CHINA'S ENVIRONMENT AND WELFARE

Lili Lai

Hygiene, Sociality, and Culture in Contemporary Rural China

The Uncanny New Village

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Hygiene, Sociality, and Culture in Contemporary Rural China

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To Judy

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Preface

I started my field research in Shang village[1], Henan Province in October 2005. It was a rainy day, and the road was muddy, but we managed to keep ourselves dry and clean since we were in a car that took us all the way from the county seat to the township office. My friend Yu Jie had traveled together from the county seat to introduce me to officials at the Zhaoying township office. Soon after our arrival in Zhaoying, the township office unexpectedly announced that they had decided I should stay in Shang village, instead of Yu Jie's home village, which was the one I had chosen as a field site in a previous visit to the area. Yu Jie quietly suggested that I agree to whatever the office decided. After a phone call from the Zhaoying office to the Shang village Party Secretary, Zhishu, we returned to the car and drove to the village committee courtyard. Fang, the township official in charge of family planning, had been sent by the township office to introduce me to the village. It was already afternoon, and it was at very short notice that Zhishu quickly figured out a place for me, a complete stranger to Shang village to stay that night. I asked him if he could find me an old-style, one-story house, of the kind that at that time seemed to dominate Shang village, even though I had noticed many newly built two- and three-storey houses visible from the main village road. After Zhishu's careful review of potential hosts – he told me later that his major concern had been the issue of my safety as a woman researcher working alone – we met my first host, whom I called Ayi, in Zhishu's courtyard. Only Ayi and her daughter lived in their house. She initially declined the request to host me, insisting, "My house is awfully dirty." Zhishu urged her to take me over to have a look and let me decide for myself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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