passengers seemed to have come from lower-middle-income families. One could tell from where they lived in Kowloon and the New Territories. From our casual conversations on the trip, I sensed that many felt that they would never be able to afford decent housing in Hong Kong. They also worried that the economic boom in the Pearl River Delta would drive house prices up in the future. To acquire a property across the border had two advantages in their minds: to have a relatively affordable vacation home for the family until retirement. By then, the border between Hong Kong and China would be further blurred, transportation less time-consuming, and the infrastructure of social services adequate. The properties in the delta would be perfect for them as retirement homes.

When asked “why the delta,” the answers had little to do with returning to one’s native place. Few of the buyers were originally from the area. An elderly couple from Shanghai whose children grew up in Hong Kong in the post-war decades decided to “settle” in the housing estate in Guangdong. They would have preferred to return to Shanghai, but it would be easier and less expensive for their children and grandchildren to come to the delta in the weekends. The recreational facilities and the environment offered by the housing estate were already far beyond what they could have ever wished for in Hong Kong. In my mind, the houses appeared “tu” (hick) with their faked baroque designs mixed with an appearance of imperial extravagance. Across the river from the villas, one saw furnaces spewing smoke and coal dust. Township enterprises with migrant laborers and makeshift dormitories broke up the overgrown fields. My companions did not seem bothered by the sight of these factories. Once we entered the heavily guarded gate of the housing estate, we were made to feel that we had entered a dream world of luxury and leisure. There was, however, an awareness of differences in class cultures. My travel companions were intrigued to learn that I lived in “the mid-levels” on the Hong Kong
Island, a neighborhood of expatriates and educated professional families. They kept saying, “You could not possibly be interested in a place in the delta. Your living environment in Hong Kong is nice, and you go abroad for vacations.”

The resident mix was different in an estate in a municipality adjacent to Guangzhou. I visited it only two months earlier during the extended May 1st holiday in China. The housing complex is a joint venture by an overseas Chinese and the municipal government. Houses and apartments built during the earlier stages are occupied, while new blocks continue to be built and sold. The grounds are ghostly quiet during weekdays. Sales agents estimate that over 65 per cent of the occupants are from Hong Kong. Families use the estate as a weekend holiday resort. Many buy the apartments for around HK$300,000–$400,000. The commuting from Hong Kong takes about four hours, by direct bus, boat, or train via Guangzhou. The Resort Clubhouse offers a variety of Western-style buffet and Chinese cuisine. The swimming pools are designed for families. Some of the selling points, according to promotional materials, are the quiet, green environment and the farm where residents can actually grow their own vegetables. There are bike paths and a large artificial lake. A line of exclusive villas with private swimming pools borders the lake. Few Hong Kong buyers invest the 12 million for these villas. The occupants are mostly Taiwanese businessmen who operate factories in the neighboring Dongguan Municipality and in Nansha, a new industrial area on the southern tip of Panyu Municipality. The security and competent management of the estate are major attractions for them.

What surprises me during that visit in 2000 is the International School. It is obviously not meant for Hong Kong children. Some of the students might be children of the several hundred thousand Taiwanese factory owners and managers in the region. Increasingly, families from Guangzhou are sending children there. Admission requires that the family acquire a property in the estate. A retired couple we visited live in a two-bedroom apartment with a ground-floor garden. Their son, who works in Guangzhou, owns the property. The couple take care of the grandchildren who attend the International School. Another son of the couple lives nearby in a townhouse. He is a self-employed professional and maintains a home/office equipped with computers and internet hookup. He commutes to Guangzhou a few days a week, and drives his Japanese luxury sedan. He and his family are obviously Guangzhou’s rising middle class. They share the use of the estate with lower-middle-income Hong Kong residents who periodically escape from their cramped apartments and tense working lives to enjoy a weekend of leisure and space. The images of the estate are changing. The immediate plans are for a professional conference complex and a small hospital. There is also talk of a new subway station connecting the municipal city to Guangzhou. This feature, the developers hope, will attract more middle-class families from the city.
Two months later, another Guangzhou resident invited me to his family’s newly acquired apartment in an estate immediately outside of the city. His parents had used savings to buy two apartments, one for each son. While all have housing from their work units in Guangzhou, the family now uses the property as a weekend home. Newer and more luxurious blocks continue to be built on the grounds of the estate. The exhibition/sales halls, however, are filled with potential homebuyers from Guangzhou, not from Hong Kong. The estate operates buses to Hong Kong, but the heavily subscribed ones are the hourly buses to the new Tianhe area of Guangzhou, where one finds banks, government offices, and modern shopping malls (such as the Times Square) with Western-style cafés and restaurants. Sales representatives roughly estimate that of the residents, 10 per cent are expatriates who rent apartments. Another 20 per cent may be families from Hong Kong. The rest are professionals from Guangzhou and Panyu who drive their own cars. There is a sizable swimming pool and gym. The grounds are lined with trees and lawns. The Clubhouse is small and services lean compared to those in estates in Shunde and Panyu municipalities. Within the estate are small restaurants and stores for daily consumption. Immediately outside the gate, one finds a Hong Kong-style superstore, operated by a leading listed company in Hong Kong. The entire environment presents itself as a suburban housing complex for professional commuters. When the sale of a high-rise subdivision was promoted in 1999, the agencies distributed information on VCDs. As in the Panyu estate, there is a sizable international school for the children of local residents.

Each time after visiting my friends in Guangzhou, I would take the through train to Hong Kong. Sipping coffee at one of the cafés at Times Square near the new Guangzhou train station, I increasingly find myself imagining that I am already in Hong Kong. The layout of the public spaces, the shops and their designer displays, the civility of the service staff and the general sophistication of the shoppers are familiar to a Hong Konger. At odd hours, I would take the Guangzhou–Shenzhen express train, cross the border at Lo Wu, and ride the subway back to downtown Hong Kong. Crossing the border at Lo Wu is a very different experience from disembarking the through train at the Kowloon station. The commuters at Lo Wu are mostly working families taking advantage of cheap recreational services in Shenzhen. Many live in Sheung Shui and Fanling, two new towns in the New Territories of Hong Kong that have been rapidly developed to accommodate the new immigrants from rural Guangdong. The families cross the border back to China to shop for weekly groceries. It also takes less time than going to downtown Kowloon or Hong Kong. Through their daily consumption, be it groceries, massage services, karaoke bars, or specialty foods, the regional orientations for these Hong Kongers are shifting north. In their minds, the political boundary is next to invisible.
The cultural orientations of the Shenzhen housing market have also changed. A new group of strategically placed developers have now entered the scene. Rather than concentrating their projects in the older commercial district near the Lo Wu border crossing, where small-scale, lower-income consumers from Hong Kong congregate, the developers spread their projects along the future stations of the Shenzhen subway system. Their potential buyers are the globally oriented young professionals, from both China and Hong Kong. Subway construction started in October 1999. Its first phase consists of fourteen stations linking the city from west to east. At the eastern end, it will connect with the Hong Kong train and subway systems through the Lo Wu border crossing. At the western end, it networks the new municipal government complex and the Huanggang border crossing into Hong Kong. The area is also adjacent to a luxury resort and golf club, close to the Guangzhou–Shenzhen highway.

With the anticipation of China entering the World Trade Organization, Shenzhen Municipal Government has relocated itself to the new area with massive infrastructural coordination, modeling itself after Canberra in Australia. The plan to build the new Shenzhen Central District was instituted in 1995. Construction began in 1998. Its aim has been to position in the Pearl River Delta a Hong Kong-Shenzhen-Guangzhou international “citybelt” for the new century. The plan stresses engagement with professionals and a new kind of citizen. The urban design involves a public space system with a transport system, government offices, a citizen center and plaza, a high-tech fair exhibition hall, a youth palace, a shopping park, and numerous residential developments. The developers in the area are the movers and shakers in Guangdong – the Shenye Group (Shenzhen Properties), the Zhongyin Group (Bank of China), the Zhonghai Group (China Overseas), the Shenzhen Municipal Government, the Cheung Kong and Hutchison-Whampoa Group from Hong Kong. A rough estimate of the housing complexes being built along the first phase of the subway yields sixty-three on-going projects (My New Home 2000a). In their promotion, sales and management, some major real estate agencies, listed in the Hong Kong stock exchange, are involved. The participation of the big two, Centerline and Midland, gives Hong Kong buyers a great deal of exposure and assurance.  

Five months after the initial sales of a project by a leading Hong Kong developer in Shenzhen, I followed some of its staff members for a site visit. Driving along a six-lane city boulevard, it took us only three minutes to reach the exhibition hall from the border crossing. The housing complex has a European name, and is marketed as the model for essential living for the new millennium. I can imagine the potential buyers, mainly local professionals and upstarts in the Shenzhen area, facing the two-story screen with lasers beaming the clean, cool dreamland of cyberspace and the elevated horizon of global finance. The first image that flashes across the screen is a healthy crawling baby, with the caption “Believe in the
present. Believe in the future. To aspire is the force behind progress, and progress is the beginning of a new living.” In a promotional booklet, the chief architect, commenting on the facilities of the complex, states his aim “to give residents a unique freedom of a spacious environment.” The entire development is based upon the concept of “nurturing the new generation with flawless perfection, with a healthy dose of nature, with emphasis on a generous and intelligent living space.”

The model apartments provide different living styles, from the younger in-look to the classic European elegance. Commenting on the concept of the EZ-life, the interior designer is quoted as saying, “the new way of life is more interactive. Everything’s in your own hands. Surf the Net, check your stocks, read your Email, chat online, study online, watch the latest blockbusters and even have your daily shopping delivered, all from the comfort of your armchair.” The apartments are provided with individual CAT5 wide-band network connections. The cyber feel extends to intelligent elevators that are programmed to take one to the floor the moment one enters the hall. It is to impress professionals who attend the trade fairs down the block.

According to the staff members, the advanced sales of phase one went well. The 800 units, averaging at US$100 per square foot, sold almost immediately. Lines formed early in the morning. The sales agents on site accepted so many cash deposits during the first day of sales that they had to call special security guards from the bank to transport the millions collected. Another 3,000 advanced units were marketed a month later in Hong Kong. An international kindergarten is established with phase one to accommodate the children of Hong Kong buyers who have made Shenzhen their home. An internationally tracked primary and secondary school will follow with the later phases. So will a Hong Kong-style superstore/market.

The promotional materials repeatedly stressed the selling points of the project – brand name, quality management, high-class services, infrastructural planning to ensure a quality environment within and outside the estate. The complex would provide the potential buyers a secure presence, and a visionary future. The local staff members are from big cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou. They are prime examples of the rising young professional class in China. A few years out of college, they are fluent in English, global in outlook, shrewd in marketing skills, and well tuned to the workings of local governments. A few weeks later, I went with one of them to attend the grand opening of a superstore in Guangzhou. The local assistant managers mingled comfortably with the top foreign managers of the Hong Kong parent company. I took my time to survey the shop. On the clean and brightly lit shelves were fresh seafood and neatly packaged vegetables. There were also English cheeses, French wines, and a sushi bar. In the morning, retired grannies came to look around. The lunch crowd followed. By the late afternoon, young professional couples came...
through the subway to take home the evening’s meal. The shop targets a clientele of 300,000. What these consumers take with them will be not just groceries, but the preference of a new lifestyle signifying wide choices, a healthy environment, and competent service. Although the company’s aim is undoubtedly profit, I share the excitement of the managers that they are using an ordinary space (a supermarket) and mundane activities (daily grocery shopping) to do extraordinary things (cultivating the tastes of China’s emerging middle class). Three months later, one staff member sent me an email with the happy message that the shop’s sales had hit 5 million yuan a day.

A global, regional and local narrative

In this short paper, I have tried to use the luxury housing market in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong to outline a changing cultural landscape. In theoretical terms, space is always continuous. The process of demarcating space into meaningful places and scales involves complex historical, economic and political agency. Undoubtedly, the liberalizing efforts of the post-Mao state have set a macro discursive parameter for its population to engage with market forces. In housing as in thought, the market has provided new ways of appreciating private and public space, and has allowed residents of particular regions to embrace the world with creative means. In the individual buyers’ choices and designs of living space, these macro themes can be concretized in everyday life. One important mediating factor should be stressed – the defining, constituting framework of a regional political economy.

To assess whether China’s liberalization direction is pursued, whether global images penetrate, or whether individuals are able to exercise their choices of living space, one has to integrate several levels of a conscious regional narrative. First, there are the stories of those who have moved around the region, as refugees in the post-war period or the split families of new immigrants. They constitute a major part of the human landscape, carrying their cultural baggage. Despite political rhetoric, the historical patterns of immigration and emigration between Guangdong and Hong Kong have always blurred the political boundary. The change of sovereignty for Hong Kong in 1997 accelerated the process of reintegration. However, implementing “one country, two systems” means that substantial social, economic and level differences remain between Hong Kong and its Guangdong hinterland (Siu 1996). The price differences between the two areas to a great extent determine what is affordable for a variety of social groups. Up to the present, the majority of house-buyers are those marginalized by the cosmopolitan, fast moving Hong Kong society of global high finance. Their turn to “the north” seems instinctive. They are most socially connected to the Pearl River Delta, and least worried about a political reversal.
Furthermore, the localized developmental agenda pursued by the municipalities in the Pearl River Delta shape both investment and consumption choices. The rise and fall of the housing market have rested on the planning visions of local governments and their ability to ensure a sound investment environment. They too have presented a dazzling variety of conscious, self-fashioning activities in the last two decades of post-Mao liberalization, from demolishing entire neighborhoods that have been branded as old, to recycling community festivals (Siu 2002).33

Another cluster of institutional channels includes the financial capacity of developers, their marketing and promotional networks, banks and legal practitioners. Their businesses are intimately tied to the individuals and families who buy into the housing market. Their entrepreneurial stories have been bittersweet. The blind frenzy in the earlier stage of housing development and house buying took a heavy toll. Today, the revived housing market requires not only the flexing of financial and political muscles, but also the intense cultivation of a cultural industry of consumption. Only the major players remain. The circulation of cultural meanings and political orientations involves catering to as well as shaping the imaginings and aspirations of the potential buyers. The developers are great friends with the local media to create the necessary images. The consumers on both sides of the border eagerly participated.

As indicated earlier, I have pursued a rather unconventional, multisited ethnographic strategy in order to appreciate a cross-border cultural landscape in the making. In order to follow the circulation of people, capital, images, and meaning in the creation of the global, the regional, and the local, I have become part of the fluidity. I appreciate the generosity of the middle-aged Hong Kong matrons who hardly know my name, but who invite me to share their leisurely weekends in Panyu.34 My fellow travelers in the bus trip to the delta’s housing estate would continue to wonder why this middle-class stranger is interested in their dream houses. I have been a nuisance to sales agents in Hong Kong and on site. They cannot fathom my unanswerable questions but have not dismissed me as a total waste of time. I also share the anxiety of some junior managers in Hong Kong who experience increasing competition from Chinese counterparts. Female professionals have the added prospect of losing out in the cross-border marriage market. As a staff member of a housing project in Shenzhen, who has come from Shanghai, is happy to settle in one of the magnificent apartments promoted by her developer employer, young Hong Kong graduates seem politically ready to “move north” to take up career challenges. It is equally exciting to stroll around with my Guangzhou friends at the city’s Times Square to look for furnishings for their new apartments in Guangzhou’s suburbia. Occasionally when I have visited boutique stores in Hong Kong, London, or New Haven, I have wondered whether a certain gift idea would fit a corner of their dining areas, or whether they are sipping the English tea I bought at Fortnum and
Mason’s of Piccadilly. The changing cultural landscape of luxury living in Guangdong reflects how different groups on both sides of a disappearing border, with varying perceptions of the globe, the nation, and the region, pursue their individual fortunes and dreams.

Notes


4 Shui On Development, a publicly listed company largely controlled by Hong Kong businessman Vincent Lo, was the first to invest in Shanghai’s private housing, high-end shopping and leisure malls, and clubhouses. A famous project for the company is Xin Tiandi. Other leading Hong Kong developers include Cheung Kong Development, Henderson Development, Hung Lung Development, Kerry Development, and New World Development. These are among the largest developers listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange.

5 See Li Yong’an (1998) You tu si you cai – Zhongguo fandichan touzhi zinan, Hong Kong: Zhongguo fandichan touzi guwen gongsi. This is a typical investor’s guide to Chinese real estate. Based on the author’s experience as a real estate consultant in Hong Kong and south China, the book provides basic knowledge on Chinese property laws, policies on taxation, markets, and technical details for choosing a residential property. The purpose of the book is undoubtedly entrepreneurial, to promote more sales.

6 See “Introduction” in David Faure and Helen Siu (1995) on the making of conscious regional constructs. The crucial components of this regional model are


8 The apartment complexes along the banks of the Pearl River remind me of those at London’s Canary Wharf. A high-rise apartment of about 140 square meters, with all modern facilities, was priced over a million yuan. On the Ersha Island on the outskirts of Guangzhou, a known Hong Kong developer has built clusters of exclusive villas with high walls, private pools and security guards, pricing at about 25 million yuan.

9 A recent report by Ming Pao Daily (January 2002) showed that average rent in Shanghai had shot up, whereas that of Hong Kong had dropped another 20 per cent from the previous year.

10 See Ming Pao Daily on the local debates and the report of property prices and acquisitions, October–November 2001. A recent government land auction in Shenzhen signaled to developers the rapid rise in land prices. Major Hong Kong developers were represented but few participated. After the auction, developers expected that more Hong Kong residents would drift back to the low-end housing market in northwestern New Territories, the district closest to Shenzhen.

11 A housing estate in Changping zhen, a popular stop for the Kowloon–Guangzhou train, is known as a place where “mistresses” congregate. The other popular place is Po Gut (Buji), a neighborhood adjacent to Shenzhen where one does not need special papers to enter, reside and work.

12 A recent report published by the government on Hong Kong residents who work in China shows that from 1992 to 2002, the number of Hong Kong residents working in China jumped from 64,000 to about 240,000. The workers are largely in managerial positions, with an average monthly wage of HK$15,000. See Census and Statistics Department, HKSAR (December 2003) Special Topics Report No. 35: Hong Kong Residents Working in the Mainland of China.

13 For a detailed analysis of the changing demographic patterns in Hong Kong and projections for the future, see Richard Wong and Ka-fa Wong, “The importance of immigration flow to Hong Kong’s future,” an unpublished report written for a research project on Hong Kong’s human resources, sponsored by the 2022 Foundation, Hong Kong, December 2004.

14 See Liu Xing and Peng Bingqing (1995) “Huizhou jiefang hou de shourong xiansong gongzuo,” Huizheng wenshi ziliao, 11: 135–145. The article records the drastic jump in the number of “illegal immigrants” being sent back from Hong Kong, and held at the temporary camp at Huizhou City. In another article, “Jiefang hou Huizhou de hunyin zhuanghuang,” Huizheng wenshi ziliao, 9 (1993): 94–104, the same authors mention the jump in the number of “marriages involving an overseas resident,” largely women marrying male returnees.

15 See the list of legal daily entries as published by the Wenhui Pao in Hong Kong. These “spouses and children” are mostly from the poor rural areas on the eastern and western edges of the Pearl River Delta. The right of abode of these new immigrant families has been a hotly debated issue in the Hong Kong legislature and in the public media.

See *Ming Pao Daily* (August 29, 2000, A13). It reports a twenty-four-hour protest sit-in in downtown Hong Kong, involving twenty families who bought into six unfinished projects in Dongyuan, Shenzhen, Zhongshan, and Huizhou. It is estimated that presently, there are 600–700 grievance owners, involving nineteen projects, with an unresolved value of over HK$100 million.

I have made it clear to him that I am interested in studying luxury housing and Guangdong’s new urban middle class.

See *Tai Kung Pao* August 28, 1999, B07. The price per square meter ranged from 1,200 yuan to 3,500 yuan.

Among more professional wives, the popular pun is to be a “duchess of Kent” (*gen de furen*), the wife who follows around.

See *Ming Pao Daily* November 2, 1999, D02, a report on the views of Choi Wai-kit, chairman of Lok Sun International. Again, many of the views are meant to be promotional.

See *My New Home* and a supplement entitled Shenzhen Walker Bi-monthly *Bookazine* (November 2000). The slogan is “Buying a holiday apartment is cheaper than staying in a hotel.” The magazine is a glossy one designed to attract real estate buyers from Hong Kong. Many of the “reports” should be read in this context.

After these two stations, the subway trains would become half-empty, as many of these shoppers would have disembarked.

A recent film produced in Hong Kong, *Shaolin Soccer*, is illuminating. Produced by a well-known comedian in Hong Kong, the entire film is set in and around Times Square, Guangzhou. The film has been extremely popular with both Hong Kong and China audiences. The film consciously blurs the conceptual divide between Hong Kong and Guangzhou, a boundary previous films have dwelled on. Sui-wai Cheung first alerted me to these subtle spatial messages in the film.

In a survey conducted by Midland Real Estate Agency and published in *My New Home* (October 2000, 17), a random sample of potential buyers asked about their preferences shows a clear split between Hong Kong and China buyers. Fifty-seven per cent of the Hong Kongers interviewed prefer properties in the Lo Wu district, as opposed to 35 per cent of the latter. On the other hand, 52.2 per cent of China buyers prefer the new Futian district where the new government and cultural complex is, as opposed to 7.7 per cent of the Hong Kongers surveyed. These figures are to give a general impression of the region’s market situation. It should also be noted that the agency’s aim is to sell real estate. Data collection is not rigorous.

See “The Shenzhen Central District”, a document prepared by the Shenzhen Planning and Land Bureau. The document is distributed by the Hong Kong developer in the promotional packet of its housing project. The media also speculate that with this group pushing the luxury units onto the market in May 2000, the results on the debate about a twenty-four-hour border crossing between Hong Kong and Shenzhen would soon be clear (see *Property Times* May 13, 2000, 9).

The local term is “*pinpai xiaoying*” (brand name effect). There is the “*yi tiao long*” coordination of infrastructural planning by the government, the design of the housing projects by the developers, the management, promotions and sales by brand name agencies. This is a much larger scale operation, showing the
determination of the government and the developers to shake off the stigma of the “lan mei lou” phenomenon in the previous years. On the participation of Centerline, see “Zhongyuan jituan zhulu Zhongyuan,” a special interview of the CEO of Centerline Real Estate (China) Consultant Group, in My New Home September, 2000, 18–23.

29 An executive of the company knows that I have been studying luxury housing projects in the delta, and invited me to go along for a site-visit.

30 The quote is from the promotional brochure of the complex.

31 The quotes are from the promotional brochure of the complex.

32 Real estate agents in Hong Kong were worried that the sales would mean taking away 3,000 plus buyers from the Hong Kong market, involving a sum of about HK$3,000 million. See Property Times May 13, 2000, 8.


34 One such matron operates a street-side stall in downtown Hong Kong. She and her husband have bought two apartments in the delta, one for them to retire to, and the other for her two children (personal conversation, Hong Kong, December 2000 and December 2001). Every time she sees me, she kindly invites me to go with her friends to the estate for the weekend.
4 Identifying China’s Northwest, for nation and empire

Peter C. Perdue

Introduction: visions of empire and nation

It is not without reason that many historians show an affinity for maps . . .
For the historical act is always also a spatial act: events take place . . .
(Keirstead 1993: 294)

The present epoch will perhaps above all be the epoch of space.
(Foucault 1986, quoted in Smith 1992: 60)

In this chapter I discuss four distinct visions of China’s national space, as revealed in recent debates over economic development, political legitimation, and cultural production in China’s “Western regions,” or rather “Northwest” (xibei, xiyu, xibu).* Three of these are official visions, serving the central state’s efforts to create a unified spatial order. One is sharply divergent, a private vision of a single writer who claims to represent a hidden popular consciousness. By comparing these visions, we can illustrate China’s problem with reconciling the multiple and conflicting territorial identities that arise out of its imperial past.

In 1995 the Dalai Lama announced the selection of a successor to the Panchen Lama, the second-ranking cleric in the Tibetan church hierarchy, who had died in 1989. The PRC government denounced him, claiming that the Dalai Lama had “violated historical precedent and religious custom” by rejecting the traditional procedure, in which high lamas were selected by drawing names from a golden urn sent to Lhasa from Beijing (Dai 1984: 207–208, 202 for picture). Beijing chose its own candidate this way, an eleven-year-old boy approved by the PRC government. The China Daily for March 2, 2001, shows him chanting Buddhist scriptures and celebrating the Tibetan New Year. The Dalai Lama’s choice has disappeared in police custody, but may still be alive under house arrest.

To justify Beijing’s actions, the People’s Daily published statements by leading official clerics and articles based on Qing dynasty sources describing the history of the Golden Urn selection procedure. Supporters of the Dalai Lama called the Golden Urn procedure only a temporary conve-
nience adopted in the late eighteenth century, instead of a deeply rooted tradition. They thus freed the Dalai Lama from dependence on legitimation by the Chinese state (Rosser 1995).

Both sides of this controversy referred to eighteenth-century Qing China as their touchstone for contemporary legitimation. Conceptions of China’s legitimate territorial boundaries in the PRC today rely in essence on the military achievements of the high Qing emperors. The key sites of contention today are the frontier regions, where imperial rule was established only 200–300 years ago. As the Marxist-Leninist ideology of class struggle has lost conviction, China’s leaders have fallen back on established nationalist tropes to regenerate patriotic loyalty. Their claims to national space rely on an unacknowledged mythology of descent from imperial conquest.

The other three visions also derive from eighteenth-century Qing legitimation projects, although each has its own institutional base and distinctive themes. Each has gained prominence in the 1990s as contests over the PRC’s claims to authority have grown. I describe these four discourses below, successively, as those of centralization, compilation, purification, and development. First, as in Tibet, PRC ministries concerned with religious and economic affairs promote centralization of control over the religious hierarchy and development of the frontier regions in order to tie them more closely to the state. Second, Chinese scholars of the frontiers have developed historical perspectives and compiled source materials on the Qing that will support the current boundaries of the PRC. Third, a few writers, like the Hui novelist Zhang Chengzhi, search for an autonomous personal stance, but even his assertion of collective spiritual purity betrays traces of the imperial and revolutionary past. Finally, the new “Develop the West” program invokes a future of economic prosperity and technological advance to reinforce the unity of the multiple nationalities of China under party and state leadership.

Historians and space

I shall begin with a brief discussion of how historians may begin to theorize the role of space, based on a recent article by William Sewell (Sewell Jr, 2001). Sewell notes that social scientists studying contentious politics have only sporadically addressed spatial features, and only as a backdrop. Instead, he argues, they must consider human space as a basic element of social structure, which both constrains and enables social life. He contrasts the uniform, geometrically defined space of abstract geographic analysis with “concrete space,” the space of lived experience. Michel Foucault, in the article cited above, similarly describes a historical shift from the “infinite, and infinitely open space” discovered by Galileo, to the “human site” of modern times, addressing the problem “of knowing what relations of propinquity, what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification
of human elements should be adopted in a given situation to achieve a
given end” (Foucault 1986: 23). Since the 1970s, cultural geographers have
increasingly turned their attention to the second form, which they often
call “place.” Carolyn Cartier argues that “we must ask how societies make
place out of space,” where place refers to “space transformed and given
cultural meaning by human activity” (Cartier 2002a: 126, 133; cf. Léfebvre
1991; Smith 1992). Many historians and geographers now recognize that
places are made, not born. Material facts do not “naturally” define territo-
ries; human social activity constructs boundaries. Processes of exchange
and cultural creation produce and reproduce the places in which humans
live, and these spatial productions in turn affect subjective experience as
well as objective material flows. Looking at the social production of space
reveals how large socio-economic processes like capitalism define and
limit the options for free human activity. I focus here on the influence of
China’s history of imperial conquest on modern conceptions of national
space. Rulers and subjects of empires and nations invoked historical and
cultural legacies in order to turn abstract spaces into places, thus embed-
ding territories in active networks of human interaction.

On the other hand, space as a social structure also enables human
action, when humans reshape their spaces to fit their own symbolic needs.
In material terms, they use technologies to change their habitats, on both
the small scale of the home and the large scale of the globe. States con-
struct territorial boundaries in order to define their subjects, and police
them with customs barriers and armies. Popular resistance to the state is
often an effort by people to find “safe spaces” where state power cannot
reach, or to seize control of existing spaces and turn them toward their
own uses. Sewell goes on to analyze the use of Tiananmen square in 1989
and the use of Paris in 1789 as examples of the productive mobilization of
spatial resources for collective action.

With this in mind, we may conceive of “national space” as a particular
version of social space. On the material end, national space is the product
of two elements: exchange and coercion. It requires a market network
linking towns to a center, “a focused space embodying a hierarchy of
centers . . . and a main center – i.e. the national capital,” and “a political
power controlling and exploiting the resources of the market or the
growth of the productive forces in order to maintain and further its rule”
(Léfebvre 1991, 112). On the symbolic side, a nation defines an “imaginary
community” which is supposed to share a common cultural, historical
experience, and belongs under a single state power. Like other social
spaces, national space has both constraining and enabling elements.
Members of a nation, as citizens, must participate in its civic life, whether
by voting, paying taxes, or serving in the military, and they generally
cannot be active in the civic life of another nation (unless specifically per-
mitted dual citizenship). Nation states control immigration across their
borders, and commit themselves to protecting citizens beyond their
borders, but no one else. These are the familiar constraints of belonging to a nation, but the same constraints produce opportunities. Citizens of one nation should benefit from the sense of belonging to a large collective entity, and they should enjoy the right to determine the future of their country. Even the worst dictators these days claim to be acting on behalf of their own peoples. Despite challenges from global forces, national states and national communities remain the ultimate decision makers in world politics today.

Claims by states and peoples to national space, however, raise difficult questions of boundary maintenance, unification, and control. Despite the nationalist myth, many peoples within one state’s territory reject the idea that they share a fate with their neighbors. Those who resist one state’s claim often invoke historical precedents that demarcate different boundaries, putting them beyond the state’s control. Tibetans, Uighurs, and Mongols in China today call upon their past experience of freedom from Chinese domination to justify greater autonomy, or even independence. By writing new historical narratives, dissidents contest the exclusive claims of one nation state. Spatial definitions, then, are closely tied to definitions of identity and legitimacy.

Contested identities also highlight the social construction of scale. Terms like “local,” “national,” or “global” are not given by nature. They are symbolic weapons in political debates between contestants with different coercive and economic resources. Nation builders often have attacked as narrow and parochial the perspectives of those who resist incorporation into their version of the imaginary community. Chinese nationalist and Communist attacks on regionalism, popular religion, or ethnic identification as “splittist” follow this logic of making national unity the prime value. “Local” representatives may reject the images imposed on them of being backward, traditional, divergent obstructions to the creation of a unified national space. Sometimes they do this by “jumping scale,” calling in support from beyond the national space to give them greater resources to defend their own positions. Tibetans, for example, have used the global diaspora, and even Hollywood, to make their claims outside the People’s Republic; Chinese Muslims have drawn on the wealth of the Middle East to build up recognition within China for their own communities. These battles over the scale of identification, like the struggles over historical narratives, address unresolved issues of how well China’s territorial boundaries fit with the virtual space that encloses her imaginary national community.

Definitions of the “West (xiyu, xibu),” or “Northwest (xibei),” play a significant part in determining how these contestants set out their positions. All these writers claim to be analyzing China’s Northwest, but the scale of their claims varies widely. The definition of the Northwest set out in China’s new development plan encompasses vastly disparate regions. It now includes twelve provincial-level units with a total population of over
358 million people, whose GDP per capita ranges from 2,500 to 6,500 yuan (Goodman 2002a). This is probably the largest region ever claimed as a single subnational space by a Chinese regime. Others focus on more closely defined regions, usually one province, or one frontier region, or, in the case of Zhang Chengzhi, a few poor villages. The scale of definition certainly affects the nature of the ideological claims: the extremely grandiose pretensions of the PRC’s development plan contrast conspicuously with the desperate efforts of Tibetans to protect the autonomy of their people, or the effort of Zhang Chengzhi to unearth a nearly hidden, private history of a very obscure region.

We can distinguish two basic approaches: one, an imperial effort to impose a comprehensive gaze on a very large part of the country, seen in both the historical efforts to investigate borders and the great developmental plans; the other a much more localized, even private focus on the special value of the experience of a particular small group with a distinct identity. But even the most local focus is linked to the wider world. Zhang’s Muslims and the Dalai Lama’s Tibetans represent China’s Northwest as a precious reminder of a nearly vanished past while linking it to a global religious consciousness, Muslim or Buddhist, beyond the PRC’s borders.

Both Chinese empires and nations produced spatial definitions to legitimate their rule. They mapped their territories and peoples in order to enclose their subjects under a uniform administrative structure. Yet both empires and nations had to control peoples with diverse identities under a single legitimating ideology. Spatial imaginations carried over from empire to nation, because the Chinese nation-state took on the claims to the same territories as the Qing empire it replaced. The nation-state did not simply inherit the empire but actively recreated its space under a newly legitimized structure. Tracking the transition from empire to nation demonstrates what post-modern geographers have stressed, that the same territorial boundaries can include diverse subjectivities and very different legitimating strategies. We should not expect to find one single, consistent mapping of space; instead, multiple mappings depend on particular configurations of interests, histories, and local identities.

China’s “Western regions” (Xiyu) exemplify this complexity of spatial definition. In imperial times, “Western regions” signified an alien territory, one beyond the core of the civilized realm, inhabited by exotic “barbarians” who often threatened the interior. The eighteenth-century conquests brought these regions into the empire, so that the broad term “Xiyu” now became the demarcated territories of “Uliyasutai” (Mongolia) and “Xinjiang” (New Frontier). Its peoples were fixed in place, and most of its borders were determined and surveyed by diplomatic agreement with the Russian empire. By the twentieth century, the term “Xibei” (Northwest) included this space, and more. It acquired significance both as a strategic realm and as a cultural complex. “Xibei” could mean backwardness,
poverty, and isolation (from interior China), just like “Xiyu,” but it could also mean rugged independence, simplicity, and firm martial character. Gu Jiegang, founder of modern Chinese history and geography, searched the Northwest in his travels for sources of resistance to Japanese and foreign incursions. The Communist Party, when it arrived in Yenan in 1935, likewise found this barren region a productive base for promoting anti-Japanese resistance. Now the much larger region named “Xibu” is a target of developmental projects designed to distribute national wealth more equitably. The scale referred to by this discourse has changed greatly, but the same features of poverty and isolation could serve the nation in different ways, depending on the context.

Building the Chinese nation required popularizing the spatial imaginary embraced by emperors and officials. Sun Yat-sen and other twentieth-century nationalists defended Qing China’s borders as essential to the formation of the multi-nationality state. Chinese nationalists mobilized popular movements to ward off imperialist threats to this space, using the tools of modern communication media: maps, newspapers, and broadcasting. Designs reproduced for a mass public replaced the secret maps of the imperial era. This nationalist space was also, unlike that of the empire, an ethnic space. Each region became the homeland of a “people (minzu),” who shared a common lineage, language, and history. Claims over the Northwest now inevitably brought in references to ethnic identities, raising the question of why the Han nationality was entitled to rule over all the others. New ideologies of legitimation drew on history and cultural contact to claim that Sun Yat-sen’s five nationalities all belonged under a single state. But these ideologies could not encompass the divergent subjective experiences of the peoples of the region; they had to be constantly reasserted in the face of resistance. Today, as trans-national forces become ever stronger, the People’s Republic still must insist on the unity of the multiple nationalities under the Han-dominated state, but its claims have become increasingly contested and problematic.

The imperial lineage of Chinese nationalism is most visible in the historical treatment of frontier expansion. When appropriating the history of the frontiers, modern Chinese writers address issues recognizable to their Qing forebears: how to define cultural and territorial boundaries between inner and outer realms, the essential self and the alien other, and how to draw the narrative lines affiliating past experiences with each other. The four contemporary discourses I discuss here put into modern terminology basic conceptions of social experience derived from the empire.

### Normalizing Tibet

The first discourse, one of administrative normalization, enforced legitimated succession under imperial patronage. Qing administration of the
newly conquered frontiers used a variety of bureaucratic devices ranging from the *junxian* system of China Proper to forms of indirect rule. The *junxian* system sent out salaried officials from Beijing. Their legitimacy derived from success in the examination system. Indirect rule, by contrast, designated local leaders whose claims to authority derived from other cultural grounds. The *jasaks* of Mongolia were leaders of noble clans; the *begs* of the Xinjiang oases were headmen from leading families, and the lamas of Tibet derived their authority from the religious hierarchy. The Qing did not undermine their local authority, but gave them bureaucratic titles, reserving the right to approve all successors to these posts. Qing recognition of the Dalai Lama was the most indirect form, since the Qing had only a small garrison in Tibet, no Han settlements, and only limited economic and cultural contact. But after driving out the rival Zunghar Mongols by invading Lhasa in 1720, the Qing maintained stability in Tibet by supporting selected factions of the Tibetan aristocracy.

Let us now return to the PRC version of the story of the Golden Urn. According to the account of Liao Qingwei of the China Tibet Research Center, succession to the Dalai Lama’s position was based on the principle of the “appearance of the living Buddha in the world” (*huofu zhuanshen*), a distinctive feature of Tibetan Buddhism (Liao 1995). When a high lama died, his soul separated from his body, and reappeared in the body of a young boy, who became his successor. The principle of searching for a “living Buddha” (Tibetan *sprul-sku*, Mongolian *khubilghan* or Hutukhtu) began in the thirteenth century and became influential among the Gelugpa sect, who rose to dominance, with Ming dynasty support, in the late sixteenth century. In 1653, Liao claims, the Shunzhi emperor of the Qing gave the fifth Dalai Lama his title and named him as a reincarnation of the Bodhisattva Guanyin. (In fact, it was the Mongol Gusri Khan who really gave the Dalai Lama his authority (Goldstein 1997: 9).) Following a similar system, the Kangxi emperor recognized the fifth Panchen Lama in 1662.

The Tibetans still controlled the selection of lamas through the eighteenth century, but the Qing emperors viewed Tibetan autonomy as a source of corruption. Nobles bribed the lamas to select their own relatives as high monks. The Qianlong emperor was determined to eliminate this mixing of political and religious influence. In 1792, after his armies had driven the Nepalese Gurkhas out of Tibet, the emperor sent down twenty-nine new regulations to govern the restoration of order. The first item insisted on following fixed procedures “to make the Yellow Teaching flourish.” He ordered the lamas to inscribe each candidate’s name on plates in Chinese, Manchu, and Tibetan, with their birth dates, and place them in a golden urn sent from Beijing to Lhasa. Under the supervision of the resident *amban*, or high-ranking Manchu official, the lamas would then draw the successor’s name from the urn. The new lama had to be a commoner, and not a scion of the nobility. In the Yonghegong temple in
Beijing, the emperor erected a large stele, the Lama shuo, explaining the reasons for his intervention in Lhasa (Perdue 2005; Lessing 1942). The inscription on the stele violently attacks the corruption of the lamas in Tibet to justify the Qing’s assertion of central control.

Liao Qingwei argues that the Tibetan lamas “loyally and sincerely” accepted the Golden Urn system. His own account, however, reveals considerable resistance. In 1807 the united lamas succeeded in convincing the resident amban to get the Jiaqing emperor’s consent to choosing the ninth Dalai Lama without the Golden Urn. In 1818, when the ninth Dalai Lama died, however, the emperor denounced the amban’s earlier request as mistaken, insisting that all future Dalai Lamas, Panchen Lamas, and Hutukhtus must be chosen by the Golden Urn system. In Liao’s account, the next three Dalai Lamas, and two of the Panchen Lamas, were chosen according to the urn. Other historians, however, are still uncertain as to how often the Golden Urn system was used (Fletcher 1978: 101).

Liao views the Golden Urn as “perfecting” (wanshan) the governance of Tibet by preventing division among the nobility and introducing regular procedures into a corrupt system. He argues that the lamas accepted the urn as an appropriate part of both political and religious ritual. Its “administrative ideals were correct,” and its “concrete implementation was feasible.” “Over one hundred years of practice, it proved to be a creative accumulation of rich experience, providing guidance for future generations.” Other historians, using Marxist terminology, explain that Qianlong wanted to undercut the “splitist tendencies” of the “feudal serfowning nobility” in order to reinforce “the unity of the nation” (Dai 1984: 207–208).

After the Dalai Lama’s designation of the Panchen Lama in 1995, the Beijing government mobilized a panoply of Tibetans and religious officials to denounce his decision. The approved leaders of major religious faiths in Beijing – Catholic, Islamic, Protestant, Daoist, Buddhist, and the Yonghegong monks – all condemned the Dalai Lama for violating “historical precedents, religious customs, and orthodox procedure, destroying the unity of the fatherland, the unity of nationalities, and social stability” in Tibet. Zhao Buchu, President of the Buddhist Association of China, claimed that the ninth Panchen Lama told him four days before his death in 1989 that he wished to have the Golden Urn used to select his successor (Renmin Ribao 1995a; China Daily 1995). For six years, a “small group search committee” had spent over 10 million yuan, closely following “religious tradition,” to set up the Golden Urn, but the Dalai Lama had preempted them with his “splitist” activities, for political purposes. Zhao appealed to the Dalai Lama to “return [huidao] to the teachings of Zongkhaba, [the sect’s founder], to the hearts of the Tibetan people, and to the great family of the Chinese people.” For Beijing, “historical tradition and religious practice agree that no Panchen Lama not approved by the center is legitimate” (Renmin Ribao 1995b).
In this debate, the Chinese Communist Party, promoter of revolutionary change, defends the traditions established by what they used to call the “feudal, landlord regime” of the Manchus, and the “counter-revolutionary” Guomindang, while the Dalai Lama and his supporters defend the right of the lamas to change tradition in accordance with their institutional needs. The Chinese put priority on the unity of the nation, defined in accordance with Qing imperial conceptions of who belonged to the empire, resting on the imposition of centralized procedures on all regions, supervised by officials dispatched from the center. Even the rhetoric of “return,” appealing to the Dalai Lama to come back (huīdào) to the national community as defined by Beijing, echoes Qing imperial usage of “return” (gui) to denote recovery of a putative lost people who now recognize imperial sovereignty. Tradition and modernity have changed places ideologically. The revolutionary nationalist Chinese state carries on the centralizing projects of the empire it overthrew, while the religious hierarchy of Tibet defends a Western model of the separation of church and state. Both select from eighteenth-century history to support their claims.

This irony reveals the contradiction at the heart of the Chinese socialist-nationalist ideology: its effort to contain the multitudes embraced by the Qing empire while asserting the essentialist consciousness of a nation state. Both the Qing and the PRC knew that convincing unification requires more than simple coercion. But the Qing emperor arguably had an easier job: he unified the empire from the top down, with his personal presence as the keystone. The emperor donned different guises for different constituencies: as Manchurian clan leader, as Mongolian Khan, as Son of Heaven, or as patron of Lamaism. These portraits fit the differing expectations of the subject peoples, and they did not necessarily contradict each other. Christopher Atwood has argued, for example, that the language of imperial “benevolence” (Chinese En, Mongolian kesig) linked the Chinese and Mongolian cultural spheres (Atwood 2000). Delivered in separate languages, to separate territories under separate administrations, the Qing integration messages suited each cultural group without having to forge a transcendent unity beyond the imperial persona itself (cf. Crossley 1999).

National unity, by contrast, had to be built from the bottom up. The modern state must claim that all its peoples share a common historical experience, despite their varying languages and cultural traditions. The PRC leaders cannot accept the Dalai Lama’s multiple allegiances to an autonomous religious institution, to his community in exile, or his ties to the global media, including Hollywood, because these connections reach beyond the control of the Chinese nationalist realm (Schell 2000). They must insist on the essential continuity of Qing bureaucratic procedures with the modern nation, while concealing the multiple cultural identifications that Qing imperial rule accepted. The developmental discourse discussed below promotes even further assimilation of Tibet by sponsoring
extensive Han immigration and economic growth, leaving little room for Tibetan autonomy within the PRC’s boundaries.

Imperial legitimation, although designed to enforce unity, could still coexist with alternative histories. The Qing historians projected the image of a protector of the Tibetan hierarchy, exhibited in the officially sponsored lamasery in Beijing, the dagoba on Coal Hill north of the Imperial Palace, and the miniature models of the Potala and other lamaseries in Chengde (Millward et al. 2004). From the imperial perspective, the lamas were among the “lesser lords” who paid tribute to the Chinese emperor’s Heavenly virtue. The emperor asserted central control, but not a transformational ideology designed to create a new Tibet. Tibetan chronicles, by contrast, embraced an alternative interpretation in which the emperor himself was a pupil of the Dalai Lama. In this lama-patron relationship (mchod-yon), the lama, who had superior spiritual power, recognized the emperor as a chakravartin king, who sponsored the church, protected the lamas, and promoted Buddhism in his domains (Hevia 1993: 247). The two interpretations coexisted, one in Chinese and imperially sponsored Tibetan compilations, the other in locally written biographies of Tibetan clerics. Leading aristocratic Tibetan clerics linked the two worlds, serving the Qing court while keeping a presence in Tibet (Sperling 1998). Tibetans and Manchu rulers projected different roles on the emperor, but both recognized the link between secular and religious authority.

The PRC’s ideology has evolved from a highly transformative one that aimed to destroy the “feudal” institutions of Tibet, to a conservative one that increasingly echoes imperial practice. Yet unlike the Qing emperor, who could plausibly claim to be a patron of Buddhism and a protector of the hierarchy, the Communist Party can make no claim to Heavenly virtue. Qing emperors like Kangxi constantly proclaimed that they shared common values of compassion and peace with the Buddhist clerics, in opposition to the warlike Zunghar Mongols. Mao Zedong, famous for telling the Dalai Lama that “religion is poison,” and for promoting revolutionary violence instead of compassion, found no common ground. His successors have embraced bureaucratic proceduralism, but cannot convincingly shake off their secular chains.

Only the thinnest of threads tie the ethnic spaces of the nation to the center. Beijing claims the right to confirm the succession of high lamas simply by virtue of continuity with imperial practice. But Beijing, unlike the Qing emperors, can make no spiritual appeals to Tibetans, even though it nominally protects freedom of religious practice. Tibetans cannot have alternate cultural expressions that deviate from the focus on the center.

The PRC version of Tibet’s relations with China has failed to convince either the Tibetans or the outside world. Whether it has convinced the Han population is harder to judge. China rules Tibet today with military force and economic power, but with no legitimacy in local eyes. Rewriting
history to demonstrate close dependence of the lamas on the Qing court by itself has not constructed a legitimating tradition. The rigid shackles of this modernizing project have failed to bind a national space to its imperial ancestor.

The Border Research Society

Frontiers have become a central focus for many historians in recent times. China, too, has begun to promote the study of its frontiers. In 1991, the Zhongguo Bianjiang Shidi Yanjiu Zhongxin (China Borderlands Research Center), part of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, published the first issue of its journal, Zhongguo Bianjiang Shidi Yanjiu (China’s Borderland History and Geography Studies (sic)). The editors announced that they were “led by Marxism and Mao Zedong thought, firmly uphold the principle of seeking truth from facts and a serious scientific attitude, and promote debate between different scholarly views.” In the inaugural issue, several scholars outlined their views of the field of borderland studies. These essays give us some insight into how academic historians of the frontier define national space.

The writers argue for substantive research on the history of the border regions, to overcome the idea that this field is a “forbidden territory” (jinqu) of research. They insist that the important themes of frontier research must be national unity, the solidarity of nationalities (minzu tuanjie), and social stability. In this way, frontier studies will support national efforts to develop patriotism among the Han Chinese and the minority nationalities.

Since frontier studies are inevitably tied closely to nationality questions, researchers cannot avoid addressing dangerous political questions. Many of the writers aim to refute mistaken conceptions, based on distorted history, which threaten the unity of the nation state. Ji Dachun, director of the Xinjiang Social Science and History Research Institute, for example, attacks several recent “bad books” which falsely claimed that the Great Wall was the historical northern border of China, and described China’s relationship with northwestern peoples as one of invasion and occupation. These books, in his view, “promote reactionary pan-Turkism and the splitting of nationalities,” reflecting the influence of “bourgeois liberalism” in border studies (Ji 1991). On the other hand, he also attacks other scholars who claim that the nationalities now living on both sides of the current national borders were all part of a Chinese nationality, and all the land they inhabit was formerly Chinese territory. This view, he argues, confuses the definitions of nationality (minzu) and nation-state (guojia). By excessively expanding Chinese territorial claims, it violates historical evidence and turns patriotism (aiguozhuyi) into expansionism (daguozhuyi).

The frontier studies scholars, then, navigate treacherous ideological shoals. In the reform period, they want to assert the autonomy of the
academy and its right to investigate objectively historical issues which have contemporary relevance. But they must affirm their commitment to national unity and direct their scholarship toward that goal. They are often forced to take a defensive stance, warding off threatening interpretations. On the one hand, claims of complete domination by expansive imperial regimes may support Han chauvinism, leaving no place for the autonomy of other nationalities. Zhou Qingshu states that “some people,” pushing ancient boundaries too far, deny that minority peoples ever had independent states, calling them only “local administrations,” and interpreting all those with tributary relations with the empire as part of a unified administration. Some even deny that the Liao, Jin, and Xia empires were states. This “rejects historical facts and does not aid the unity of peoples.”

On the other hand, Zhou rejects disturbing claims for complete separation between the peoples of the heartland and those of the northern borders. He writes, “In the past imperialists nonsensically argued that China from ancient times saw the Great Wall as a boundary, that north of the Great Wall was not part of China’s territory, and that Han people only settled beyond the Great Wall very recently . . . these arguments are not convincing.” Zhou argues for considerable cultural contact between Mongolia and the North China plain, going as far back as the Paleolithic. By asserting the continuity of cultural exchange, he can recognize that political and military frontiers shifted constantly, yet avoid granting any rights of independence to the Mongols beyond the wall (Zhou 1991).

Tibet, of all the frontier regions, provokes the most politicized history. Duojie Caidan, chairman of the China Tibetan Studies Research Center, states that it is “impossible to deny” that Tibet has been “part of China” (ru Zhongguo bantu) since the Yuan dynasty. The claim for Tibetan independence is a creation of imperialists who have a “secret plot” to carve up China. “Historical workers must expose imperialist plots to destroy national unity, and must use convincing historical sources to demonstrate the long historical links between Tibet and China.” Duojie cannot allow for changing degrees of contact between Tibet and China over the centuries; he must claim that “No matter whether it is the history of politics, economics, administration, communications, or national culture, we must begin our study [of Tibet] from the great background of development of Chinese history,” using “objective facts” to demonstrate the “deep historical connections” between Tibet and China. In this extremely politicized history, all historical interpretation is forced into a tight straitjacket, leaving no room for non-Chinese influences on Tibet or any consideration of Tibetan autonomy (Duojie 1991).

Although they all agree on reinforcing orthodox national ideology, the frontier studies scholars vary in their flexibility and openness. They face the difficult task of massaging recalcitrant historical evidence to fit the strictures of the modern nation state. Some are willing to allow for substantial differences between the past and the present in cultural
understandings and spatial conceptions; others cannot admit any difference at all. As so often happens, periodization is closely connected to definitions of spatial identity. Historians who find major breaks in the imperial age threaten to disrupt the territorial continuity on which the modern state is based. Yang Jianxin, for example, argues that each dynasty faced different border problems. Scholars need to recognize that the many varieties of border control, including “loose rein” (jimi) policies, local chieftains, tribute relations, etc., do not conform to modern ideas of administration. He sees the eighteenth century as a major turning point in frontier relations. Before this time, border problems were “internal,” but in the eighteenth century, as the Qing developed relations with other states in Eurasia, it was forced to stabilize and clarify its frontiers. Yang’s plausible analysis opens space for discussing the high Qing as defining a significant rupture with the past, a time that created the territorial boundaries and cultural identities that the modern state has inherited. Other writers, however, must insist on much longer continuities, reaching as far back as the Yuan or even the Paleolithic. They devote themselves to reasserting the “totality” (yiti) of the unified empire from its earliest beginnings to the present (Yang 1991; Zhang, Boquan 1991).

Much of their project would be familiar to the emperors and scholars who preceded them. Modern Chinese frontier studies builds on a vast legacy of research. One book, nearly 500 pages long, lists over 8,000 articles published on the Western regions alone in the twentieth century (Liu 1988). The Qing dynasty began a vast publication program of dictionaries, translated materials, inscriptions, biographies, gazetteers, portraits, and official histories of all of its newly conquered regions. The rhetoric of the modern frontier scholars calling for more compilations, translations, and specialized training carries on this imperial legacy. The Qing official historians, like their modern counterparts, dedicated their studies to reinforcing imperial unity and driving out alternative accounts (Perdue 2005). They nearly succeeded, because the conquered peoples had few refuges beyond the imperial realm. Today, however, many of China’s frontier peoples, especially northwestern ones like the Mongols, Tibetans, and Uighurs, have international contacts and related independent governments, or governments-in-exile, which are not under the PRC’s ideological aegis. The anxious tone of the frontier historians today, constantly concerned to drive out heretical interpretations, reflects the greater transnational cultural crossing available to all of China’s peoples, and the opportunities for autonomous reflection that it offers.

For most Western scholars, “frontier” implies a zone of opportunity, where identities can mix and shift. In their view, the globalized world of today has revived the “middle ground” between early modern empires and states, which provided an arena for trade, cultural exchange, and transformation (Adelman and Aron 1999; Aron 1994; Standen and Power 1998; White 1991). Orthodox Chinese scholars, however, find these implications
threatening, not broadening. The rigid boundaries of territory and identity implied by China’s nationality policy require fixed historical interpretation and ideological enforcement. Frontier studies in China reflect the center’s fear of losing its grip on the definition of national essences, an effort to close off threatening lines of inquiry, even as publications multiply. Compilations of sources, including translations of non-Chinese materials, continue to amass an archive of imperial or national knowledge in the interest of putting multiple identities under a single, focused gaze. Like the national space that includes Tibet, the frontier space cannot accept alternative foci.

In search of a pure past: Zhang Chengzhi’s Xinlingshi

By contrast, the contemporary Hui writer Zhang Chengzhi depicts an open frontier that offers opportunity for creative spiritual development. In his historical novel-cum-memoir Xinlingshi (History of the Soul), he narrates the history of the Jahriyya sect of Islam in Gansu province, combining official documents, oral histories and his own personal experiences. His story begins with the rise of the preacher Ma Mingxin, who gathered a large number of followers in certain counties of Gansu, inspiring a religious movement which was violently suppressed by Qing armies in 1781. Zhang uses this eighteenth-century incident to construct his personal vision of a spiritually pure movement radically opposed to the Qing government and to China’s classical tradition. For him, the frontier becomes the source of an alternative history, a private quest utterly divorced from the imperatives of imperial or national politics (Zhang, Chengzhi 1999).

Xinlingshi opens with a description of the vastness of the great Northwest. The author feels his own insignificance in this vast sea, as if he were a small piece of dust or a bubble in a river. As he feels himself disappearing into it, he conceives his goal of telling a hidden history, unknown to most of the world: “the great Northwest is submerged, it is silent. It suffers nearly indescribable droughts and calamities, but it is waiting for someone to reveal its spirit” (Zhang, Chengzhi 1999: 2). He spent six years traveling in the region, from 1984 to 1990, mainly in southern Ningxia, the heart of the Muslim Chinese community. In a small village he met his closest friend, Ma Zhiwen, who enlightened him about the dedication of the followers of the Jahriyya sect of Islam (Gladney 1991: 48; Fletcher 1995). Astonished by the deep religious devotion of this community, he vowed to write their story as an inspiring example of collective sacrifice to spiritual ideals.

The Northwest was a boundless, poor land, where making a living from agriculture was nearly hopeless, where people suffered constantly from drought, famine, and catastrophe. Yet in this barren region, dedicated believers in Sufi mysticism found genuine beauty. In Zhang’s view,
“Without the spirit, the land is ugly.” Mysticism, he feels, a product of remoteness and poverty, is nearly incomprehensible to the rational scientific mentality of Han Chinese culture. Zhang has found no genuine humanism in either traditional or modern Chinese culture, but he has passionately embraced the single-minded search for God of the Jahriyya order.

One great leader inspired them: Ma Mingxin, the eighteenth-century founder of the order who, “like a great stone statue battered by wind and rain,” gave his followers direction through his preaching and his heroic martyrdom. A great religious writer, Abdu Naidir, called in Chinese Guan Liye, wrote their central text, Reshihar, containing mystical language in Arabic and Persian, inaccessible to outsiders. Zhang translates part of the text, which describes Ma Mingxin’s travels across Central Asia, his mystical revelation of Sufist knowledge in the desert, and his return to China to spread his message among the poor of Gansu.

Joseph Fletcher has established that Ma Mingxin in fact studied in Yemen with a prominent Naqshbandi Sufi saint, and brought back his “New Teaching” sixteen years later to China in 1744 (Gladney 1991; Fletcher 1995). Zhang, however, is primarily interested in the roots of the Jahriyya order in China, not in its affiliations with the Middle East. For Zhang, the Jahriyya is the product of poverty in the Northwest, a creation of people who rely not on economic strength but on spiritual power. Thirsty for spiritual experience, their community grew steadily in the mid-eighteenth century, gaining power and organization while officials remained unaware of them. Like a “whirlwind,” the ideal of oneness with God swept through the barren frontier, transmitted through handwritten manuscripts and oral teachings. “People in rags” were its most genuine followers: “riches could not seduce them; they preserved humanity in the midst of hunger and cold . . . People who gave up hope now have hope . . . an invisible organization, an iron-moated fortress had appeared among them” (Zhang, Chengzhi 1999: 36–37).

Ma Mingxin’s New Teaching distinguished itself by advocating the “vocal dhikr,” or loud chanting of Koranic teachings by circles of believers seated around a table covered with a cloth with “Muhammad” written on it. Zhang finds in this ritual a deeply resonant appeal that reaches him even in far off Beijing. It is a kind of inexpressible beauty, inconceivable in the Chinese tradition. “China knows nothing of it. China cannot tolerate this wild mysticism. It is a deep critique of black Chinese tradition” (Zhang, Chengzhi 1999: 42).

In his account, the Jahriyya were forced into martyrdom by the brutal intervention of the Qing state in the late eighteenth century. Rivalries with the alternative Naqshbandi sect of the Khufiyya led to fights and several killings. The Khufiyya then appealed to the Gansu Governor-General to intervene on their behalf. Governor-General Leerqin and his subordinates, who took large bribes, according to the Jahriyya manuscripts, sent
troops to suppress the Jahriyya, forcing them to raise the flag of Holy War to defend themselves. When Qing officials declared their goal of exterminating the New Teaching and arrested Ma Mingxin in Lanzhou, Jahriyya followers led a large army to free him. But the Qing defenders had Ma Mingxin killed publicly on the city wall of Lanzhou, exposing Qing brutality, as the “machinery of the Chinese state carried out its first terrorist act against the people’s faith” (Zhang, Chengzhi 1999: 58). Despite repeated Qing efforts to obliterate the faith, the Jahriyya survived, fleeing to Xinjiang and Yunnan. They transmitted their teachings underground, passing manuscripts from hand to hand, focusing their devotion on the tombs of their lost leaders. Jahriyya women sent to Ili as bondservants to the Manchu military took revenge on their captors by killing thirty of them in their sleep, and their leader committed suicide after reporting her act to the Qing authorities. Her grave in Ili continued to inspire Jahriyya followers with her glorious act of martyrdom. In Zhang’s view, because “the Jahriyya do not recognize a fatherland, they only recognize humanity,” government authorities saw them as “eternal heretics and criminals” (Zhang, Chengzhi 1999: 77).

Zhang uses the fate of the Jahriyya to indict the “flourishing age” of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1796) as one of corruption, brutality, and repression. The “false relief case” that took place in Gansu in 1781 illustrates his argument. Wang Danwang, a provincial treasurer from Jiangsu transferred to Gansu, embezzled relief funds to enrich himself and other provincial officials (Hummel 1944: 100, 944; Yang 1989). When Imperial Commissioner Agui arrived with his army to repress the Hui rebellion, he also exposed the relief falsification, leading to the impeachment and execution of about seventy-five officials.

The two events were only indirectly linked, but Zhang uses this coincidence to deliver a moral judgment on the Qing: it was not a “flourishing age,” even though the commercial economy grew and people’s welfare improved, because “economics do not define an era.” Only “humanity and spirituality” can be the true hallmarks of a period. The Qianlong reign should be remembered not for its luxurious court, its massive imperial production of scholarship, or its growing population and commerce, but for the origins of a truly spiritual community in the backwaters of the Northwest.

Zhang selectively invokes the eighteenth-century frontier experience in order to invert conventional judgments of historical time and space. He turns the rising tide of prosperity under Qianlong into the tragedy of annihilation of the Jahriyya community. He likewise inverts spatial orientations, changing poor, barren Gansu into the seedbed for China’s only truly humane community. By contrast, the capital of Beijing becomes the “frontier,” remote from the spiritual values of the Northwest. In Beijing, Zhang Chengzhi writes that “Ma Mingxin in prison, being tortured, praying to God, saw me. He transmitted his heroic faith to the ‘frontier’ of Beijing.”
In 1989, Zhang converted to the Jahriyya faith, a belief he maintains today. “In a faithless China, Ma Mingxin and Jahriyya provide a guiding light” (Zhang, Chengzhi 1999: 80).

Like the other frontier writers discussed here, Zhang draws very selectively on the historical record. He completely ignores mystical and subjective currents in Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism. He downplays the political activism of Ma Mingxin’s New Teaching, portraying the believers as victims of religious factionalism and official repression. Jonathan Lipman’s account of the Jahriyya, on the other hand, ties the fate of the movement closely to Central Asian influences, the local socio-political environment, and the administrative procedures of the Qing state (Lipman 1997).

Although Zhang’s extraordinary attack on imperial and contemporary orthodoxy mobilizes the past in a completely different manner from the official historians of the Qing and PRC, he still shares their claim to detect a submerged, hidden collective consciousness acting in history. But unlike most Chinese nationalists, he aims to submerge himself in this consciousness, not to lead the community forward. Stephen Dedalus, at the end of James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, chose “not to serve” (non serviam) his homeland, vowing “to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” Zhang’s narrator finds a community within his nation; he does not construct one from outside it. On the other hand, unlike the activist Lu Xun, he does not try to awaken the masses from deadly slumber. He defines the space of his rebellion as neither the subjective consciousness of the exile nor the national territory of the mass movement, but the intensely local focus of one remote community.

Zhang’s rhetoric of poverty producing pure devotion to non-material ideals oddly echoes Mao Žedong’s depiction of the Chinese people as “poor and blank,” raw material for constructing his socialist Utopia. Zhang’s experience in his youth as a radical Red Guard carries over to his advocacy of anti-economic spiritual activism. Consistently rejecting modern Western capitalism and the corrupt economism of modern China, he counterposes a severe moral vision to the compromises of daily life. In 1994, he attacked the “greed, vanity, and lack of patriotic backbone” of Chinese intellectuals and writers. (Zhang, Xu et al. 1994; Barmé 1995: 227).

Zhang’s militant puritanism also has imperial and early-twentieth-century precedents. Gong Zizhen, arguing for the incorporation of Xinjiang as a province in 1820, also saw the newly conquered region as a resource for reforming social ethics of the interior. He proposed to send the landless poor from interior China to Xinjiang to protect them from temptations to engage in crime, and he urged severe restrictions on trade, so as to prevent luxuries from the interior from corrupting Xinjiang (Gong 1820; Millward 1998: 241ff.). Gu Jiegang, traveling in northwest China during 1937 and 1938, found a rugged peasant spirit among the poverty-
stricken villagers which he saw as a source of national vigor that could rescue the rest of China from debilitating divisions (Gu 1937). Zhang portrays his Jahriyya community as an anti-governmental, spiritually dedicated collectivity, independent of the taint of political compromise or bureaucratic routine, but his moral project of regeneration still echoes efforts of other travelers in the imperial and modern period who attempted to use hidden histories to rescue the nation. He finds underground spiritual forces in remote localities that can redeem the corrupt official culture of both the empire and the nation.

**Developing the West**

Recently, the PRC has announced ambitious plans for economic development of western China, including the northwestern region of Ningxia, Gansu, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Qinghai along with the southwestern interior (Becquelin 2002; Goodman 2002a; Goodman 2004). With over half of China’s land area, but only one-quarter of its population, this region contains over half of China’s poorest people, and most of its ethnic minorities. In the state’s view, economic development and ethnic solidarity are closely linked. Bringing prosperity to these poor regions should convince the non-Han populations of the advantages of unity with the Chinese nation, and legitimize the regime for trying to reduce income inequality across regions. This developmental discourse is the civilizing mission of the PRC government today.

As *The Economist* notes skeptically, however, very little of the development aid will go to local communities: “Some of the biggest bangs for the development buck lie in spending on schools and health, and cheap, local roads that tie isolated communities to the broader market. But rather than choosing such basics, the government is obsessed with gigantic, and correspondingly expensive, infrastructure projects” (*Economist* 2000). It has directed large amounts of labor and capital to rebuilding the road from Beijing to Lhasa, constructing railroads to Lhasa and Kashgar, opening up natural gas pipelines from Xinjiang to Shanghai, and diverting irrigation water to the Taklamakan desert. Xinjiang is viewed as an important source of natural resources and a region with prospects for becoming “the country’s biggest production base for cotton yarn and cotton cloth” (Xinhua 2001b).

Economic profitability, however, clearly takes second place to military security. Most of the economy of Xinjiang has been dominated by state-owned agricultural and industrial production under the Construction and Production Corps (*bingtuan*), a large military network of agricultural colonies, schools, processing plants, and prisons established in Xinjiang since the 1950s. It includes 2.5 million people, or one-seventh of Xinjiang’s population, and its unprofitable activities are heavily subsidized by the central government.
The third component of the development plan is encouragement of Han immigration. The new communication and transportation links with China Proper, added to wage subsidies, provide incentives for laborers to settle the frontier regions. Local Uighurs complain that Han workers get preferential treatment in hiring, and the state-backed firms undermine the local economy in order to promote Han exploitation. The state support for Han immigration has provoked frequent antigovernment violence in the 1990s by Uighurs fearful of losing local cultural autonomy and economic control (Rudelson 1997: 170–171).

All three elements of the developmental program – infrastructure investment, security, and Han immigration – have clear roots in Qing policies to integrate Xinjiang into the empire. The first imperial settlement of Xinjiang began with agricultural colonies populated by soldiers from Manchu banners and Han regiments. The soldiers were encouraged to bring their families out to the frontier so as to form a permanent population. Soldiers were followed by civilian migrants, supported with government subsidies of animals, seeds, transportation expenses, and tax-free lands. The Qing invested in the development of roads and irrigation systems in the major oases around Turfan and Urumqi and promoted commercial linkages with the interior by supporting Han merchant contractors who traded in textiles and tea. Qing officials also opened mines and minted new coins in the region (Millward 1998). The ultimate goal of Qing policy was to make the region pay for itself, thus justifying the heavy expenses of military conquest, but Xinjiang never became self-sufficient. It always needed substantial subsidies from the center to support its military and administrative establishment. Xinjiang also supported a vast penal colony, where everyone from disgraced officials to common criminals could be sent, usually for the rest of their lives (Waley-Cohen 1991).

The PRC’s military, economic, and judicial projects for Xinjiang uncannily echo those of their imperial predecessors. Even the extensive PRC prison camps in Qinghai follow the Qing precedents in Xinjiang. Control of a large multicultural territory depended in both regimes on centrally sponsored programs of economic development combined with extensive Han immigration. The PRC proponents of development use forward-looking and pragmatic rhetoric, but they also seek historical justification. Fang Yingkai, of the Production and Construction Corps Party School, compiled his two-volume study entitled Xinjiang Tunkenshi (History of Military Land Clearance in Xinjiang) explicitly under the direction of Party leaders of the region, in order to show the positive economic results that all previous Chinese dynasties had brought to the region (Fang 1989).

Yet the PRC goals for the western regions go far beyond those of the Qing empire. Whereas imperial administrators accepted indirect rule by local leaders under loose supervision, the PRC state has sought to penetrate local society thoroughly, using modern technologies of coercion, transportation, economic exchange, and communication. The PRC inherits
the technologies of the great age of territorialization, described by Charles Maier as the period from the 1860s to the 1970s when states around the world attempted to vastly increase their central control, relying on the key technologies of the railroad, the steamship, and the telegraph. Maier cites Henri Léfebvre to indicate the scope of nation-state aspirations: “central-ity now aspires to be total. It thus lays claim, implicitly or explicitly, to a superior political rationality … Space is marked out, explored, discovered and rediscovered on a colossal scale. Its potential for being occupied, filled, peopled and transformed from top to bottom is continually on the increase” (Maier 2000; Léfebvre 1991: 332, 334).

Large-scale technological projects, including railroads, dams, and steel mills, became the primary symbols of this age. Such obsessive focus on secure borders and large-scale industrial monuments has waned in much of the industrialized world. Global forces of exchange and mobility have challenged territoriality itself as a principle, so that “identity space,” which creates communities, no longer corresponds closely to “decision space,” which secures livelihoods. In China’s West, however, as the development projects indicate, the combination of gigantism with bounded territory still evokes a powerful response. Its sponsors combine the invocation of past grandeur with the new territorial and developmental dynamic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Other modernizing states have also attempted to impose development by force, denigrating local knowledges as nothing more than obstructions to “scientific” planning. The Indian state, like the British colonialists, adopted a militarized campaign of universal vaccination against smallpox, disregarding the viability of indigenous practices of variolation, and James Scott cites many other examples of the failure of “high modernist” projects when confronted with diverse local communities (Apffell Marglin 1990; Scott 1998). The PRC endorses this high modernist program, with an additional heavy political investment, because it sees development of the West as essential to holding the nation together.

The PRC thus counters ethnic separatism with the primacy of unity and stability. Legqog, chairman of the regional government of Tibet, blamed the Dalai Lama for depriving Tibet of development opportunities in the 1950s and 1980s by staging protests in Lhasa against Chinese control, and deputies from Xinjiang to the National People’s Congress claimed that economic progress required social stability (Xinhua 2001b). Ignoring the differential distribution of wealth and opportunities created by ethnic discrimination, official spokesmen cite aggregate growth rates without examining relative changes among ethnic groups. Although regional inequalities have grown during the reform years, the official ideology envisages uniform progress for all the peoples of the nation.

Neither Qing nor PRC integration policies eliminated ethnic discontent in any of the frontier regions. Han immigration to Xinjiang stimulated the native reactions that broke out in rebellions under Jahangir in 1820 and
Ya'qub Beg in the 1870s. As the Qing empire weakened in the face of foreign incursions, the frontier provinces seized the opportunity to claim *de facto* independence. Outer Mongolia broke away to become an independent country in 1911; Xinjiang remained nearly autonomous under Chinese warlords; and Tibet retained *de facto* autonomy until the 1950s. Except for Outer Mongolia, the PRC has reestablished military and administrative controls over the regions conquered by the Qing, but local discontent persists (Bovingdon 2002). The PRC has much greater state power than the Qing dynasty, but its legitimation efforts still lack consistency. Its greater coercive power is now offset by its rivals’ access to transnational networks of communication. Despite Beijing’s efforts, these regions will not remain sealed off from the rest of the world, or reliably committed to the nineteenth-century model of the nation-state.

Each of these legitimating discourses attempts to respond to the assertions of autonomy by drawing on the legacy of the closed, totalizing ideology of the Qing empire, updated in the modern language of centralization and territorial control. Claims to Tibet invoke the patronage relations of lama and emperor, added to regular bureaucratic procedures introduced in the eighteenth century. The frontier historians draw on the continuity from empire to nation to outline a linear process of incorporation, while the developmental discourse projects a future of increasing prosperity that benefits all. Zhang Chengzhi’s eccentric spiritual search indicates that wildly divergent cultures lie hidden in the Northwest, which cannot be easily routinized or regulated by a modernizing state. The localizing, anti-centralizing traditions can draw on just as convincing a historical past as the official state ideology, and their tradition has the advantage of being indigenously produced and personally compelling, not imposed from above by outsiders. Like Sufism, Uighur nationalism and Tibetan independence likewise find their roots in personal commitments that transcend the Beijing state-centered modernizing project. These commitments are both intensely local, focused on places with special meanings, and extensively global, as they invoke international support to protect themselves against repression. These frontiers are the site of multiple, contending appeals, each of which attempts to mobilize historical memories to generate a specific collective consciousness. As things take place in minds and in action, contending histories weave time and space into contradictory patterns. China’s national identity hangs in the balance.

**Note**

* By “West” in this discussion I do not mean the European and American west (*xiyang*), but the regions of interior China called *xibu* or *xiyu* in modern discourse. To avoid confusion, I shall use “Northwest” or the Chinese terminology throughout.
This chapter explores the effects of commercialization on one part of the Chinese newspaper industry. One conspicuous outcome of commercialization was the emergence of local tabloid newspapers in most provinces and major cities. Compared to the official press, the journalistic presentation of these local tabloid newspapers is sensational; their content is closer to Western tabloid papers with obvious signs of depoliticization, trivialization of content and globalization in reporting, entertainment and advertising. The appearance of tabloid newspapers in a media environment from which they had been banned for decades raises some broad questions. First, with regard to organization, what degree of ideological conformity does the Communist Party maintain over local tabloid newspapers? How does the local Party-state, i.e. the closely interwoven government and Communist Party organizations, operate and regulate local tabloid publishers? Do local editors have the organizational and editorial freedom to make the papers attractive for a mass readership and become commercially viable? Second, in terms of presentation and content, what strategies do these papers pursue to attract readers? How do they relate to their locality? What makes them different from official papers?

The gradual decline of China’s monolithic propaganda apparatus and central Party control over public opinion and the press during the reform period has been widely observed (Zhao 1998; Lee, Chin-chuan 2000; Wang 2001c). As part of China’s administrative decentralization, it opened the way for local governments to start commercially operated tabloid newspapers, such as the *Beijing Evening News* or *Yangcheng Evening News* in Guangzhou in the 1980s (Lee, Chin-chuan 2000; Zhou, He 2000; Rosen 2000; Pan 2000). By the mid-nineties local tabloid newspapers had sprung up in most parts of the country. These tabloid newspapers no longer aimed to be ‘transmission belts’ between Party and society, even though they were owned and operated by the local Party-state. They were business enterprises which had to respond to market demand in order to find readers willing to pay for information and entertainment. Their exposure to the market differentiates them from the official national daily newspapers, such as the *People’s Daily*, as well as from the official
provincial newspapers. The official newspapers retained their political monopoly as mouthpieces of the government and the Party as well as their economic advantage through access to subsidies and institutional support, or even relied on the profits made by local tabloid newspapers. The differentiation between ‘power-bloc’ and ‘popular’ media that is made in Western studies (Fiske 1992) increasingly applies to China, irrespective of the major differences from Western newspaper markets. This study will focus on the situation of local tabloids which are confined to a major city or a province and leave aside the small number of locally based tabloid newspapers which have achieved national distribution, such as the above mentioned Beijing Evening News or Yangcheng Evening News. Local tabloid newspapers have no local monopoly and must compete against other, similar, papers for advertising, private subscriptions and retail income in their local market. The decentralized administration of these papers points to a decline in central state control over the press. This does not mean that the localization of ideological control will lead to greater freedom and liberalization, if not democratization, of the press, but the indications are that it has created incentives for a more flexible and market-conforming local governance under which tabloid newspapers are embedded in the local economy and the local Party-state.

The societal and political changes resulting from the commercialization of the press are still under discussion. Academic literature has focused on the consequences of declining ideological control by the central Party-state. Some scholars have argued that commercialization leads to self-liberalization and the beginnings of a democratization process (Pei 1994) with public media as the ‘fourth estate’; other, more pessimistic, views argue that unfettered commercialization will entail depoliticization and trivialization of the media, leading either to a ‘praetorian state’ (Lynch 1999), or to new forms of totalitarian ‘ideological domination’ through market control (Zhao 1998). Studies of local newspapers have observed a trend towards a ‘Party Publicity Inc’ (Zhou, He 2000), characterized by central ideological control of the Party over commercialized newspaper operation, including local newspapers (Wu 2000).

Conjectures about the press and political change in China are still predominantly based on the central state with its supremacy over particularistic bureaucratic and local interests. It is worth recalling some insights from transition studies concerning institutional responses to the weakening of central state institutions. Studies on China’s economic transition suggest that when institutional control shifts from the central to the local level, a specifically local dimension of interaction between state and society develops which is characterized by continuous negotiation and bargaining (Oi 1995; Che and Qian 1998; Nee 2000). As central control and resource allocation are weakening, the local state takes on more differentiated functions through regulatory and entrepreneurial involvement in commercial activities. The local Party-state disaggregates into a diversity of commercial,
administrative and political interests which may at times be in conflict and do not necessarily add up to a coherent ideological position.

For the governance of the local press this means that the former ideological control mechanisms of the central Party-state are likely to be replaced by locally negotiated forms of control that are not defined by the dichotomy of ideological censorship versus political liberalization. Control of the press involves entrepreneurial, regulatory and ideological issues that impinge in different ways on the interests of local administration. Indications are that the local Party-state has conflicting interests and institutions, whose authorities have to be negotiated rather than obeyed (Zhou, He 2000).

Governance is likely to be reflected in the appearance as well as in the commercial strategies of the local newspapers. The local Party-state has a profit motive in running tabloid newspapers. This requires targeting a readership that is willing and able to pay for their media product and providing this product as a competitively priced service. Accordingly, it requires a commitment to popularization at the expense of propaganda in order to maximize the number of readers. As will be seen, a strategy of localization which enables newspapers to reflect local concerns and to mediate between local state and society is important here.

This study analyzes a rare case of competition between a state-owned and a semi-private tabloid newspaper which occurred in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The competition between two papers with different ownership forced local authorities to embark on an institutional learning process on how to balance their commercial with their regulatory and political interests. The episode ended with the spectacular collapse of the semi-private competitor after two years of successful operation when the local government used its administrative powers to terminate its operation on technical grounds. The case illustrates the extent and limits of economic and political liberalization in a local newspaper market. It further demonstrates that ‘popularization’ and ‘localization’ have become major competitive strategies in the struggle for more readers and higher advertising income, irrespective of ownership structure. Information that is not specifically sourced was obtained from interviews with the chief editors of the two papers (April 2001) and local Party and government officials.

The following section will present the factual background of the tabloid newspaper market in Guangxi. Subsequent sections will focus on the role of the local Party-state, the readership and, finally, on the presentation and content of these papers, in particular their popularization and localization strategies. The conclusion revisits the issue of local identity and the nature of the local state.
Tabloid newspapers in Guangxi

Guangxi is one of the poorer provinces of China and among the more conservative as far as privatization and persistence of Party control over media is concerned. The market for popular newspapers in Guangxi, particularly in the capital of Nanning, is largely closed to external competitors. Locally produced newspapers compete amongst themselves with little regard to a national or even province-wide audience. The impact of nationally distributed tabloid papers and nationally operating newspaper groups has been relatively small. For instance, in 2001, the Guangzhou-based *Yangcheng Evening News* (*Yangcheng Wanbao*) reportedly sold only 10,000 copies in Nanning, compared to 100,000 copies sold by each of the two main local tabloids. None of the national newspaper groups (*China Print Media* 2001) had made inroads into the market.

By 1999, Guangxi had five daily tabloid-style newspapers. The oldest of these papers, the *Nanning Evening News* (*Nanning Wanbao*), was founded in 1950 by the Communist Party Committee of Nanning City. For most of its history, it was the ‘popular’ local newspaper in the traditional mould of a Party newspaper with propaganda-oriented national and local content (*Guangxi Zhuangzu Zizhiqu Xinwen Chubanju* 2000). Its revenue relied on institutional subscriptions. In this set-up, there was no economic rivalry between the local *Nanning Evening News* and the provincial-level ‘official’ local newspaper, the *Guangxi Daily* (*Guangxi Ribao*), which was under the Party Committee of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Sharp price rises for paper supply in 1987 and 1988 forced these papers to introduce commercial advertising (*Dangdai Zhongguo Congshu Bianjibu* 1992: 203). Competition in the newspaper market and a commercialized tabloid press emerged from the mid-1990s when the Press and Publication Office under the provincial Party Committee closed the *Guangxi Economic News* (*Guangxi Jingji Bao*) and changed its name to the *South Country Morning Post* (*Nanguo Zaobao*) with the specific aim of creating a popular newspaper to compete with the *Nanning Evening News* for readership and advertising income (Li Rangjian 2000: 35). Administratively, the *South Country Morning Post* belonged to the *Guangxi Daily* (*Guangxi Ribao*). The paper had initial difficulties in adapting to the new commercial environment and changed editors several times. In the years after 1995, more commercially oriented local newspapers entered the market, which was becoming more diversified. At the end of 1997, the *Guangxi Daily* converted another of its papers, the *Greater Southwest Economic Herald* (*Daxi'nan Jingji Daobao*), to the life-style daily paper *Modern Life Daily* (*Dangdai Shenghuo Bao*), published since 1998. In 2000, the *Nanning Evening News* under the Nanning City Party Committee started to publish its own tabloid paper, the *Eight Laurels City News* (*Bagui Dushi Bao*), which until then had been published by the *Nanning Evening News* as a weekend paper under the title *Readers’ Weekend* (*Duzhe Zhourou Bao*).
The one exception among these Party-controlled newspapers was the *Guangxi Business Daily (Guangxi Shangbao)*, published since 1999 as a joint state-privately funded paper. Notwithstanding its title, this was also a tabloid paper. In 2001, the market leader was the *South Country Morning Post*, which had by far the largest circulation (Table 5.1).

These circulation figures indicate the relative market positions of the papers in the tabloid market at the time, but do not reflect the market dynamics. Whereas the *South Country Morning Post* had the highest circulation overall, its hold on the important Nanning market, where its circulation was between 110,000 and 120,000 copies (interview information), was precarious. Its position in this market was threatened by the *Guangxi Business Daily*, which had reached a circulation of 100,000 copies within only two years of operation. Up to 2001, the *South Country Morning Post* and the *Guangxi Business Daily* were the two most important competitors in the local tabloid market. In terms of business turnover, the *South Country Morning Post* was by far the stronger paper with an annual advertising income of 66 million yuan in 2000 compared to 12 million yuan for the *Guangxi Business Daily*. The *South Country Morning Post* was printed in a tabloid format with 24, 32 and 48 pages, depending on the day of the week. The *Guangxi Business Daily* printed twelve pages daily and used a broadsheet format.

The *Guangxi Business Daily (Guangxi Shangbao)* was originally a trade-oriented newspaper set up under the same name by the provincial Trade Office in 1986. It depended on annual subsidies of around 100,000 yuan. By 1998 its subscriptions had dwindled to around 1,000 per issue and an accumulated debt of 680,000 yuan became unsustainable for the Trade Office. That year, the privately owned Chongqing Li Fan Motorcycle Sales Corporation Ltd. (China Byte 2001) invested 6.8 million yuan to acquire a 70 percent majority share in the limited liability company it co-owned with the Guangxi Trade Office. Its aim was to gain managerial control over the *Guangxi Business Daily* and to convert it into a general tabloid paper to compete in the local advertising market. According to the chief editor of the paper, Li Fan Motorcycle Sales Corporation Ltd. had gained experience from investments in similar newspaper projects in Chongqing, Yunnan, Fujian, Beijing and Tianjin. The owner of the company’s holding, Li Fan Group, was a prominent private businessman, Yin Mingshan, who had also invested in a soccer club in Sichuan (*Nanguo Zaobao* 2001). The Guangxi Press and Publication Office approved the take-over on the condition that the paper retained its original name and its broadsheet format. With a minority share of 30 percent held by the *Guangxi Trade Office*, the *Guangxi Business Daily* could claim that it had a government affiliation, which helped it circumvent national press regulations that banned private newspapers (Fischer 2001). Nevertheless, in early 2001 the chief editor argued that the company operated in a legally ill-defined area and that the newspaper’s future remained uncertain.
Table 5.1 Tabloid newspapers in Guangxi in 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Established</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
<th>Retail rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nanning Evening News</td>
<td>Nanning CCP</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Country Morning Post</td>
<td>Guangxi CCP</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Life Daily</td>
<td>Guangxi CCP</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight Laurels City News</td>
<td>Nanning CCP</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangxi Business Daily</td>
<td>Li Fan Motorcycle Sales Co., Guangxi Trade Office</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Communication from China Print Media, Beijing, April 2001.

In June 2001, the Guangxi Business Daily was suddenly closed after reportedly defaulting on debt that was mainly owed to the local state-owned printing factory. This was the official reason given at the time, and details were not made public. Other reasons given were that the paper was operating illegally and that it had refused to be merged with its competitor, the South Country Morning Post. There was some public unrest and reports of demonstrations that started when news spread that the paper’s management had absconded. In street demonstrations, workers demanded their lost benefits, and readers who had paid in advance for their subscriptions demanded compensation. Subscribers were particularly unhappy when the local Press and Publication Office offered them subscriptions to the official Guangxi Daily in replacement for their subscriptions to the Guangxi Business Daily. In the end, the Office seemingly acquiesced, offering subscriptions to one of its popular life-style papers, the Modern Life Daily.

The competition between the publicly owned South Country Morning Post and the Guangxi Business Daily shows in some detail the response of the local Party-state to market reforms in the press sector. This response was conditioned by its own commercial interests, its censorship powers and related administrative powers. On the other hand, the local Party-state was constrained in the use of its powers by its regulatory role in the newspaper market and its regard for public opinion. The competition between the state-owned South Country Morning Post and the privately funded Guangxi Business Daily illustrates the scope and the limitations of the powers of the Press and Publication Office. In the new commercial environment, the local state represents a diversity of interests that include revenue generation for its own publishing outfits, administrative regula-
The role of the local Party-state

Commercialization and administrative interference

The Guangxi Press and Publication Office under the provincial Party Committee had itself become the first entrepreneurial entrant in the tabloid market, when in 1995 it set up the *South Country Morning Post* as a subsidiary under the official *Guangxi Daily*. The new paper was designed as a popular broadsheet and targeted the emerging advertising market. Its profits were used to subsidize the official *Guangxi Daily*. However, the Press and Publication Office did not have the power to keep other tabloid newspapers from entering the market. When in 1998 the provincial Trade Office with the help of a private investor decided to convert its loss-making trade newspaper, the *Guangxi Business Daily*, into a tabloid newspaper, the Guangxi Press and Publication Office had to approve the entry of the new competitor. The Office could also not prevent the new competitor from benefitting from its semi-private status. For example, the *Guangxi Business Daily* did not have to adhere to the general restrictions imposed on state-owned enterprises, including newspapers, with regard to salary structures. The *Guangxi Business Daily* was also exempt from some technical operational requirements, such as mandatory cooperation with the Post Office for its distribution. On the other hand, the Guangxi Press and Publication Office could use its political and administrative powers to interfere with the operations of the new entrant.

The state-owned *South Country Morning Post* and the semi-private *Guangxi Business Daily* operated in the same commercial environment. They depended on advertising and retail revenue for their income and had to compete for journalistic talent. For both papers, advertising was the most crucial element of their commercial viability. In 2000, the *South Country Morning Post* had an annual advertising income of 66 million yuan, with no information available on their retail and distribution income. For the same period, the *Guangxi Business Daily* had an advertising income of 12 million yuan and an additional income from retail and distribution of 10.8 million yuan. For both papers, the major advertisers were in medicine, real estate and consumer items. For the *South Country Morning Post*, 70 percent of its revenue came from local clients and 30 percent from national advertisers. Advertisers considered size of print run as a major criterion for placing orders and monitored and measured the effectiveness of their advertisements with the papers. Competing media in the advertising market were radio, television, billboards and increasingly the internet.

Local administrative procedures and bureaucratic rivalries meant that
the *South Country Morning Post* suffered some disadvantages. As a subsidiary of the official *Guangxi Daily*, it had to sell its advertising services through the advertising office of the *Guangxi Daily* and was not entitled to liaise with advertisers. The paper’s editor complained that the staff of the *Guangxi Daily* were still accustomed to the paper’s traditional work practices and expected to be approached by prospective advertising clients. Advertising staff of the *Guangxi Daily* did not actively market their services and had no financial incentives to improve their performance. This precluded the *South Country Morning Post* from actively acquiring advertising on its own account and from developing its own advertising strategy. Even though his paper’s advertising income was far ahead of its major competitor, the editor of the *South Country Morning Post* was concerned that his paper would gradually lose its advantage. At the *Guangxi Business Daily*, in contrast, advertising staff were the highest-paid employees in the company with monthly salaries above 10,000 yuan. Running its own advertising also enabled the paper to coordinate advertising with its editorial policies. The editor saw the lower advertising income of the *Guangxi Business Daily* as a result of late entry into the market. He was confident that his paper would soon surpass the rival paper’s circulation and advertising income, not least because the *South Country Morning Post* faced administrative obstacles in its distribution and retailing.

Administrative rules for official newspaper distribution required the *South Country Morning Post* to rely on the postal system, in line with its parent, the *Guangxi Daily*. The inflexible procedures of the Post Office meant that readers would receive their newspaper relatively late and made multiple daily deliveries impossible. The Press and Publication Office had a say in this matter, as the editor hoped to eventually be able to set up his own distribution network by convincing the Office to change its rules. In contrast, the *Guangxi Business Daily* had been able to set up its own distribution network from the outset. In 2001, the *Guangxi Business Daily* employed approximately 500 staff engaged in distribution and active marketing of the paper. Distributors conducted door knock campaigns to win new subscribers and offered free weekly trial subscriptions to potential readers.

Administrative rules also influenced competition for qualified editorial staff. The demand for local news stories forced editors to find qualified journalists who were able to identify good stories and present them attractively. This meant finding capable journalists who were inquisitive and proficient in writing. Journalists in both papers worked competitively under daily evaluation. The editor of the *South Country Morning Post* had his desk in a large open-plan office to create an atmosphere of transparency and openness. Each article was displayed on a notice board next to his desk and showed a point score that was used to calculate the authors’ bonuses and financial remuneration. However, the effectiveness of this procedure was limited because of the salary caps placed on state-
owned enterprises that limited financial incentives. The *Guangxi Business Daily* had considerably more leeway in this respect. While it did not have the same modern office environment, its top journalists received monthly salaries of up to 10,000 yuan, approximately three times the level of comparable positions at the *South Country Morning Post*.

While disadvantaged by administrative restrictions left over from the planned economy, the *South Country Morning Post* benefitted from political support. The Guangxi Press and Publication Office held a range of administrative powers that it could use to directly influence the operation and the commercial viability of the newspapers under its jurisdiction. The Office had the right to approve capital structure, size of equity capital and market coverage, and could prescribe on technical issues, such as the number of pages per issue for each day of the week. It used these powers, for example, to prevent the *Guangxi Business Daily* from raising its private equity capital to a level that would have enabled the paper to reduce its debt or purchase its own premises. Instead, the Office required the private shareholder to underwrite the commercial debt of the paper. As a result, the paper had to operate out of rented premises, which had a negative impact on its general commercial reputation and the social standing of its staff. The Press and Publication Office also restricted the paper’s expansion into other provincial cities by requiring that a certain amount of news coverage be locally sourced. For the editor of the *Guangxi Business Daily*, the most obvious case of commercial discrimination was the limitation placed on its daily number of pages. Whereas the *South Country Morning Post* was able to vary the page number for different days of the week and according to advertising demand from 24 to 48 pages, the *Guangxi Business Daily* was limited by administrative fiat to 12 pages per day for each day of the week. This was a severe commercial restriction, as the paper was unable to print supplements or extended weekend issues. It forced the paper to maximize the use of its limited editorial space.

**Censorship and legal liability**

Censorship was thought to apply equally to both papers. However, in reality the *South Country Morning Post* enjoyed a slight advantage. There was a modus vivendi by which both papers included a minimum amount of official political news coverage, such as reports on core ideological issues and major national news releases. Also, a certain amount of space was set aside for news stories sourced from the official Xinhua News Agency. The two papers differed on how and where to place these items. The *South Country Morning Post* was more willing to place major political news items on its front page, while the *Guangxi Business Daily* tended to relegate them to later pages.

Unsurprisingly, both papers encountered political difficulties when reports that were critical of local government authorities were published. However, the efforts of the papers to present themselves as critical voices
and defenders of public interest did not necessarily evoke action by local censors. The South Country Morning Post could take a slightly more daring stand, because it was given the benefit of the doubt if a report was deemed to be on the borderline of tolerable criticism. Both editors indicated that a hierarchy seemed to be at work in these cases. The larger and the more influential a newspaper was, the more it would be able to take up critical stories. For example, both editors stated that the Guangzhou-based Yangcheng Evening News, with its large national circulation and its huge advertising income, was less vulnerable to local political pressure than smaller papers, because it enjoyed the support of a national readership and economically powerful advertisers. In this hierarchy, the Guangxi Business Daily ranked below the South Country Morning Post.

From the editorial perspective, censorship was less of a problem than the threat of legal action. Part of the political authority of local censors had been shifted to the legal system as complaints against the papers could be referred to local courts. The editors claimed to be more concerned about legal liabilities than censorship, as legal claims could lead to costly court cases and damages. The South Country Morning Post, for example, had lost one court case, in which a family had sued the paper for inadvertently revealing their identity through a photograph that accompanied a report in which the mentioning of names had been suppressed. In early 2001, the Guangxi Business Daily had similar cases pending. In practical terms, legal action had become a new and additional control mechanism over the press. The threat of legal action forced editors to balance different commercial and political considerations. A lost court case could damage the newspaper economically but, on the other hand, might attract public attention and sympathy and enhance the reputation of the paper, if there was public interest involved. Public interest would reliably arise if the papers took on local government administrations.

Local political legitimization

Both editors confirmed that censors and the local Party administration tolerated exposure of local government failures, as long as these were localized instances that did not have larger political implications. Both editors agreed that exposure of the failings of local authorities and local government incompetence was an accepted part of their papers’ social responsibility. This watchdog function over local administrations and the performance of local grass-roots officials was tolerated, if not encouraged, by the local Party-state. Local authorities were aware that for the papers such reports attracted public interest and were a way of attracting readership.

The editor of the Guangxi Business Daily claimed to take social responsibility more seriously than his competitor and traced his paper’s commercial success to its ability to attract highly qualified journalists who were able to find social issues and turn them into good stories. He stressed
his paper’s capacity to engage people of the lower strata of society and to pursue issues relevant at the city district level. His position was, as he put it, ‘relatively left’, meaning more socially engaged, in comparison to the *South Country Morning Post*. His journalists were taking more initiative in identifying social issues and helping readers solve difficulties they encountered with local authorities. At the same time, he felt disadvantaged, because his competitor, a party-run paper, could afford to be more assertive in its exposure of instances of local misgovernment without having to fear the same reprisals. His paper had to make up the loss of this competitive edge by being more inquisitive and showing stronger advocacy. Most of its top journalists were roving investigators who had been provided with their own cars to allow them to move around freely. His paper had devoted a whole page to hotline enquiries from readers. These were generally concerned with minor grievances such as noisy building sites, problems with water and gas connections, consumer protection, employment issues, and the like. Taking up these issues, bringing them to public attention and eliciting responses from the responsible government administrations or companies had in his view become the most crucial element in assuring the popularity of a paper, as will be shown further below. This critical press coverage had as its aim, and was generally followed by, remedial action on the part of the local administration or officials involved.

The local Party-state tolerates a rudimentary role of local media in ‘public supervision’, i.e. the supervision of local authorities through public opinion by exposing inefficiencies of individual government officials or administrations. Such ‘social responsibility’ has immediate political consequences since it creates a public forum for local concerns and gives voice to the local population. The role of local media as the ‘Fourth Estate’ (Schultz 1998) is attractive since it offers the local Party-state increased popular legitimacy, and is moreover able to reach and influence a large reading public.

What emerges most clearly from these observations is that the local governance of the press takes shape in an institutional learning process. The local press administration had to learn to balance its dual role as entrepreneur and regulator. The local Party-state was closely involved in this process and used ‘public supervision’ by the press to increase its political legitimacy. While the importance of ideological censorship has declined, censorship continued to play an important role. Local censors maintained rigid limits on the coverage of ideological and central political issues, but tolerated criticism of local administrative problems and generally minimized interference with the commercial operation of the newspapers. Also, the local press administration retained censorship powers to protect its commercial interests. This embedding of tabloid newspapers in local institutions created the conditions for tabloid newspapers to reach a popular audience.
The ‘popular’ readership

The market-oriented ‘popularization’ of the tabloid newspapers stands in sharp contrast to the propagandistic ‘popularization’ policies pursued by the Communist Party before commercialization. Traditionally, propagandistic forms of popularization targeted readers with limited literacy and limited access to education and publications.

Information on the readership of tabloid papers in Guangxi is contained in a readers’ survey published by the South Country Morning Post on April 6, 2001 (see Table 5.2). This survey was based on 2,998 returned questionnaires about readers’ demographic background and reading habits. A similar survey for the Guangxi Business Daily was not available. The other available survey was conducted for the Modern Life Daily, which at that time was not competing with the two major tabloids. It is added here for reference. Also included for reference is a general readers’ survey done for advertising purposes in 2001.

If these surveys are taken as an indicator of the popular reading public, readers of the South Country Morning Post are essentially different from the target audience of ‘popular’ publications under China’s socialist ideology. The traditional target audience consisted mainly of peasants and workers who had missed out on formal education. The demographic details of the readers now point to a young and well-educated urban readership. Buyers were predominantly male. Newspapers bought were generally passed on to three or more readers. In occupational terms, the largest groups of respondents were students, followed by workers, retired people, the self-employed, and further, in a fairly even distribution, sales persons, managers and government cadres. More than one third of them had received tertiary education; the majority (38 percent) had completed secondary education (see Table 5.2). This data represents an important change in what is understood as the socialist ‘popular’ audience. The readers are now urban, educated and spread across professional categories. The tabloid newspaper editors measured the degree of popularity of their papers in terms of sales, advertising income and, most importantly, market share. The number of readers and thus their share of the market were their primary concerns. Social criteria, such as spending power that might influence advertising, were additional considerations, but subordinate to the need to attract a mass readership.

Popularization and localization of tabloid newspaper content

The Chinese Communist Party had a long tradition in publishing ‘popular reading matter’ (tongsu duwu) for workers and peasants with limited character knowledge and little purchasing power (Hendrischke 1988). Recently, the term ‘popular’ in its various meanings has attracted renewed scholarly attention (Li Hsiao-t’i 2001). The emancipatory and propagan-
distic overtones of *dazhonghua* and *tongsuhua* no longer easily apply to commercialized production of reading matter. Similarly, the ideological differentiation between official and unofficial has become doubtful (Wang 2001f). Under market conditions, the old term ‘popular’ (*tongsu*) has either lost its former political and cultural connotations or simply disappeared to be replaced by marketing terminology. Tabloid newspaper editors argue in terms of market share when explaining the popularity of their paper. What makes a newspaper ‘popular’ has to be constantly redefined in response to readers’ demand, competitors’ actions and local government policy. The institutional embedding of the tabloid newspapers in the

### Table 5.2 Readership characteristics of the *South Country Morning Post*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><em>South Country Morning Post</em></th>
<th><em>Modern Life</em></th>
<th>Nanning readers' survey</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>19–25</td>
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<td>35 (26–40)</td>
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<td>36–50</td>
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<td>51–60</td>
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<td>7 (41–60)</td>
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<td>&gt;60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sales person</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>Law enforcement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Management</td>
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<td>Culture/education</td>
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<td>Government</td>
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<td>Self-employed</td>
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<td>Retired</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
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<td>Primary</td>
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<td>Junior high</td>
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<td>Senior high</td>
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<td>Tertiary</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Residence</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nanning inner city</td>
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<td>Inner suburbs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outer suburbs</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Outside of Nanning</td>
<td>38</td>
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local Party-state has removed ideological and administrative barriers and has created the conditions for the papers to explore new popularization strategies. For this, the editors relied on market surveys and readers’ data. Irrespective of the different ownership of their papers, they primarily relied on sensationalism to make their papers popular with their readers, including globalized coverage of sensational news and stories. This stands in contrast to the localization that was another popularization strategy.

According to the above mentioned readers’ survey conducted by the *South Country Morning Post* the ten most popular pages of that paper were (in order of popularity):

1. Front page
2. Selections from other newspapers
3. News Focus (special news feature stories)
4. Advice and daily life
5. Entertainment
6. Special reports (on social affairs)
7. Important news
8. People’s life
9. Criminal cases
10. Sport

At first glance, a preference for and essential predominance of tabloid-style content is not immediately apparent. However, at a closer look, literally every item in the above list, with the exception of the sports pages, contained sensational items, such as criminal cases, scandal stories, sexual references and items characteristic of tabloid papers world-wide. For example, the popularity of the ‘selections from other newspapers’ was, in the opinion of the editor, due to this page providing an overview of scandalous stories from other localities.

From the perspective of the two editors, sensationalism was so much part of their coverage that it was no longer a differentiating device in the competition between the papers. The *Guangxi Business Daily* tried to differentiate itself from the *South Country Morning Post* more in form than in content. It carried fewer articles per page, introduced more prominent headings and easier-to-read print sizes, allowed local crime and consumer news to dominate the first few pages, and carried Xinhua reports only in exceptional cases. Generally, Xinhua sources were confined to the ‘National News’ and ‘International News’ pages. ‘National News’ represented a mixture of the standard news items of the official press and of sensational news, such as major corruption cases, medical news (for example sperm banks) and others. ‘International News’ was likewise a mixture of official news and sensational or entertaining items.

Readers’ views on the globalization and internationalization of content were not covered in any of the available readers’ surveys. Judging from
the contents of the papers, globalization was largely part of sensationalism. Unlike official papers, both tabloids had information and entertainment items from foreign countries interspersed with local news on nearly every page. Generally, these were sensational items, seemingly chosen for their exoticism and shock value. Such items included news stories about lost children in Africa, traffic accidents on other continents, bomb explosions, etc., without any evident political or diplomatic rationale. Western press photos of scantily clad fashion models and sensational reports on mad cow disease in Europe could be found juxtaposed with local news about new bicycle tires and neighborhood restaurants. The coverage of Chinese film stars in the entertainment pages was as extensive as could be found in any comparable newspaper from Hong Kong or Taiwan. In terms of mixing the sensational and the global, both papers shared more common traits than differences. Both relegated national and international political news to the inside pages and emphasized sensational news and entertainment items from predominantly local, but also international sources.

One aspect of localization for both papers was the predominance of local news in their reporting and limited, if not token, coverage of national news. Unlike in the official local papers, the tabloid papers had reduced national political news to the bare minimum required by the authorities. The decision about the amount of coverage and the prominence of its display was a matter of negotiation between the editor and local political authorities. Even the editor of the Party-owned *South Country Morning Post* had to be convinced of the need to give national news high visibility. For example, during the Hainan airplane incident in April 2001, both papers had to carry respective articles on their front pages and in the domestic news sections for several days. In both cases, however, these items were rather small and were given much less visibility than in official papers.

The role of localization is discussed in a book on journalism written by the chief editor of the *South Country Morning Post* (Jiang 1998). Influenced by his education in Western journalism and his long career as a local reporter and head of smaller local papers, he sees his main task in raising circulation and expanding readership. In his order of priorities, the relevance of news to local readers ranks above its national prominence or its sensational value.

From a geographical point of view, the closer a story is to the distribution area of a newspaper and the more it is a local news item, the more interesting it is for the readers. For example, if an earthquake of magnitude five occurs in the local region and an earthquake of magnitude eight elsewhere on the globe, the local readers will certainly be concerned about the local one. Of the [two] news items of a former Korean president embezzling a huge sum of several hundred million Yuan and of a former Head of the Land Allocation Section of the
Beihai City Planning Office not confirming the origin of over 1 million Yuan [in his possession], readers in Beihai and Guangxi will surely be more concerned about the latter story.

(Jiang 1998: 12–13)

More important than local news coverage was local investigative journalism and local advocacy for their readers’ interests by the newspapers. Asked what local items they would look for to attract most attention to their papers, both editors named human-interest stories and local social responsibility issues. Social responsibility was mentioned most prominently whenever the question of localized competitive strategies came up. This was backed up by survey results for both papers. A large majority of South Country Morning Post respondents, when asked in the survey what impressed them most about the paper, mentioned ‘social responsibility’, i.e. social engagement, ahead of ‘the quality of writing’, ‘subject matter’ and ‘inquisitive journalism’. Of the respondents, 57 percent felt that the paper closely related to their personal and professional life, 40 percent saw it related in general terms, and only 3 percent stated that it was unrelated. Eighty six per cent of the respondents stated that the contents of the papers were a frequent topic of their normal conversations and 89 percent of readers nominated the South Country Morning Post when asked which mass medium they would turn to for help when faced with practical difficulties. Only 9 percent of readers nominated television. Readers expected that their newspaper would take on an advocacy role if the public interest required it. Among the suggestions made to the South Country Morning Post were phrases such as ‘concern for people’s lives’ and ‘strengthening of supervision (of government) through public opinion’. This type of localization has become the core element of the popularization strategies of both papers and the one on which they spent most effort and innovation. For example, both papers had readers’ hotlines to follow up on readers’ queries and frequently risked conflict with the censors when pursuing local government officials or grass-roots administrators.

**Conclusion**

The ‘programmatic proposal [for] . . . the reinsertion of the state question back into contemporary Chinese popular cultural studies’ (Wang 2001f) was a starting point for this chapter. The state, in the sense of the ideologically committed central state, has withdrawn from the prescriptive and direct ideological control of popular media by allowing popular demand to articulate itself through the market. At the same time, the local Party-state has become an economic and political stakeholder in the market for popular newspapers. Local state and Party institutions define the borders and rules for media and newspaper markets under their control and set the conditions for popularization and localization. The local Party-state is not
a unitary institution but a conglomerate of institutional interests. Economically, the local Party-state has become a stakeholder in the newspaper industry and represents entrepreneurial interests. Politically, the local state pursues a diversified political agenda that is in transition from ideological control to a ‘semi-pluralist’ agenda which includes ideological control, an acceptance of supervision by the media and recourse to the law. The local state and the local Party retain ultimate power over the media, but the use of this power is generally tempered by the rules of the market, notwithstanding incidences in which the power is abused for particularistic interests. Overall, the local Party-state continues to acquire its transitional and regulatory know-how through a learning process. The local state is learning to rely on market intervention to defend the interests of enterprises in which it holds a stake. It might abuse its power, as in the case above, by closing a competitor, but it nevertheless relinquishes some of its political power and implicitly accepts the limitations it faces as a market participant. In return it gains political legitimacy.

While manifesting symptoms of content commercialization and a gradual withdrawal from state tutelage, the local tabloid papers do not threaten party hegemony over the political sphere, but they also do not just exploit loopholes in central control (Donald and Keane 2002: 7). They effectively sidestep central political issues in order to focus on local concerns. Politically and economically co-opted by the local Party-state, the local papers moved away from the central Party-state and in the process established new precedents for political and social debates at the local level. Relaxation of ideological control that creates space for the expression of local social and political concerns is an important part of popularization. This type of popularization no longer points to a target audience defined by political or social criteria or along ideological lines. It seeks profit maximization and attracts relatively well educated readers whose self-interest and social responsibility are primarily articulated at local level. Rather than contributing to an abstract press freedom as part of central reforms, local tabloid newspapers seem to be involved in the gradual formation of a local political culture which in turn may pave the way for the emergence of a local public sphere whose features are only just taking shape.

There is an obvious link between local specificity and sensationalism. While the primary attractiveness of news may come from its ability to titillate, additional attractiveness stems from the satisfaction derived not only from an identification of the local but from its association with the global. These stories were happening in other locales on the national or global scale as well as in the immediate vicinity. The sense of the readers’ vicarious proximity to these broader events is assured by their juxtaposition with daily local events on the same pages. The emphasis on the local necessarily contributes to the formation of a local identity, although not in a locally exclusive sense that makes the specific locality privileged over other scales (Oakes 2000). The sense of locality that emerges from the pages of these popular
newspapers is an inclusive one (Goodman 2001). The papers focus on Guangxi, but the news they print confirms that Guangxi is involved in the same corruption scandals, crime cases, personal affairs and sensational happenings as other locations nationally and internationally. Local tabloid newspapers, in this sense, seem to be able to play a role from which official newspapers are barred by the political constraints placed on them.

Two types of localization can be observed for local newspapers, one based on scale, the other on place. The appeal of the former is not tied to their specific place but to the local scale. Thus while popular newspapers are produced locally, they are not necessarily consumed locally. For the tabloid newspapers in Guangxi, localization as a popularization strategy is tied to the actual place and caters for specific local needs that are defined in scale by the political limitations imposed on the tabloid press.

Note

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Commercial nightlife in Hainan since 1988

Feng Chongyi

Ever since its establishment as China’s new province and largest Special Economic Zone in 1988, Hainan has been at the cutting edge of Chinese economic modernisation and openness to international influence. In this process, lifestyles on the island have changed beyond recognition. One of the most salient changes has taken place in the nightlife of urban residents. Right after the establishment of Hainan Province in 1988, barrooms (jiubajian), the falang (a mini-brothel disguised as a barbershop), the gewuting (cabarets with a whole range of services by girls) and karaoke bars mushroomed along every street in major cities and towns on the island. However, they were soon replaced or supplemented by a variety of “health protection” (baojian) facilities such as saunas, bowling alleys and jianshen meirong yuan (beauty and massage parlours). And, in more recent years, teahouses have emerged to dominate the scene. The trajectory of this development is not a simple matter of sophistication and is therefore worthy of discussion.

This paper is an attempt to identify and evaluate the factors contributing to the rapid change in leisure culture at the forefront of the Chinese march to modernity, with special attention to the relative importance of the state and market in shaping popular culture. The paper also discusses the relationship between the nightlife of urban residents and prospects for the emergence of a public sphere.

The concept of space is of vital importance when enquiring into the development of popular culture and the emergence of the public sphere in Hainan. Léfebvre’s concern with finding liberatory spatial practices within the state-controlled hegemonic space is essential to my investigation of the emergence of the new-style popular culture and public sphere on the island (Léfebvre 1991: 68–168). Since the end of the 1970s the gradual withdrawal of the party-state and the expansion of the market economy have produced a new space for legitimate experimentation with public and private activities. In this historical setting teahouses in Hainan constitute a social space not only for cultural consumption but for social and political interactions.
A colourful commercial nightlife appeared in Hainan in the 1980s as a manifestation of reform and economic prosperity. Public nightlife was revolutionised in Mao’s China, where evening time was usually occupied by work and forced participation in meetings and political studies; evening recreation hardly existed except for the occasional staging of propaganda movies and dramas. The emergence of mass leisure and commercial nightlife was made possible by both economic development and the depoliticisation of private life in the reform era.

Reform China is characterised by a tangled combination of political control and economic liberalisation. Economic liberalisation has released an endless source of energy for wealth creation which in turn has brought about phenomenal economic growth in the last two decades. Per capita GDP in China increased seventeen times during the period, from 379 yuan in 1978 to 6,534 yuan in 1999 (National Bureau of Statistics 2000). As for Hainan, per capita GDP also recorded a six-fold increase in the first decade after its establishment as a province, from 939 yuan in 1987 to 6,022 yuan in 1998, and urban disposable income per capita increased five times during the same period, from 986 yuan in 1987 to 4,853 yuan in 1998 (Statistical Bureau of Hainan Province 1999). The wealth is of course not equally shared by the entire population and the lion’s share has been captured by a wealthy, restless, assertive and ambitious social stratum consisting of economic administrators, stars of all walks of life, managers of private business and managers of state-owned enterprises (SOE). At the same time, political power is still monopolised by the communist party-state, which continues to restrict in particular the free organisation of opposition parties and free competition for public office. Though in danger of wan wu sang zhi (one’s sense of mission being eroded by excessive attention to petty pleasures), conspicuous consumption and luxurious entertainments have become an easy channel to release the energy of this new social stratum.

There are several reasons why barrooms, the falang, the gewuting and karaoke bars became the first form of popular commercial nightlife in reforming China and Hainan. First, the decline of Marxist ideology and drastic social change had resulted in a spiritual crisis where both bodies and souls were in urgent need of consolation (Feng and Benton 1992). Second, along with capital and new technologies, urban commercial nightlife in China during the 1980s was imported from Hong Kong, Taiwan and other overseas Chinese communities. Urban commercial nightlife had of course existed in Chinese history, but the public memory of that experience was almost entirely erased under Mao’s rule. The typically tender and melancholy style of songs, dance and other entertainments popular in Hong Kong and among other overseas Chinese
communities became an easy target for emulation. Popular culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan claimed a substantial share of the cultural market in China and played a significant role in defining Chinese modernity in the 1980s. The third factor is related to gender. While commercial nightlife consumers were predominantly male, there were thousands of girls from other provinces or rural areas available to work as xiaojie (hostesses), who provided companionship or sex services to male customers.

Roughly around 1994–1995 a new form of commercial nightlife centered on health protection (baojian) became fashionable in Hainan. The factors contributing to this new fashion included the drive of market forces to diversify services, the greater wealth of the middle class which was pursuing new forms of excitement and placing greater emphasis on physical health, encouragement of leisure culture by the party-state, and the increasing influence of nulaoban (businesswomen) and kuotaitai (rich wives). Going bowling, playing tennis and playing golf were regarded not merely as a kind of physical exercise, but also as a demonstration of wealth. Regular sauna and health protection massages were believed to be an effective way of relieving fatigue and strengthening health. Keep-fit massages, physiotherapy and gyms served both men and women, an indication of the ability of businesswomen and rich wives to break the male monopoly on exploiting luxurious forms of commercial nightlife.

It is market forces that nurture the commercial nightlife in Hainan. The birth and rapid growth of a middle class have generated an ever greater demand for such development, and the opportunity has been wisely seized by entrepreneurs. In contrast, the party-state has been at best ambivalent towards these new developments, not least because of the reality of a fragmented bureaucracy. On the one hand, commercial nightlife is nothing but a component of the market economy promoted by the party-state, and party and government officials have been one of its major consumer groups. The party-state is also more than happy to see the attention of the population being diverted from political demands for democratisation to recreational activities, as well as the resulting job opportunities and tax revenue thus created. On the other hand, due precisely to the fact that economic reform and development have not been matched by political reform and development, the party-state has been very sensitive to any subversive potential. To make things worse for commercial nightlife business, a greedy bureaucracy has been doing its best to capitalise on the sharp vigilance of the party-state and to create opportunities for collecting squeeze. The authorities can check, fine, discipline or close down commercial nightlife businesses at any time. Giving offence to any authorities, such as the Industrial and Commercial Administration Bureau, the Department of Culture and Physical Education, the Public Security Bureau or the Fire Brigade, will result in the calamity of heavy fines or closure (Chen and Liu 2000). The Hainan Provincial Government even made a decision on July 21, 2000 that no new “places of recreation” such
as shops for electronic games, gewuting, saunas, massage parlours, or video show rooms would be approved in the province (Fu and Wang 2000).

**Socialising and communication: tea, taste and talk**

During the late 1990s chayiguan (tea art houses) suddenly came to the fore as a new kind of facility in Hainan’s already colourful nightlife. Nanguo Chayiguan, established in April 1997 by Liu Hanxi, a Chaozhou migrant, is claimed to be the first teahouse in Hainan to feature the concept of the “art of tea drinking” in its name and its service, although it is argued that similar teahouses were established by Taiwanese in the early 1990s (Hainan Provincial Tea Academy 2000). Liu Hanxi came to Hainan in the early 1970s and originally worked at a state farm. In 1988 he established the Nanguo Foodstuff Industry Company producing coconut milk powder, coconut coffee, coconut tea and coconut candy. The idea to establish a tea art house was introduced from his home town Chaozhou, home to the tradition of “gongfu cha” (tea of effort, a name derived from the fact that a great deal of effort and skill are involved in serving the tea). According to Liu Hanxi and his wife, the concept of “tea art house” in Hainan was their invention, because even in their home towns people would drink “gongfu cha” at home rather than in a teahouse. Nanguo Chayiguan was expanded and renamed Nanguo Mingxiangcun (fragrant village of famous teas) in November 1999. It now has 21 private rooms, 18 set tables and 40 casual tables, with a capacity to serve 500 customers at one time.

Currently there are more than 200 tea art houses similar to Nanguo Mingxiangcun in Haikou (Yuan 1999). This is quite a large number for a city with a population of about 600,000 people. The art of tea drinking is now an island-wide recreation, with tea art houses dotting the cities and towns all over the province. The tea art houses in Hainan are all luxuriously built and tastefully furnished and decorated. Inside, they are usually decorated in a graceful ancient Chinese style to show taste in elegance, tranquillity, leisure and beauty, with fences of bamboo or twigs of the chaste tree to separate the rooms, original bamboo or timber furniture within the rooms, and scrolls of copies of famous traditional paintings and poems related to the art of tea drinking on the walls. Externally most of these tea art houses are magnificent buildings. And the splendid neon signs and traditional Chinese lanterns of these tea art houses have become a particularly attractive sight in Haikou’s streets of an evening. Tea utensils including teapots, teacups, tea saucers, tea trays and teapoys are all tastefully selected. And the brands of tea served at these tea art houses are usually famous.

The “art of tea drinking” in these tea art houses usually involves a tea ceremony emphasising how the tea looks, tastes and smells and often includes comparative tea tasting. To make a good pot of tea, special attention must be paid not only to the quality of tea, but also the quality of
water, the water temperature, the amount of tea leaves, and the type of teapot. The correct water temperature varies from tea to tea. The proportion of tea leaves to water also depends on the kind of tea leaves used. Steeping time also varies from tea to tea. Five or even more infusions can be made from the same tea leaves, as long as each round tastes the same as the first. Creating consistent flavour is where the mastery of the server is seen. The best kind of teapot to use for most fermented teas is a purple clay ceramic pot. Teapots used in these tea art houses are usually quite small, and the matching tiny teacups are just enough to hold one or two small mouthfuls of tea.

This new style of tea drinking contrasts sharply with the folk “laoba cha” (fathers’ tea) in Hainan. Just as the name suggests, a “fathers’ teahouse” is a place for the elderly to meet and drink tea. The “fathers’ teahouse” is usually established at a shop front on a street in a residential district, and is furnished with simple tables and chairs. The teas served at this kind of teahouse are green tea, red tea, jasmine tea and chrysanthemum tea of the most ordinary brands. A variety of local snacks and nuts are also served at a “fathers’ teahouse”. One pot of tea is sold for 1 yuan or less, and customers can stay there for many hours, chatting about neighbourhood gossip, rumours, stories, legends and current affairs, or even reading the newspapers (Yang, Weiping 1999).

The art of tea drinking in Hainan has been described by some local journalists as a “white-collar fashion”, due to both the high costs and the refined taste involved (Du 1999; Xiao 2001). But there is no reason to assert that this is an activity exclusive to any particular social group. There are several motives identified among regular visitors to tea art houses in Hainan. The most apparent and common of these is to entertain friends or business partners. Nowadays because invitation to dinners is no longer cherished as in the past, friends or business partners simply meet for tea drinking. Another similar motive is simply to kill time and relieve stress through idle chat. However, at a deeper level, regular customers of tea art houses have a strong desire to join artistic circles and cultivate their sense of sophistication, or at least a desire to put on refined manners and pose as a lover of culture, due to the association of the refined taste of tea drinking with Chinese history and culture.

Indeed, the upsurge of the art of tea drinking in Hainan and elsewhere in China can be regarded as a revival of an old tradition in a new environment. There is a very long and rich tradition of tea drinking in China dated back to the Zhou Dynasty 3,000 years ago. And the history of the teahouse in China can be traced back to the Southern and Northern Dynasties in the fifth and sixth centuries. According to The Tea Classics written by Lu Yu in the eighth century (during the Tang Dynasty), a level of sophistication in tea drinking had been achieved by that time, and the publication of the book itself played an important role in elevating tea drinking to a high status throughout China (Chen, Zongmao 2000).
Originally, tea drinking was regarded as something good for the health and naturally enjoyable. After the Tang Dynasty, the artistic conception of tea was cultivated among the gentry, bureaucracy and literati, who eventually turned the mundane things of life into ones of higher meaning. Tea drinking was given a symbolic meaning in calming one’s spirit and clearing one’s mind, and tea drinking has become a form of artistic and intellectual expression in Chinese culture. Books, poems, and paintings about tea became increasingly popular. Just as wine has come to be associated with excitement and stimulation, tea has been considered to imply distillation, transcendence, virtue in simplicity, or a return to original purity. It was during the Song Dynasty that teahouses became widespread all over the country. Tea drinking establishments could be found at any public gathering place or point of interest; temples, palaces, and even famous mountains had their respective tea vendors. As vividly described in Lao She’s famous drama *Teahouse*, drinking tea and talking in teahouses about all topics of public concern still constituted a major interest in the life of Republican China.

The popularity of tea art houses rests partly in their combination of Chinese tradition and modernity. The search for “Minzu xingshi” (national form) has been high on the agenda of political cultural discourse in China since the 1930s, and the search for “Chinese characteristics” has never been far from the surface in China’s drive for modernisation in the reform era, especially after 1989. The art of tea drinking can be seen as a perfect combination of modernity and Chinese tradition. Unlike *gewuting*, karaoke and coffee houses, which have a clear foreign origin, the art of tea drinking is a renowned Chinese invention. The growing popularity of tea art houses coincides with the rise of nationalism in China. Yet, the tea-making technology, the tea ceremony, the architecture, furniture, decorations, lighting and music have all been adapted to meet modern standards and tastes, which are believed to be cosmopolitan in nature.

Although the origin of the art of tea drinking can be traced to elsewhere in China, what is unique in the teahouse culture of Hainan is the particular synthesis of the relaxing atmosphere, the sophisticated taste, the rich flavour of commercial life, and art of both a traditional and modern character. It must be admitted that the geographical environment, the way of life and the political culture on Hainan Island are particularly favourable for development of the art of tea drinking. It is claimed that the tropical climate and long period of daylight make tea drinking highly desirable, and the islanders of Hainan are said to have developed an easy-going philosophy of life conducive to the relaxing atmosphere of tea drinking. A rapid increase in tourists and migrants has become an additional stimulus to the development of tea drinking on the island. Due simply to its unspoiled beaches and its location in the tropics, Hainan has been designated a key province for the development of tourism in China and for taking the lead in developing “leisure culture” promoted by the party-
state. Since the 1980s Hainan has become a major destination for international as well as domestic tourists. Income from tourism accounted for 15.4 per cent of GDP in Hainan in 1999. Hainan also has a reputation for enjoying greater political freedom compared to other provinces, and this has been one of the major reasons attracting thousands of new migrants from the mainland (Feng and Goodman 1995).

Implications for Hainanese popular culture

In defining the concept of the popular culture, Jing Wang has highlighted the waning of the binaries of high culture versus low culture and the official versus the unofficial in the China of the 1990s (Wang 2001c). Popular culture does not necessarily manifest itself as a rebellion against official culture. Rather, popular culture is an outcome of negotiations between the population and state authorities in contemporary China. The art of tea drinking and other forms of commercial nightlife in Hainan can be regarded as local popular culture in the sense that they are initiated and participated in by the local people. In the meantime, they are sanctioned and even supported by state authorities, with government officials composing one of the most active groups of participants. There is no obvious confrontation between the official and the unofficial.

However, it is legitimate to raise the question: whose is the “Hainanese popular culture”? It was mentioned earlier that the population in Hainan does not participate equally in the art of tea drinking and other forms of commercial nightlife. The rise of a commercial public nightlife can be seen as a marker of the emergence of a wealthy, privileged elite in Hainan. As argued by Weber, a particular style of life provides a basis to distinguish a status group from the rest of society. The style of life adopted by a status group serves to reinforce the honour system underpinning the group’s status (Weber 1974). Bourdieu also demonstrates that lifestyles reflect the variation in the economic capital and power of classes and class fractions throughout society (Bourdieu 1984b). There seems to be a legitimate reason to regard commercial nightlife in Hainan as a symbol and manifestation of social decadence and social stratification, due to the fact that customers come almost exclusively from the wealthy spectrum of society.

It should be stressed that the case of Hainan also adds a communal dimension to the concept of popular culture in China. In the case of Hainan, the “local” (difang) and the “popular” (minzhong) can mutually define each other to a certain extent, but they do not entirely overlap. In reality, “Hainanese” refers to different groups of people, who are differently related to Hainan as a place. Currently there are at least three large readily definable groups of people claiming the title of Hainanese: the Li, the Han Hainanese and mainlanders living on the island, not to mention many other minor groups such as the Miao, the Hui and Cantonese (Feng and Goodman 1997; Feng 1999). Generally speaking, the state privileges
mainlander culture, which is closer to state ideology and the mainstream culture in China, whereas the cultures of the local Hainanese and the Li are losing out.

Who are the Hainan locals?

Indeed, due to the fluidity or diverse claims of Hainanese identity, the recent construction of Hainanese culture on the island has been a less than concerted effort. The group most obviously qualified to claim Hainanese identity is the Li, the indigenous people on the island. The Li have their own culture, in terms of speech, dress, customs, and religious beliefs. It is not absolutely clear whether they were the first people on Hainan; what we do know for sure is that well before the Han Chinese set foot and established an administration on the island during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), the Li had lived there for hundreds of years, at least dating back to the Neolithic Age. As has been the case for other indigenous people in other societies, the Li have been the most disadvantaged group on the island since the Han Chinese established their rule there. They have been driven by the Han Chinese to live in the hostile mountainous areas of central and southwest Hainan. In contrast with their counterparts in Taiwan, however, the Li fought fiercely against the Han Chinese hegemony throughout the history of imperial China and the Republican period (Su 1986). Their culture and traditions had been preserved intact due to inaccessibility and their strong resistance to sinicisation until the 1950s, when the assimilationist policies of the communist regime were firmly carried out in the Li areas.

The Li and those sympathetic to them have made painful efforts to reconstruct the “objective” history of the Li. But there is every indication that the pace of assimilation into the mainstream Han culture has been accelerated by the current modernisation drive. Even the traditional Li costume, arguably the most obvious symbol of the Li culture until the early 1980s, is fast disappearing as part of the modernisation process. Nowadays the Li people dress exactly the same as the Han, and the traditional Li costume can only be seen on occasions aimed to catch the tourists’ attention.

While the Li are clearly a minority on the island, the Han Hainanese on the island account for more than 60 per cent of the population, are speakers of Hainanese (a variety and local adaptation of Minnanese) and are the product of centuries of fairly constant Han migration to Hainan from Zhangzhou, Quanzhou and Putian of southeast Fujian and Chaozhou of northeast Guangdong, after Hainan was formally incorporated into Chinese territory in 110 BC. Over generations, they have developed their own culture, different to some extent from that of mainland China in terms of language and religious beliefs in particular, assimilating various elements from the aborigines of Hainan and the societies of Southeast Asia and beyond.
The local Han Hainanese might have played a role as oppressors of the Li on the island, but they remain probably the only Han Chinese group marginalised in their own native place in communist China. In the Mao era, "internal colonialism" was the best term to describe the relationship between the mainland and Hainan. After the "liberation" of Hainan in 1950, particularly after the crackdown on “Hainanese localism” and the purge of Feng Baiju and his followers in 1957, Hainan’s politics became dominated by cadres from the mainland who supplanted the relatively numerous and well-organised local Hainanese communists who had fought against the Nationalist regime and the Japanese for three decades (Wu and He 1996). Hainan has always had abundant natural resources, but there was little attempt from either the central or Guangdong governments to set up additional processing industries or infrastructural projects for their development. All strategic resources – iron ore, rubber, and salt – were directly controlled and run by Beijing or Guangdong and Hainan’s output was allocated to other parts of China for development of industry. Local Hainanese were required to almost exclusively cultivate grain, particularly rice, to feed themselves and the mainland migrants, rather than the tropical crops more suited to the environment, and communication with the outside world was largely cut off. New opportunities have been created by “special policies” granted to Hainan since 1980 and particularly by the establishment of Hainan as a province as well as a Special Economic Zone in 1988. However, the status of local Hainanese in Hainan has hardly improved. Those resource-extracting enterprises previously run by Beijing or Guangdong on the island have been returned to Hainan, but not necessarily to local Hainanese. Key positions in the new provincial SEZ have been filled by “qualified personnel” sent or imported anew from the mainland.

The local Han Hainanese placed emphasis on outstanding and unique cultural achievements in Hainanese history. Their most important heroes are Qiu Jun4 and Hai Rui 5 of the Ming Dynasty and Feng Baiju and the “three sisters of the Song family” 6 in modern times. With great relish they dwell upon the fact that Hainanese fared better than their counterparts from other provinces in the highest Imperial examinations, one of the most important indicators of cultural achievement. They also stress the contrast with the allegedly inward-looking and conservative culture of traditional China. In their view the outward-looking and entrepreneurial culture of Hainan resulted from extensive links between Hainan and the outside world (Zhang 1988; Fu 1989). Through contact with Southeast Asia and beyond, tropical agriculture and other foreign technology have long been present in Hainan. Vocabulary from foreign languages has been incorporated in the daily speech of Hainanese villagers, such as ausai (outside), bo (ball), budud (bottle), ciagadu (screwdriver), degci (taxi), din (tin), lan (knitting wool in French), legbo (netball), legdai (necktie), leng (ring), mada (police in Malay), mai (metre in French), sabon (soap in French), and sidam (stamp). One major setback for the advocates of local
Hainanese culture, though, is the futile attempt to revive Hainan opera (*Qiongju*), which used to serve as a strong bonding agent for the Hainanese community all over the world. Hainan opera took shape at the turn of the Ming and Qing Dynasties by combining elements of poetic drama from southern Fujian and local folk songs, music and dance. During the Qing Dynasty and the Republican period dozens of Hainan operas had been created and performed in Southeast Asian countries as well as Hainan. From then on Hainan opera has experienced a steady decline, albeit for different reasons in different periods.

If the Li and the Han Hainanese are clearly underprivileged and their cultural traditions on the decline, it is the new immigrants from the mainland (*daluren*) who brought in a highly commodified culture (teahouse culture included) that now dominates the “Hainan popular culture”. 1949 is a clear dividing marker for the communities of mainlanders on Hainan, including about a million “old mainlanders”, those who first came to Hainan during the early 1950s and mainly settled in the state farms, and roughly the same number of “new mainlanders”, those who have been attracted to the island since the 1980s by economic reform and have taken up positions as administrators, managers and technicians, as well as “blindly floating laborers” (Zhan *et al.* 1993). Except for a small group of troops sent from the mainland who struggled to keep their corrupt Mandarin (*junhua*), the mainland migrants to Hainan before 1949 tended to localise themselves and adopt local culture, including local dialects and customs. Their followers after 1949, however, have been too proud to learn from local culture and determined to build up their own community separately from the locals. Some new migrants since the 1980s have even left their families behind or kept their official residence registration back on the mainland. Unlike their predecessors who were refugees in one way or another, these new migrants have been sent by, or responded to the call of, the party-state to develop the “backward” island.

The mainlanders have been striving to create a new Hainanese culture for themselves. The hegemonising power of language is beyond exaggeration in Hainan. While a thick local accent is common everywhere in China, mainlanders in Hainan have succeeded in establishing proficiency in standard Mandarin as one of the most important factors for appointment in government and other professions. Given Hainan’s policy of importing “qualified personnel”, many of the new mainlanders have been able to secure desirable positions before leaving the mainland. Because few Hainanese can speak anything like unaccented Mandarin, the restructuring of the Hainan government, the re-opening of Hainan University, the restructuring and expanding of Hainan Teachers’ College, the Hainan Provincial Party School, and art and mass media institutions, as well as the establishment of new research institutes, new research centres and new firms, have created golden opportunities for the mainlanders to seek dominant positions. The mainlanders do not conceal their lack of respect
for locals. Historically, Hainan was regarded by the imperial government as “the ends of the world” (tianya haijiao) and “a miasmic barbarous spot” (manzhang zhi di) suitable only for the exile of criminals from mainland China. Many of the current mainlanders on Hainan tend to deny the existence of a Hainanese culture different from that of the mainland, arguing that the Li have been assimilated to Han culture and that Han culture on Hainan is nothing but a small and underdeveloped unit of the “Central Plains culture” (zhongyuan wenhua) (Li et al. 1989). These mainlanders form a significant elite group and regard themselves as explorers, pioneers and pathbreakers for a New Hainan (Jiang 1991).

Efforts have been made by the mainlanders to invent new traditions for themselves on the island. One most striking example is the annual International Coconut Festival started in 1992. The idea of the festival came from three mainlanders who felt homesick and wanted to celebrate the brotherhood of mainlanders on the island. The first Coconut Festival was organised with corporate sponsorship but the festival has been taken over by the provincial government since its second year. The coconut is chosen as the symbol simply because it is exotic to mainlanders, whereas the festival has nothing to do with the coconut – regardless of its planting or harvest, though the time is set in early April to coincide with the 3rd March Festival (lunar calendar) of the Li. Major features of the festival include various programmes of entertainment for visitors from the mainland and abroad, exhibitions of local products, and bids for investment projects and other commercial activities. The performances include ballet, mainland operas and Li-style dances, but no Hainanese opera (Pang 1995).

Precisely because of divisions and conflicts among these different ethnic communities, the current Hainan provincial government has spared no effort in projecting a homogeneous Hainanese community. According to the official line, any individuals registered as permanent residents on the island are Hainanese, no matter where they come from or what languages they speak. The official line obviously privileges the mainlanders, who can claim a Hainanese identity with full access to local resources and at the same time preserve their cultural and political superiority over the local population. However, it is undeniable that there are common themes and symbols shared by all communities on the island in their daily practice and construction of local popular culture, which should be understood as an ever-changing historical process rather than a static property anyway. For example, for all communities in Hainan, cosmopolitan Hong Kong with its openness and higher level of internationalisation is the best model for Hainan to follow, as indicated by their zeal to “create another Hong Kong” (Zhong 1995). It is reasonable to believe that tea art houses have become part of such shared symbols of a new Hainan identity and popular culture, precisely in the sense that the art of tea drinking seeks to combine the confined and the popularised, and that all communities have been participating in both the production and consumption of it.
Intellectual circles often seem to hold negative views about the current trends in China’s commercial nightlife. Some scholars blame the tyranny of consumerism, which is said to destroy the sense of social responsibility in favour of sensational stimulation and physical satisfaction (Yi 1998). Some scholars have described with contempt the current Chinese popular culture dominated by evening newspapers, readers’ digests, vendors’ stand literature and soap operas as “chaguan wenhua” (teahouse culture). This teahouse culture is said to be characterised by a lack of profundity and catering to the needs of careless cultural consumers (Tian 1998).

Nevertheless, the emergence of a commercial public nightlife can also be observed as a manifestation of a healthy social transition in China. Habermas provides a brilliant account of the emergence and transformation of the public sphere in the specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Habermas 1989). According to Habermas, the public sphere was “the sphere of private people coming together as a public”, a sphere between the state authorities and the private sphere, including family and the realm of commodity exchange and of social labour. Concrete constitutions of the public sphere included salons, coffee houses, newsletters, journals and societies. In this public sphere people preserved a kind of social intercourse that disregarded status altogether; started to discuss questions of “common concern”, which had been restricted to church and state authorities in the past; and converted culture into a commodity available to the public without exception. “People’s public use of their reason” was regarded as a defining feature of the public sphere. Public opinion formed through public discussion, public reasoning and public debates would become the basis on which public policies were formulated and implemented, as well as a powerful force to check state power.

It seems that something similar is occurring in Hainan. There are thousands of teahouses and coffee houses where people meet to talk on a roughly equal footing on whatever topics they like, including political rumours about the corruption of the bureaucracy and the jingles that mock the party-state. On these occasions, the boundary between the party-state bureaucracy and businesspeople is definitely no less blurred than that between the court aristocracy and the bourgeoisie in Europe in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, currently there are about 900 societies or associations in operation in Hainan (Ru 1998). These societies and associations are known as shetuan zuzhi (social organisations) according to the official categories of the party-state. They include several traditional “mass organisations” organised by the party-state, such as the Communist Youth League, the Trade Unions, the Women’s Federation, the Associ-
The Hainan Association of Entrepreneurs, the Hainan Association of Individual Labourers, the Hainan Chamber of Commerce, the Hainan Association of Lawyers, the Hainan Association of Tea Professionals, and the Hainan Friendship Society for Poets, Calligraphers and Painters. There are also more than 20 newspapers, 36 journals and 5 formal publishing houses in the small province (Liao 1998).

There is no doubt that over twenty years of reform in China, the party-state has adjusted not only its goals and policies away from traditional state socialism, but also, to a lesser extent, its organisational structure and its relationship with society. Since the 1980s there has been a significant expansion of private space for economic, cultural and even political activities, due to a gradual erosion of state power over society and selective withdrawal of the party-state from the public realm as well as the private realm. Hainan seems to be in the forefront of social-political changes resulting from corresponding changes in the government structure. While China as a whole is moving away from a model of totalism where the party-state exercised complete control over society, some sort of civil society consisting of a variety of social organisations and professional associations has also emerged in Hainan.

It is hard to conceptualise these new developments in the state–society relationship in China, and it remains controversial whether they can be understood with reference to the theoretical framework of the public sphere and civil society. Since the early 1990s there has been an intense debate about whether the concepts of the public sphere and civil society can be applied to study modern or contemporary China (Huang 1993; Brook and Frolic 1997). Some critics believe that these Western concepts do not fit Chinese history and reality, simply because these concepts downplay the prominent role of the state in Chinese society and a dichotomous opposition between society and state is not a proper formulation to describe China’s past and current situation, and propose China-specific concepts such as the “third realm”, in which both the state and society participate (Huang 1993; Wakeman 1993). Some speak of the public sphere and incipient civil society in ancient as well as contemporary China with great enthusiasm (Rankin 1993). There are still others who are in favour of a creative adoption of the notions of the public sphere and civil society in the Chinese context, rejecting both positions of Westcentric unilinearity and Chinese exceptionality (Brook and Frolic 1997; Frolic 1997).

I tend to believe that the emergence of new spaces for legitimate public and private activities beyond the direct state control, and the development of semi-autonomous social organisations and professional associations, can be best described as a Chinese variety of the public sphere and civil society. As rightly pointed out by Mary Backus Rankin, the public sphere
and civil society did not develop along one path even in Western democracies, so one cannot expect the Western patterns to be duplicated in the very different Chinese contexts (Rankin 1993). In the strict sense, both the classical Lockean notion of civil society autonomous from and in opposition to the state and the classical Habermasian notion of the public sphere countering the state are based on the specific historical experience of late-seventeenth-century England and eighteenth-century France, where the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie were duly represented in the emerging nation-state and the state was subordinated to society. Mechanical application of this specific model to study Chinese society may not be suitable due to different historical contexts. However, the concepts of the public sphere and civil society are also used in a more general way, referring to the general phenomenon of the rise of associational life, the greater autonomy of individuals and society, and the growing force within modern society to create responsible and accountable government. In this general use of the two terms, the classical model of the West is no more than a variety of the public sphere and civil society (Diamond 1994).

Through a century of reforms, revolutions and waves of other political and intellectual movements modelled on the West, many “Western” concepts and institutions, such as liberty, individualism, democracy, constitution and parliamentary government, have become an intrinsic part of modern and contemporary Chineseness. The concepts of the public sphere and civil society used in the general way are useful in studying the current state–society relationship in two senses. First, there are elements of the public sphere and civil society easily observable in contemporary China, as demonstrated by the case of Hainan (Feng 2001). Second, there is an increasingly powerful discourse of the public sphere and civil society among Chinese intellectuals in observing and projecting social and political development in China (Ma 1994; He 1995; Deng 1997). This is not to deny that there are striking differences between the public sphere and civil society in China and the classical model in late-seventeenth-century England and eighteenth-century France. If the public sphere and civil society grew naturally from society in late-seventeenth-century England and eighteenth-century France alongside the emergence of the bourgeois nation-state, in contemporary China they are created by and from the Leninist party-state, and their development is largely sponsored by the party-state. This specific path of development, coupled with supremacy of officialdom in history and underdevelopment of the concept of inalienable human rights, illuminates several features of the public sphere and civil society in China. For example, there is no clear cut boundary between the state on the one side and civil society and the public sphere on the other, with their functions deeply overlapped; civil society and the public sphere are only realised halfway, with no absolute legal guarantee for their operation, and their autonomy compromised to a great extent; and the relationship between the public sphere and civil society on the one side and the
state on the other is cooperative and mutually supplementary rather than confrontational.

For the all-round development of the public sphere in Hainan some important links still need to be established, in particular. Despite liberalisation and marketisation of the media over two decades, there is not yet institutionally guaranteed autonomy for newspapers, journals, publishing houses, radio stations or TV stations. Publishing houses, radio stations and TV stations are firmly in the hands of the party-state. Newspapers and journals are either run by the party-state or affiliated to (guakao) a unit of the party-state. While authors today enjoy much greater freedom, editors and managers of newspapers and journals are held responsible if anything goes beyond the point of tolerance by the party-state or individual bureaucrats at any time. As a result, no links are established between the media and conversations held in teahouses and coffee houses, and between the institutions for consumption and the institutions of politics. There is only pop gossip, commercial news, and party-state propaganda; information media and political journalism are largely absent. Conversations, jokes and grievances among fragmented small groups can at best generate a public sentiment (rather than public opinions), which remains skillfully monitored and manipulated by the party-state.

Conclusion

China is in transformation from a command economy to a market economy, from an agrarian society to an industrial and commercial society, and from a closed party-state to a sort of political pluralism. Research on commercial public nightlife in transitional China is significant in two ways. It emphasises the Weberian tradition that sees lifestyle as an indicator of social status and social change. And it explores the signals of cultural and political change at a given locality.

Commercial nightlife in Hainan has resulted from market forces and the emergence of a new middle class, although it could not have come into being without the measured withdrawal of the party-state. Commercial public nightlife as a way of conspicuous consumption is of course not enjoyed by all social strata but confined to the communities of business people who can afford expensive services and those public power holders involved in the second economy characterised by the exchange of power for wealth. On the one hand, commercial nightlife in Hainan on such a grand scale can be seen as a phenomenon of the early phase of modernity, because the privatisation of leisure and family-centred activities relating to nightlife has become a general trend in the developed world. Yet public taste in consumption in Hainan is fast changing in the direction of diversification and sophistication. The recent upsurge of the art of tea drinking seems to indicate that popular culture in Hainan and elsewhere in China
has surpassed the stage of blind imitation and a new trend highlighting a nativist tradition has emerged. As with other forms of popular culture in China, commercial nightlife is neither imposed by the party-state nor derived from a reaction against the party-state, but results from the constant negotiation between the party-state and the population.

Public nightlife also provides a useful point of entry for our observation on the potential emergence of a public sphere not least because teahouses or karaoke bars are new social spaces that are also public spaces. Such new public social spaces cannot be easily subjugated to the surveillance of the state probably because of its limited capacity to dictate lifestyle choices. In understanding the fast-changing state–society relationship in China, attention should be paid to changes within the state as much as to change in society. More significantly, the case of Hainan suggests a fundamentally different historical context for the development of the public space and sphere in contemporary China to that of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Whereas the bourgeoisie invented basic means such as postal services, newsletters and newspapers for public communication and created the public sphere from nothing, the emergence of the public sphere for the middle class in China today comes from the reversing direction and is dependent on the withdrawal of, and subject to negotiation with, the party-state. And even if the “public sphere” and “civil society” are concepts still much in contestation today, we can be certain that public spaces are emerging in China en masse and new forms of sociality are in the making. It is already a reality that everyday life no longer remains in thrall to a homogeneous, abstract space of the state.

Notes
1 Karaoke originated in Japan in the early 1980s and immediately found a substantial market in China. Since the late 1980s major cities and towns in Hainan have been densely dotted with karaoke bars, which feature both public spaces and small rooms for private parties (these KTVs are equipped with expensive technology; karaoke discs offer on-screen lyrics and sometimes sexually explicit backgrounds). Men entering these places without female companions are likely to be approached by 小姐 who provide a singing partner, conversation, and petting.
3 Interviews in Haikou, November 2000.
4 Qiu Jun (1421–1495) served as head of the Ministry of Rites (in charge of education and the selection of officials), head of the Ministry of Revenue and teacher of the emperor. Apart from his achievements in administration, history, philosophy and economics, he is believed by many to be the first in the world to advance the theory of labour value. For his career see “Qiu Jun” in Zhu Yihui (ed.) (1992) Hainan mingren zhuanti (Brief Biographies of Eminent Hainanese), Guangzhou: Zhongshan Daxue Chubanshe p. 13; see also Jiang


6 Song Qingling, Song Meiling and Song Ailing were from Wenchang County and married to Sun Yat-sen, Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kaishek) and Kong Xiangxi respectively.

7 Here I strictly follow the Gramscian notion of hegemony rooted in persuasion or consent as well as coercion. For an interesting discussion on the Gramscian theory of hegemony, see Paul Ransome (1992) *Antonio Gramsci: A New Introduction*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, Ch. 4 in particular.

8 Interviews, Haikou, April 1999.
In the last decade, a gap has opened within the interior and impoverished zones of China. Simply put, the gap may be described as that between consumer desire and economic development. The much-touted market transition has proceeded there in fits and starts, deeply hindered by infrastructural obstacles and minimal peasant resources. At the same time, it has been outpaced by the growth in consumerist structures of feeling. In the Miao countryside that I have researched, for instance, desires for goods and lifestyles were not only purveyed in ever-more-accessible media formats such as satellite television and VCDs, but were reflected in the material longings brought home with returned youth who had left Miao villages to dagong in coastal cities. The textures of local life in Miao communities revealed a fecund nexus of time-honored forms and recently added technologies and modalities for producing culture.

When I set out to write this paper, I had in mind to take under consideration a notion of productive consumption. Miao and other minorities in China have been amply represented as cultural producers, valorized sources of archaic and vital traditions that kept China’s dwindling treasure house stocked with vestiges of particularity. What made each minority distinct, it was assumed, was their ongoing manufacture of cultural fragments tied to the variegated pasts of China’s multi-ethnicity. Consumption, on the other hand, I took as belonging to a kind of totalized modernity that was sweeping across the face of China. Consumption was a vehicle of assimilation, a mechanism for minorities’ participation in dominant, even global, culture, a vehicle for the supersession of spatial constraint. Consumer goods and styles, I assumed, were artifacts of a homogenizing urbanity which Miao struggled to engage or resist.

But just as significant work has been done on the notion of alternative modernities, I wanted here to explore instead the idea of alternative modalities of consumption and style. I wanted to ask whether it is not overly simplistic to think of consuming practices as necessarily sinicizing or urbanizing. What else might consumption do? As Michel de Certeau (1984) has suggested, consumption may be far from passive, but rather a creative and even tactical way of making use of the received products of
mass culture. Going beyond Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984a) notion that social classes use distinctions of taste and consumption style to reproduce themselves, highly elaborated cultural studies approaches exemplified by Paul Willis (1990), Angela McRobbie (1991), and John Fiske (1989) have argued that subordinated groups use consumption to actually create themselves through appropriations of dominant cultural fragments. Other critics, such as Paul Gilroy (1987), Kobena Mercer (1987), and Marie Gillespie (1995), revealed the heavy racial and ethnic freight carried by consuming practices that are instrumental in the formation of minority identities, affirming Dick Hebdige’s (1979) axiom that subculture is no less than the meaning of style.

The project of this paper, then, was to ask: Might rural China, the minority hinterlands, be thought of in any of these terms originally developed for cultural politics in complex Euro-American metropolises? Will Miao villagers take up newer technologies and style choices as means for marking themselves as Miao? Will consuming become an activity that is productive of and for the Miao? Will it emerge as one of the practices by which Miao seek to “emplace” themselves in an ongoing contest over China’s contemporary spatial hierarchy?¹

Asking questions about how Miao or other minorities might consume differently falls under the rubric of what could be called “ethnoconsumerism.” My sense of this concept goes beyond the definition offered by marketing specialist Alladi Venkatesh: “Ethnoconsumerism is the study of consumption from the point of view of the social group or cultural group that is the subject of study. It examines behavior on the basis of the cultural realities of that group” (1995: 27). To assert that every cultural group is always already characterized by a particular way of encountering consumer goods is to overlook the crucial signifying function of consumption in which identities are fashioned and distinctions marked actively and in relation to other social sectors. Consuming, then, can be thought of more as a practice of social positioning, following James Ferguson’s elaboration of the notion of “cultural style” for urbanites in Zambia’s copperbelt: “The concept of style can serve as a quite general analytic tool by being extended to include all modes of action through which people place themselves and are placed into social categories. Specifically, I use the term cultural style to refer to practices that signify differences between social categories” (Ferguson 1999: 95, emphasis in the original).

What is enabling about an approach such as Ferguson’s is that it can be applied not only to ethnic groups, but also to other class and status categories, and to the ongoing process of negotiating distinctions. The rural/urban divide – the focus of Ferguson’s analysis in Zambia – is an example of just such a set of categories, also highly salient in China, that is emergent and in many ways contingent on the deployment of style signifiers (Schein 2001). In any instance of rural–urban articulation, however, we are also dealing with the specific dynamisms of persons who have
engaged in negotiations over time within a particular regional context. Certain modes of signification, hence, will always inflect the practices of what Farquhar refers to as the “historically constituted consumer” (2001: 126). For this historical moment, one might ask then: How does the elaboration of rural Miao consumption articulate with the urbane experiences of returned workers from the cities? Are returned Miao workers simply agents of the erasure of local cultural particularity, or are they themselves forging migrant Miao forms of style? Studies of rural laborers, especially of rural women, entering industrialized spaces to labor have documented the acute social and personal tensions arising out of the contradictions between their nascent consumption desires and the economic demands of their home villages (Clark 1999; Freeman 2000; Mills 1999; Ong 1990; Wolf 1992). What these studies inadvertently generate is a model bifurcated into cosmopolitization of migrants as bearers of change and static farming villages unaltered by workers except for the impact of cash remittances. I want, instead, to explore here the kinds of fusions that take place between these two poles, and the ways in which a certain site might reveal the effects of burgeoning consumerism in localized and perhaps ethnicized ways.

In the process, I want to advance a formulation of translocality as a way of describing one of the most significant artifacts of youthful labor mobility. One of the things that is produced as young people go out to work is a complex web of linkages across space, a sense of places connected by the flow of workers back and forth from home to metropolis and of the concomitant movement of cultural sensibilities and style considerations between locales. Media have been critically important in the circulation of notions of consumerism and of images of particular desirable commodities and lifestyles, but these actual shuttlings of people are having an even greater impact on rural Miao localities, and even on the very constitution of “Miao locality” itself. In the course of such geographic transit, one of the things that is generated is a reconfigured spatial subjectivity characterized by a sense of connectedness, borne by villagers as well as migrants, that is both about personal and familial bonds across the vastness of China and about the growing mutual imbrication of that same city and country that had been frozen into separateness by Maoist policy. To pursue this trajectory, then, I borrow from developing works within the field of geography, works that are contributing to an ever more dynamic formulation of notions of space and scale, notions that supersede more inert or static conceptions of places and their interactions. The field of anthropology, with its traditional focus on localities, has much to gain from a theoretical articulation with geographic insights that bring translocality into greater visibility as a social practice and as an arena of struggle.\(^2\)

What follows is a series of vignettes, fragments gleaned from episodic moments of research on media, consumerism and translocality. Fieldwork has been sited primarily in the large Miao community of Xijiang in the
mountains of Southeast Guizhou province, but also in multiple towns and
cities where Miao reside and work. My interviewees, some of whose
stories will be encountered here, include Miao cultural and intellectual
elites as well as those who toil or have toiled in menial occupations in far-
flung parts of China. I took first at the role of media, especially television,
in the production of consumer desire and of a sense of connectedness to
distant metropolises. I then turn to clothing and fashion, to innovations
that are being made in Miao style, and the forms of signification implied in
different approaches to Miao dress. I then turn to the cultural politics of
labor migrants, especially returnees, and issues around their cultural and
economic capital as they re-enter the countryside.

Television’s doings

A new flower, one could say, has bloomed in every village of the Southeast
Guizhou Miao countryside since the late 1990s. It is white, sometimes the
height of a two-story house, and was planted by the government. Although
most people don’t know what it’s called, its roots extend underground,
creeping out to every household. In tandem with the removal of so many
longstanding state guarantees – in the form of social welfare, employment,
and development funding – what the state has sought to guarantee in the
late 1990s is satellite television reception for every village. In a growing
number of villages of the Miao countryside, as part of the Xibu Da Kaifa
or Opening the West policy, cable has been laid to every home, even
though in some communities the majority of households lack the resources
to purchase televisions.

Xijiang, also known as the Thousand Household Miao Village (Qian Jia
Miao Zhai), is a sprawling settlement of over 5,000 inhabitants. Nestled at
the foot of Leigong Shan, the highest mountain in the prefecture of South-
east Guizhou, it had long been hampered from receiving broadcast televi-
sion because of the precipitous mountains that blocked so many signals.
The Xijiang of 1999 was a village transformed. Sixty per cent of house-
holds, locals informed me, had television, 20 per cent of which were color.
Ten per cent were said to have purchased VCD players. Only a year later,
in the fall of 2000, Xijiang boasted a full 80–90 per cent of households with
TV. Foreign programming had increased and American movies were iden-
tified locally as one of the most favored types of programs for viewing. For
some, Titanic had become a phenomenon, with one residence even
adorned with a fan poster of “Jack” and “Rose.” For the first time, TV had
become so commonplace that I observed a form of viewing that has been
referred to as the “glance”, in which those with televisions in their homes
did not necessarily focus a directed gaze on the set itself for undistracted
viewing, but rather cast “a lazy eye over proceedings” (Ellis 1985: 137),
taking in programming in the context of other activities, and surrounded
by other visual stimuli (Naficy 1993: 106).
Members of less privileged Xijiang households that were not yet media-equipped went to neighbors’ houses to watch at night. Gone were the video houses that used to screen tapes for paid viewing in the early 1990s. In their place, rental shops for VCDs were proliferating. Xijiang’s movie theater had burned down a few years ago and had not been rebuilt. The local government has ceased to project entertainment films on great white sheets hung on the façade of the schoolhouse for all to see on starry nights. The privatization of media consumption proceeds apace as public viewing is replaced by domestic household reception.

Along with its movie theater and video houses, Xijiang’s Culture Station, which used to organize public events, movie screenings and dances, has also been eliminated. In 1999, what the state supports instead is a tourism office (which aids outside visitors in finding and photographing local color) and a broadcasting station. In the latter, a government employee works from 8 a.m. to 2 a.m., making sure that the transmission of nine channels from satellite dish via cable into homes goes smoothly, maintaining and installing cable hookups, and playing three movies a day on a dedicated tenth channel. Which channels are offered for Xijiangers to view – China Central TV 1, 2, 5, and 7, Guangdong TV, Shandong TV, Yunnan TV, Hunan TV, and Guizhou TV – is established, he reports, by the county of Leishan. The people’s favorite shows are news and movies. Other viewers tell me they benefit from technical agricultural information shows as well.

TV as instrument

The quest for TV in Miao villages is not only a grass-roots effort on the part of media-hungry villagers. It is also a very deliberate policy aimed at orchestrating change. Midway through the 1990s, as the story goes, some of China’s leaders had visited Miao areas and, shocked at the abject level of poverty, had decided to intensify development of communications and transport. Policies of economic privatization were upheld, and little actually changed in terms of economic development in the villages. What was changed, under a policy initiated by the central government in 1994, and abbreviated by the term “cun cun tong dianshi” (every village connected to television), was the priority placed on getting media hookups installed. Eighty per cent of the costs were to be absorbed by the central government. Now included under the broader rubric Xibu Da Kaifa, the effort exerted by the state to bring television and roads to minority villages was at least in part to accelerate an overhaul of peasant consciousness toward market mentalities (shichang sixiang). Meanwhile, the market-oriented driver of media production continued to register that such mentalities had not been achieved to any degree worthy of note. In a trade journal, Marketing Max, directed at advertisers, an article from 2000 celebrated the reach of Guizhou Satellite TV beyond provincial borders to national and
urban markets, boasting that it covered 27 per cent of the national population, ranking fourth after Shandong, Zhejiang, and Sichuan Satellites (Mou 2000: 102). Since Guizhou’s provincial media strategy was to intensify efforts to reach outward in quest of markets, what was in turn offered to peasants in Guizhou’s countryside was, then, a kind of pseudo-affiliation with national receiving audiences, since they were not yet identified as potential markets in and of themselves.

Connectedness, whether through the hard roads being constructed all over the countryside or the cultural signals transmitted through space, was to gradually modernize minds and enrich villages. Among the five top priorities for a poverty alleviation and development plan for the Mashan area of Southeast Guizhou, for instance, were not only improvement of basic living conditions, economic development and population control, but also connecting every village by satellite and by road.5 By the end of 1999, one estimate stated that 9,500 minority villages in Guizhou had satellite dishes; of these 4,000 were Miao villages, 2,000 of which were in Southeast Guizhou. The goal was to have every village equipped with satellite reception within five more years.6

TV, like the PA system that had bellowed through the villages before it, was to have an educative function, but now it was to socialize remote peoples to the consumption desires and profit-making schemes essential to the market transformation. Now that cable had been laid to every home in many Miao villages, a desire to purchase televisions was itself described as a potential spur to development: with cable access so close at hand, and nine channels now reliably received, Miao were envisioned as more likely to seek economic schemes to raise the cash that would enable them to bring “the world” into their households. The impact of avid television reception is indexed by the following: decades of formal public address had done little to propagate putonghua among Miao villagers; in 1999, by contrast, almost anyone I spoke with, of any age or gender, could understand Mandarin with ease. The current regime, in effect, had delegated the work of national linguistic standardization to the more muted modalities of the mediated pop domain.

Other forms of standardization are also schemed in the promulgation of television. Miao elites, passionate and nationalist researchers of their own minzu, described to me some of the effects they envisioned for TV. In the process, they conveyed their regard for the medium as an instrument of social incorporation that could bring minority peasants into the fold of state-promulgated modernity. In answer to my query about why the big push for television, one explained:

First, backwardness is a problem of sensibility (guannian). Television encourages Miao peasants to be civilized, orderly, developed. It makes their outlook (sixiang) more advanced. It introduces law and prevents economic disturbances. It advises them and teaches them. Second,
minority officials have been demanding television for their people in the countryside. Third, since it is necessary for the state to rule the minorities, television serves to win people over. Fourth, in China the peasants are so isolated that TV may be their only access to the outside world. They long to know more about the outside. Their minds are empty (kongbai) and TV fills the void.

Another Miao scholar described in more detail both what TV should do, and how peasants watched it:

Television is an educational tool. It helps to publicize the policies of the Communist Party and it unifies the people. What peasants want to watch is news, legal education programs, technical agricultural programs and shows about how to get rich. They aren’t interested in pornography, or in serials and stories. They know they are untrue. What happens when peasants watch TV is that their horizons are broadened, and their closed minds are opened up.

Permeating such discourses about the pedagogical potential of television are the distinctly spatialized notions of opening up, breaching the closed boundaries of the retrogressive minority peasant mind, cross-cutting it with wider knowledges. What happens in the uttering of such statements is one instance of the dynamic production of locality, of a highly freighted sense of the small places (difang) of Miao social life as characterized not only by geographic remoteness but also by confinement of outlook. The work of containment could actually be said to be active in such moments of the instantiation of scale, in which the small and the local are counterposed to the vast and the worldly in an unyieldingly rank-ordered social system. As Swyngedouw (1997b: 140) states:

Spatial scale is what needs to be understood as something that is produced; a process that is always deeply heterogeneous, conflictual, and contested. Scale becomes the arena and moment, both discursively and materially, where sociospatial power relations are contested and compromises are negotiated and regulated. Scale, therefore, is both the result and the outcome of social struggle for power and control.

Elite discourses and policies that produce Miao villages as the smallest and most closed types of locality must contend with other forms of scale-making in the use of media. State and sympathetic elites may seek through media to foster the market’s grip on the minds of minority peasants, but other messages may also come across in the course of television reception. A burgeoning internationalization of viewing content, of the type described by Arjun Appadurai (1996), Mayfair Yang (1997) and others, holds the potential for translocal social imaginings that exceed not only
locality but also Chinese borders. Foreign programming may precipitate what I have called “imagined cosmopolitanism” – a yearning for mediated membership in a chimeric and simulated boundaryless world of material abundance and supranational identities (Schein 1999). In this case, we encounter a dreamed-of affiliation with global culture that would symbolically release the Miao from their low-ranked sociocultural slot within China, allowing them to recast themselves, if only in fantasy, in a world less structured by impermeable hierarchies. Consuming media, then, could be seen as a means to simultaneously participating in Chinese reform and “linking up with the world,” even if only in fantasy fragments meted out by a narrow sampling of television stations.7

One night in Xijiang, I revisited a middle-aged woman whom I had interviewed previously as a returnee from garment labor in the nearest city. She was staying at home now, doing needlework alone in a bare room under a dim bulb with the flicker of a television shifting the light about the space. She was sewing to make money for her sons’ education, but, she confessed, sometimes she would get distracted by the television shows. Volunteering a succinct phrase, she made clear that television served as a vehicle of fantasy transport for her and for others like her who were otherwise confined by the impossibilities of their class position. With a resignation mingled with discontent, she sneered: “The rich travel; the poor watch TV.” Inadvertently defying the top-down pedagogical portrayal of television’s effects, she thereby narrated another volition: to, in the words of Neil Smith, “jump scales” – to symbolically transpose herself through her media consumption into the practices of a more mobile and prestigious class. As Smith puts it: “jumping scales allows [persons] to dissolve spatial boundaries that are largely imposed from above and that contain rather than facilitate their production and reproduction of everyday life” (1993: 90). Such a vision, on the part of a rural Miao television consumer, despite having no immediate economic ramifications, can be seen to conceptually reverse the directionality of scalar flow. In other words, rather than television being seen as a medium for the downward flow of educational content, it becomes a vehicle for the imagined upward flow of peasants into the cosmopolitan whirl of the “global subject,” dismantling, however chimerically, the picture of local constraint contained in the dominant stereotype of the “closed mind” and the bounded village.

Highly fashioned ethnicity

Another quite distinct form of “jumping scales” might be discovered in the fashioning of outward-looking but still highly ethnic body practices, a form of fusion that renders any mechanical cultural “placement” of the Miao highly unstable. The following vignette explores the incorporation of mediated images of transnational style into a classic type of venue for state-sponsored ethnic performance. In the fall of 2000, the Southeast
Guizhou Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture staged a new form of festival with heavy sponsorship from the government of the prefectural capital city of Kaili. With the hopeful design of drawing eager tourists of both domestic and foreign origin, it was titled the Festival of Clothing Culture of the Miao and Dong of Southeast Guizhou. In most other instances, such showcase festivals in Guizhou had staged elements of the past, the quaint customs for which the province was so well known due to its high proportion of minorities. By contrast, what “clothing culture” meant for this newfangled event was an exuberant celebration of hybridized culture, of the embrace of “modern style” in ethnic format.

A huge stadium had been transformed into a stage with an imposing painted backdrop, a polychrome composite of the famous Dong drum tower, the Miao patterned bronze drum and a Chinese dragon motif. On either side were a novel form of adornment – advertising banners of corporate sponsors. Forty-nine delegations, a total of several thousand people, represented Southeast Guizhou’s cities, towns, and counties, as well as workunits such as the postal service, the agricultural bank, schools and performing troupes. The show went on for approximately four hours.

There was considerable variation in how “clothing culture” was displayed. Some of the performances featured traditional-style costumes and musical instruments, but they were almost always specially fabricated for the event. Other performances were showcases of new forms of style. In these fanciful interpretations, the stuff of rural ethnic life had been remolded to emulate the forms of cosmopolitan fashion that had been studied from television. Bare shoulders and miniskirts, exposed midriffs and spaghetti straps, platform shoes and ultra-high heels were common motifs. Fabrics were in the brilliant colors achieved only through synthetic dyes – reds, yellows, hot pinks, orange, chartreuse and turquoise – and many had satiny sheens that were the antithesis of the rough-hewn textiles of country handicraft. Short clacking skirts were fashioned out of rustic wooden spoons or hearth brooms, while wooden bowls or silver coils were fastened over breasts with the flimsiest of straps. Like pasties, all manner of molded cups protruded from breasts with ornaments from daily life added to accentuate pointiness. In one case, the famed short skirt of the Duanqun Miao, which is a tightly pleated skirt that extends only to the hips and is worn over pants, was adapted into the briefest of miniskirts, the pants now removed. Some skirt styles were refashioned such that they were not skirts at all, but clingy shorts and hotpants. Sometimes calves were adorned with fabric wraps, anklets or other jewelry designed to evoke the leggings that in former times would have been carefully wrapped to conceal any skin, but now coyly covered the bottom of the leg while the knees and thighs offered an expanse of exposed flesh. Sequins, sparkles, feathers and silver abounded. One type of headdress was in the style of a birdcage, while another simulated a giant decorated wooden comb of the type used by country girls to hold the hair in place at the back.
of their heads. Tourist kitsch items were fastened onto skirts. Other performers flaunted long red evening gowns, or flowing skirts of azure blue accented with tiny fragments of rural embroidery. Women were strikingly tall, their faces heavily made up.

In a certain sense, music and dance, longtime staples of ethnic events, had been superseded, becoming a mere vehicle for the display of clothing. Model culture permeated the presentation of whatever dance or song was offered. Even many groups who were staging rural-style performances paused at the end to have the performers swish toward the audience and slowly turn to show off every angle of their costume. Ballet-schooled performers kicked their legs up toward their heads in a can-can type maneuver. Photographers swarmed at the edge of the performing area, scrambling to get close-ups of the costumed women as they moved to and from the stage. More than simply a supplement to an otherwise aural and kinetic cultural program, the costumes had become the cultural epicenter of this lavish display. Grooming and style were the point of the festival, and modeling sparred with dancing as the preferred mode of display.

I asked a middle-aged Miao singer who had been a professional performer for decades what she thought of the transformations in costume styles. As I’d seen the previous evening, her ethnic song and dance troupe had also widened its repertoire, so that now they performed not only in simulations of traditional costume but also in hot pants and miniskirts, as well as in Western-style flowing evening gowns complete with hoops to make them flare out flamboyantly. “New clothing styles convey prosperity,” she said. “The old styles and the new styles each have their strengths. To develop (fazhan) the clothing is also beautiful.” Again, she narrated the desire to break the lock on global sociospatial hierarchy: “It shows that our country is also prosperous.” I asked her about the preponderance of revealed flesh in the new costume styles. “Everyone’s watching TV, and wants to learn more and more (xuexi xuexi),” she quipped. “They think what they see on TV is so beautiful.”

The language of beauty is found on the lips of many who appraise costumes and dress styles in Miao country. Beauty is commonly equated with novelty and modernity in these discourses, and the conflation characterizes both the appeal of the spectacle that is television and the panorama that is newfangled costume on display. By contrast, costume, or any form of ethnic look, is not the style of choice among young people as they display themselves in their country lives, coming and going about the villages, or promenading on market day in search of counterparts for courting. Most young Miao women in the Xijiang region are no longer willing to wear their hair up in the regional Miao style. Some have long pony tails down their backs, others have gone to the beauty parlors that have opened up in town to get fashionable cuts and even permanents. They wear sweats, polyester pants, occasional skirts and all manner of blouses, eschewing the handmade and embroidered jackets that used to be daily uniforms. In
recent years more and more of these new items are purchased during and brought back from dagong sojourns in the city, as treasures from those metropolitan vanguard sites from which style-modernizing tutelage has been gained. And such tutelage is typically blended with improvisation, in keeping with a globalized characteristic of youth culture as experimental and productive. Novel combinations emerge, signaling not a simple – or slavish – emulation of the urban, but rather yet another scale-jumping to the fluid and often self-consciously innovative domain of economically constrained consuming youth. On market day it is possible to spot hot pants, or a leather skirt, or platform shoes worn along the roads and paths of Xijiang. For sale on market day are a growing range of lipstick hues, an abundance of padded and contoured bras, and multiple styles of panties and girdles.

Watching, learning, improvising – the always partial appropriation of urbane knowledges – is much of what rural beauty culture is about. Zhang Zhen described the ever more mediated urban climate in which style is elaborated:

In the 1980s, fashion and new trends discreetly but decidedly began to reshape Chinese women’s self-perception and gender awareness. By the early 1990s, however, flourishing media (popular magazines, television, film, video, karaoke, advertising, and so on) began to transmit on a much broader scale images of a new breed of young women, emphasizing fashion, sensuality, sexuality, social mobility, and the fast-moving tempo of a postsocialist consumerist society.

(2000: 98)

However, consumerist overhaul notwithstanding, the vendors along Xijiang’s market strip complain that not enough people are actually buying their wares. Instead, a more directed kind of flaneurship (Benjamin 1973), imbibing the messages of media and the spectacle of goods as so many lessons, guides many approaches to consuming. A middle-aged teacher tells me she loves to watch ads for make-up on TV. I ask her why, since she herself doesn’t buy or wear make-up. “Because I learn how to take care of my skin,” she explains without hesitation.

In this instance, unlike the wooden pedagogies attributed by elites to media’s function that we saw in the previous section, the educational potential of media is something fabulated by the recalcitrant consumer. Ads are intended to promote sales of beauty commodities, or at least to urge those of meager resources to quest for more cash to spend – on dominant cultural products. But Miao cultural practices complicate the linearity of such exchanges. Whether appropriating beauty culture to then craft ethnic costumes out of local materials, or watching ads and browsing commodities so as to gain knowledges without giving up cash, both serve to reconfigure the prevailing ideology of the market, substituting – at least
in part – the status strivings around beauty for the clean exchange of commodities.

**Signifying dress**

Indeed, cultures of beauty and grooming may be one of the most ubiquitous imports that migrants bring back to home villages when they return. The jostling together of so many different approaches to style that are to be witnessed on Xijiang’s market day is testimony to the multifarious hybridizations that are inscribed on the surface of the body as migrants move between spaces. Such differences cannot be placed on a clean continuum from country exotic to the urbane modern for they are crosscut with multiple regional inflections and self-representational intentions. As Ferguson suggests, any local elaborations of style are subject both to individual impulses and to several kinds of constraints:

> The idea of style as a cultivated competence implies an active process, spread across historical and biographical time, situated both within a political-economic context and within an individual life course. Such a complex process involves both deliberate self-making and structural determinations, as well as such things as unconscious motivations and desires, aesthetic preferences, and the accidents of personal history. (Ferguson 1999: 101)

For minorities, grooming along the lines of urban conformity may have to do not only with the prestige of the metropolis but also with the stigma of non-Han ethnicity as materialized on the body. Naficy, in a discussion of newly minoritized Iranians in the US, suggests that dislocated peoples may use beautification for very pointed purposes: “The wide use of makeup, hair dye, and plastic surgery among Iranians may stem partially from their desire – common among immigrant groups – to hide or remove marks of ethnic physiognomy, particularly when the host society is perceived to be hostile” (1993: 144). Gillette has argued that young women of the Hui minority in China use the adoption of Western bridal gowns in a similar de-ethnicizing fashion: “By donning such bridal attire, Hui women created images of themselves that contravened the parochial, backward, and ‘primitive’ stereotypes the state perpetuated on China’s ethnic minorities. They carved out for themselves, their families, and their community identities that appeared prosperous, cosmopolitan, and modern” (Gillette 2000: 106). Such types of self-effacing practices on the part of Miao migrants may seem a far cry from the wooden-spoon miniskirts and the hyper-ethnicized representations seen in the Clothing Festival. Yet the distinction is not necessarily that clear-cut: festival models showcasing ethnic looks also dye their hair and groom themselves according to many of the dominant beauty codes, insisting on the exposure of skin as a signifier of the modern.
Meanwhile, it is the more ethnonationalist elites that reflect discerningly on the changes in style seen among young people. In a discussion with senior Miao scholars, the topic of costume preservation came up. I posed the apparent contradiction contained in the current consensus that tourism is the best vehicle for developing the Southeast Guizhou Miao regions. Minority peasants, according to development policy, need to rely on tourism to modernize and become wealthy, yet tourism prescribes that they will continue to live and appear to visitors in traditional garb. For women the dilemma is particularly acute, since one of the things they would love to do with any newfound prosperity is to overhaul their appearance to be more urbane and fashionable, yet one of the biggest draws for tourists is to view them in quaint and ethnic costume. “This is not a problem,” expounded one of the scholars. “Throughout history, Miao have found a way of preserving their distinctiveness, even as they adapt to new circumstances and alter their culture. This is but the latest in a long history of changes, and I have no doubt that eventually Miao women will take the modern styles and make them their own, make them Miao.” This scenario – an ethnicizing of styles adopted from the mainstream culture industry – is what might be referred to as ethnoconsumerism. Yet in terms of fashion I saw no hint of this type of re-ethnicizing effort in the countryside. It was in Beijing that I encountered a Miao who appeared to be pursuing this type of agenda, and more as a cultural producer than as a consumer.

Wei Ronghui

Wei Ronghui is in her mid-forties, a Miao from Guizhou, a woman of Beijing. She came of age as China was coming out of Maoism and her career bears the imprint of that older era when the state took greater responsibility for “bringing up” (peiyang) minority young people from the countryside, fashioning them and instating them as urban professionals. All over Beijing, Miao elites warn me that it will not be easy to get in touch with Wei Ronghui. She is very busy, they admonish; she is very well known (hen you mingqi). I catch up with Wei at one of her several offices. It is after dinner on a weeknight – her good Miao friend, a producer at Beijing Television, who has taken me to dinner, has been unable to cajole her into joining us to eat, despite calling her on the cell phone repeatedly.

Wei appears unassuming, a kerchief in her unstyled shoulder-length hair, wire-rimmed glasses. She wears a maxi skirt and platform shoes, and speaks very softly. She is Vice-Director of the Museum of Nationalities and Director of the Institute for Research on the Costumes of Chinese Nationalities. More recently she has become Director and General Designer of the Research and Design Center for Costumes of Nationalities at the Museum of Nationalities. It is not her official posts that have earned her so much acclaim, however. Wei has become a recognized
designer of high fashion. Her work has shown in Paris, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Singapore, and the United States.

Wei’s background is rural and unremarkable. She went to local schools when she was young. During the Cultural Revolution she was sent from school to the countryside to cut trees. In 1976 she tested into the Central Nationalities Institute where she studied philosophy, then became a teacher of it. She was well on her way to becoming part of the apparatus for turning minority college students into Chinese citizens schooled in Marxism-Leninism when she transferred to the Nationalities Museum and her talents started to show. While she was curating and doing research on ethnic costume, she started designing on her own.

Her designs are flamboyant, guided by a vision of the fusing of haute couture with components and elements from minority costume. She distinguishes her work from the ethnic fashion that has become widespread in city shops all over China – jackets made of batik cloth, shoulder bags with embroidered panels. She doesn’t want to do that. Her promotional brochure reads “From Barbarism to Modernity” (Cong Manhuang dao Xiandai). In it are pictured flowing gowns of bright shiny blue fabric accented with a colorful sash, off-the-shoulder wrap tops in fabric resembling Uighur dress, miniskirts and other forms of exposed flesh, headpieces so outlandish they might only be worn on a fashion runway, never in a minority village. Some of these styles had been showcased in the Southeast Guizhou Clothing Culture Festival. Indeed, she actually takes credit for the trendy innovations that so many provincial designers now mimic, asserting that she invented the style that merged the ethnic with the sexy with the fashion runway look.

Wei sees herself as a player in the global fashion scene, but she is also a devoted Miao ethnic. She talks with passion about Miao handicrafts, asserting that they are perhaps the best and most diverse in the world. She wants to put up money to start a school where old women would be hired as teachers to transmit their craft to younger women who might otherwise be uninterested. She has plans for a craft museum in Beijing. She hates that the Miao countryside is getting plundered by traders and collectors and no longer wants to use original pieces in her own works. Living, like so many migrants, in the translocal circuit, she travels back to Guizhou frequently to see her family but no longer to make collections of antique textiles. Everything she makes, she wants to design based on inspirations from the collections she already has. “I want to continue to develop styles. Developing them is the way to preserve them. I need to do deep research into the colors, the craftsmanship, the fabrics, etc. Only after really knowing something can I design an outfit.”

At the same time that she deepens her engagement with Miao “tradition,” Wei also wants to elevate the prestige and visibility of these bits of ethnicity to the level of global recognition. She wants to be the agent that allows Miao ethnic dress to “jump scales,” to circulate translocally.
“There’s always been a sense,” she says, “that ethnic things couldn’t make it into the highest levels. Now I want elites to be able to imagine wearing these styles. Look at Christian Dior. They made a big hit out of Miao silver. Once the foreigners had designed beautiful things with minority material, Chinese also saw how beautiful the clothing could be. Traditional looks have been revived.”

Trans-cultures

It is largely through the mobility – social, cultural, and spatial – of internal migrants that the effects of such elite cultural currents are in turn registered in purported backwaters and localities of the minority countryside. The impact of returnees is felt acutely in the recasting of notions of style and of consumption. Even in 1999 and 2000, although nationwide there had been a breathtaking overhaul in commodity culture, little had changed in Miao villages in Southeast Guizhou in terms of what was available on the market. Tiny shops dotted villages selling sundries such as matches, batteries, candy and other small functional goods. There was a slight increase in the availability of print media for sale, especially on market day, when an occasional poster, or a selection of framed artwork, sometimes of stars from the Chinese media, would trickle into circulation. As we’ve seen, beauty goods were more abundant than other commodities, with face creams, lipsticks and shampoos gaining ground as local wares. The rise of beauty culture was no doubt augmented by the presence of hairdressers who, identifying themselves as “from Hunan,” represented yet another form of internal migrant. Their little salons flaunted posters of stylish haircuts and seductive postures, textbooks for the look of urbanity.

As I’ve said, the impulse to actually purchase newfangled commodities was not taking hold among many of the older generations, and this was an area in which the role of migrant returnees was major. But more than actual durable goods, it was leisure culture and lifestyle changes that were coming home with the laborers. Within one Miao family, five grown children exemplified the range of life courses, the reach of translocal ties, and the effects of having gone out to dagong. Two daughters were married into villages within the region, and one daughter had been willingly married out to a Han groom on the coast through an introduction by another Miao family that had previously given their daughter to a coastal Han family. Prized for being loyal, honest and diligent, the region boasted more and more such Miao young women who were experiencing internal migration through marriage rather than labor. As affines, the new in-law families were now engaged in an unprecedented shuttling between Han and Miao regions that had formerly had little contact. Meanwhile, the family’s elder son was laboring in Guangdong together with his wife and child. The youngest son had tried to go out to work in the Shenzhen area and returned because, as he told it, he didn’t like it, he missed home. After
living in tents, eating poorly, being underpaid and laid off, and harassed by the police who beat him to extract fines, he gave up and came home, complaining bitterly of the hard work, the bad food, the social unrest (luan) and lack of culture (meiyou wenhua) of the people on the coast. Seventeen years old, he helped his parents with agricultural labor and, as was to be expected in the region, cruised distant villages to court girls of families with surnames different from his own. When his father was out of earshot he confided to me that he had four or five girlfriends, but hadn’t settled on one yet.

I couldn’t help but wonder whether his success in the potential marriage market had something to do with the cultural capital he had brought back with him from his truncated sojourn in the cosmopolitan world of coastal labor. Although he’d refused to stay, he’d developed an appetite for popular culture, and spent his time at home hovering around the family’s newly acquired VCD player with color screen, the pride of the village. His favorite was music VCDs, with gyrating dancers, glamorous, crooning vocalists and oddly intercut scenery providing the accompanying images for songs from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. To my shame, I couldn’t engage him when he asked me by name about my preferences for multiple popular singers for I was not nearly as up on them as he was. I asked to take a photo of him and his teenaged friend watching the VCDs in the Miao family living room. I was intending a “candid” shot of the activity, but instead they took this as an opportunity to demonstrate their skills in the fashion domain. They put on oversized blazers and sunglasses over their dressed down country garb. Then they rigged up their karaoke microphones and posed together with the technology feigning to be two more crooning pop stars.

These moments, which I have elsewhere referred to as “performances of modernity” (Schein 2000: 254–279), are significant not as simple emulations of urban Han culture, but because they demonstrate the viability of the culture of the modern within the Miao domain. Internal labor migration is never as straightforward as the flow outward from villages and toward cities and urbanization. The cultural politics swirling around and through minority villages, and the practices of translocality precipitated by the movement of laborers, fosters a situation, and a concomitant prestige structure, in which Miao villagers strive to fuse the local with the urbane, to fashion ways of being Miao that are no longer tethered to stigmatized backwardness and inflexible tradition. In the process, hybrid cultural and economic forms emerge, reflecting both the portable consumption tastes of migrant returnees and the intense desires of locals to participate in the modernities that are taking the country by storm.

**Disco localized**

One such new form surprised me when, in 1999, I arrived back in the community of Xijiang after an absence of several years. Just off the main
strip lined by small shops, and behind the lively arcade where local butchers peddle fresh meat by day, a tiny country disco has opened. Signaled only by a snazzy sign reading Wu Ting out on the street, the entrance is understated. Some of the older people I asked told me there was no disco in operation. When I pressed them, saying I had heard there was and seen the sign, they said it operated only on market days. But when I went to look for it, it was quietly there. And it was far from quiet inside.

Apparently, it was mostly the young clientele that knew there was such a disco in town and knew how to find its entrance. There you pay 1 yuan to a middle-aged woman proprietor at the door and you pass through a red curtain into a darkened space, clouded by thick cigarette smoke, that could be anywhere in the world. The disco ball turns lazily above the crowd, showering the room with tiny spots of light, while light strips inset into the floor flash in different colors controlled by the MC. Sometimes the high-velocity percussion of a strobe light is added, also at the hands of Tang (a pseudonym), the man behind the bar. A thirty-one-year-old Xijiang native who had spent time in big cities, Tang had brought the disco ambience to the country to sell to young people. Still farming by day, this was his sideline venture. Yet, he lamented, it cost so much money that he didn’t know if he could keep it open.

Tang’s narrative was one of personal initiative fused with the teleology of cultural overhaul in the market transition. Ever since he was a second-grader, he recounted, dancing had been his hobby (aihao). Later he had learned by watching TV, randomly appropriating whatever he was able to (luan xue, luan tiao). In 1995, he had gone off to Fujian to dagong. He went by himself, confident, as he told it, that he could adapt to anything. He found work as a carpenter. At home, he had left land, a wife, an unborn child and his parents. Because his family still farms the land for livelihood, it had been possible for Tang to launch this losing enterprise when he returned from Fujian. Twelve thousand yuan, he had invested here. He started out the disco venture in a smaller village outside Xijiang where there was space on the second floor of the government building. In those days, everyone patronized the new business, old and young, out of curiosity. In the blush of success, he moved to Xijiang when a space became available. Here he has to pay 200 yuan a month in rent, plus eight types of taxes and fees totaling almost 500 a month. He would need to make 30 yuan a night to break even, but calculates he probably averages only 15. The posted cover charge is 2 yuan, but locals know he will only insist on 1 yuan per person. To drum up business, he’s added an illuminated billboard in the center of town to lure customers with promises of karaoke and Mahjong; but he doesn’t have the funds to start up these activities.

He shows off the extensive technology that he flaunts as an Oz-like wizard behind a high counter. There he varies the lighting, adjusting the strobe and the flashing lights inset in the floor while changing the music
among any number of mainstream pop songs. He learned how to use the equipment from watching others and from a Taiwanese boss he had had in Fujian. He also learned to dance through mimicking. In Fujian, he used to go to discos, and eventually had hired a dance teacher. He then went on to attempt to fulfill the reform era dream – to merge his personal tastes with his city-acquired skills to bring modernization home, and to make money while doing it.

The high counter that houses the disco technology has not succeeded as a refreshments venue and nor has the secluded side room set up for private groups. Young people don’t spend their scarce cash on drinks or snacks. But they do come up with enough to get through the door and to dance in provocative embrace to slow pop music, some with same-sex partners. Local codes of conduct are still developing. Tang’s wife, who takes cover charge at the door, doesn’t dance, and has no interest, but she doesn’t mind if he dances with others. According to Tang, the local etiquette is that you must be acquainted with someone to dance with them, but you don’t need to be romantically involved. Although many protest that they don’t know how to dance, the level of improvisation is high, with a variety of more and less formal styles coexisting on the dance floor. What’s important is to be there, to be willing to dance, as some are more than others, to be kinesthetically part of this imported slice of modern leisure that means so much in terms of local prestige. Engaging in newfangled activities, then, has become one of the ways that young people pursue courtship amid the time-honored modes of standing out on the bridge and chatting under the stars, or singing antiphonal songs at special festivals.

What has been the impact of the disco beyond its walls? Intergenerational relations have been affected to some degree. To my surprise, parents and members of the older generations didn’t openly voice opposition to the advent of the disco as a new part of Xijiang’s social landscape. What they voiced instead was the new empowerment of young people, the feeling that elders could no longer intervene in spending practices, leisure choices, or morals. According to the owner, at the outset, the biggest concerns of locals were that the disco would make too much noise, disturbing their sleep, or that it would encourage young people to waste too much money. When I asked them, I sensed significant disapproval, but only in the passive form, reflecting the overhaul of economic authority that uneven reform policy has wrought. “I don’t know what they do in there,” elders would mumble, “There’s nothing we can do about it.” About her children, two local students, one mother said, “Their main responsibility is to study; we don’t let them go out. The disco is only for older kids who have finished school.” Most of the people who frequented Xijiang’s disco, it was explained to me, were those returned from the coastal areas and the cities where they had gone to dagong, to supplement family incomes by selling their cheap labor for wages in factory production. There they had learned the practices of urbanity, and had come to crave them enough that
they would be willing to spend money to have them recreated at home – under parents’ watchful but resigned eyes. And there they had gained the economic means to make cultural innovations without regard for their elders’ judgements.

As a sideline venture, then, Xijiang’s disco was not making it economically, but its other forms of social import cannot be overlooked. So compelling was the draw of having a tiny oasis of urbanity within the Miao countryside, that Tang was willing to keep operating the business at a financial loss to himself. The disco had become a kind of alternate classroom, where young people shared their modern knowledges, acting as each other’s teachers and collectively remaking their customary evening cruising practice into a new hybrid. In this privileged space, identities were also being made. Farrer has analyzed the role of discos in Shanghai, as intimately implicated in identity production: “For youth, the disco was a space apart from everyday life for work on the self. It was not a space to display who they were, but who they wanted to be” (2000: 246). For Xijiang youth, ethnically and spatially removed from the pulse of Shanghai trendsetting, who they wanted to be was a polyglot and emerging compound. For these were the returned youth, or those who had never gone out to dagong, and their investment in home and its refashioning as a place that could be both Miao and modern could not be effaced.

Conclusions

I originally set out in this article to determine whether a distinctively Miao form of ethnoconsumerism was being practiced in the Miao countryside, and to ask how a burgeoning Miao translocality might be affecting that practice. The vignettes here reveal more hybridized and negotiated scenarios. Miao in rural locales, increasingly immersed in the cultures of consumerism purveyed through media, are in one sense caught up in the prestige of the modern style of which cities are the ultimate icons. Many adopt that style uncritically, albeit partially. A great many adopt it only in sensibility, watching, learning, but lacking the funds to participate in any more material fashion in the consumption frenzy. While there is no clear sense of an alternative Miao approach to consumerism in my findings, it is precisely that partiality that makes for the particular inflections of Miao consumption. As we saw with the disco, and with the sensibilities of other migrant returnees, taking up fragments of urbanity occurs side by side with valorizing home and with wanting to retain some measure of local life-ways. It is out of this kind of accommodation that admixtures are fashioned, giving Miao consumption a more distinct cast, a character outside of blind emulation.

It is noteworthy that the increase in movement and exchange between sites, and between city and country, has produced both hyper- and de-ethnicization. For the Miao and other minority labor migrants, the move
out of the villages may be for a menial toil that effaces their identity, but may also be for a kind of service work that includes performing their cultural uniqueness for dominant consumption. The experiences of each kind of migrant have produced differing valuations of Miao culture, defying the stereotype that to move to the city is simply to be subsumed into a homogenizing dominant culture of consumerism.

It is likewise noteworthy that Miao elites, such as Wei Ronghui and those who commented on the transformation of Miao women’s dress, have distinctive perspectives on the maintenance and promotion of Miao style. These concerns were also generated out of translocal experiences on the part of those cultural specialists who had lived long-term in Han urban settings in professions that had been tied up with promoting, researching or somehow brokering their cultural uniqueness. But for more youthful urban migrants, on the other hand, concerns about somehow staying Miao, or keeping the countryside Miao, were nothing less than irrelevant as they struggled with their newfound consumer yearnings, their awareness of the poverty at home, their longstanding desires for modernity, and their passion to escape ethnic stigma. It was this complex of longings that insured that consumption would not happen in any generic Miao way.

If we can talk about Miao ethnoconsumerism, then, it is not in terms of pre-existing cultural codes that shape the way Miao receive products of dominant culture, but rather as a creative practice aimed at merging the passion for the modern with the affection for the familiar and the local. Out of these impulses come new cultural forms such as the Clothing Festival, Wei Ronghui’s designs, mountain karaoke and the Xijiang disco. Again, it is not only the forms, the cultural fragments, that are produced here, but also the recasting of Miao places as nodes in the network of translocal flows rather than as the endpoints of “development.” They exemplify instead what Doreen Massey has called a more “progressive” sense of place: “Instead . . . of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extra-verted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local” (1993: 66). It is through a remaking of place along these very lines, that Miao consumer-producers make the fixity of scales appear less certain.

It bears highlighting that the spatial dimension is strongly conditioning of these productive acts, for it is out of the great disjunctions between the coastal metropolises and the Miao mountains, and out of the intensified linkages between these two putative “poles,” that such new forms emerge as actual artifacts of translocality that trouble easy polarities. And because not only new styles, but also new cultural practices are appearing, it is no longer possible to categorize these phenomena solely as consumption. The lines between the local and the urbane, between cultural production and consumption become blurred and it becomes more appropriate to think in

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terms of productive consumption. Both style and space come to be actively worked in Miao translocality. It may be that one of the ways that we could distinguish Miao, and perhaps other minorities’, consumption, then, is that it is just so very productive.

Notes

1 I adopt the term “emplace” here to signify the processual character of struggles over sociospatial location. Whereas a phrase such as “to be hierarchically placed” risks an overly static description of social structure, the notion of emplacement allows for more ongoing sociocultural negotiation over the rank-ordering of space.

2 For a sample of works within anthropology that exemplify the openings of a conversation about space and place, see Moore (1998), Feld and Basso (1996) and Gupta and Ferguson (1997).

3 Fieldwork was carried out for short periods in 1999, 2000 and 2001 against the backdrop of extended research over four stays in Xijiang between 1985 and 1993. Research has also been conducted in Beijing, Guiyang, Kaili, Leishan and other Miao villages. I am extremely grateful to the people of Xijiang for their ongoing participation in the project. I am also grateful to Rutgers University and to the Rutgers Research Council for support of ongoing research.

4 It is not only the state, however, that in effect limits reception of stations in the countryside. Since provincial and local stations all over China must pay a sizable “landing fee” (luodi fei) to have their signals received in any given province, it is also likely that market-conscious stations elsewhere have not calculated Guizhou residents’ potential as consumers to be worthy of their initial investment. Ironically, while television is touted as an instrument for the marketization of sixiang, it is in part the market itself that de facto becomes an agent of exclusion of those already on the margins. I am indebted to Jing Wang for this insight about the mechanics of “landing fees.”


6 The account in this paragraph is based on information compiled by Miao scholar-journalist Long Jiangang of Foshan University.

7 See Zhang Zhen’s (2000: 93) discussion of the phrase “yu shijie jiegui,” literally “linking up with the tracks of the world,” which she glosses as “China’s desire to catch the last train of global modernity.”
8 Anhui *baomu* in Shanghai
Gender, class, and a sense of place

_Wanning Sun_

Anhui, *baomu*, and popular culture – an introduction

The most enduring image of Anhui is its poverty. Having worked in the agricultural irrigation project for many years, I have come into contact with people all over China at national conferences, seminars and training courses. Each time I introduce myself as being from Anhui, the response I get is monotonously predictable: Ah, Anhui, a poor place, many beggars, and peasant migrants, and Wuwei *baomu* (maids). It seems that maids from Wuwei are as (in)famous as the beggars from Fengyang in the past. What makes me angry is that we are called ‘poor’ not just by those developed provinces, but also by those dirt-poor provinces in central and western China which are much worse off than we are. My consistent attempts to quote statistics proving Anhui’s economic growth and its exact ranking on the national scale are usually dismissed as bluff. Are we really poor? My knowledge of the agricultural development nationwide tells me that Anhui is below national average. Indeed many provinces are better off than we are, but there are also plenty of provinces which are worse off than Anhui. Given this, the question is why Anhui has such a special claim to the image of poverty. In my view, there could be a number of reasons. First, people are used to the logic: unless you are really poor, you would not become a maid in someone else’s house. *Baomu* belongs to the ‘low caste’ (*xia deng ren*). Anhui produces *baomu* and therefore Anhui is poor. Second, historical memory is hard to erase. Starvation during the three-year famine saw more people die in Anhui than any other places in the country. Itinerant beggars from Fengyang accompanied by the sound of flower-drum (*hua gu*) became an ubiquitous sight in many places outside Anhui. Third, we have not been very smart in promoting a positive image of Anhui to outsiders. As a result, apart from the Yellow Mountain, the only things which outsiders come to associate with Anhui are things such as floods and famine, children dropping out of school due to poverty, or endless supply of maids.

(Zhang 2001: 4)
As a native of Anhui, and having the experience of living in Shanghai for ten years, this writer’s view resonates with me. He is an agricultural scientist from Anhui. I quote him at length here because his protests over a hegemonic representation of Anhui serve as a useful point of departure for me to talk about place identity, spatial imagination, and representation of place in popular culture. Zhang’s persistent interventions in these popular constructions of Anhui prove to be consistently futile. His account points to the politics of ‘geographical imagination’ (Massey 1995a) and the power which is involved in describing, interpreting and indeed imagining a place.

The most recent evidence of the tenacity of such images can be found in a film made by Wang Xiaoshuai, a most accomplished sixth-generation filmmaker. Guniang Biandan (So Close to Paradise, 2002) is set in Wuhan, Hubei Province. The film is about rural migrants in the city, and at one point in the film, Dongzi, an ‘inarticulate’ country lad from the rural area of Wuhan, has a fall-out with his bosom friend over a woman. One day, eating a bowl of noodles in a roadside noodle hut with his friend and his girlfriend, Dongzi decides to annoy his friends by requesting two itinerant beggar-singers to stand by his table and sing for them. At the price of a few cents, the two young women, or to be more precise girls, dressed in shabby clothes, with an intimidated and submissive look on their faces, sing a tune from Tianxianpei, a ‘yellow-plum’ (Huangmei) folk opera known to be indigenous to southern Anhui. Here the iconicity of Anhui is recognisable at two levels: the age-old image of the itinerant beggars from Fengyang, roaming around the country singing sad tunes in exchange for a morsel of food; and the default association of Huangmei folk opera with Anhui. The presence of the beggar-singers in the film may be just a gratuitous detail contributing to the formation of the mise-en-scène of China’s urban landscape. However, what is interesting and most telling about this detail is a naturalisation process, by which a connection between ‘poverty’ and ‘Anhui’ is, once again, made to seem an unquestionable part of the nationally shared knowledge.

Let’s return to Zhang, our writer from Anhui whose quote starts this chapter. His frustration raises the question of power in the definition and interpretation of a place: who is in a position to claim legitimacy in describing a place and why? Zhang’s account linking the history of begging with the current export of Anhui maids to Shanghai and Beijing households also points to an important dimension in spatial imagination. Indeed, as is the case with the imagination of any place, in constructing a sense of place, what is described or interpreted is not just a place, but a place which has lived through time, or what is sometimes referred to as ‘the envelope of space-time’ (Jess and Massey 1995). Given this, the question arises as to how certain attributes of a place come to gain ‘popularity’ in spite of the inherently selective nature of these attributes. History seems selectively remembered in ways which enable certain aspects of a place to
have a more tenacious hold on the popular imagination in spite of consistent attempts – on the part of those who claim to be more informed about the place – to de-emphasise these attributes. For instance, in spite of the provincial government and the state media’s concerted efforts to repackage the image of Anhui by promoting the natural beauty of the Yellow Mountain, the once dazzling prosperity of the Hui merchant class and the impressive cultural legacy created by the Hui merchant culture, and the well-established tradition of respecting and producing literati and intellectuals in Anhui, it is the image of the poverty of Anhui, embodied in the figures of the maid and the beggar, which tends to ‘stick’ in the national imagination. Given this, the pressing question to ask, and indeed this is the central question this chapter seeks to explore, is: what is the relationship between the images of place and space produced in popular cultural representations and the popular perceptions which circulate and perpetuate in the national consciousness?

I suggest that what is involved in the popular representation of Anhui is not simply a set of views about Anhui held by people from more developed provinces, but a systematic deployment of a discourse which establishes or reinforces a structural dichotomy between centres and peripheries, between knower and known, the independent and the dependent. Such discourse arises in tandem with actual uneven state economic development policy, and for this reason, I argue that the actual history of uneven development and the cultural stereotypes of a place are mutually reinforcing. In this sense, directly homologous with discourses of the Orient described by Said (1978) is a marking out in language of an object to be known, the construction of an opposition between the knower and the known, the active and the passive, the rational and the irrational.

On the basis of this premise, I will in this chapter look at the production and consumption of a product – the servitude of the Anhui maid – and consider an associated ‘meta-product’ – the imagination of the ‘Anhui’ in the urban consciousness and popular cultural representations. The ‘Anhui baomu’, who has travelled the trajectory of mobility from servant to the state to that of the market, has acquired the status of a brand name, a product which circulates in the market constantly. Among the large floating population in Shanghai, with many rural women from various other provinces working in bars, restaurants, barber shops, and recreation venues, the maids and domestic cleaners seem to be indelibly associated with Anhui. ‘The little maid from Anhui’ (Anhui xiao baomu), as she is – sometimes affectionately and other times condescendingly – described, is seen to roam around the urban space of Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen, visible everywhere, available at low price, and always in abundant supply. Against the background of the unequal development of Anhui in relation to some of the more developed places in China, and drawing on a number of in-depth interviews and conversations with both employers and maids conducted in Shanghai in 2001, I aim to consider both the popular
imagination of ‘Anhui’ produced by those who come to be able to benefit from the servitude of the Anhui maid, and the representation of Anhui and its maid in various popular cultural forms such as films and television dramas. I will then go on to show that ‘Shanghai’, like ‘Anhui’, is also produced as a plenitude of social relations, and as such, the place offers different, if not oppositional, spatial experiences to different social groups who come to inhabit it. In doing so, I argue that the contiguous and contingent relationship between ‘Anhui’ and ‘Shanghai’ as a place is made possible through a series of popular binarisms – modern versus backward, developed versus poor, urban versus rural – as well as the systematic unequal power relations which condition these necessarily reductionist configurations. In order to arrive at these points, however, it may be useful to delineate, first of all, the theoretical parameters within which this discussion on space, place, power and popular representations unfolds.

**Space, place and popular culture**

Post-colonial critiques of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ bring a number of perspectives to bear on the understanding of ‘space’ and ‘place’. Necessarily space or place building is both a socio-economic project which bears a relationship to geography in the material sense, and a discursive project which has an impact on the imagination of geography. For instance, the ‘nation’ as space or place, as Anderson (1983) argues, is an ‘imagined community’ made possible by the regular imagining provided in the print media, and the ‘Orient’, as Said systematically demonstrates, for another instance, is not just simply a geographic location but more importantly ‘a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident’ (Said 1978: 2–3). Following these insights, we can say that places and spaces are to be distinguished not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined, and therefore studies of place and space must transcend the material and include the imaginary. And it is precisely for this reason that Chen et al.’s multifactorial inquiry into the ‘China urban’ points to the importance of extending the category of the ‘urban’ to a potential that includes both imagination and practice (Chen et al. 2001: 2–3).

Such spatial imagination of places and spaces is borne aloft by the circulation of both people and media images. For this reason, the value of critical media studies lies in understanding the ways in which the production and consumption of images of place assists or prohibits the spatial imagination of people about certain places and spaces. This is because, in the globalised mediated time-space, it is in the media that struggles for ‘the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging’ (Said 1994: xiii) unfold. Ballew’s ethnographic account of Shanghai’s media professionals’ insistence on portraying xiangxia (rural area) according to popular stereotypes and the ruralites’ attempt at subverting such
images attests to the power struggle in the mediated spaces (Ballew 2001). Li Zhang, studying migrant spaces and criminality, also argues that localising migrants in specific spaces is both a material and discursive practice which turn people into subjects of discipline (Zhang, Li 2001a: 202).

Critical studies of production and consumption of spatial imagination in mediasphere often argue that space and place can be productively examined by considering their relationship to the specific medium of communication. Broadcasting, for instance, performs its ‘transportation’ function, similar to that of a vehicle or a portal, by way of ‘mobile privatisation’, a mechanism which allows one to stay at home while ‘going places’. Television, for instance, posits the audience in what Morse calls a ‘liminal space’ between inside and outside, private and public, which in fact can also be seen as a ‘non-space’ – a ‘ground within which communication . . . between virtuality and actuality . . . can take place’ (Morse 1998; 102). The capacity of television to afford vicarious travel from one place to another is central to the experience of TV consumption, which according to Shaun Moores is about ‘simultaneously staying home and, imaginatively at least, going places’ (Moores 1993: 365). The implication of these insights is clear: places and spaces are not only constructed, produced and circulated by those who are mobile, but also experienced – vicariously – and fantasised by those who are not.

However, the production and consumption of the narrations about place and space is hardly meaningful without considering the relationship between places and spaces and the body which traverses them either vicariously or literally. As Louisa Schein succinctly points out, ‘places are not only constituted by their location and physical features’, but also by the ‘specific, often regulated, forms of bodies that inhabit them’. ‘Bodies’, as she observes, ‘can serve as dislocated signifiers of places’ (Schein 2002). In addition, drawing on feminist and post-colonial subaltern studies, cultural critics and anthropologists increasingly work under the assumption that the body is not only a gendered and racialised space and a site of negotiation of difference in these terms. More importantly, the negotiation and refashioning of the body also constitutes the narrative fodder which enables popular representations of space and place in the media to be sustained and made meaningful. My own analysis of the representation of the rural female body on Chinese television and films suggests that the body of the female peasant in an urban space is crucial to the narrative of modernity and transnational capitalism, as it functions discursively to make class interests invisible through the use of familiar tropes of city versus country, tradition versus modernity (Sun 2002a).

In light of the perspectives outlined here, what exactly, then, is the connection between space, place and popular representations? Here I propose that there are at least three ways of conceiving this relationship. First, representations in popular culture provide rich fodder for the kind of fine-grained analysis of the significant narrative forms and discursive strategies
used in representing place, space, and translocal practices. These representations provide clues as to how those who are immobile fantasise about far-away or unknown places, and how those who have resettled remember experiences of familiar places about their lives prior to geographical displacement. These acts of fantasy and remembrance take place in a proliferation of spaces – mediatised or actual – all of which have an impact on the formation of a translocal spatial imagination. Second, studying the production of popular narratives of travel and mobility allows us to ask the question as to what mobility – of people, capital and images – does to localities through individuals’ constructions of a sense of place. Of particular relevance to the investigation of the construction of a sense of place in popular cultural representations is the need to examine the changing styles of imagining ‘the city’ – both the ‘international global city’ that acts as a magnet for Third World migrants, and the ‘internal global city’ to which villagers and rural ‘migrants’ gravitate within their own country. Third, building on the first two connections, questions regarding the consumption of popular culture unravel the ways in which various socio-economic and political forces come to facilitate or inhibit the formation of translocal imagination. Like popular press, television is also about the ‘regular imagining’ of individuals in mundane, everyday and domestic space. Since television is much more accessible to the Chinese population than cinema, its capacity to assist and facilitate translocal imagining is not to be underestimated. On the other hand, the formation of any translocal subjectivity is an uneven, unequal and disjunctive process. The proliferation of media images of the ‘successful man’ (chengong renshi), for instance, is contiguous with the omission and the marginalisation of other social groups such as the laid-off factory workers and rural migrants. My inquiry into the life of a group of rural women migrants in Anhui now working in Shanghai further suggests that since leaving the village, many have had less time, energy and opportunities to consume media images and participate in the act of imagining.

The Yellow Mountain or the ‘Philippines’ of China?

Possibly the earliest representation of the Anhui maid in the Chinese popular media is a film Huangshan Laide Guniang (The Girl from the Huangshan Mountain) produced in 1983. In the film, a young woman from Anhui goes to Beijing to work as a maid in order to pay off the family debts. Living in the urban metropolis proves to be a challenge, but ‘the girl from the Yellow Mountain’ successfully negotiates a life working for three families. The film was quickly eclipsed by a mirage of popular representations about the maid and the migrant women which emerged in the 1990s, including television series such as Girls From Out of Town (Wai Lai Mei), Shenzhen Working Girls (Shenzhen Dagongmei), Sisters’ Ventures in Beijing (Jiejie Meimei Chuang Beijing), and Roughing It in Shanghai.
(Chuang Shanghai), which is the story of a group of rural migrants from Henan Province trying – some are successfully and some not – to become ‘Shanghai residents’ (Shanghai residents).

What is interesting about The Girl from the Huangshan Mountain, however, is the use of the Yellow Mountain as the icon of Anhui, as well as a set of binary rationalisations which are implicit in such use. The Yellow Mountain is natural, idyllic, and untainted by urban modernity, and as such its beauty is sustainable because of, not in spite of, the ‘primitive’, ‘backward’ nature of the province and the poverty in which people in Anhui live. In spite of the fact that China Science and Technology University is located in Hefei, the capital city of Anhui, and that Anhui is the birthplace of many nationally prominent scholars and thinkers, the dominant signifiers tend to come from a homology, which differentiates the modern – wealthy, cultural, technologised, urban, male – from the pre-modern – the poor, or even backward, unskilled cheap labour forces, rural, and female. My discussion of the imagination of ‘Anhui’ resonates with Finnane’s study, which identifies the dichotomy between the ‘urban, dynamic, cosmopolitan culture of Shanghai’ and the ‘inward-looking, rural and underdeveloped’ look of Subei (Finnane 1993: 232). The default association of the beauty of the Yellow Mountain serves to reinforce the authenticity of Anhui as a place of nature rather than culture. Like many developing countries, Anhui’s attraction as a tourist destination is enhanced precisely because of, not in spite of, its low level of economic growth. After all, the pleasure of being a tourist comes not only from gazing at spectacular things and people in exotic places, but also from being able to consume that experience at a low price. This seems to be evidenced in the little-known fact that the Yellow Mountain has in recent years become a favourite site for a number of transnational film productions including Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.

In spite of the phenomenal appeal of the film to the ‘metropolitan gaze’ (Mackie 2000) of the transnational spectators, the Yellow Mountain in the film cannot engage, directly, the speculative gaze of foreign capital. More specifically speaking, in order to be discursively useful, the Yellow Mountain must remain a generic and fictional place signifying natural beauty and exotica rather than an unique place. In other words, for the place to remain competitive as a supplier of ‘raw’ materials to transnational cultural production, the Yellow Mountain must accept the terms of anonymity, forgoing, once again, the opportunity to make a mark for itself in the sphere of transnational image-making.

Many Shanghai residents employ maids from Anhui; however, their imagination of Anhui is often marked by the ‘metropolitan gaze’ discussed here. Ms Zhu – one of the Shanghai residents I interviewed – experiences ‘Anhui’ through a trip to the Yellow Mountain and the maid she hires. The twenty-seven-year-old Shanghai native is expecting a baby. She and her husband, a Taiwanese businessman working in Shanghai, live in a
spacious apartment on the seventh floor of a fourteen-storey building in an affluent area of Shanghai. She told me that she has travelled extensively both inside and outside China, including a week in Hong Kong and two weeks in Taiwan. She reads newspapers every day and her favourite publication is *Vogue*. Zhu went to see the Yellow Mountain for a week as a tourist in 1998. To Zhu, the Yellow Mountain is a beautiful place, but the rest of Anhui, from what she could see from the train and bus windows, was ‘desolate’ (*huang liang*) and poor (*ping qiong*). When asked to summarise the first things which spring to mind about Anhui, she said, ‘poor, its economy is backward, education level is low, cities are undeveloped, and prices are low’.

Zhu’s imagination of Anhui is quite similar to that of other urban residents living outside Anhui. Like Zhu, Mr Mi (he told me he was called Arnold) was also born and brought up in Shanghai. He is twenty-seven years old and has a business dealing in computing. The only person from Anhui he has come into contact with is the part-time maid whom he has hired for nine months. Like most others, Mi’s only impression of Anhui is its poverty. When asked to summarise his imagination of Anhui in a few words, three things came to mind: the Yellow Mountain, a strategic stronghold of China’s central plain (*zhong yuan yao sai*) in historical times, and lots of poor people: ‘Poverty forces many people to choose *baomu* as a profession. Gradually the place has acquired a reputation for it. This has a chain reaction effect – more people leave to become maids, more will follow. Anhui is the Philippines of China.’

Although he has not been to Anhui, Mi concurs with Zhu in having a binary perception: the beauty of the Yellow Mountain and the poverty of the rest. His comparison of Anhui to the Philippines is interesting. By equating a ‘poor’ hinterland rural province in China with a poor Asian country, Mi subscribes to the language of a global power but appropriates the power associated with that speaking position in defining his relation to Anhui. In identifying against situating Anhui within a global geopolitical framework, he brings to light the discursive complicity between global centres and national ones. In other words, by mobilising a global configuration of space and place to define and describe Anhui, a place he has never been to but which nevertheless produces the servitude for his consumption, Mi points to the increasing possibility of replicating global power relations within a national space.

Mi, who compares Anhui to the Philippines, says that he does not really need a maid, as there is not that much work to do, except to clean the rooms, sweep the floor, and wash clothes. He confesses that it is his flatmate’s idea. ‘Salary is cheap. One hour a day, 100 yuan a month.’ It is clear here that although the maid does not seem to do that much for Mi and his flatmate in practical terms, she, as a consumption item, may be useful in signifying a newly acquired status as a member of a social group which has come to be identified with having disposable income and freedom from
menial and domestic chores. Like a house, a car or a passport to travel, the maid is another ‘thing’ to be associated with a certain life-style, or what Bourdieu describes as a ‘distinction’. McClintock’s (1995) observation of the necessity of having a maid to claim middle-class status in urban Victorian England is remarkably resonant here. Ms Zhang, a retired senior journalist in Shanghai who has recently moved to a spacious new flat in Pudong (east of the Huangpu River, a recently developed area), explains why maids are in increasing demand these days. She says that most of her friends have purchased apartments of approximately 100 to 140 square metres in size. According to her, the expansion of the living space means more cleaning work. Therefore, most well-to-do families (xiao kang) have the money to hire part-time cleaners since wages are pretty cheap.

Plentiful, available and cheap – the trademark of the Anhui maid

In spite of the relative cheapness of hiring an Anhui maid, many Shanghai employers prefer to hire a local maid. In contrast to the Anhui maids, who are largely from villages and, as mentioned earlier, have little education, Shanghai maids, mostly laid-off workers from state enterprises, have previously participated in the making of modernity while the Anhui maids have not. Although these Shanghai women have borne the brunt of economic restructuring and suffered the downside of modernisation, their capacity to deliver what is expected of the modern life in Shanghai nevertheless gives them an edge over the Anhui maid. Consequently, local maids cost around 5 to 6 yuan an hour, while an Anhui maid costs 3 and sometimes 4 yuan an hour. Since local maids are in demand, employers have to make do with ‘second best’ by employing Anhui maids. Shanghai maids, due to high demand, are in a better position to pick and choose. Most of them prefer to be part-timers (zhong dian gong, literally meaning ‘paid by the hours’), leaving the live-in nannies (baomu) and maids to Anhui women. In other words, the only way the Anhui maid can compete with the Shanghai maid is by her availability and low price, an enduring sign of her ‘orientalness’. Plentiful, in perpetual circulation, and primed to serve, the ‘Anhui maid’ dominates the market with quantity, not quality.

In a popular twenty-two-episode television drama serial on Chinese television, The Twenty-eight Maids in Professor Tian’s House (Tian jiaoshou jiaode ershiba ge baomu), which places the ‘maid’ at the very centre of the story, it is the constant arrival of the new maid and the departure of the old maid which propels the narrative forward. Professor Tian is a professor in Shanghai, and lives in a leafy quiet suburb in Shanghai. He has a bed-ridden mother who is in need of constant attention. Professor Tian has at different stages employed twenty-eight maids because each of these maids fails to perform satisfactorily in her own way. The maid, when caught in the class-based and gender-specific conflict, is more often than
not interrogated and found wanting, and is told that she has to go. It is worth pointing out that Professor Tian and his family can afford to dismiss the maid so easily because she – the maid – exists in plentifullness, is ready to travel and eager to serve. A common scene in the show is the office of the neighbourhood maid hiring agency which Professor Tian frequents, and where dozens of maids – where else do they come from if not mostly from Anhui? – mill around eagerly looking for prospective employers. On a number of occasions, Professor Tian comes back home from the introduction agency with a maid carrying but a small bag as her luggage. On one particular occasion, Professor Tian rings the agent, requesting a *baomu*, and the next thing we see, five maids turn up on his door-step, all claiming to be the most qualified one.

The abundance, and hence ‘cheapness’, of the Anhui workers is not just limited to the domestic sphere. A group of young women from Mengcheng County, northern Anhui, currently working as contract office cleaners at Hongjiao International Airport of Shanghai also testified to this. Mostly aged eighteen and nineteen, these women work from 7 a.m. till 5 p.m. six days a week for a wage of 650 yuan a month, plus a bonus of 50 yuan to be handed out at the end of each year. The four Anhui girls share a flat which is about 10 square metres, with no cooking and bathroom facilities. These girls send back all the money they save to support siblings and their parents at home. They work for long hours – ten hours a day – and low pay – about 3 yuan an hour – to clean dirt: mopping floors, cleaning the sewers and dusting office furniture. Huang, who has been on the job for two years, says that while receiving the same wages, local cleaners finish at 4 p.m. whereas Anhui maids finish at 5, and the reason given for the discrepancy is that ‘they are from outside Shanghai’ (*wai di ren*).

It is clear that the maid can be seen as a metaphor for Anhui, whose economic advantage lies in excessive labour force and cheap resources, and which has always been cast in the role of the ‘servant’. During the period of state-supervised command economy, Anhui’s economy was defined in relation to Shanghai as a supplier of raw materials such as coal. Such geographically organised and state-initiated relations of power create much of the uneven development of Anhui in relation to Shanghai, its nearest economic and industrial capital. In addition, the position of Anhui under the socialist economy is that of a victim of a ‘scissors cutting’ effect, whereby Anhui, designated as a farming province, was forced to sell grain, oil and cotton at very low prices but pay increasingly higher prices for capital goods necessary for farming. The uniqueness of Anhui as a poor, vagrancy-producing place is therefore created by the unequal as well as interdependent connection between Anhui and other more privileged places. This unevenness manifests itself not only in economic but also in cultural terms. The interaction between Anhui and big cities, be it itinerant beggars in Shanghai, workers from Shanghai relocated to Anhui, and more recently Anhui maids cleaning houses and cooking food in middle-
class households in Shanghai and Beijing, has all but reinforced and consolidated the social imagination and popular consciousness of Anhui as a uniquely poor place. Placed in historical context, Anhui as imagined in Shanghai at present is not dissimilar to Subei (northern Jiangsu), a place which supplied migrants to Shanghai in the middle of the nineteenth century (Honig 1989, 1992). Finally the narrative of Anhui’s poverty constructed within this framework of unequal development plays a role in the reproduction of uneven development over time. The reputation of poverty means that Anhui is less able to attract the desperately needed investment from overseas than the other parts of the country. It also means that in an era when the state pares down its intervening role, Anhui cannot expect to receive much compensation from the state for the economic sacrifices it was forced to make during the previous era. The experience of people from Anhui in Shanghai over the last decade or so resembles that of the Subei people in the late Qing period in that both have suffered the consequences of what Finnane (1993: 232) refers to as ‘internal colonialism’, whereby the interaction between the core and periphery has resulted not in a reduction but in an increase in regional inequalities.

Foreigners in the city: constructing the otherness of the Anhui maid

Compared with the employers mentioned so far, Ms Xu (Sylvie) is the most cosmopolitan of all. She lived in France for ten years, and came back to Shanghai a few years ago. She now works as a scientist in a French-owned pharmaceutical company in Shanghai and for this reason travels to France at least a couple of times a year. She speaks fluent French, is taking lessons to improve her English but speaks Mandarin most of the time, in spite of the fact that she is a native of Shanghai. She observes that France, like the UK, is part of the old European civilisation and thus the French have a strong sense of self and otherness. This, according to her, is in contrast to settler countries such as Australia and the US. It is for this reason that she felt that she would feel more at home in Shanghai than in Paris. Xu has a local maid. Most of her friends also have local maids. Local maids command a higher price, because they are not as easily available as Anhui maids. According to Xu there are several reasons for this discrepancy. Local maids tend to be laid-off factory workers. Becoming a maid for them is a big step down in the food chain, hence it is usually perceived to be the last resort. They are more desirable because, according to Ms Xu, they tend to be older, more experienced with household work including childcare, and more responsible. They are also thought to be more capable of running a modern household, such as operating an automatic washing machine or programming a microwave. According to Xu, another reason for her preference of Shanghai maids is their locatability or localness. Anhui maids come from somewhere else, have no fixed addresses,
and can leave without a trace. Xu mentioned that stories of maids from outside Shanghai stealing from or ‘ripping off’ employers and then doing a ‘runner’ are widely circulated. In contrast, local maids are bona fide residents and ‘easy to track down’ (zhi geng zhi di – literally meaning ‘intimate knowledge of their roots and background’). This is where the paradox of mobility and power lies. While in some cases, liminality is seen to be a sign of cosmopolitan nomadism (Peters 1999), as is the case with Ms Xu herself, it is, in other cases, associated with vagrancy. The Anhui maid is a perennial reminder that claims to modernity by one social group may be either a consequence of another group’s having to remain pre-modern or contingent upon the privilege of one group to define what is ‘modern’ on behalf of another group. The emphasis on fixed address in the selection criteria for a reliable and trustworthy maid testifies to the double bind of the Anhui maid. She has to leave home and remain mobile in order to be marketable, but she is deemed a less competitive ‘product’ than local maids because of her (dis)location. In this sense, the Anhui maid, since she has less bargaining power than her Shanghai counterparts, is in a way bearing the brunt of Anhui being perceived as a pre-modern and backward place. This, I argue, is the mechanism which facilitates an almost default association of ‘Anhui’ as a metaphor of pre-modernity and vagrancy with the ‘Anhui maid’ as a metonym of rootlessness and un-modernness.

In addition, the maid as the ‘threshold figure’, a source of sexual and social anxiety for urban employers, is also a common trope in popular cultural representations. In the story of Professor Tian mentioned earlier, Professor Tian and his family try to live – uneasily with the fact that they have to bring a maid into their intimate, domestic space, but cannot trust her due to her ‘foreignness’. Professor Tian’s wife cannot trust the maid because she – the maid – is seen as the possible seducer of her husband and her teenage son, and his daughter cannot trust the maid because she – the daughter – believes that all servants are potential liars and thieves. While Professor Tian seems to be most generous and trusting of the maid, his trust and generosity are seen to be in danger of being used and abused. One of the maids, for instance, who harbours ambitions to become an actress, resorts to blackmailing Professor Tian into giving her a role in his play by threatening to fabricate stories of a sexual liaison between them. The space of the home housing a middle-class family in Shanghai is thus ridden with anxiety and paranoia since the arrival of the Other.

**Shanghai – competing senses of a place**

The ways in which people think and feel about places are determined by the particular spatial relationship they have with the place, and this relationship in turn has an effect on the subjectivity of the people who come to assume such relationships. If ‘a sense of place’ (Rose 1995) refers to the
way people feel and think about places, it is inscribed by the lived experience and the subjective feelings associated with everyday consciousness, which in turn are embedded in wider sets of social relations. Given this, it is hardly surprising that a quite different sense of what Shanghai is like can develop between those mobile middle-class families and the maids whose mobility is much more limited. This point is also most clearly evidenced in the ways in which ‘Shanghai’, or ‘the city’, is experienced, imagined and perceived differently by those who employ maids and by the maids themselves.

Xu, who traverses between France and Shanghai, thinks that Shanghai is an open space: people arrive and blend in. ‘Nowadays you never know who is a local or who is not. That’s why I stop speaking Shanghai dialect.’ Ms Zhang also endorses the view that the city is a place where identities can be easily (re)invented: ‘Shanghai is the place to be, unless you can go overseas. Clothes and fashion accessories are available at such an affordable price. Every working girl can dress up as nicely as the locals.’

To the mobile middle class, Shanghai is not only open, but also accessible from an ‘aerial perspective’, afforded by a life-style which consists of flying in and out of Shanghai to go overseas or to other parts of China, and travelling by taxi or driving their own cars to get around the city. This aeriality is implicit in Ms Zhang’s proud description of the change which has occurred to the look of Shanghai. She talks about the panoramic view of the greening of the CBD area of downtown Shanghai as a perfect mosaic of ‘modernity’ (xian dai hua) and ‘greenery’ (lu hua), and Lujiazui Road in Pudong as an extremely exciting place to visit.

These feelings of Shanghai as a friendly, open and all-embracing place are not shared by those maids and their families. Chen Caiyun, Ms Zhu’s maid, for instance, thinks that the only thing people are friendly to in Shanghai is money. According to her, rent is too dear and living costs are too high. ‘Without money, you are nothing. You can’t get by without money, not one cent less.’ ‘Without a local residential permit, a business license costs thousands of yuan, and “black cats” [hei mao – police] are always after you.’ Chen Shuiying, a maid from Jinde in Anhui and employed by Mr Mi, is thirty-eight years old and has two children. Her son is back at home going to school, while her husband works in a retail business in Shanghai, and her daughter also works in a clothing factory there. They live in a 14-square-metre rental place in an outlying suburb of Shanghai. Chen has been in Shanghai for six years. She used to work as a live-in baomu, but has gone up the ‘food chain’ and has been working as a part-time cleaner. She cleans seven households every day, and since she cannot ride a bicycle, she walks from one household to another. She says she is always rushing from one place to another, since she must be punctual. Chen works nine hours every day, not including travelling time. As a result she seldom goes out (except to go to work), as ‘there is no time’. Like Chen Shuiying, Chen Caiyun seldom goes out apart from work. She
complains that the city is too noisy, and full of thieves and muggers. According to her, Shanghai people are unfriendly to outsiders, especially people from Anhui.

Chen Caiyun’s routine is somewhat different. Aged forty-six, she works only for Ms Zhu. Chen cooks and cleans for three and a half hours every day six days a week and eats dinner with her employers. She is currently paid 450 yuan a month, but has been asked to work from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. every day for 1,000 yuan once Ms Zhu gives birth. Chen has agreed, since she thinks that it is a reasonable deal. Chen and her family come from Wuwei, and have not been back for three years. Her husband is not working at the moment – the seafood retail business is not doing well and he is too old to work as a security guard. Both her son and daughter, in their early twenties, work in a restaurant as kitchen hands. They live in a rental place in Putuo District for 300 yuan a month, a price that Chen thinks is extremely high. Chen has also worked as a baomu for one year in Beijing prior to Shanghai. Chen told me that she does not like travelling, since she gets road-sick on the bus. For this reason, she cycles for an hour and a half each way from home to Zhu’s home every day. Chen has little education and can hardly spell her own name, but she gets around by remembering road signs.

Both Chen Shuiying and Chen Caiyun’s movements in the city are necessitated by work, not leisure. The mode of their travel – on foot and by bicycle – connotes a relationship to the city different from that connoted by travel by car or bus. For them, the city is not a space to traverse with power and speed, but a distance for the body to overcome. The fact that Chen Shuiying walks to work points to the social semiotics of walking. While for Walter Benjamin’s flaneur, walking bespeaks leisure and male class power in the age of high capitalism, the walking women on their way to work in urban Shanghai bespeak the lack of it. The Anhui maids’ physical movement in modern Shanghai is remarkably similar to that of the invisible ‘flaneuse’ described in the feminist literature on women and modernity in the West.14 Chen Caiyun’s illiteracy forces her to get around her routine routes by tracing familiar signs, relying on what Tadiar (1993) refers to as ‘images of seriality’.

Detailed conversations with three airport cleaners from Anhui about their sense of Shanghai also challenge the notion of Shanghai as an open and accessible city.15 Compared with the two older maids mentioned above, these younger women are newer to Shanghai. Huang came two years ago and the other two, Ge Chang and Shao Huan, came only four months ago. None of the three women speak Shanghai dialects. They can understand a bit, but all say it is too hard to learn. Sharing a flat not far from work in Shiwan – they ride a bike for twenty minutes to go to work – they have little time for anything else apart from cooking and washing clothes outside work hours. Huang went to Puxi (west of the Huang River) once a year ago with some friends. The other two have never been
to downtown Shanghai. They do their shopping for clothes and groceries in the local district, and literally have no relationship with Shanghai. With little money and no local dialect, getting around the metropolitan areas of Shanghai is not only a daunting logistic task but also forbiddingly expensive. For these women, whose spatial practices are circumscribed by a lack of economic, cultural and social capital, Shanghai remains another world, a ‘forbidden city’, marked with invisible yet real boundaries. Their position in Shanghai is defined as peripheral geographically, socially and economically. Recruited to contribute to the project of modernity and globalisation, these women cleaning the airport remain invisible figures in the transnational space.

Industrial cleaners are also less visible than domestic cleaners in popular cultural representations. This is because domestic maids including nannies and cleaners are what McClintock (1995) calls ‘threshold figures’, transgressing the public/private, waged/unwaged, inside family/outside family boundaries and posing a potential threat to the moral and sexual norms of the family. This perennial fascination and anxiety about the maid gives rise to the proliferation of popular narratives of the maid. In contrast to the maid, industrial cleaners doing menial work in the globalised, deterritorialised and corporatised place do not present themselves as ‘interesting’ narrative fodder. The more public their work is, the more invisible they become. ‘Nobody seems to cast a glance at us’, observes Huang.

Though working at the international airport, these women are the least able to afford an aerial view of the city. Their spatial movement is contingent upon a set of localised, peripheralised physical movements commanded by absolute daily necessity: working, grocery shopping and travelling to and from work. They have no claim to the place they work in – the international airport – or the city they live in – Shanghai – both of which have come to signify, to the rest of China, the power of cosmopolitan nomadism, modernity and global capital. Here lies the stark contrast between the international airport and the Anhui women who are employed to clean the place. It is the contrast between the most connected and the least connected; the most central and the most marginalised. In spite of the long hours and low wages, these young women’s most vocally expressed dissatisfaction with the job is not low pay nor heavy workload. Ge complains that she is not allowed to speak to people at work; Shao says that she almost decided to quit because the male workers give her a hard time teasing and making fun of her; and Huang, the most experienced of the three, complains that she is constantly made to feel inferior because she is not a local worker. ‘The supervisor is a very tough man. He only trusts Shanghai workers.’ ‘It doesn’t matter how much more work we do than them, as long as they have a word with the supervisor, we are in trouble.’ The hierarchical power of gender, class and privilege associated with place conspires to produce a form of psychological violence on the
body of these women, who are recruited to attend to the abject function of the corporate urban body. The (in)visibility of these highly regulated, disciplined and alienated figures performing menial work in transnational space embodies the most profoundly disjunctive and unequal nature of globalisation processes.

Interestingly, unlike their employers whose spatial imagination is usually configured along the rural/urban, backward/modern, inland/coastal, China/foreign distinctions, these women appear to have the tendency to think about places and people from these places in terms of their money-making potential rather than in terms of their geographic or cultural distinctions. Asked to describe the places they have been to, Chen Caiyun says that her home town (*laojia*) is no good because it is hard to make money. Beijing people are more generous with money (*shuang kuan*) than Shanghai people, and Taiwanese employers are most generous of all. Shanghai is no good because people tend to be mean. In answering my question as to ‘where they would most like to go if they had unlimited access and mobility’, Chen Caiyun says, ‘I would like my son to become either a car mechanic or a driver’, while Chen Shuiying answers, ‘I would most like to work in a factory, where I can clock in and clock out punctually.’ Both women’s conflation of a geographic space with economic opportunity is worth considering. Is a sense of social and economic security a prerequisite for developing a sense of place or a claim to a place? My interviews with the three younger women about their imagination of places also seem to confirm this suspicion. My request to each of them to give me a wish-list of the places they would really like to go repetitively drew blank looks and subsequent giggles. Then after much prompting one of them says: ‘I dare not imagine.’ This tendency not to identify with the city in spatial terms and instead reconfigure it into some kind of economic or social abstraction (*wo bu gan xiang*) is a sobering reminder that the nature of one’s sense of belonging and sense of place is contingent on one’s socio-economic power and status.

Although both the young women working as airport cleaners east of the river and the domestic maids west of the river have commented on their experience of being ‘othered’ and ‘orientalised’, all of them articulated a strong sense of ambivalence about both ‘home’ and ‘Shanghai’. The two domestic maids mentioned earlier say that they would like to work as long as they can in Shanghai but eventually may go back home, for ‘after all, home is home’ (*jia zong gui shi jia*). They also say, however, that if they could stay and settle down in Shanghai, they would, for after all ‘city is better than country’ (*cheng li zong bi xiang xia hao*). These seemingly contradictory feelings are echoed by the younger women at the airport. Similarly, these young women talk about their homesickness but at the same time remember with distaste the ubiquitous muddiness of the village roads back home. The ambivalence which marks the spatial imagination of these women seems to both articulate and embody an irreconcilable
tension they come to experience in the modernisation process. As objects to be ‘civilised’ and modernised in this process, and subjects who aspire to be modern, they on the one hand articulate a strong exilic yearning for home but at the same time acknowledge the seduction of modernity and the irresistible power it holds over them.

**Anhui baomu in Shanghai: in lieu of a conclusion**

I hope to have demonstrated that popular representations of Anhui both are the product of and in turn give shape to the popular consciousness of the place. The hegemonic imagination of Anhui – both potent and elusive – is borne aloft by, and at the same time lends legitimacy to, popular media discourses about Anhui. Such popular media discourses not only mobilise familiar metaphors and metonyms, but they are also part of the signifying practices which rely on a process of naturalisation. This process enables certain ways of imagining places – for example ‘Anhui’ through the maids it produces and ‘Shanghai’ through its burgeoning middle class – to become intelligible and ‘unquestionable’. The symbiotic relationship between the production of media images and the circulation of popular perceptions, as I have outlined in this chapter through the example of ‘Anhui’ and the ‘Anhui maid’, echoes Li Zhang’s observation about the representation of migrant spaces via the case study of the Zhejiangcun (Zhang, Li 2001a: 207–208).

Like a stream without a source, these images and anecdotes circulate through urban society, build on each other like a snowball, and eventually become elaborate urban myths that shape the popular imagination of Beijing residents. Through repetition, circulation, and expansion, these fantasies, desires, and facts mesh together to construct the ‘reality’ of migrant community. No longer appearing to be ideological, such representation becomes part of so-called common sense, a naturalised form of ideology, the validity of which people cease to question.

The ‘reality’ of Anhui, as I have shown here, is indeed constructed with a myriad of fantasies, desires and facts meshed together. Consequently, ‘Anhui’, as part of the elaborate urban myth, is consumed both as a territorial space whose poverty has conditioned the cultural practice of the Anhui maid, and as an imaginary place whose accessibility, marketability and ‘authenticity’ emerge because of the poverty of the region. The ‘Anhui maid’ is seen as a metaphor for the gendered, unequal and uneven relationship between Anhui and the developed places such as Shanghai, and in those terms she features prominently in both the popular cultural representations and the popular consciousness. Mobile, and plentiful and available any time, her discursive usefulness lies in her capacity to embody
the enduring potency of the metaphor for poverty. The Anhui maid is a brand name, a product, whose cachet, authenticity and desirability are made possible not in spite of, but precisely because of the uniqueness of Anhui as a poor place.

Notes
1 Many thanks to the people in Shanghai who have helped to make this paper possible, including the people who agreed to be interviewed as well as Rosemary Brooks, Xu Xiaoyan and Hsu Ling who arranged, facilitated and helped conduct interviews in May 2001.
2 Fengyang is a county in northern Anhui and is well known for a number of things. It is, first of all, known for producing Zhu Yuanzhang, the first peasant emperor in the Ming Dynasty; second, it is the birthplace of Fengyang flower drum, an art form associated with the life of itinerant beggar-artists; and third, it is well known for its Xiaogang village, the first village which experimented with the family land responsibility system in the late 1970s, which was to revolutionise the land reform system in China in the reform era. See Sun 2002 for a brief account of Fengyang.
3 Recent examples of these efforts are a number of elaborately produced television documentaries promoting the beauty and cultural richness of Anhui, particularly the impact of the Hui merchant culture. Such attempts on the part of state television tend to privilege Anhui’s history of culture and prosperity over that of poverty and economic disadvantage. These programs include Zongheng Zhongguo: Anhui [Across China: Anhui], produced jointly between Phoenix TV and Anhui Television, and Hua Xia Wen Min [Chinese Civilisation: Huizhou] (Chinese Central Television), both broadcast on both national and Anhui television in early 2002. None of these programs mention the legendary Anhui maid and the poverty usually associated with Anhui. Whether these media promotions stand a chance of changing the popular imagination of Anhui in the nation remains to be seen.
4 It should be clear to readers of this paper that my interest goes beyond the experience of the ‘maid’ (baomu) and includes that of domestic and corporate cleaners. My use of the term ‘maid’ as an ‘umbrella term’ in the title of the paper is intended to highlight the tenacity of a stereotypical perception of a group of rural women from Anhui in the nation’s social imagination.
5 Obviously any discussion on the Anhui maid must be premised on an understanding of the historical, social, economic and cultural conditions of Anhui which gave rise to the phenomenon, and the current patterns of the Anhui maids’ movement. For the former, see, for instance, Sun 2004 and Chi Zihua 1996; for the latter, see Ma and Xiang 1998 and C.-L. Gong 1993.
6 Arjun Appadurai (1996) argues that the formation of modern subjectivity becomes unpredictable due to the constant circulation of both people and images on the global scale.
7 Colin Mercer (1992) discusses the role of the newspapers in the formation of a sense of collective identity. He argues that, unlike novels, the quotidian nature of newspaper consumption contributes to the process of ‘regular imagining’.
8 Wang Xiaoming, for instance, has written eloquently about the contingent and contiguous relationship between four social groups which have been born out of the economic reforms. They are the ‘new rich’, white-collar workers, unemployed or wageless pensioners, and rural migrants. See Wang Xiaoming, Preface, in Wang Xiaoming (ed.) (2000). Zai Xin Yishixingtai De Longzhao
Xia [Under the Dominance of the New Ideology], Nanjing: Jiangsu People’s Press, 1–26.

9 For an extensive discussion on the historical factors affecting the economic development of Anhui and on the current ranking of Anhui in comparison with the national average, see Sun 2002.

10 This information comes from Hu Yihu, the host of Phoenix’s program Zongheng Zhongguo: Anhui [Across China: Anhui], jointly produced by Anhui TV and Phoenix TV. The program was screened on Anhui TV in early 2002.

11 These women say that they try to save every cent in order to send more money home. Although work lunch costs only 5 yuan, they never buy lunch at work. Instead they bring their own so as to save money.


13 For some useful references on the ethnic discrimination of the Subei people in Shanghai, see Emily Honig’s works (1989, 1992) and Antonia Finnane’s work (1993).

14 For reference to some important works on the flaneur/flaneuse split and the gendered nature of modernity and city, see Elizabeth Wilson (1991, 1992) and Janet Wolff (1985, 1990, 1997).

15 These women interviewed are employed by a cleaning agency contracted by the Pudong International Airport Cargo Terminal Co. Ltd. Their job is to clean office spaces as well as warehouses of the company.

16 Apart from the perennial stories about the maid permeating the newspapers and magazines, there are numerous television dramas portraying the maid as the ‘threshold figure’. The most well-known is Tian Jiaoshou Jia De Er Shi Ba Ge Bao Mu [Twenty-eight Maids in Professor Tian’s House]. Numerous documentaries have also focused on the lives of the nannies, the most well-known one being Yuan Li Beijing De Jia [My Home Is a Long Way From Beijing], which is the story of a group of Anhui maids in Beijing.
9 The pornographic city

Tani E. Barlow

It is precisely the marginal nature of dirt that makes it such a difficult concept. As dirt increases or becomes more concentrated it becomes less dirty. Anyone trying to remove it from its foundation, collecting it from the margins in heaps, diminishes it and frequently ends up with something that is not even dirty. There is always something dirty about any kind of touching and handling, fumbling titillation ... because it is related to dirt: both being an introductory, gentle, and for this very reason so perceptible a way of meddling with order.

(Christian Enzensberger 1972: 32)

Everyday life is a crust of earth over the tunnels and caves of the unconscious and against a skyline of uncertainty and illusion that we call Modernity. The unconscious is only consciousness ignoring its own laws ... and in this respect everyday life is indeed modernity’s unconscious.

(Henri Léfebvre 1971: 109–117)

In the pornographic city – the glittering and horrible spatial hallucination smut creates – no one is unscathed. All spaces are fouled, all who touch are tainted. The pornographic city is a bacchanal of illegality, wrongdoing, unjust consumerism, waste, corruption, immorality, despoiling, human uncaring, unkindness, frustration and criminal waste. Husbands get drunk and have sex with other women. Good women are turned out as prostitutes. Sexually transmitted diseases pose a chronic danger. Undisciplined children terrorize their parents. Attractive girls turn into serial murderers who butcher truck drivers, bind them into grotesque packages and leave them strung up like hams along the roadway (Anonymous C 1997). A bleary, indistinct or liminal kind of spatiality, the pornographic city is repetitive, violent and brutal; its social imaginary is all about theft of virtue, duping, tricksters and cheats, human inability to survive the chaotic environment.

Smut (a legal definition will follow) provides readers a luridly descriptive rationality, a low-tech method for grasping how everyday life works. Smutty rationality or savoir faire exposes the horror and promise of what
Jing Wang suggests is “China” today: an urbane, state-bureaucratic society of controlled consumption (Wang 2001c). Wang’s thesis coincides with the vision forwarded by Henri Léfebvre, where the aura of the state saturates everyday life (Léfebvre 1971, 1991). I find helpful her argument that Chinese popular culture is (1) a built mechanism of capital accumulation, (2) an extra-philosophic space (since historically speaking it has finally been able to sidestep literary elite ideological control), and (3) the effect of policies constructed and authorized in the technological elite’s bureaucratic state councils (Wang 2001b). Chinese popular culture has singular historical integrity as well as a general theoretical salience now (Li Hsiao-t’i 2001). What happens when popular culture studies goes beyond the task of establishing how the systemic state-bureaucratic society of controlled consumption operates and asks how, in Wang’s words, the consumer is a purposive agent?

My task here is to analyze ephemera, defined, for the purposes of this discussion, as residual, sticky elements of dailiness or “context,” that ordinarily do not survive into historical archives and are consigned, as Léfebvre says, to modernity’s unconscious. My ephemeral archive is defined by its obsession with eroticized social relationships and criminality. How different are inherited methods of radical social history from a consideration of smut in the context of an intellectual history of everyday life? Is not the great achievement of feminist studies its recognition that differential sex, injustice and subjectivity are linked in complex fashions? How could histories be written with archival sources that so rarely survive in archives? These general questions are at issue for me perhaps because my intellectual life has taken shape around historiography and historical writing, in post-economistic critical cultural studies, while teaching in an interdisciplinary, self-marginalizing Women’s Studies department. In general this scholarly background predisposes me to ask two questions. How does such lowly, commercial, déclassé reading matter transmit such unparalleled knowledge about everyday conditions that its readers actually form a market? Is the pact that smut strikes with readers so meaningful that to preclude smut from what becomes history would leave an absent presence?

This is by way of explaining why I borrow a spatial term, the pornographic city, to highlight several difficulties that smut savoir faire presents to our effort at thinking about place, space and popular culture theory. Paradoxically, given smut’s proven capacity to resist state bureaucratic eradication efforts (smut molds itself around the civil codes that ban obscenity), readers apprehend in smut the means to rationally appreciate the state’s criminal law in abstract, comprehensive terms. Further, the economy of smut makes “city” a generic category and lived geography all but irrelevant. Despite its pervasive urbanity, smut does not care where, Beijing or Hefei, Hong Kong or Tokyo, Heilungjiang or Hainandao, or the internet, it surfaces since the sales strategies of criminal porn distributors
are insensible to named place. This in some sense reduces the purchase of place theory. In political economy terms, smut is aspecific and generic but never idiosyncratic: currently there is no such thing as a “Beijing style” in smut, since smutty commodities are marketed locally, are maybe printed locally, but are distributed in nation-wide circuits. Characteristically generic, aspecific, detailed, but never singular to a social spatiality or culturally designated place, the omnipresence of smut in popular street culture demands not a sociology of space (i.e. which measures difference and scale) but a social poetics of space. Finally smut could suggest how spatiality is infused with the pathologies of everyday life and thus fused to emotion in ways that cannot be ignored.

“Our space,” Léfevre observed, “has strange effects. For one thing, it unleashes desire” (1991: 97). The socially produced space of the pornographic city rests on a foundation of anxiety. The reader’s desire to know about the black society or criminal underworld is at odds, sometimes comically, with disingenuous efforts to reinculcate in readers a so-called traditional morality that proscribes the activities lovingly portrayed. Contemporary Chinese smut, like traditional Chinese literary porn, is generically concerned with sex and crime, but now it is posing, rather than dissolving, paradox. Smut today attempts the impossible: to represent “private” space (eroticism, illness, incest, genital life, law-breaking) in a public, mass marketed, illegal medium. Mirroring smut’s content of private anxieties, and the way that anxious smutty stories violate and reinforce privacy, is the fact that yellow literature is truly dangerous only when the government “strikes hard” at crime during what are by most accounts popular social purity campaigns. Even then, decency law aims almost exclusively at crime racketeers and leaves ordinary smut firmly embedded in the quotidian environment. Ordinary smut has been so fully integrated into everyday life that it is both invisible and yet by its persistent ubiquity a constant silent rebuke to the spiritual environment. (See Figures 9.1 and 9.2.)

Making smutty rationality into a spatial metaphor underscores what I see as the benefits and limits of space for popular culture studies. The logic of the pornographic city is not topographic, it is not a part of what Doreen Massey depreciates as “power-geometry” (Massey 1993). But because it is imaginary, the pornographic city does not fully correspond to Massey’s progressive concept of space either since to even see the pornographic city, let alone learn its lessons, you have to have already read, even studied, the smut. You cannot just walk into the pornographic city. This is a city that cannot be scaled in Erik Swyngedouw’s sense either, precisely because smut is inexact and indistinct. If smut is amenable to any space-based analysis then it must be seen to work primarily on the space of the private body. In the last analysis, for all its rationality and all its intellectual thrill, eroticism is bodily. I use a powerful spatializing metaphor, of the city hopelessly soiled, to suggest that urban transformation traumatizes
**Figure 9.1** Knowing woman.

**Figure 9.2** Building a community (with eugenic baby).
locals and newcomers alike. Making smut literal, highlighting its savoir faire, and taking seriously its ability to discolor all who come into contact with it, returns imagination to physicality where the trauma lodges. The dirty are abject and helpless when the measure of belonging is cleanliness. A city mapped in the highly saturated palette of the spiritual civilization is clean, bright, square and orderly. What the traumatized and abject are compelled to see, the pure ignore: a city where suffering and loss are as real as crime, dislocation, brutality, fear and injustice.

Defining smut

According to national guidelines in effect since 1997, two traits make a publication unacceptably yellow. These two qualities are yinhui, obscenity, and seqing, or pornography. (In the statutes, yellow literature is distinguished from violations of copyright, anti-statist or what are termed “illegal publications” (feifa chubanwu), a more serious violation of law.) The regulations classify under the category of pornography anything advocating obscene acts, or inciting lust (xingyu) in ordinary people by concretely describing sexual activity or intercourse that is lewd and filthy (yinxie). These include: lewd instruction in sexual technique, concrete descriptions of incest, rape and other crimes, concrete descriptions of children’s sexual play, concrete and obscene descriptions of abnormal sexual activities and violence, and other graphic descriptions of sexual matters that ordinary people allegedly find unbearable. Obscenity, on the other hand, refers to anything poisonous to the psychological health of ordinary, particularly immature, people. This category includes violent representations inciting youth to admire criminality or to make light of the law, bringing latent criminality into open expression, inflicting emotional trauma or disclosing schemes that swindlers might use to cheat innocent citizens (Liu, unpublished).6

Inside the general distinction between obscenity and pornography which I will expand for the purposes of this essay are the juridical modifiers vulgarity (diji yongsu) and explicitness (juti, concrete). The “Regulations of publications with miscellaneous or mingled obscene content” (jiaza yinhui neirong de chubanwu) particularly concerns me because it describes “vulgarity” quite explicitly. Vulgar cultural commodities “lack scientific or artistic qualities,” and are injurious to the social morals and mental health of ordinary, particularly young, people. Under this rubric fall: descriptions of sexual activities, sexual psychology or descriptions of sexual organs, publications that openly advocate sexual freedom, concrete descriptions of behavior that children would find traumatic, concrete descriptions of the rape or seduction of minors, fornication, incest and prostitution, lurid descriptions of sexually transmitted diseases and lewd descriptions that ordinary people would find distasteful.

“Vulgar obscenity” is the nearest state, juridical category corresponding
to the term “smut” as I employ it here. While Chinese obscenity law does not belabor the difference between porn and smut (there is no native vernacular category of smut, only differing emphases leading from obscenity into pornography), in actual practice vulgarity is obscene writing with no photo image. In current Chinese popular culture, in other words, to all intents and purposes smut is material that people seem to like reading precisely because it is informative, unappetizing, and repellent, and because it uses words to describe sexual activities, organs, freedoms, behaviors, perversions and degradation.

In a 1998 scholarly article, part of an ongoing debate over the yellowing of mass popular culture, Li Baijian drew a line between ordinary popular literature and what he called “huangse xialiu” or yellow gutter literature (Li 1998). The problem for critics writing in the Qu Qiubai-Mao Zedong tradition is that writing on “love, passion, obscenity, sex, rape, killing, fear and oddities” (ai, qing, yin, xing, jian, sha, jing, qi) is now wildly popular, which suggests that gutter literature may be the popular culture (tongsu shuji) of our time. Li’s crisis interests me because he points so directly at the analytic problems xialiu wenxue presents to us. In the mid-1990s I was living in an inexpensive hostel in the Jiaodaokou district of Beijing. Each time I left for the shops or to visit friends I would bring home armfuls of tabloids and magazines and dump them on the dressing table. One day I found the cleaning staff waiting for me. They had laid out several tabloid broadsheets on the bed and were earnestly discussing something; as I burst in the room, they started to interrogate me about the material. They expressed two primary worries. Why would a scholar be interested in low class material, and why would an American in China buy socially harmful reading material? I recall taking up the Qu Qiubai-Mao Zedong position that popular literature is the voice of the masses, that any good scholar would want to know something about popular attitudes and that this stuff seemed to be very popular. When my own relatives gave me a dressing down for similar reasons and explained that xialiu wenxue had the capacity to diminish my (and their, I suppose) class standing, I came at the collected material with fresh respect. The broadsides and luridly decorated short stories about mayhem and murder were potent beyond my initial understanding. Material I draw on to map the pornographic city is generically speaking this kind of xialiu wenxue – “gutter literature,” “trashy writing,” “smut.” The terms all refer in any case to a subset of regulated, generic mass or popular writing. Smut is “vulgar” in a statutory sense. Its social vulgarity makes it obscene under government regulation and consequently an illegal, banned, cultural commodity.

Smut and its environments

In the old porn distribution center of Xibahe Village in the Chaoyang district of Beijing a greening project took center stage during the spring of
2001. Under the insignia of the Beijing State Administration of Industry and Commerce Bureau (Beijing gongshang xingzheng guanli ju), rows of dazzling, intensely color-saturated advertising images stretched down the pedestrian road along Jingan xijie. The greatest concentration of posters ran along the wall fronting the Jialefu supermarket. The posters drew a parallel between a green spiritual civilization and the promise, to those who could buy, that commodities would civilize and beautify personal, domestic space. Encoded in these graphic dreams of a clean, orderly, lush city addressing every citizen’s spiritual and material needs is Deng Xiaoping’s theory of the two civilizations, the material and spiritual (Lynch 1999).

The superrealist socialist public sphere is as imaginary as the pornographic city. In January 1994, propaganda and federal level thought work officials approved the publication of canonical works on public morality (Quanguo xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo huiyi 1994). The documents established the Party consensus on Deng Xiaoping’s theory of the two civilizations, the material and the spiritual. Deng’s civilization ideology holds that spiritually compromising cultural representations threaten the project of socialist marketization. The widespread popularity of anti-pornography campaigns, urban parks, populist environmental beautification and other palliatives is a sign of the theory’s positive results (Bakken 2000). Ordinary people and intellectuals apparently ratify the view that securing material goods is only half of the state’s responsibility. The government is increasingly held responsible for regulating the cultural or “spiritual” environment, too. The 1994 documents are practical. They stress why durable, long-term strategies for cleansing the cultural environment must be developed. They are forthright about the fact that propaganda workers confront major contradictions. That is because material development and spiritual development are antagonistic or mutually cancelling when regulatory policy is stressing development. Liu Zhongde pointed out that raising the level of spiritual civilization in a socialist market economy would compel regulators to inject wholesome alternative cultural products into the markets. Yet free cultural markets are profitable because they offer impure, pornographic materials. While cultural economies require open markets, openness lifts previous filters on pornography, and that allows contaminating materials into the system (Liu 1994). Ai Zhisheng noted that officials in popular culture venues face the same problem as fine arts partisans. The best the state can do is to strike a balance between elevated products that transmit spiritual value and mass-produced, crude, potentially polluting and overwhelmingly popular commercial products (Ai 1994). Responsible cultural workers should “sweep away the yellow,” but they must replace it with clean, main melody fare that guides consumers away from what all acknowledge is grossly profitable smut and porn (Qin 1994).
Smut, scholarship, and state regulation

While state policy on gutter literature is consolidated in civilization theory and practice, the debate over what has caused the eruption of gutter literature into public view in the last two decades, and judgments about whose responsibility it is to rid the society of it involves many people, not just government officials. Because the “yellowing” of mass popular culture touches on broader questions of information control, the internet, copyright violation, the criminalization of product distribution routes and the corrupt commercialization of an older, socialist public sphere, many people perceive themselves as having a stake in this problem. The mandated discourses of spiritual civilization form an outer perimeter. Inside it an intense discussion among national intellectuals unfolded in the 1990s over how to address the question of an adulterated or pornographic mass culture. Commentators in this debate do not concur on what falls under the rubric of obscenity. They also differ over what impact reading smut has on readers and writers and whether controlling the tide of commercial smut rolling through these markets is more important than other pressing social problems (like, for instance, some of the crimes represented in smut itself).

Still, when it comes to the topic of pornographic adulteration of the new mass consumer culture, academic writing appears by and large to share the government’s objectives. Law professors, school administrators and propaganda workers, of course, but also cultural theorists, guardians of language purity, college teachers and educated people generally implicate themselves in the problem of how to define smut and how to distinguish harmful and benign popular cultural commodities. In my sampling, though people give differing reasons for opposing the yellowing of the popular culture, most link xialiu wenxue to vulgarity, pornography and social degradation. For instance, Li Xuebin suggests that questions of porn and smut must figure heavily into the larger debates about regulating the mass popular culture. Literary or elite university critics like Li see the basic challenge as the entry of dehumanizing values into what had been largely their own highly regulated domain of mass culture. Yellowness may be just a signifier in this debate. But crass market acquisitiveness, sensationalism, an explicitly sexist sensorium, widespread images of eroticized violence all raise critical questions about taste and the relation of taste to class polarization in the new socialist market economy. At stake in the work of Chinese Law University Professor Shu Guobao, to note another instance, is what sort of impact smutty popular commodities have on shaping individual consciousness. At opposite ends of the domestic political spectrum, their common reference point symbolized in a fraught concern with pornographic culture, each (a less reflexive Communist Party cultural regulator and the highly cosmopolitan social theorist) is concerned with questions about the adulteration of the public sphere.
The relation of yellow culture (porn and smut in my categories) and the state is extremely complex. So many ways exist to articulate the smut question to matters like popularizing the new legal culture; protecting high culture from low, tasteless and scummy competitors for disposable income; feminist alarm at rising brutality in literary and photographic depictions of women; the politics of articulation to globalized cultural theory. This does not even mention questions like internationalization of criminal porn, copyright policy or intellectual property rights and WTO sanctions against infringement, regulation of the internet, hate speech enflaming national minorities, terrorism and so on.

Over the decade of the 1990s regulatory regimes were codified, and transprovincial, national working committees established, such as the National Office for Eliminating Pornography and Cracking Down on Illegal Publications (NOEPCDIP). Government administrations, for example the General Bureau of Radio, Film and TV (RFT Bureau) or the State Press and Publications Administration (SPPA), were streamlined – in part in response to the internet revolution – and the previously unregulated and decentralized world of publication began to respond. The cultural market in magazines, tabloid broadsheets or xiaobao, and all the other media that deliver xialiu wenxue of necessity are now regulated through the ISBN/ISSN control structure (Lynch 1999). It would appear that regulation of smut and porn through these new cultural market regimes and the “hard strike” policing policies have succeeded in disciplining the culture markets and driving the material out of Beijing markets. Anti-porn sweeps are generally popular with parents: in my last visit to the city in 2003, I saw far less smut and more crime and violence publication than in earlier years.

The pornographic city

The point is that regulators (and readers, too, as I will argue shortly) consider gutter literature to be a point of condensation. That much is indisputable. What smut provides its primary consumers is special knowledge about the latent forces lurking just beneath society’s surface. A key tenet of the pornographic city is that only smutty reading matter provides a rational and righteous mapping of these forces because smut gives readers access to the contemporary rationality which links criminality to popular understandings of the law. Smutty ways of knowing may be sexual or criminal (the two pertinent domains of government regulation). But they are also legalistic, normative and social. The xialiu wenxue reader’s sensual pleasure in reading about wickedness and dirt is mediated by the real need to survive in a wicked, dirty world. Smut offers a perverse reading of law as the logic of crime. This takes the lovely, lush chimera of the social public sphere with its associated consumer dream of personal perfectibility and turns it into so much epiphenomenal fluff. The law of the body is the
law of disease. The law of everyday social reality is the struggle of the most violent against the others, the trickster against the dupe. The law of politics is that what may look like a mild-mannered government official is, in fact, a casually predatory crime boss who justifies his criminality to the judge as simply the recognition that in today’s society you either have money or you are nothing.

The criminality depicted in smut is not illusory. Spectacularly violent crimes in the 1980s laid the foundation for the theory of the two civilizations (Tanner 1999). No doubt real criminality is the reason why urban citizens support law and order, anti-pornography “hard strikes” (FBIS January 10, 1997; FBIS December 18, 1996). But they probably support anti-smut campaigns for the reasons my relatives gave: consumption of writing about indecency, criminality and unhealthiness is contaminating. Class anxiety is germane here because there is a presumption that this literature may be appealing primarily to the street trash, migrants, laid-off workers, or prostitutes who are alleged to threaten order. If there is a spatial scale at work in the pornographic city, it would be this amorphous sense of relational and contaminating class difference, I think, evident in fears of shared readership as much as smut’s descriptions of the criminality of elites. No doubt influxes of rural labor, urban renewals that devastate familiar neighborhoods, rises in the violence of crime if not the rate of crime itself, all must be shaping the emotions of readers who consume smutty stories about eroticized violence (Li, Zhang 2001).

Smut, then, is not about erotic relief. Rather it addresses the real constraints that anxiety and fear impose on citizens in the compulsory popular culture regime of the state bureaucratic society of controlled consumption. Real concerns about criminal violence ground the logic of smut in the pornographic city and feed the market for encyclopedic, pseudo-stately works like the two-volume Great Spectacle of Black Society In and Outside China, which provide “fact” to reinforce the “personal” stories that appear repetitively in story form in less exalted venues. Black Society calms and instigates fears through the processes of cataloguing and normalizing criminal activity into historical types, for example narcotics industry (peddling, smuggling, international, etc.); gambling (syndicates, addictions, class implications); prostitution (history of Chinese, US and Japanese slattern cultures); smugglers and smuggling (specie, commodity, weapons, cultural treasures, etc.), gangsterism, banditry, syndicates, terrorists, murderers and so on in a magnum opus of 1,400 gory pages (Pang and Gao 1994).

No matter what narrators allege, smut is not so much exposing the social reality beneath official representations but rather providing consumers a knowing and consistent reality or rationality. For even where a text or image may not be immediately or obviously prurient, it may still be defined in regulatory terms as incompatible with spiritual civilization. Gutter literature appears to be part of a subtle, criminalized cat and mouse game between writers of these stories and the authorities. I make
this suggestion on the basis of no hard evidence but rather because I have noticed that dirty material collected in the 1990s proved to be typologically the inversion of the banned categories of official vulgarity: (1) descriptions of sexual psychology and descriptions of organs and acts, (2) paens to sexual freedom, (3) descriptions of infantile or underage sexuality, (4) statutory rape, (5) incest, (6) prostitution, (7) lurid descriptions of sexually transmitted diseases. For each kind of vulgarity there exists either a corresponding magazine specializing in it, or a well-developed sub-genre of writing available across the full spectrum. The illegality of gutter literature is highlighted in a smut savoir faire.

How to center something as ephemeral as an “unhealthy medical magazine” poses a critical problem, for “it is precisely the marginal nature of dirt,” as Enzensberger argues in his phenomenology of smut, “that makes it such a difficult concept.” How does an unhealthy description of a venereal disease differ from a healthy one? Partly it is the neighborhood: descriptions of venereal diseases are unhealthy in dirty magazines that deal in abjected social dregs. A description of venereal disease becomes vulgar, is open to yellow classification in regulatory terms precisely when it brings into visibility the indistinction and discomfitingly vague and shifting line between spiritually uplifting or clean cultural products and what is unquestionably pornographic pornography. “As dirt increases or becomes more concentrated it becomes less dirty,” Enzensberger cautions. The less overtly or graphically representational a dirty description is, the more pervasive and even invasive. This ability of smut to cast a spell, to nauseate and attract pleasurably, may actually be due to its ubiquity, and its nondescript, smeary dinginess. That is why the most significant smut is not about sex at all, but about sexually transmitted diseases; not the encyclopedic index to social pathology, but intensely focused case studies describing internal indecision or aspecificity regarding sexual identity, phallic women and predatory lesbians, and thus, at core, basic human drives that while animal or natural, prove in the pornographic city to be socially debasing and humiliating. If smut is as I am arguing generic because (1) it is the inverse of criminal statutes and (2) it sells the impression that dirty books, magazines and broadsheets allow readers special information they need to navigate in today’s society, then the encyclopedic glamorization of criminal society and detailed descriptions of sexual diseases are intimately connected.

A few outstanding examples should make my point. The smutty medical journal Family Doctor (Jiating yisheng) is vividly offensive in a petty, sour, titillating way. A typical 1997 issue of the magazine included articles about illnesses one can contract in airplanes, diabetes, why women get bladder infections, why people get headaches after intercourse, whether post-coital leucorrhoea is really an illness or not, neurasthenia and various other psycho-sexual and social diseases. In other words, because of its relentless focus on genital life, its general topics take on a
strange unseemliness. On top of general-topic, so-called “family matters,” the magazine for several years devoted two full sections exclusively to sexual concerns. “Sexual knowledge” and “Discussions on love and sex” have disappeared by January 2000, my last copy of the magazine. But in the late 1990s they were a cornucopia.

These articles are not educative in a “healthy” way. They are formulaic. “Causes and cures of female sexual disinterest” consists of four studies. In case one the woman is frigid because she lacks scientific knowledge of her own body. Case two feared pregnancy, case three developed an unreasonable fear that her husband was sleeping with prostitutes and would infect her with AIDS, and number four had married because her husband drugged and raped her while they were courting to force her into accepting his proposal. The “doctor” cures the first three cases with psychosexual counseling, but number four must divorce and remarry to become orgasmic. After these it is a wonder anyone would retain an interest in erotic life, so diminishing and demoralizing are the “cases.” But “The Wife Who Only Wanted Sex” is no less dispiriting given that the topic posed is whether a man is better off married to a very sexual woman with unattractive personal qualities or a really nice woman who has no libido. This erudite author’s wife was troublingly orgasmic but lackadaisical about personal development (“The wife” 1997). For readers, a message the essay conveys is that more than likely one’s wife will always be a bit out of whack; another commonplace the piece conveys obviously is the tenuous linking of female libidinous drives and modes of appropriate social regulation (Guan 1997).

The magazine of medical rationality I have personally found most disagreeable is the fascinating In the Beginning because of the prevalence in it of ambivalent stories about childhood sexuality and sexual development. This magazine alleges to be the publication of the Population Control Bureau of Guangdong Province. Unlike Family Doctor, In the Beginning is not a glossy, highly commodified publication. Its cover (stapled on perhaps after pirated reprints in local smut markets) is the only glossy thing about it. In the Beginning appeals to a (perhaps imaginary) close-knit community of readers that shares “true life” dilemmas and intimate experiences in writing. Since the stated objective of the magazine is population control and eugenic quality, it is in a good position to repetitively draw a malodorous, imprecise line between obviously clinical descriptions of disease and pornographic fantasies about genital life. The articles’ scientific content is thin, and incomprehensibly technical, while the stories provoke as much anxiety about somatic and carnal matters as they relieve in each of the banned categories of vulgarity, but most exquisitely in developmental sexuality and childhood sexual expression.

For instance, along with stories about sexual dysfunction, epilepsy, AIDS and condom use, one vivid issue highlights three essays on childhood sexuality. In a section entitled “Gender Education,” the question
posed is “How should childhood ‘self-love’ be dealt with?” The first task is to teach readers what is meant by “self-love,” of course. “When it happens their [little infant’s] affect will be disturbed, their eyes unnatural and their faces redden. Often they might sweat and appear exhausted. Once in the habit they will do it whenever bored.” It may be normal, but infant self-love is really not a positive behavior. A big obstacle for readers situated in a market where families are expected to have one child is that single children are said to masturbate more than children with siblings. Parents tend to over-pamper single kids, they lack collective social experience, and, anyway, parents ignorantly have sex in front of children under two, oblivious to the scientific fact that children have sexual feelings from birth (Yu 1997).

More unhealthy than masturbating babies is father–son incest, the sub-theme of “Sex education is as important as nutrition,” a beautifully crafted, first-person account of a son’s early childhood sexual awakening. One night dad catches his second-grade son masturbating and reassures him that it is normal. But father adds that the boy will need to curtail the activity so that when he grows up he can have a normal sex life. When you feel the inclination, think about me instead, the father tells his son. The boy gets older and one day, reading about sexually transmitted diseases, he feels a pang of anxiety because while congratulating himself on the purity his dad’s instructions instilled in him, the boy feels imperiled because the stories are sexually arousing to him. Consequently the son develops an anxiety fearing that the pleasure his father’s kisses and caresses give him mean that he himself is a homosexual. Troubled, he confesses. Once again the good father explains that sexual intimacy between fathers and sons is normal and does not lead to promiscuity, queer sex or AIDS. The son grew up to be normal (Yang, H. 1997).

Ren zhi chu, of course, is the first line of the “Three character classic” and refers to the nature of humanity naturally tending toward goodness when properly educated. Perhaps the title is also a pun on the character “xing” in the second line of the Classic, since xing ben shan or “humanity is originally good,” might also be misread as “sex is originally good.” Certainly the magazine’s self-description as “the adult’s Three character classic central repository of knowledge about marital sex” is clear. But it is worth repeating that this magazine has never been a scientific source of objective information about erotic matters. Issue after issue it is full of highly intimate, anxious, first-person accounts that stress the terrors of psychosexual life. The discovery that beneath the infant’s bland face is a sexual being with a dangerous, nasty, natural sexual practice is presented as an alarming bit of erudition. The “natural” masturbatory experiences of a young boy are connected in narrative to father–son incest and, of course, to perverse sexual desire and fear of AIDS contamination.

A similar mix of shallow erudition on human nature and communal anxiety over social regulation applies in the many, many, many descrip-
tions of sexually transmitted diseases that *In the Beginning* publishes. Like “After her husband infected her with a venereal disease,” many in this genre begin with the presentation of symptoms. “Doctor, I have a sexual disease and acute pain with urination,” is how this particular example opens. After a long explanation of events unfolding in her husband’s cerebral cortex on a drunken business outing where husband lost control of his sexual impulses, it is not exactly clear what the story is about. And that is certainly one of the genre’s strongest selling points. It could be the power of a woman’s love to overcome obstacles, even erotic betrayal. It could also serve as a lesson in the sexual physiology and psychology of men. It is also a nasty little fable that makes sexual indiscretion seem normal and terrifying at the same time.

“Porn with Chinese characteristics” finds outlets in many registers, though it is literally impossible to know whose desire is being invoked in *Caihong* or *Rainbow*, publishing under the slogan “Philosophy, human sentiment, knowledge, entertainment . . . Fresh, elegant, simple, meaningful,” and directly advocating sexual freedoms liberally larded with incest subthemes. High- or low-level smut venue, the social disorder that incest signifies and its power to “yellow,” stain, contaminate what it touches fills even modestly incestuous stories with foreboding. *Rainbow’s* imaginary market position as the Rolls Royce of smut just means it puts a gloss over contaminating material that *Zheyidai* or *The Todays* presents in an overtly grotesque mode. “The full account of a female murderer’s crime” involves a nephew who stalked and repeatedly raped and tortured his aunt. After many failed attempts to free herself and a resigned recognition that government authority is unwilling to protect her, she kills her tormenter in the cave where he has kept her captive, just as he is deciding to butcher her. Though she serves her time, even the sentencing judge admits that the quality of mercy must apply in cases of incest (Anonymous A 1997). *Rainbow* and *These Times* share the notion that criminals are accountable and law merciful just as they argue year in and year out that sexual expression is natural, though being irrepressible, it must be regulated through some sort of social ethic. Regnant, scientific “sex sociology” abounds in gutter literature, which provides a middlebrow intellectual framework for the perverse recoding of unease. One *Rainbow* “sociologist,” for instance, pondered why wives and housekeepers are so obviously disposable elements in the sexual jungle (because law cannot regulate a force as powerful as sexuality, indexed obviously as a male prerogative). Ergo courts of law should not get involved in placing limits on people’s extramarital sexual activities since even marriage cannot be expected to put the genie of sex back into the bottle of repression now that modern society no longer subscribes to traditional sexual ethics (Sun 1997).

For a moment in the late 1990s, smut magazines became fixed on abnormal sexual psychology, criminal sexual violence, stories of sexual degradation and violent or criminal women. A special issue of *Zheyidai* in
January 1997, for instance, included stories about perverse male masturbation techniques, a sexual murder and mutilation crime, and a tale of six female university students living in the same dorm who are turned into the private harem of a seventh girl. “A Rarely Seen Female Hermaphrodite: A Case of Forced Sex and Murder” focuses on a person who by the age of twenty had married and borne children. Following childbirth she felt a strange sexual desire for women; then she had an erection. This spurt of androgen set her on a course of seducing many women and eventually killing her lover of ten years. When examined, a small penis was found appended to her vagina, which makes her that rarity of nature, the female hermaphrodite. Nothing, the story intones, is more obvious than gender identity. But the female hermaphrodite is hard to smoke out even though she can rape women just like men do and this one had a consciousness of her own criminality. She knew very well that her behavior was immoral and illegal but she did it anyway (Li, C. 1997a).

Nüxing fanzui, English title Women’s Guilt, made the special brew of abnormal psychology and female criminality its market device. The premise of Women’s Guilt is to offer readers “case studies” or chapters on women in prison in order to illustrate the psychology and criminal reasoning of female murderers, libelers, thieves, hooligans and so on. The ugly, masculine, female butcher Wang Wei, for instance, in “The female butcher re-opens the Buddhist precept against killing,” loved slaughtering pigs. In a “pork for love” trade, the man she loves agrees to marry her on the initial condition that she supply him with meat, and then later that she never come to the school where he works as an athletics coach, that she resign from butchering and never interrogate him about his affairs. They marry and she has a child, but when he does not return to their farm for months, Wang Wei takes her son to visit the school where they encounter her husband making love to another, feminine woman. The enraged Wang brutally slaughters the husband, his lover and her own son in a final vulgar climax to a vulgar story. The erudite narrator notes that this was a feminine crime rooted in female abnormal psychology, morbidity and insanity, which is the scientific reason why her crime was excessively gory. Although people are animals and are thus naturally bestial (shouxing), brutality left to itself becomes lawlessness. That is why all societies must have laws to control the criminal elements who tend to be young, have a low cultural level, a tendency to go to extremes and no sense of law. They are as these stories like to say, “fa mang” or illiterate in the law (Anonymous B 1997).

Smut and the law

There is more to this rich vein of gutter literature than I can possibly convey in one short essay, but clearly by virtue of content, state ideological regulatory measures and simple generic formulas, smut opens an indistinct
zone where human desire appears to seek a transcendent regulatory mechanism in natural law and natural justice. Incestuously linked in these stories, intimate and public spaces are barely distinguishable. Crimes of intimacy are punished in a just order or not punished in an unjust social world, but the law of punitive retribution remains in effect either way. The liminality and pervasive illegality of smut mirrors the anxious way that the erotic body is paraded into a terrifying social order where Eros becomes visible primarily in scenes of criminal violation or disease and pain. Nowhere is this clearer than in the smarmy relationship struck between the government’s rolling campaigns to popularize law throughout the nomenklatura and smut culture’s own preoccupation with legal erudition. Smut inverts the discourse of law. Basic Knowledge on the Construction of the Socialist Legal System, the 1996 primer on how government officials should understand and practice law, looks at juridical discourse from the perspective of the emergent, socialist, civil society the socialist market economy is expected to produce. To regulate the socialist consumer markets, civil and criminal codes are required and consumers have to accept education in the ideology of lawful consumption practices. Like healthful and appropriate consumer law manuals, unhealthful or smutty writing is also preoccupied with law. Only in the pornographic city, the relation established between law, crime and erudition reverses legitimate, spiritually uplifting legal campaigns. Unlike the lush garden images that line the boulevard in front of the Xibahe Jialefu department store with its helpful slogans on sanitation, its environmental concerns and popular eugenics, smut slogans advocate more knowledge about law delivered to them in more and more grossly libidinized descriptions of violence, criminality, life crises and bad health. Gutter literature readers are often enjoined to be different from the criminals and victims paraded through smut case histories, particularly female violent offenders. Do not be faming or illiterate in the law. “One only knows one’s own ignorance as one learns to study the law, to know the law, to understand the law, to protect and defend the law” begins the story called “I have a legal method of controlling you.” The story concerns women who fight over men and end up violating the law against sexual slander. Women, even women who do know the law, are swayed by their ungovernable passions and commit more serious crimes like harboring fugitive lovers. The centrality of law in these stories is related to the illegality of the crimes deliciously represented and to the moral dilemma of the criminal protagonists who should know about law, and should know right from wrong. Furthermore, the more unlawful and passionate the crime, the more central to the story is the narrator’s alleged love of law.

Sometimes the narrator of the story is himself an officer of the law. In such cases the struggle of reason to master a situation is not just the pedagogic imperative that we learn to awe and respect law. It can also be a struggle in the mind of the detective, policeman or judge to grasp the
irrationality of crime itself. A good example is the horrifying case of Zhou Yuwu. “The approaching last days of a mad corpse raper” is a true case tale about corpse thefts in and around Longshan, Hunan province. When the cops investigate a rash of missing body cases, it turns out that each recovered, putrid corpse has been sexually mutilated. While no one would be blamed for suspecting that corpse raping is something only a ghost or monster would do, in fact, the criminal is human, all too human. While interrogating him, the detectives learn that Zhou had undertaken the task of raping corpses because someone told him that if he could have sexual relations with a hundred dead women, he could become a spirit. The rational detectives, as servants of the law, initially have a hard time even catching a man with such ludicrous motives. The narrator finds it hard to believe that a human would engage in such ghost-like criminal behavior. But the story also confronted the reader with a difficult and learned legal paradox. While China’s traditional ethical culture allegedly interdicted corpse raping, in actual fact none of the current state’s criminal laws now covers this exigency. That is because current case law defines rape as sexual misconduct against the will of the woman. Dead women cannot be said to have a will. In the end the narrator does not explain the judge’s reasoning, but notes with satisfaction that Zhou got the death sentence despite this serious legal aporia (Shi 1997).

Like much smutty literature this story is well written. There is pure narrative pleasure when you read about criminal investigations or anticipate with foreboding what the wronged wife or abandoned lover will do in revenge. Many short stories make explicit references to elite, vernacular Chinese fiction, particularly, interestingly enough, early-twentieth-century vernacular or *baihuawen*. But well or crudely written, the pleasure the reader takes in gutter literature is certainly linked to the spectacle of social norms violated and returned back to order. Narrative pleasure fuses with satisfaction and delight at learning how to resolve erudite questions of law, morality and justice when as reader you confront a violent and sexual trespass. A common question of who the reader should be extending compassion or scorn to, the murderer or the victim or both ignorant parties, is a question calculated to prolong the reader’s cathection to the pornographic city, a world where everything is indistinct, blurry, stagnant, hidden, subliminal, incestual and mixed. Smutty legal tales often draw the reader by promising fantastic scenarios. The corpse raper, you recall, might have been a demon and not a human, after all. Or they can merely deliver an obvious ration of evidence that virtue is ruined in the greedy frenzy to get wealth. The transport or euphoria that the reader feels in considering the fantasy reality (he might be a ghost), yet rationally judging the reality in the end (he was just a very ignorant criminal after all) is rooted in a certain realism. For the “reality” that the reader’s erudition gains him access to is only truly real in the world of smut, of course, where law and morality adjudicate what is normal and what is – regrettably and attractively – abnormal.
Good smut offers a kind of democratization of social access in the imaginary world of porn city. This 1990s smut on erudition, particularly, reaches out in stories about law and health through the urban class structure to include the mal-educated and middlebrow reader in a rich stew of literary and scientistic “knowledge.” Abnormal sexual psychology consolidates law and science for a readership that is fascinated and appalled, but, in the very promise of the term “abnormal,” educated. Smut makes us all erudites of a certain kind. Perhaps the subjects of smut are also cosmopolitans, denizens of the city not because the stories are about the city always, but because the urban market for this material is large and even where it appears in rural contexts it is marked as from an urban space. Knowledge requires effort and access. The consumer of smut could until recently easily acquire enormous amounts of highly repetitive, comfortingly familiar but new and exciting data at any busy smut stand. Perhaps the ubiquity of smut with its promise of secret knowledge about the underworld of society is also a reaction to the decades of state information control. But maybe the power of stories to explain why criminals rob, murder, rape, corrupt innocence, trick good people, steal from the masses, and so on, arms consumers with a rationality that, though itself thoroughly corrupt, is able to make sense of the world.

What is certainly undeniable is that smutty ways of knowing are primarily sexual or criminal and reflect the particular domains Chinese states have consistently sought to regulate. The horror and the promise of neoliberal society or Chinese late socialist culture are etched out in the spatial metaphor of the pornographic city where desire and anxiety attend the bureaucratic popular culture of controlled consumption. Though the metaphor I have chosen is spatial, it is offered in the spirit of irony. Smut logic is linked to seeing through the law and somehow when vision spectralizes the statutes, it seems fixed on the spectre of female criminal violence, just as in the worlds of blind unlawfulness, genital ambiguity, STDs, unwanted pregnancy, abandonment, rape give shimmering access to a heartbreakingly obscure erotic body. The desires that this socially produced human space unleashes often appear, in other words, as painfully illicit, while at the same time every conceivable argument – social, social scientific, scientific, medical, legalistic – is forwarded to prove the natural goodness of human sexuality and the injustice of criminality. A spatialization of wanting does not imply that desire is quantifiable; the earnest notion of place cannot explain the ubiquity and ordinary unseemliness of smut. Longing is longing for things, of course. But if the cleanliness of order and the sweet smell of new things, mass market clothes, houses, toilets lie beyond the reach of the abject urbanite, then perhaps smut savoir faire, which dwells so lovingly on the powers of disorder, corruption, and ugliness, is about a landscape of social vengeance or redress of injustice as much as anything else.
Notes

1 Jing Wang directed the Luce Project for Popular Culture to reconsider the concepts of space, place and popular culture. Judith Farquhar read and commented on earlier drafts as well as generously sharing her vast knowledge of Beijing street life. Donald M. Lowe, my first, best critic, has been in the case of smut a tolerant, sweet-natured presence. Brian Hammer searched databases for academic debates on smut, sent me xiaobao from the field and prepared bibliographic synopses of about a dozen novels, all of which contributions inform my perspective. Maranatha Ivanova shared her extensive knowledge of the Beijing demi-monde during two long discussions, and she interviewed kiosk workers for me about customers for smutty magazines. Hairong Yan wrote field notes on the placement of smutty material in a Hefei transit point and purchased a good sample of out-of-date journals from a lending library manager at the site, which added positioned knowledge that infuses my account. John Erni and Anthony Fung invited me to present “Pornographic City” at the City University of Hong Kong, “Cultural Studies of Global Hong Kóng,” June 4–6, 2001. I gave an interim research report, “Smut and porn in contemporary Chinese popular culture” at the Luce Foundation-funded third conference on “Mapping the ‘Popular’ in Post-Socialist China,” held in Hangzhou, June 18–20, 2001. I am grateful to respondents and to other Luce Project scholars, but particularly to Judith Farquhar. A 1998–1999 grant from the Walter J. Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington has enabled me to collect popular culture ephemera. I am grateful to all these individuals and institutions.

2 Smut production sites are nodes on distribution networks. A case in point is Haipang Village in Guangdong where news reports state that an elaborate underground factory production line existed which not only had cutting edge technology, but also used sophisticated management techniques to control labor (Yang, S. et al. 2000). Markets are also nodes within networks. Police reports name nationally known smut and porn markets scattered in major cities. These markets are located near shipping routes for easy dissemination across provinces, in places like shipyards or the immediate environs of train stations. Material produced in Guangdong might be shipped to Beijing (though its ISSN identification will claim Mongolia to be its place of origin). In Beijing there are what crime reports call “spontaneously” formed illegal newspaper and periodical wholesale markets. As late as July of 2000, newspaper and periodical wholesalers of various tiers gathered at Changchun Street and Xuanwumen in the early morning hours. There the middle-tier wholesalers buy from criminals working in legitimate presses, printing smut on company presses. Suburban retailers show up to buy in these markets and take publications out to the outlying suburbs of Beijing (Hong Kong Mingbao 2000). This report must have frustrated the municipal authorities who, in January of 1997, had initiated a broad sweep of the city to tamp down the thriving Beijing smut and porn markets. They concentrated on Zhongguancun in Haidian District, Xinjiekou in Xicheng, and, of course, Xibahe in Chaoyang District. I did not realize, of course, when I was collecting in Xicheng and Dongcheng in 1997, that smut markets there were in a high tide mode.

3 A social poetics of space must address the question of wanting or desire. People want to know, possess, avoid, satisfy, and all of this bodily wanting unfolds in space (Léfebvre 1991; Farquhar 2001). I am in effect fusing Léfebvre’s theory of productive space to Gaston Bachelard’s “poetics of space” and reading smut through the poetic image of the pornographic city. It helps that “the poetic image is an emergence from language . . . a little bit above the language of signification.” And for a social scientist it is useful that “in poetry, not-knowing is a
primal condition” (Bachelard 1964: xxiii, xxix). The political economy of pornography is complex, and I will not attempt to analyze it here. However, ISBN reports make clear that the producers and marketers of dubious and obscene materials operate in highly organized and well-capitalized criminal networks; there is concern now that the gangsters are at least inter-Asian if not international. From local mom-and-pop printing shops to whole porn villages, printers use plates that are pirated and recirculated widely. Often print shops and distributors are located close to roads or train stations for that reason. That and the illegal but booming markets in ISSN tracking numbers mean that there seems to be no such thing as a localist smut industry, or a place-specific smut. Of course place names are ubiquitous in the content of smut (as they are conspicuous in titles and bogus documentation of place of origin). That may be convention and it may be a rhetorical trick to reinforce the “true to life” quality of the writing. In other words, it does not matter to the criminal underworld where smut is produced, where the material is consumed or by whom, and for that reason smut is associated with transit points (train stations, bus stations, underground criminal transportation, the entries to parks, zoos, subways, large anonymous boulevards, etc.); material created in one place, alleged to be created in a locale, has either traveled from there or was never in that place at all.

4 Smut is often so openly displayed that I bought it for years before reading the statutes and realizing that publication, sale or possession of smut is strictly forbidden in the People’s Republic of China.

5 Smut, like pornography, however, is implicated in capital accumulation because it is created and distributed by criminals in crime syndicates.

6 I read the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) for several years in the late 1990s to track patterns of government crackdown and changing constitutional law. While specific statutes change, the post-January 1997 regulations are formulated in relation to the Chinese Constitution, Article 25, which spells out limitations on speech, including pornographic speech.

7 This surge in sexual ambiguity smut may reflect official decriminalization of homosexuality in the PRC. See Jo Lusby (2003) via Jeroen de Kloet in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture listserv, March 21, 2003. Lusby points to the importance of 1997: “Homosexuality has not been listed as a crime on Chinese mainland statute books since Liberation in 1949. Until the mid-90s, homosexuals were sometimes arrested under a ‘hooliganism’ clause in the law, but reform in 1997 removed this provision. Then, in April 2001, the biggest single advance in gay rights came with the declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder by the Chinese Psychiatric Association, meaning that rather than being officially treated as a ‘perversion’ requiring psychiatric care, it was re-categorized as something similar to an ‘identity crisis.’”

8 The mix of female libido and the charnel house is not unusual. In “The corpse in the fridge” [Bingxiang li de nanhu], a modern-day Pan Jinlian commits an incestuous murder with her husband’s nephew. After she gets him to kill his uncle, the murderess chops up the pieces of her husband’s body and attempts to dispose of him. The mother of the murderess turns her daughter in to the police after witnessing a scene of her libidinous daughter mincing the husband’s refrigerated corpse.
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