

VOICE AND SILENCE OF THE SUBALTERN:  
RURAL WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC CULTURE OF POST-SOCIALIST CHINA

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines rural women's self-narrations about their sufferings in post-socialist China both in the official media and in the documentary films. The central question this study asks is whether it is possible for the post-socialist subaltern, such as rural women, to speak. The thesis first demonstrates how the official media efface the voices of rural women by constructing a unified discourse on *suzhi* or quality development in the post-socialist era. This is followed by an analysis of rural women's writings on their struggles with the official rhetoric channeled through TV documentary programs in the official media. This work concludes with a discussion of the possibility for rural women to speak via the medium of new documentary films. Known as "alternative archives," new documentary films examined rural women's articulations, which in turn can be seen as forms of talking back to the *suzhi* development discourse.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although my life in Beijing I had to sing, dance, and work as a tour guide under the hot sun every day was lonely and tough, looking back, I think that Beijing was still better (than rural areas). Even living as a street cleaner in Beijing would be still better (than living in the countryside).

–Youduo, a young rural working girl interviewed in Beijing in the TV documentary program *Fan Hua* [Flowers] in CCTV<sup>1</sup>

I imagined Beijing was perfect (before I migrated). But now it is a big disappointment.... Back home, my period was monthly, but now I get it every two weeks.... It's tough living away from home.

–Afeng, a rural young migrant girl interviewed in Beijing in an NDM film, *Out of Phoenix Bridge*<sup>2</sup>

Public space of China's post-Mao era has witnessed the emergence a noticeable discourses on the necessity of developing *suzhi* or the quality of the entire Chinese nation.<sup>3</sup> From the speeches of high-rank officials to newspapers, magazines, documentaries, and TV commercials, we can see that the term *suzhi* often consists of a number of dimensions such as the citizens' political and moral, technical, social and

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<sup>1</sup> “*Fan Hua*” [Flowers], *Ban Bian Tian* [Half the Sky], CCTV. (Beijing, China, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> *Out of Phoenix Bridege*, DVD, directed by Li Hong, (1997; Women Make Movie, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change*, (New York: An East Gate Book, 2006), 288.

cultural, and psychological qualities.<sup>4</sup> The term *suzhi* is roughly translated into (human) quality in English, yet it pools together heterogeneous meanings in contemporary China. As anthropologist Tamara Jacka has already pointed out, *suzhi* originally came from Japanese and referred to chemical composition or characteristic of a substance. As *suzhi* was integrated into Chinese, it began referring to the character, characteristics, or quality of the spirit or body of a human being. The word *suzhi* did not gain much popularity until 1970s, and went into unprecedented explosion in 1980s as the term began to be frequently used in family planning discourse emphasizing *renkou suzhi* (the quality of the population). The frequency of *suzhi* used in the *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily News] increased from 7 in 1970 to 102 in 1980, and then 813 in 1985, to 1,066 in 1990 and 2,486 in 2000.<sup>5</sup> In this study, *suzhi* is treated as a relatively new discursive element in dominant ideology of the post-socialist era since 1980s, and particularly its ramification after the 1990s.

The *suzhi* development discourse, has further transformed as China's post-socialism merged with neo-liberalization. Emphasizing on improving one's political, educational, technological, ethical and psychological qualities, *suzhi* development discourse in a way articulates the post-socialist Chinese state's deep anxiety about promoting while at the same time regulating the rapid economic development. For example, at the National Educational Conference in 1978, former Chinese president Deng Xiaoping stressed that "The national strength and stamina of economic development more and more depend on the *suzhi* of the laborers."<sup>6</sup> Former president

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<sup>4</sup> Hairong Yan, "Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks," *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2003): 495-98.

<sup>5</sup> Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*, 288.

<sup>6</sup> Yan, "Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism," 498.

Jiang Zemin also called for “cultivating millions of high *suzhi* laborers and skilled technicians to meet the demands of modernization” at the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1997.<sup>7</sup> With the help of official media, after the 1990s, an easy target for discourse has mainly been peasantry and rural migrants.<sup>8</sup> In particular, uneducated and unskilled surplus workers in rural areas began to be asked to become skilled laborers, who could contribute to their nation’s economic development by raising their *suzhi*. As the party-state has stressed the necessity of raising *suzhi* of the entire Chinese nation throughout the previous thirty year of economic reform, not only in official statements but also in everyday speech, one can readily come across statements on the importance of one’s *suzhi* development.<sup>9</sup> A university issues a *suzhi* diploma together with its regular diploma. Various kinds of ability tests including IQ test are getting popular in China. Individuals also make efforts to improve their *suzhi* “through, for example, better diet and exercise, the provision of ‘quality’ education for one’s children, self-study in English and computing, and the broadening of horizons through travel to the city or abroad.”<sup>10</sup> Even the concept of *suzhi* is sometimes used for a barometer evaluating one’s fashion sense.<sup>11</sup>

Several academic works on contemporary China have provided deeper analysis on how to understand the unprecedented explosion of the *suzhi* discourse in China since 1980s by paying special attention to the tricky relationship between the *suzhi*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 495.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 498.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 497.

<sup>10</sup> Jacka, Rural Women in Urban China, 39-41.

<sup>11</sup> Ngai Pun. “Becoming Dagongmei (Working Girls): The Politics of Identity and Difference in Reform China.” *The China Journal* 42 (1999): 1-18.

development discourse on rural women and their migration.<sup>12</sup> Contextualizing the prevalence of the term, *suzhi*, in the polarization between the city and the countryside in post-socialist China, Hairong Yan finds the discourse as part of the mechanism to propel rural women to the coastal cities as a cheap labor force securing the post-socialist development in China.<sup>13</sup> As she has noted, the de-collectivization and the decrease of investment in agriculture since the late 1970s gave rise to the massive unemployment problem, poverty, and lack of welfare and education in rural areas.<sup>14</sup> In this material context that produces systematic unevenness, the rural area has experienced what she calls “spectralization of the rural” in whose process the rural area and people have been represented as “a wasteland of backwardness and tradition” and “moribund Other.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast, in urban areas, mainly in the southern coastal regions, the influx of foreign investment and the financial support of the state created numerous factory towns since the policy of open-door industrialization, thus luring millions of peasants out of their farmlands to work in urban factories.<sup>16</sup> Anthropologist Tamara Jacka translates this political economic condition Yan elaborates into the specific layers of implications relating to the *suzhi* development discourse on rural women. She points out that rural people, especially women and those in the poorest areas, are now considered as backwards, lacking a certain level of *suzhi* in terms of education, culture, morality,

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<sup>12</sup> Please see Andrew Kipnis, “Within and Against Peasantness: Backwardness and Filiality in Rural China.” *Comparatives Studies in Society and History* 37 (1995): 110-35; Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Borge Bakken, *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity in China*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ellen R. Judd, *The Chinese Women's Movement: Between the State and Market* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Yan, “Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism”; and Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*.

<sup>13</sup> Yan, “Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism,” 496.

<sup>14</sup> Hairong Yan, “Spectralization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labor Mobility of Rural Young Women in Post-Mao China,” *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 4 (2003): 583-86.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 586.

<sup>16</sup> Yan, “Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism,” 586.



manners, psychology, physiology and genetics.<sup>17</sup> In this context, rural women are encouraged to improve their *suzhi*, and migration to cities is mentioned as a way they can improve them. For instance, in several Chinese articles on the benefits of migration, migration and work in the city have been portrayed as the means whereby the backwardness of the peasantry could be overcome.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between the discourse emphasizing rural women's lack of *suzhi* and their "beneficial" urban migration is a tricky one. The emergence of the *suzhi* development discourse targeting rural women and its prevalence in Chinese society are deeply intertwined with the phenomena of spectralization of the countryside and increasing demand for labor in urban areas. The discourse, in effect, disguised the unequal nature of labor management in post-socialist China: instead of dealing with the conflict between post-socialist transition and the political economic disadvantages the rural laborers have been exposed to, the *suzhi* discourse shifts the focus to a neoliberal question—i.e., how to transform the surplus labor, particularly rural women in the countryside into useful workers in cities. What we see happening to rural women under the reign of *suzhi* discourse is something comparable to the status of subaltern classes in postcolonial India. As subaltern studies have shown, while at the center of capitalism the bourgeois intellectuals were able to present the logic of capital as a universal cultural regime (such as values and concepts of the Enlightenment), the elite at the periphery failed to achieve a broad, cross-class coalition while identifying themselves with the Euro-centric political and cultural ideal. They instead suppressed the political and cultural involvement of peasants and workers. In post-socialist China, while the state

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<sup>17</sup> Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*, 39-42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 49-55.

actively participates in the global economy, China's official media and the state discourse tend to render the rural laborers as an inferior group who lack the educational, cultural, moral, psychological, physiological and even genetics qualities, and thus rule out the value of their self-consciousness and subjectivity.

Regarding how post-socialist transition rules out the self-consciousness and subjectivity of the working class, Xinyu Lu, a Chinese media scholar, has made some keen observations. In her essay on Wang Bing's documentary *West of the Tracks* (2003), Lu sees through the film how the construction of market economy during China's post-socialist transition not only disabled the economic status of the socialist workers and factories, but also left no room for workers to articulate criticism due to their already depleted class consciousness.<sup>19</sup> She argues that although working class at heavy industry were once symbolizing the triumphing force of socialism, workers' class consciousness has been long flattened into the state ideology. Thus during the post-socialist era when their labor is "transformed and rejected by capital," the working class does not have the legacy to form their own voice and vision.<sup>20</sup> They are, in a word, abandoned by the state as "ruins" and "remnants" in the post-socialist China losing their class consciousness. As Hairong Yan and Xinyu Lu point out, what replaces the void after "the collapse of the human subjectivity" is the "neoliberal human subjectivity" that needs to improve their *suzhi*, not class consciousness.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Xinyu Lu, "West of the Track: History and Class-Consciousness," trans. J. X. Zhang, in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry et al., (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 57-76.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 66-7.

<sup>21</sup> Yan, "Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism," 493-512; Yuezhi Zhao, "Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy: An Interview with Lu Xinyu," *Global Media and Communication* 6, no. 1 (2010): 10.

The class-consciousness of the peasantry, as Xinyu Lu further points out, was even weaker during the socialist time due to the Chinese Marxist theorization of Chinese society, in which peasants were seen representing feudal laborers thus could only be the followers of the leading revolutionary working class.<sup>22</sup> In this circumstance, peasants' loss of class consciousness would be even more complete in post-socialist China. Lu argues that the wide circulation of the term "subaltern" after the mid and late 1990s in China signifies the collapse of the unitary social spatial relationship and the accelerated polarization of Chinese society.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Lu sees that the post-socialist ideological structure of neoliberalism and market fundamentalism have reinforced rural disintegration and undermined the basis for the construction of a rural subjectivity,<sup>24</sup> so much that the majority population in China—workers and peasants—have been denigrated to the status of "subaltern" losing their class consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

The post-socialist subaltern, however, is different from the postcolonial subalterns in terms of their historical pasts. As we know, Chinese women had a recent liberating history where they were able to find ways of "talking back" to the feudal system. Gail Hershatter's well-known reflection on Spivak's question "Can Subaltern Speak?" traces back to the history of women's subjectivity and voice in modern China.<sup>26</sup> She argues that

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<sup>22</sup> Lu, "West of the Track," 66-7; Zhao, "Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy," 8-16.

<sup>23</sup> The use of the term "subaltern" is well known in India's post-colonial context and it is rather new in the China's post-reform context. Lu contends that the wide circulation of this term did not occur until after the mid and late 1990s in China and it signifies the collapse of the unitary social spatial relationship and the accelerated polarization of Chinese society. *Ibid*, 20-1.

<sup>24</sup> Zhao, "Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy," 15-6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 16-23.

<sup>26</sup> In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak discusses how intellectuals leave suffering Indian women under the custom of sati voiceless through their representations of these women. According to her, both representations of the Indian women's suffering by the British imperialists and Indian nationalists ignore the voice of these women. Although both British imperialists and Indian nationalists acted as if they saved Indian women or spoke for these women, they in effect spoke for their own stance. Intellectuals, who represent subaltern groups, frequently frame this marginalized subaltern group in the terms and interests of dominant social class including intellectuals themselves. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," in

“many subalterns making cacophonous noise, some hogging the mike, many speaking intermittently and not exactly as they please, and all aware to some degree of the political uses of their own representation in that historical moment.”<sup>27</sup> Using the sex workers in republican Shanghai as examples, she demonstrates how divergent were the voices subalterns used to speak up. These included, but were not limited to, collections of anecdotes, portraits, and poetry to and by high courtesans; gossip columns devoted to courtesans in the tabloid press; newspaper reports on court cases involving both courtesans and streetwalkers; and fictionalized accounts of the scams and sufferings of prostitutes.<sup>28</sup> Even the socialist residue of “*su ku*” (speaking bitterness) remained present in rural women’s speaking tradition. In her essay, “Working Sisters Answer Back,” Jacka notes that rural women she interviewed gave critical accounts on the exploitative and unjust urban discourse in ways similar to the “speak bitterness” sessions in socialist China, even that means they have to consent with Marxist categories of class exploitation.<sup>29</sup> It is indeed the case that at the current moment of post-socialist and neo-liberalization, women experienced a historical reversal and rural women’s status even falls back to the feudal-like moment. Those channels that Chinese women used to use to talk back in revolutionary China are no longer viable to the rural population in the post-socialist era. Nor were those in the Republican period. Are there any socialist or

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*Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-316.

<sup>27</sup> Gail Hershatter, “The Subaltern Talks Back: Reflections on Subaltern Theory and Chinese History,” *Positions* 1, no.1 (1993): 125.

<sup>28</sup> For more examples please see *Ibid*, 108-9.

<sup>29</sup> As Jacka mentioned, in fact, in pre-revolutionary China, Chinese women could act against injustice or injury perpetrated upon her by her husband or in-laws through the public performance of screaming her sufferings for all the village to hear. In socialist China, this was led to the practice of “*su ku*” (speaking bitterness), which was so pivotal in the formation of a revolutionary consciousness amongst villagers. Tamara Jacka, “Working Sisters Answer Back: The Representation and Self-Representation of Women in China’s Floating Population,” *China Information* 13, no. 1(1998): 59-61.

republican residues left in the gender consciousness of contemporary Chinese women? Is it still possible for them to speak to *suzhi* discourse and the regime of exploitation? If rural women in post-socialist China wanted to respond, in what way and through what channel are they able to do that?

This study aims to explore these possibilities. To be more specific, this study seeks to investigate whether rural women have the channel or medium to make their noise against the post-socialist neoliberal regime represented by media filtered discourse such as the *suzhi* development. In a way, the “subalternization” of rural Chinese women in the 1990s concurred with the surge of the new media such as internet, DV, and diversified TV programs. Instead of meetings, speech, articles, these newer media have occupied a prominent place in China’s public life. The earliest form of them includes serialized TV programs, official and semi-official journalism, digital video camera (hereafter, DV camera), and since the late 1990s, the New Documentary Movement. While China’s booming film industry has largely elicited rural women from the screen,<sup>30</sup> these new media activities actually have made the subaltern visible by projecting the images of the labor “remains” of socialism, including rural women, into the post-socialist public life.

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<sup>30</sup> Tang Xiaobing, focusing on new filmmaking tradition in post-socialist China since the late 1940s, address that New China Cinema’s distinct characteristic of social engagement has elicited representation of rural women and their participation in social change in those films. See his “Rural Women and Social Change in New China Cinema: From Li Shuangshuang to Ermo,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11, no. 3 (2003): 647-674. Focusing on contemporary Chinese women’s films, Dai Jinhua, a Chinese feminist cultural critic, points out that even though a number of Chinese films have been produced by women directors, very few of them touch upon female issues from a feminist perspective. According to her, contemporary women directors have rather played a role as a producer of either mainstream or art films, so that Chinese women, let alone rural women, have been invisible in contemporary Chinese cinema and women’s films. See her essay “Invisible women: Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Women’s Film,” *Positions* 3, no. 1 (1995): 255-280.

Several scholars studying contemporary Chinese media have already addressed how the diversification of China Central Television (hereafter, CCTV) programs since 1990s created grey areas in TV journalism, as well as how the introduction of DV camera stirred up the wave of “documenting” the invisible and the change. Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel see the New Documentary Movement (hereafter, NDM) films taken by DV camera as having accumulated into “alternative archives” that contain recordings on “topics that are ignored in official discourse, or marginalized politically because they do not ‘fit’ with the hegemonic approach to post-Mao reforms.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, the alternativeness created by newly emerged DV camera is well manifested in that it records events and gives voice to people normally overlooked in the mainstream official media. They have also paved the new possibility of looking at the strong connection between the usage of new media and the discovery of rural and migrant women’s self-consciousness. Media scholar Xinyu Lu’s pioneer study of China’s NDM films gives a more direct hint on how certain ways of using DV cameras have brought forth unprecedented change to subaltern’s self-narratives in post-socialist China.

One of the NDM’s defining features is that it tries to let the ‘others’ speak for themselves and *engender them in the position of subjects*.... This objective social existence, in turn, makes it possible for these groups to enter history, engendering a realistic and opening opportunity for democracy (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup>

She acclaims how these conscious ways of bringing forth the documenting power of DV camera gave rise to the NDM movement, an informal journalist and alternative media movement that have profoundly changed the mode of political cultural production. Lu noted that as a new mode of witnessing history, the use of DV camera were “contributing

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<sup>31</sup> Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel, “Alternative Archive: China’s Independent Documentary Culture,” in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry et al. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 137.

<sup>32</sup> Zhao, “Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy,” 19.

to constructing subaltern narratives and reconstituting the subjectivity of workers and peasants”<sup>33</sup> As the scholars of the NDM point out, the genre’s way of engaging with ordinary people had an impact on the official programs as well. CCTV has produced more programs and “on-site” live interviews with ordinary people, including migrant women workers.<sup>34</sup> Official media such as CCTV and Phoenix TV have produced quite a few TV series focusing on rural migrant women as well.<sup>35</sup> The possible impact of new medium such as DV camera on today’s subaltern people as well as Chinese society as a whole is already expected.

It is based on these existing studies of the possible indirect connections between the new media and subaltern that this thesis sets up its goal. This thesis will analyze the interactions of different media-based rural women’s self-narrations. These include the TV series and the personal essays of rural women themselves from a more official channel—CCTV programs—and their interviews on the one hand, and on the other, documentaries made with DV cameras by independent filmmakers. This study pays a special attention to those instances when rural women were given the chance to talk back to the *suzhi* discourse in post-socialist China. I will argue that individual filmmakers’ use of DV cameras have contributed to the possibility for rural women to talk back in verbal and nonverbal ways, to the extent of allowing what the *suzhi* discourse tend to erase to reemerge: their self-consciousness and self-awareness in post-socialist China. More specifically, the rise of the DV camera has made rural women be capable of speaking out and representing themselves in various ways—both verbally and nonverbally. In fact,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Xinyu Lu, “Rethinking China’s New Documentary Movement: Engagement with the Social,” trans., Tan Jia and Lisa Rofel, ed. Lisa Rofel and Chris Berry, in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry et al. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 29-30.

<sup>35</sup> For example, the Phoenix TV’s *Looking back 30 Years: The First Generation of Migrant Workers*, aired on July 8, 2008.

thanks to the video camera, the subaltern can “answer back” through gazing back or through meaningful silence and gestures. I will argue that a wide range of camera-human relations seen in these individual films indicate the new possibilities to capture subalterns’ “multiple voices” in contemporary China.

This study is organized in three sections according to three specific types of materials. The first section analyzes TV documentary programs on rural women and their migration issues in the official media, and provides a critique of them. To this end, it will specifically examine *Fan Hua* [Flowers], a TV documentary program on Chinese migrant rural women in CCTV that embodies the *suzhi* development discourse on rural women. In the second section, I turn my attention to a publication of rural women’s own writings, *Zhongguo Nongcun Funü Qinggan Zishu* [The Feelings of Rural Chinese Women: Self-Narrations].<sup>36</sup> Compared to the CCTV program, this publication includes many more personal accounts and experiences of rural women, which gives the public a chance to glimpse into very different stories from their first-person perspective. I will examine how these narrations bent themselves to seek consensus with the conclusion of the CCTV program. The last section explores a few Chinese NDM films with a special attention to their camera-human relations and its way of articulating rural women’s own narratives and their experiences. In doing so, this study wants to find a possibility of rural women’s talk-back to the *suzhi* discourse. For this aim, this section will present analysis of the following NDM films dealing with Chinese rural women’s issues in post-socialist China: *Last Train Home* (2009), *Bing Ai* (2007), and *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (1997). By exploring post-socialist subaltern narratives through the NDM films, this study hopes to

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<sup>36</sup> Lihua Xie ed. *Zhongguo Nongcun Funü Qinggan Zishu* [The Feelings of Rural Chinese Women: Self-Narrations] (Guiyang: People’s Press of Guizhou, 2000).



continue the discussion of “Can the subaltern speak?” in the post-socialist Chinese context. In doing so, it also hopes to supplement the current literature on NDM films with more clarifications of these films’ alternative qualities regarding the matter of articulating subaltern narratives.

## 1. RURAL WOMEN'S MIGRATION IN *SUZHI* DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

This section explores the post-socialist Chinese state's *suzhi* development project as represented in the official media. It does so through an analytical reading of *Fanhua*, a CCTV documentary series focusing on rural women's migration to the cities. Although the quantity of the TV documentary coverage of the rural is very small compared to its focus on urban issues,<sup>37</sup> the official media did involve itself in producing public image of this subaltern group as the tide of migration in post-socialist China.<sup>38</sup> Through analyzing CCTV's documentaries about rural women, this section seeks to unfold the issues in the following central questions: What stance does the official media take on the issues of rural women's migration within the *suzhi* development discourse? What discursive strategy does the official media devise when dealing with the issue? What information, regarding the issue, does the official media attempt to avoid?

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<sup>37</sup> The official media's TV documentary programs dealing with the rural account for only 1 per cent of the output of all registered television stations. For example, *China's Documentary* aired on CCTV produced 317 documentaries between 1996-2001, but only 18 of them touched upon rural issues. In particular, rural women, including migrant women, as a theme of TV documentary programs, have suffered more stratification in that they rarely speak to or give voice to the outlets of the official media. Wanning Sun, "Inequality and Culture: A New Pathway to Understanding Social Inequality," in *Unequal China: The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Inequality*, ed. Wanning Sun and Yingjie Guo, 27-42. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 37-8.

<sup>38</sup> For the representatives of TV documentary programs on rural migrant workers in the official media, please see, "*Fan Hua*" [*Flowers*], *Ban Bian Tian* [Half the Sky], CCTV, (Beijing, China, 2008); *Gong Di* [Construction Site], Dalian TV, (Dalian, China, 2004); *Hua Shuo Nong Min Gong* [Talking about Rural Migrant Workers], CCTV, (Beijing, China, 2009); "Migrant Workers," *China Insight*, CCTV, (Beijing, China, 2011); and *Picum Jishi* [Documenting the Pi Village], CCTV, (Beijing, China, 2012). *Fan Hua* amongst these is the only TV documentary program specifically for migrant women issues.

Before getting into the detailed discussion of the TV documentary, let me further unpack the *suzhi* discourse and its significance in the public life of post-socialist China. The concept of *suzhi* as the crux of the economic development in post-socialist China is well manifested in the speech of former Chinese president Jiang Zemin in 1997:

Modernization of socialism should have both prosperous economy and prosperous culture. The progress of modernizing our country, to a great extent, depends on *improving the quality (suzhi) of Chinese citizens and on making use of talents as resources*. ... In order to construct socialism with Chinese characteristics, *we must pay special attention to elevate the ethical and intellectual quality as well quality of science and technology of our nation*. This will provide strong intellectual and mental support to economic development and social evolution. This will also nurture new generations of modernized socialist citizens who have ideal, morality, culture and discipline. This is the long term mission for the cultural construction of the nation (emphasis added).

–Jiang Zemin’s report at the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, 1997<sup>39</sup>

In Jiang’s mind, in order for China to become a competitive player on the global stage, the party-state needs to raise the *suzhi* of the entire Chinese nation. Anthropologist Hairong Yan calls this *suzhi* project a “neo-humanist” project of the “neo-liberalist governmentality,” and finds that, throughout the thirty-year of economic reform, not only in official statement but also in every day speech one might have readily come across *suzhi* development discourse such as “we should urgently improve the *suzhi* of the entire Chinese population.”<sup>40</sup>

However, even though *suzhi* development seems to be the paramount task for the successful market economy, scholars agree that the meaning of *suzhi* is too ambiguous to

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<sup>39</sup> Zemin Jiang, “Jiang Zemin’s Report at the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party,” *Zhongguo Gongchandang Xinwen Wang*, September 12, 1997, Accessed September 3, 2013, <http://cpc.people.com.cn>.

<sup>40</sup> Yan, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism,” 495.

define as one unified term.<sup>41</sup> Jacka points out that the term *suzhi* has been used to refer to “a host of attributes, including education, culture, morality, manners, psychology, physiology, and genetics”<sup>42</sup> and even “somewhat ephemeral qualities of civility, self-discipline, and modernity.”<sup>43</sup> Albeit it is very difficult to define what *suzhi* exactly means, it is quite clear that the term is used by post-Mao state and Chinese elites to highlight the lack of quality of the Chinese laboring masses.<sup>44</sup> Such *suzhi* development discourse ceaselessly stresses the deficiencies of the common laborers and how they should improve,<sup>45</sup> so that it serves as measurement and quantification of what can’t be quantified—human subjectivity.<sup>46</sup> Yan contends that the deployment of *suzhi* “inscribes, measures, and mobilizes human subjectivity as the powerhouse for productivity and development”<sup>47</sup> and the term *suzhi* represents “a sense and sensibility of the self’s value in the market economy.”<sup>48</sup> Anthropologist Ellen R. Judd also points out that the term *suzhi* “becomes those attributes and abilities that enable women to compete in the marketplace, individually or collectively”<sup>49</sup> and “it is to be encouraged and measured through direct quantitative success in market competition.”<sup>50</sup>

Rural residents, in particular, rural women have become a main object of being measured and indexed by their *suzhi* level for the goal of the new economic development

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<sup>41</sup> Please refer to Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*, 40-2; Judd, *The Chinese Women's Movement*, 19-32; and Yan, “Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism,” 495-507.

<sup>42</sup> Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Yan, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism,” 494.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 494.

<sup>45</sup> Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*, 41.

<sup>46</sup> Yan, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism,” 497.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 497.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 495.

<sup>49</sup> Judd, *The Chinese Women's Movement*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

of the nation.<sup>51</sup> Jacka points out that television series *Heshang* [River Elegy], aired on CCTV in 1988,<sup>52</sup> delivered the message that “China was being held back by its backward peasantry.”<sup>53</sup> “Peasants were explicitly associated with stagnant tradition and condemned as weak-spirited, passive, and superstitious.”<sup>54</sup> Soon, the *suzhi* of rural women was assessed quantitatively as too low in the market economy, and they have been required to improve their *suzhi* to become the “agent of change”<sup>55</sup> and the “neo-liberal human subjectivity,” as Judd and Yan describe respectively.<sup>56</sup>

The *suzhi* discourse concealed important structural problems during China’s post-socialist transition toward global economy and its neo-liberalization of production. The post-socialist transition has had a complex impact on rural women’s long term struggle for betterment in their sociopolitical as well as economic lives. Judd maintains that the fact Chinese Women’s Federations urged rural women to strengthen themselves in the marketplace manifests China’s struggle between national identity (read inferior, rural) and modernity (read global economy).<sup>57</sup> As Jacka puts it, “inferior, low-quality peasants, the tide of peasant workers, and working sisters are representations whose origins and development have been closely tied to Chinese struggles for national identity and modernity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.”<sup>58</sup> Yet seeing peasantry as an obstacle to modernity has produced inequalities between the rural and urban unprecedented in socialist China. By emphasizing the peasants’ backwardness or their

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<sup>51</sup> Please refer to Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*, 40-2; Judd, *The Chinese Women's Movement*, 19-32; and Yan, “Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism,” 495-507.

<sup>52</sup> Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*, 40.

<sup>53</sup> *Heshang* [River Elegy], CCTV, Beijing, China, 1988.

<sup>54</sup> Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*, 40.

<sup>55</sup> Judd, *The Chinese Women's Movement*, 28.

<sup>56</sup> Yan, “Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism,” 493-512.

<sup>57</sup> Judd, *The Chinese Women's Movement*.

<sup>58</sup> Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*, 58.

lack of *suzhi*, the *suzhi* discourse, “diverts attention away from deficiencies and inequities resulting from structures, institutions, and practices either created, or endorsed by, the state.”<sup>59</sup> In fact, many Chinese intellectuals have warned the structural problem of current development strategies.<sup>60</sup> Wen Tiejun, a renowned Chinese expert on Chinese rural reform, warns on the “over-urbanizing” policy for the sake of “a high national income.”<sup>61</sup> He foresees that enforcing urbanization to the rural only exacerbates the widespread problem of “the three big disparities (between incomes, urban and rural areas, and regions).”<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, the *suzhi* development discourse sidesteps these uneven development problems. As Yan puts it, “it hides the politico-historical processes that have produced the difference between ‘developed’ and ‘under-developed’ areas.”<sup>63</sup>

*Suzhi* development discourse’s concealing effect has been resonating as the “*zhu xuan lu*” (main melody) in the official media as well, and characterized the cultural politics in the representation of subalterns throughout post-socialist Chinese media.<sup>64</sup>

*Fan Hua* [Flowers], a documentary program on Chinese migrant women is one example.

<sup>65</sup> One of the most complete TV programs focusing on rural women, *Fan Hua* was aired

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 56-8.

<sup>60</sup> Many have written regarding this respect. For example, Tiejun Wen, “Deconstructing modernization,” *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 39, no. 4 (2007): 10-25; Hui Wang, “Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity,” translated by Rebecca E. Karl. *Social Text* no. 55 (1998): 9-44; Zhao, “Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy,” 5-32. Dirlik’s work also deserves our attention regarding Chinese modernization path. Please see Arif Dirlik, “Modernity as History: Post-Revolutionary China, Globalization and the Question of Modernity,” *Social History* 27, no. 1 (2002): 16–39.

<sup>61</sup> Wen, “Deconstructing Modernization,” 18-22.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 10-25.

<sup>63</sup> Yan, “Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism,” 495.

<sup>64</sup> Wanning Sun uses the term, “cultural politics” as a new and innovative way of approaching to social inequality in reform China. She imparts two exact meanings to the “cultural politics” of social inequality: that is, the “culture of inequality” and the “inequality of culture.” The “culture of inequality” refers to “a set of moral, social, and political-economic values and assumptions that govern the ways in which inequality is rationalized, maintained, managed and negotiated in institutional and organizational settings.” The “inequality of culture” refers to unequal access to an array of cultural and symbolic resources. Wanning Sun, “Inequality and Culture,” 27-8; Wanning Sun, “The Cultural Politics of Recognition: Rural Migrants and Documentary Films in China,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 7, no. 1 (2013): 3-20.

<sup>65</sup> “*Fan Hua* [Flowers],” *Ban Bian Tian* [Half the Sky], CCTV. (Beijing, China, 2008).

in 2008 on CCTV in order to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China's reform and opening up. While there have been different discussions of the rural women and their struggles, this TV series appeared to offer a monument of 30 years urbanization or a historical conclusion of the rural abandonment policy in a celebrative tone.<sup>66</sup> The TV program is thus serving the best example of the position official media takes in regard to the entrenched rural-urban disparities as well as the voice of the subaltern. This is one of the reasons why I chose *Fan Hua* as the main object of this study rather than other programs.

*Fan Hua* is an important documentary program specifically focusing on migrant women in the official media.<sup>67</sup> *Fan Hua* was originally produced as a part of CCTV's *Ban Bian Tian* [Half the Sky, 1995-2010], a regular weekly show featuring Chinese women through live interviews. In the post-socialist China, *Ban Bian Tian* is the most influential program amongst several TV programs, established specifically for women in the Chinese official media.<sup>68</sup> Its first formal broadcasting began on the New Year's Day of 1995, somewhat inspired by the United Nation's Fourth World Conferences on

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<sup>66</sup> Please see Hui Wang, "Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity," translated by Rebecca E. Karl. *Social Text* no. 55 (1998): 9-13; Tiejun Wen, "Industrial Capital and Rural Construction," *Open Times* 6 (2005): 11-8; and Tiejun Wen, "We Still Need Rural Construction," *Open Times* 6 (2005): 5-10.

<sup>67</sup> Chinese official media has designated special channels to deal with rural issues, which also often contains segments of rural women. For example, CCTV's Channel 7, which has predominantly dealt with rural issues since 1995, once aired *Nong Jia Nü* [Rural Women], a program about rural women. Channel 7's special program *Jinri Nongcun* [Today's Rural Village] also included segments on rural women. But Channel 7 had relative low viewership in urban region, and has smaller the influence in the Chinese public life overall. See Wei Bu, "Chinese Women and the Mass Media: Status Quo, Interventions, and Challenges," in  *Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Jie Tao, Bijun Zheng, and Shirley L. Mow, 274-88. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2004), 278.

<sup>68</sup> Yanjun Shou, "Half the Sky: A Television Program for Women," in  *Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Jie Tao, Bijun Zheng, and Shirley L. Mow, 261-73. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2004), 261-64; Bu, "Chinese Women and the Mass Media," 278-79.

Women in Beijing that year.<sup>69</sup> Since then it has played an important role in raising the public awareness of gender inequalities in all fields of Chinese society rather than focusing on the celebrities as commercial TV often do, and was closed down in July 2010.<sup>70</sup> The *Fan Hua* series shared with the program's main concern on neglected women such as "laid-off female workers, rural women, migrant female workers, young women who have been kidnapped and sold, girls deprived of education, people with AIDS, the disabled, pregnant women."<sup>71</sup> Due to its unique feminist perspective and its special concern for neglected women, the program once ranked first in popularity, second in quality, and sixth in audience satisfaction amongst the twenty-two specialty TV programs in a survey conducted by CCTV polling center in 2000.<sup>72</sup>

As a part of *Ban Bian Tian*, *Fan Hua* in many ways can be seen as a Chinese official feminist production on the issue of rural women. It consists of twenty episodes with each episode covering a separate theme about migrant women. Its diverse themes include migrant women's experience in cities, their life dreams and true selves, their struggles for rights as female workers, their love and marriage lives. The program is properly classed as a feminist production, because it brought the public eye to the existence of the rural migrant women and their unequal experiences. It provided the readers abundant personal stories of individual migrant women with a strong feminist touch and mainly broadcast for female viewers. It also invites individual migrant women to speak in front of the camera to the audience. Nevertheless, *Fan Hua* was an "official" production, because even though it aired with distinctive feminist feature of advocating

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<sup>69</sup> Shou, "Half the Sky," 261-64.

<sup>70</sup> Bu, "Chinese Women and the Mass Media," 278-79.

<sup>71</sup> Shou, "Half the Sky," 264.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 263-64.



rural women's rights, as a CCVT program, it also renders all personal stories into the overall narrative of inferior, weaker rural group rising up to the challenge of global urban economy. It is worth exploring to what extent the *suzhi* development discourse's rendering of rural women's voices was successful and complete.

The very fundamental message passing through each of all the twenty episodes in *Fan Hua* is about positive effects of rural-urban migration on rural women, and this message is based on the *suzhi* development discourse. The program is constant in reiterating that, in particular, rural-urban migration has been contributed to making rural women urbanized and modernized, which means improving these women's *suzhi*. The viewers can clearly hear this primary message, above all, through the well-written script of voice-over such as, "(After migration,) migrant women transform themselves by changing their hair-style, their accent, and even their way of thinking. Migration experiences transform their values, their fate, and their life mottos."

Besides the voice-over, the program renders the core message to its viewers through the representation of experts as well. In the documentary program, many professionals appear and give their own views about the issue of rural women's migration. They have a variety of careers ranging from government officials, university professors, researchers, newspaper reporters, editors, to psychologists. In episode 1 alone, "*Xiao Niao*" (The Birds), which has a running-time of 30 minutes, as many as 11 experts make their appearance. In episode one the voice-over first asked, "what have migration affected the first generation of migrant women in Shenzhen and what did these women get from their migration experiences?" This followed by a series of clipped answers from the professionals and cultural VIPs:

Xiaozheng Zhou, Director of the Law & Society Institute, the Renmin University of China: Their thoughts, lifestyle, values, aesthetic taste, as well as their financial ability, *they, we called, are urbanized* (emphasis added).

Juan Ding, a researcher, the Women's Institute, the Women's Federations: I believe the biggest change is that they learned the spirit of novelty and innovation such as *city lifestyle* and *urban values* (emphasis added).

Xiaoyun Li, Dean of the Humanities and Development Institute, the China Agricultural University: They themselves need to wish to change their lives through migration. This is because they got more freedom, relatively become more liberated, relatively become more emancipated, relatively speaking, they got the gender equality. Relatively speaking, I can only relatively speak, but *they could get closer to the modern values and thoughts* (emphasis added).

Shigao Jiang, a photographer, Shenzhen Evening News: At that time, at the Special Economic Zone in Shenzhen, (migrant women's) appearance had been changed through a series of some technical training and some cultural literacy education. I believe that *not only their appearance but also their spirit* was very good (emphasis added).

Juxtaposing the quotations from these different experts foreground similar attitudes: they all stress that rural women who chose to migrate to cities are benefited from the urbanization because these women are no longer backward, rather they become modern not only in their outlooks but also in their spirit. As administrators and educated elite, they see in the rural migrant women's transformation a confirmation of urbanization's invasion to the countryside and the polarization of urban and rural qualities. By celebrating the newly urbanized and modernized rural women, urbanization at the price of the countryside is thus not only natural but also exemplary, representing the direction of the nation.

The feminist perspective of this program does not run into conflict with the above elite vision. Feminist approaches in *Fan Hua* puts an emphasis on the economic

opportunities that rural-urban migration brings to migrant women workers. Of course the policy responsibility of creating the economic inequality between the rural and the urban is untouchable for such a TV program. The voice-over provides precise figures of the wage difference between Shenzhen and the rest Chinese cities, not to mention the countryside: “Migrant women working at the factory of the Shenzhen Kaida Plastic Gift Toy Co. could, at a minimum, earn 80 RMB a month. At that time, the average income of Chinese people in cities was 60 RMB a month and the price of a head of Chinese napa cabbage was 0.05 RMB per *jin* (500g or so).” It then concludes that “Being able to earn the wage of 80 RMB right after finishing their middle school must have been attractive to migrant women.” This attractiveness of the money was articulated through Yanping Zheng, a migrant woman in Shenzhen, who was proud of having money and to be a consumer.

The money we could earn in Shenzhen was much more than what our parents had earned for decades. One more thing which made us feel pride of being a migrant woman in Shenzhen was that we could get many smuggled goods there like Deng Lijun’s records. There was a big public restroom across the Shenzhen Station. Some people brought smuggled denim jackets and jeans through the way of putting on two or three of them, and sold the stuffs inside the restroom. I could buy some of the stuffs on the weekends. After I worked for one year, I could purchase a color television when I visited my home. I remember that at that time, I bought a Lesheng color television.

*Fan Hua* selected a number of individual rural migrant workers who in many ways served to subvert or/and the sequel a series a popular stereotypes in post-socialist public space—that of models of success, formally represented by factory managers, entrepreneurs to bankers. Doubtlessly, the success here means economic success. Zhenyu Liao is a migrant woman, who quit a teaching job in an elementary school in her hometown and went to the city. She acquired a wide range of working experience and

accumulated a certain amount of money after several years. With the valuable assets, Zhenyu went back to her hometown and established her own business, a profitable supermarket. Zhenyu's story of becoming a successful migrant woman entrepreneur showcases the economy-centric view of the rural-urban relations. She was praised for returning, after raising her *suzhi*, as a money-maker rather than a rural educator. By showcasing Zhenyu, who chose leaving for a city over staying in a rural village, *Fan Hua* implicitly puts more value on individual's *suzhi* development and economic independence over urgent and direct need for rural education.

In addition to stressing economic "success" rural women might be able to enjoy after migration, *Fan Hua* also puts emphasis on the self-realization of migrant women. It introduces many exemplary individuals, who succeeded in accomplishing their life dreams or have been pursuing their goals in cities, and this is especially well manifested in episode 2, "Tiankong" (The Sky). "Tiankong," which mainly touches upon rural women's life dream, begins with the voice-over introducing one migrant woman called Xiaojun:

Ten years ago, she arrived in Beijing from Dashan village in Yunnan province with the dream of becoming a musician. However, when she first arrived in Beijing, she had no home to stay and there was no way but to begin working at a record store. Later, she, after all, organized a band and also participated in direction. Now, she even has her own entertainment management agency.

Along with the example of Xiaojun, who succeeded in accomplishing her dream of being a musician, it displays similar stories of several exemplary migrant women from a diverse array of occupational fields including artists, singers, athletes, and writers.

Yuxiu Liu is one of the migrant women, who have attempted to fulfill her dream in the city. Yuxiu, who is from an impoverished small village in Shandong, since early

years, has liked to paint and wanted to become a painter. Unfortunately, she lost her parents when she was very young, so that she had no choice but to migrate to Beijing in order to work as a migrant woman. Nevertheless, Yuxiu did not give up her dream of being a painter. She often dropped by a bookstore and looked through some painting books on her day-off. One day, after noticing that Yuxiu often comes to read books without purchasing anything, the owner of the bookstore humiliated her. Since then, she has decided to make a book of her paintings of the lives of migrant women and distribute it to other migrant women for nothing. In order to achieve her dream of publishing her own painting book, she is now enthusiastic about painting her life as a migrant woman every day.

Youduo A is another migrant woman, who already achieved her life dream in cities. Although she is now a famous ethnic minority singer, who appears even in TV singing programs, she was only a sixteen year-old working girl when she first migrated from Guizhou to Beijing. She has once worked as a dancer at a folk village and also as a waitress at a bar. After a few years of living in Beijing, Youduo moved to Shenzhen and began working as a dancer and a tour guide at another folk village there. Even though her life as a working girl was tough and lonely, she dreamed of being a famous singer. Every day after work, she practiced and learned new songs until late. After years of hardship and hard exercising, an opportunity finally came to her. In 2002, she participated in a youth singing competition sponsored by CCTV and won an award in an ethnic song division. Afterwards, she won two more awards in other singing competitions in 2006 and 2007. In addition, in 2008, she attained the honor to sing at the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony.

Similar with Youduo, most of the exemplary migrant women introduced in “*Tiankong*” are prize winners or medal laureates: Chengmei Liu, who was a working girl from Hunan, won a gold medal in the performance division at the World Chinese Art Festival; Xiaoqiong Zheng, who was a migrant woman working in Dongguan, won the Renmin Literature Award; Wenjun Guo, who was a working girl from Shanxi, won a gold medal in women’s target shooting at the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympic games. Experts who appear in the episode analyze why these rural women go to cities and try to fulfill their life dreams despite all the difficulties. Amongst them, Xiaoyun Li, Dean of the Humanities and Development Institute, the China Agricultural University, mentions, “They want to change their poverty and their backward status. They want a decent and dignified life such as urban lives which they are able to go to school, go to a factory to work, work at the government agencies, and work as a typist or secretary. They have such a dream.” Dong He, a reporter at China Women’s News, states, “Accepting all the immutable is the unique feature of cities. The city can change everything.” These exemplary migrant women introduced in “*Tiankong*” demonstrate that even rural women can have big life dreams and goals. These women’s case confirms that a rural woman can also fulfill her life dream and goals through her own persistent efforts to fulfill their goals in cities.

Reiterating the message that migration has ultimately had a positive influence on the rural women in *Fan Hua*, the program with its use of the economic independence and the achievement of life dreams can be seen as a part of the *suzhi* development discourse. The core message of *Fan Hua* is premised on the assumption that the rural is backward and the *suzhi* of rural residents is too low compared to those of urbanites. From a perspective of *suzhi* discourse, *Fan Hua* implies that the life of rural women in the

countryside—bearing and rearing children, looking after their house, and supporting their husbands for the rest of their lives—is dull and meaningless. In contrast, urban areas are represented as the space where rural women can be emancipated from the traditional moral values and fulfill their dreams and desires. By showcasing new modernized and urbanized rural women after migration, the program seems to allude to its viewers that the city makes backward rural women to see the other world and to accumulate *suzhi*, so that the liberation of rural women can be achieved through migration to a bigger city.

The official feminist perspective in *Fan Hua* is embodied in its effort to recognize and glorify migrant women workers' sacrifice for China's economic development over the past three decades. In a sense it follows the socialist tradition of honoring the laborers, particularly women laborers. The first episode deals with the first generation of migrant women workers in Shenzhen, who were mostly from Shaoguan or Meizhou in Guangdong over thirty years ago. It provides with very vivid stories from the first generation of migrant women in Shenzhen to its viewers by visiting the 25<sup>th</sup> migrant women's union party at the Shenzhen Kaida Plastic Gift Toy Co. in 2007. Migrant women in this episode were invited to look back at the time when they first migrated to Shenzhen and talk about their first experience being in the "city." Yanping Zheng recalled that "the bus went down the unpaved road from Shenzhen to Shekou and it raised a cloud of dust," and "thirty years ago, everywhere in Shekou was under construction and there was nothing. We were like living at a construction site." Huilian Li, who has also worked at the factory of the Shenzhen Kaida Plastic Gift Toy Co., recalled that the first night:

We slept on the very poor and shabby worktables and there was even nowhere to clean up. From the very first day, some girls regretted

coming and wished to go back to their hometown. Three days later, some had already gone home. However, I thought that I should wait at least for six months. I considered myself as a youth being sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution and waited here for my future.

Comparing their migration with the youth sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, the migrant women's self-accounts have vividly revealed involuntary nature of their suffering. Instead of seeing the urban site as a place to elevate her quality, she herself could have gone elsewhere she had a better opportunity.

This fragment of women telling their stories in their own voices was soon submerged by scholars who busily evaluate the great contribution these women made to the growth of Chinese economy in the global competition. Yue Yuan, a researcher at the Beijing Horizon Research Group, comments that "We might not be able to expect the current competitiveness of Chinese products without the movement of about 200 million labors." The voice-over of the program confirms that:

The first generation of migrant women actively and enthusiastically engaged in their work. They were dedicated in learning and developing their skills. They were not afraid of hardships and were very patient. They were also obedient and responsible.... Factory owners in Shenzhen *not only got the cheapest labor but also the most skillful labor in the world* (emphasis added).

In other words, *Fan Hua's* feminist representational strategy glorifying rural women and their migration is mainly intertwined with *suzhi* development discourse. Stressing migrant women's economic independence and life fulfillment it affirms the story that rural women's migration is a win-win game to both the structure and the subaltern: rural women accumulated *suzhi* in cities and lived a freer, richer, and happier lives, while the nation's economy succeeded in the global realm. The episode highlights



and glorifies the sacrifice of the migrant women while at the same time, maintained the inferior, backward status of the rural laborers.

With all these successful stories, recognitions, glorifications and women's own proud narrations, *Fan Hua* manages to maintain its silence about the very structural reasons as to why rural women have no choice but to leave their home and migrate to cities in the first place, and why the countryside as their home was denigrated to the status of backward, unbearable, deadly place. Critique to social stratification and policy-made rural degradation is not an absence in the post-socialist public arena.<sup>73</sup> Wang Hui points out the widening discrepancy between urban and rural areas in post-socialist China due to the economic policymakers' attentions predominantly toward the creation of urban wealth.<sup>74</sup> According to Wang, the uneven focus of economic activity toward urban regions brought about considerable disruption to the rural and thus to China as a whole. He also argues that the emergence of a "floating population" (*liudong renkou*), who left their un-remunerative farms and migrated to cities to seek work, is one example directly manifesting the post-socialist economic imbalance. Given Wang's points about the disruption to the rural, which was result of the post-socialist uneven development policy, we can see what the feminist perspective in *Fan Hua* manages to avoid. Neither the scholars nor the voice-over in *Fan Hua* commented even indirectly on the structural problem, the post-socialist uneven development policy in China. In doing so, *Fan Hua* reduces the collective difficulties rural women experienced as a whole into individual

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<sup>73</sup> Please see Sun, "Inequality and Culture," 27-42; Hui Wang, *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*, ed. Theodore Huters, (Harvard University Press, 2003); Wang, "Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity," 9-44; Wen, "Industrial Capital and Rural Construction," 11-8; Wen, "We Still Need Rural Construction," 5-10; Yan, "Spectralization of the Rural," 578-96; and Zhao, "Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy," 5-32.

<sup>74</sup> Hui Wang, "The Historical Conditions of the 1989 Social Movement and the Antihistorical Explanation of 'Neoliberalism'," in *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*, ed. Theodore Huters, 46-77. (Harvard University Press, 2003), 46-77.

stories. The collectivity of rural women's consciousness was dispersed into individual rural women's self-discovery and self-developments. The following statement by an interviewee best illustrates this:

Xiaozheng Zhou, Director of the Law & Society Institute, the Renmin University of China: The first generation of migrant women is the emblem of taking action, which is the only criterion of verifying the truth. What significance does the first generation of migrant women have? They *broke up the boundary between the city and the countryside*—that is, *alleviating the problem of dualization of society* (emphasis added).

It is true that first generation of migrate women were brave leaving their homes and familiar environments for the better future. But, their actions are by no means “alleviating the problem of dualization of society.” The fact that they had to leave their elderly home says the opposite namely; that the depletion of rural economy caused by the state withdrawal cannot hold their own laborers. Rural women's migration as one way of “constructing a harmonious society” is ironically the effect of the fundamental structural contradiction deeply embedded in the process of marketization in post-socialist China.

What does *Fan Hua* tell us about the voice of the subaltern in the post-socialist era? In her search for subaltern's subversive voices, Hershatter has brought about a wider range of the subaltern. She points out that,

For a China historian, this legacy of official subaltern-speak complicates enormously the search for subversive voices, since we might call subalterns always already speak (and often understand their own experience) in *the language of the state, which simultaneously recognizes their suffering, glorifies their resistance, and effaces any aspect of their history that does not clearly fall into these two categories* (emphasis added).<sup>75</sup>

This problem, frequently seen in the historical works produced in socialist period, is recurring at this very different historical moment. Similar to the historical works, the

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<sup>75</sup> Hershatter, “The Subaltern Talks Back,” 108.

production process of *Fan Hua* overcodes and eliminates subalterns' subversive voices while allowing them to speak and in doing so, this CCTV production manifests the limits of the post-socialist official feminism in articulating subaltern's voices. In the program, rural women's voices were covered by the neoliberal narrative, which in turn boxed these voices into the *suzhi* development discourse or similar ideological devices. For example, rural women's migration was captured into a narrative of a voluntary and brave adventure of leaving the country, their sufferings in cities into a voluntary price paid for the future return, their adaptation to the city life into sense of satisfaction and happiness, and their stories into willingness to develop themselves without letting out subversive voices.

After the third decades of economic reforms, China faces the moment of crisis as further economic growth and growing chances of social polarization are now requiring the party-state to pay close attention to the possible conflicts in the midst of the rapid but uneven development. The party-state is currently facing with the conundrum of balancing two very contradictory values—advocating national economic development and pursuing social harmony. We can readily find this conundrum of the party-state in the speech of former Chinese president Hu Jintao in 2012:

At present, as the global, national and our Party's conditions continue to undergo profound changes, *we are faced with unprecedented opportunities for development as well as risks and challenges unknown before*. ... We must aim higher and work harder and continue to pursue development in a scientific way, *promote social harmony*, and improve the people's lives so as to complete the glorious and arduous tasks bestowed on us by the times (emphasis added).

—Hu Jintao's report at the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, 2012<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Jintao Hu, "Hu Jintao's Report at the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party," *Voltairenet.org*, November 17, 2012, Accessed September 28, 2014, <http://www.voltairenet.org/article176641.html>.

This conundrum can be the key to understanding the state-sponsored official media's *suzhi* development project and its ideological nature when representing rural women and their migration issues. It also explains why, after the *Ban Bian Tian* program was closed down for its possible offensiveness, the discursive strategies *Fan Hua* devised are reproduced by other TV documentary programs focusing migrant workers.

*Picun Jishi* [Documenting the Pi Village], a TV documentary program aired on CCTV's Channel 9 in 2012, consists of five episodes of successful individual stories of migrant workers originated from the Pi Village on the outskirts in Beijing. Like *Fan Hua*, the narrations in *Picun Jishi* follow the model of dreams-coming-true and that dream, identical to all five migrant workers, is the urban success. Lao Zhang, in the Episode 1, is a shoe repairman from Hebei province and his dream is to bring his family to the city and live like authentic urbanites. He has worked hard and even though he did not get an urban *hukou*,<sup>77</sup> he managed to send his daughter to university who now has a white-color job in Beijing. Xiao Yuan in Episode 3, is an apprentice in a furniture factory who dreams to work in the city as a sofa artisan. Even though at the beginning this dream seems to be far, after several months' of his apprenticeship and efforts, he now feels much more confident than before. Hu Jing in Episode 4, runs the most profitable hair salon in Pi village, but has a much bigger dream of expanding her business and running a bigger salon at a new place close to the core area of Beijing. The program demonstrates the dreams of the rural laborers while letting go the chance of revealing the structural reason of the rural decay. Once again, the collective and structural crisis of the socio economy is rendered into the

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<sup>77</sup> For furthermore information about Chinese *hukou* system, please see Hein Mallee, "Migration, Hukou and Resistance in Reform China." in *Chinese Society, Change, Conflict and Resistance*, ed. Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, 136-57. (Routledge, 2003), 136-57; Hein Mallee, "China's Household Registration System under Reform," *Development and Change* 26, no. 1 (1995): 1-29.

desire-fulfilling stories of the individuals. Akin to the *suzhi* discourse, these individuals' stories provided symbolic solution to the irresolvable contradictions in the political economy.

## 2. BETWEEN THE PERSONAL AND THE IMPERSONAL

In Chinese official state media rural women are often represented as self-development subjects who internalize the *suzhi* discourse. If the rural women could write about their lives as rural women themselves outside the official media, is it possible for them to express their opposition to the *suzhi* development discourse? In this section, this possibility will be explored through readings of rural women's own writings: published in the work, *Zhongguo Nongcun Funü Qinggan Zishu* [The Feelings of Rural Chinese Women: Self-Narrations] (hereafter, *Self-Narrations*). As a collection of letters written by rural women to the magazine *Nongjianü Baishitong* [Rural Women Knowing All], *Self-Narrations* was published in 2000 by the People's Press of Guizhou. The first section addresses their lives in rural area, their unfulfilled desires, love, marriage, and divorce; and family issues; the second section is about their journey to the city, their urban experience and success. The first-hand accounts of these women make the work a very rare window to look into the question raised at the beginning of the thesis, can subaltern still speak today and in what way?

Rural women's writings in *Self-Narrations* are entangled with sensitive gender issues that many rural women confront in both the rural and urban settings of post-socialist China. The core value of this publication lies in its ability to convey the diverse sufferings of rural woman, through the personal voices of these women. This in a way

manifests what Jacka identifies as the continuation of *su ku* or telling bitterness tradition. First, rural women in *Self-Narration* speak how their lives are made miserable by what can be called feudalist legacy of regarding men as superior and women as the inferior, which has become more prevalent in post-socialist countryside than the socialist era. Many of the young contributors express their resentment of being born to be girls, citing the limited love received from their parents and their limited opportunities for education compared to their male siblings. In case of married rural women, some wrote of cruelty they suffered from their family members due only to the fact that they gave a birth not to a son but to a daughter. Among several stories written about the predominance of men over women in the countryside, the following two are amongst the most tragic.

The first account is that of Xiuxiu, who was born into a normal rural family in 1982. The story is told by her teacher, Du Juan, who explains Xiuxiu's fate as a rural young girl.<sup>78</sup> Since Xiuxiu's parents wanted to have a son, they fell into despair when she was born. Two years later, her parents finally gave a birth to a boy, paying a fine for violating the one-child policy. From that moment, Xiuxiu began being discriminated by her parents. While her younger brother went to school, Xiuxiu's parents kept her at home and required her to rear cattle. One day, her younger brother was bullied at school. Following this incident, Xiuxiu was permitted to go to school in order to protect her younger brother. She always studied hard and did well in her classes. However, the opportunity did not last for very long. When she finished her grade four, her parents insisted to discontinue her studies since her younger brother was already old enough to no longer need someone's protection. Xiuxiu appealed to her parents to allow her to

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<sup>78</sup> Lihua Xie ed. *Self-Narrations*, 33-5.

continue to go to school but only received their insults and physical abuse. Xiuxiu, in the end, chose to kill herself; her body was found in the village stream.

The second story, written by Quan Lu recounts sad experience of a married rural woman in her village, called Xiang.<sup>79</sup> Xiang married to a man in her small village against her parents' will when she was twenty-one years old. Her marriage life was happy thanks to her husband's concern and love for her, but this lasted only until she gave a birth to a daughter. The attitudes of her family members toward her, including her husband and her mother-in-law, completely changed after her first daughter's birth: from love to disdain. Five years later, Xiang tried to have one more child that she, along with her family wished to be a son. But unfortunately, her second child also turned out to be a daughter. After her second daughter's birth, her family members' hatred toward her became even more serious than before. It was at this point that her husband began sleeping outside and did not come back home very often. One night, her drunken husband said to her, "Wang has already agreed that his wife would give birth to a son for me. In return, he wants you to sleep with him." Xiang, after listening to this unreasonable demand from her husband, who once cared for her devotedly, drank a bottle of pesticide and finished her short twenty-seven year old life by herself.

One important part of the bitter telling found in *Self-Narrations* relates to rural women's desperate feelings regarding the limitations to their freedom brought about by the restraint of arranged marriage. Writers expressed their frustration over the unfairness that they cannot choose their life partner themselves but only have to follow their parents' opinion. They expressed feelings of sadness that they have to become somebody's wife or mother when they are so young. For a rural young girl who is seeing

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 28-9.



someone, it is more unbearable to be forced by her parents to leave her partner and enter into a marriage. Faced with arranged marriage, some women choose to flee to urban areas and others even choose a more radical exit—committing suicide—in order to escape their miserable fates.

For example, Jingjing chose the path for migration to urban areas due to an arranged marriage, which she could never endure.<sup>80</sup> When she was eighteen years old, her parents forced her to give up her studies and marry a man she had never even met before. At that time, her older brother was already in his thirties but still unmarried. In order to secure a spouse for her brother, her parents demanded that Jingjing sacrifice herself. They attempted to marry Jingjing off on the promise that they could exchange Jingjing with a girl for her brother. Jingjing, who wanted to continue her studies and enter university, obstinately refused to marry. Since the price for rebellion would be physical abuse from her parents, Jingjing had no choice but to run away from home and support herself by working as a waitress in an urban area.

Some married rural women use their writing to express their sufferings rooted in their unfortunate marriage life. Married rural women in *Self-Narrations* describe their dreams of happy families filled with laughter, warmth, and love; however, most of their own experiences are characterized with their longing for love from their husbands and concern about their dry marriage life. Most of married rural women in this publication speak about the difficulties of maintaining stable marriage life after their arranged marriage. Some women have not shared a bed with their husbands for a long time, but maintain their marriage life for the sake of their children. Some women write of suffering between moral values and their personal feelings since they found their true love beyond

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 164-65.

their family and have affairs with a third person after their arranged marriage. And some women cannot easily decide to divorce despite the brutal physical abuse from their husbands due to other people's adverse attention toward divorced women in rural society.

Shijing, for example, writes about her hapless marriage life and the domestic discord in her family.<sup>81</sup> She was in her forties when she decided to migrate to Beijing in order to get a job. Her husband was not respectful or dutiful to Shijing and their family: he would frequently spend the nights out drinking and only return in the morning. He did not care about their children and even physically and verbally abused them for no reason. Shijing could no longer tolerate her alcoholic husband and decided to get out of her misfortune. She finally moved to Beijing and began working as a street vendor.

Lastly, migrant rural women use their compositions to speak out about the difficulties of their journey to a big city. In particular, in the second part of *Self-Narrations*, a considerable number of rural women's writings reveal in-detail their sufferings as migrant women. For instance, some rural women write about how they coped with a series of difficulties rooted in unfair treatment by urban residents in cities. Seven stories out of ten in Chapter 8—"Migrant Women's Inner Voice"—give shape to the discrimination and humiliation rural women experienced after their migration to urban areas. Writers comment on the difficult for rural women to be deeply embedded in urban environments during the short term of their migration, mostly due to the urban residents' stereotypes and prejudices towards these women. Their narrations confirm what Pun Ngai, a sociologist specializing in Chinese migrant women's issues, has noticed in her research. Ngai points out that migrant women in urban areas can experience discrimination just because of their unsophisticated dialects and old-fashioned rustic

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 156-58.

clothing.<sup>82</sup> According to Ngai, some terms used by urbanites to refer to migrant women in their daily conversations—“*Cushou cujiao* (rough hands, rough feet)” and *xiangxiamei* (village girl)”—directly manifest their negative perceptions of migrant women.

Individual migrant women’s awareness of urbanites’ perceptions is provided in *Self-Narrations* as well. Indeed, migrant women are highly susceptible to how urbanites perceive and treat them:

Niuxiu: For the manager on my assembly line at the factory, working girls from outside like us seemed to look like that we have two letters engraved on our faces, “*xiao tou* (a thief)”. My manager always kept a close watch on our activities and her glassy stare gives us the shivers.<sup>83</sup>

Yongfen: (After coming to Beijing,) I sometimes went out and looked around here and there. I was often confronted with the disapproval of the urban dwellers. I felt that Beijing people did not welcome strangers from outside and looked down on working girls like us. The excitement I felt when I first came to Beijing soon withered away and I only wanted to go back home.<sup>84</sup>

Quanlü: (When I just arrived to Beijing,) I was still proud of my purity, which rural women possess. However, urban residents gave me a strange look and that was almost an indignant glance. I did not fully understand the ways of the world. I realized only after that, for them, I was nothing but an uneducated and uncultured working girl from the countryside.... I found that my boss and colleagues were monitoring me at work to make sure that I did not steal the raw materials from the factory. In addition, at lunch time, they did not care about the fact that I was there and talked in whispers among themselves, ‘look at her naivety!’ Another colleague spoke lightly, ‘a rural girl from the poor mountain village might have wanted to make an excursion to Beijing. What a brave girl she is!’... Tears ran from my eyes. Is there such a great gap between rural and urban residents? Are rural women always the lower class to urbanites?<sup>85</sup>

From the aforementioned statements, we can see that migrant women are fully aware of how their identity is defined by urban residents. Migrant women are sensitive to all the

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<sup>82</sup> Pun, “Becoming Dagongmei (Working Girls),” 1-18.

<sup>83</sup> Lihua Xie ed. *Self-Narrations*, 166.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 171-72.

abstract values that urbanites use in order to make generalizations about these women—such as, their job, their lack of education, their low cultural level, their language, their outlooks, and their economic difficulties. Through their writing migrant women are, confidently and clearly, expressing that those urbanites’ perception and treatment about them are wrong and unjust.

In addition to revealing urbanites’ disdain, contempt, and humiliation toward themselves, two stories out of ten in Chapter 8 touch upon the issue of sexual harassment and exploitation that migrant women suffer at the hands of urbanites. Renchong, a twenty-four year old migrant woman, who is now working at a private enterprise, realized that rural migrant women are easy targets for sexual exploitation in the urban job markets when she was seeking work in the city.<sup>86</sup> One day, Renchong got a notice to come for an interview at a company. When she visited the company, she found that there were already a number of young rural girls awaiting their interview. Meanwhile, a manager came in and explained the work duty for successful applicants: “our company’s prosperity depends on the management of customers. Your main duty will be entertaining customers. How can you entertain them? If you can please them, you could use any method. For example, you can sing together, dance together, and drink together.....”<sup>87</sup> As soon as she heard the sexual exploiting nature of the work of the company, she silently left the room and gave up the interview opportunity. Jinjing also suffered sexual assault in the workplace.<sup>88</sup> Shortly after her fled from her home to avoid her arranged marriage, it was hard for her to find work since she not only had no special skills but also no acquaintances in the city. She became acquainted with the owner of a fancy restaurant

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 153-55.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 164-65.

who felt sorry for her situation and offered her a waitress job at his restaurant. Jingjing worked very hard and her boss also took special care of her. After a month of working there, she was promoted to the owner's secretary to manage a number of events at the restaurant. However, one night, only about one month after her promotion, the owner called her into his office and attempted to rape her. Thankfully, she escaped unharmed. She later wrote the humiliating moment she confronted as a rural working girl as follows: "... although I lost my job, I kept my dignity and my self-esteem as a rural woman."<sup>89</sup>

As a collection of personal stories about rural women's sufferings told in first-person reports, *Self-Narrations* is indeed a very valuable publication since it exposes gender inequalities and gender oppressions toward rural women in contemporary China. This publication gives rural women a chance to tell their stories, thus a useful source of information on rural women's individual lives would be a great help to feminist scholars and those who wish to listen to voices of Chinese rural women themselves. However, despite their significance, rural women's personal stories in *Self-Narrations* are accompanied with some of impersonal aspects that go along with *suzhi* development discourse. It is unclear if this is because of the editor or publisher's requirement or due to rural women's self-censorship. Along with the multiple personal stories regarding rural women's sufferings, we can also see the apparent tension between personal and impersonal aspects of the women's narrations. The remainder of this section explores how these rural women's self-narrations in *Self-Narrations*, full of their personal voices, can be also read as another example embodying the *suzhi* development discourse targeting rural women in post-socialist China.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 165.

While rural women talk about their sufferings in their writings, they show a tendency to represent rural society as a backward place compared to cities. In *Self-Narrations*, rural society is portrayed as an outmoded space where traditional moral values still suppress rural women's freedom. This tendency of depicting rural society as backward space is also manifested in these women's strong will to leave the countryside and move to cities. While rural society is portrayed as a space of stagnation, tradition, and weariness, urban areas are depicted as places where women can be liberated from the traditional moral values and fulfill their dreams and desires. For rural women in *Self-Narrations*, the boundary between the rural and urban area means the dividing line between benightedness and enlightenment, and the act of migration is a starting point of their life journey from the "middle age" towards enlightenment. Many rural women in *Self-Narrations* seem to have decided to migrate to bigger cities with a desire for new or more challenging experiences for their *suzhi* accumulation and self-improvement.

For instance, Hongjie explains her old dream of being a business woman in her writing.<sup>90</sup> Ever since she was a middle school student, she had wished to own her business and build a large fortune. After she failed to enter university, she wanted to open her own store but her parents did not believe their youngest daughter would have the ability to manage the responsibility. Despite not having any connections in Beijing, Hongjie still braved the rural-urban migration in order to gain some knowledge and skills related to running a business in the future. For the first time in her life, she began working as a waitress at a restaurant and was able to eke out a living without any assistance from her parents.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 174-75.

Yongfen, another working girl from Sichuan, also longed for a city life because of her desire for new and more exciting experiences.<sup>91</sup> During her middle school second-year vacation, she found that some of her close friends decided to leave for Beijing, where the municipal department of labor was looking for new applicants at the time. Even though she did not have any aspiration for going to the city before, peer pressure and the social atmosphere advocating rural women's migration made her change her mind. After deep consideration and discussion with her family members, she also decided to go to Beijing along with her friends. She explains her final decision and her motivation for moving to Beijing as follows: "It was not money but my desire for new more interesting experiences that made me leave for Beijing as a working girl. I thought that working in Beijing would be good for me since I could learn some valuable lessons for my life through the migration experience."<sup>92</sup>

In particular for Yongfen, after several years of residing in Beijing, the vision of rural society as backwards eventually creates in her mind a desire to enlighten and develop rural society. Yongfen reveals her strong will to reform rural areas in her writing as follows:

It has been three years since I came to Beijing. I am now familiar with Beijing and love this city. In addition, *my self-confidence has also been promoted. I have broadened my knowledge and skills.* Now I have also come to treasure my hometown more than before. I know that I have to go back home, but now is not the time. When I am satisfied with my achievements, *I will go back home to develop my hometown. I will confidently tell people, "I was a working girl* (emphasis added)."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 168-70.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 170-71.

To Yongfen, rural space is reduced to a space of backwardness and benightedness while urban space is promoted to a space of modernity and enlightenment, where she can accumulate *suzhi* and develop herself to reach her potential. The clear conceptual distinction between the rural and the urban in a migrant woman's mind at last leads her iron will to develop not only herself but also the backward rural society.

Some rural women in *Self-Narrations* manifest their strong will to leave for the cities also through their decision to migrate in spite of local people's censure in rural society. The phenomenon of rural-urban migration in the course of economic reforms collides with gender expectations toward rural women. This collision causes sufferings unique to migrant women, which male migrant workers do not need to contend with. In the countryside, a rural woman's migration itself often becomes the object of gossip among local people. Xiaofeng, a migrant woman working at a factory in Shenzhen, moved to the coast in spite of her boyfriend's obstinate opposition to her decision to migrate. She talks about her four-year boyfriend's betrayal after her migration in *Self-Narrations*.<sup>94</sup> When she first made up her mind to go to Shenzhen to work, her boyfriend opposed her decision saying,

Here, you have your parents and I, who cherish you. Why do you want to leave and move to work far away? ... *Ninety percent of girls who went to Shenzhen in order to work are not good girls now. They became bad after moving to Shenzhen. ... All the people here in our village agree with this (emphasis added).*<sup>95</sup>

In spite of his stiff opposition due to local people's bias against migrant women, she was hoping that he would understand and support her decision. However, they ended up parting and she left for Shenzhen. After her break up with her boyfriend, she narrates that

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 150-52.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 150.



although she sacrificed her love in an attempt to move to Shenzhen, her decision was not misguided: “Compared to before (when I just arrived to Shenzhen), now I can say that I have attained an amount of success. ... I believe that my decision to migrate was not wrong. I will keep trying to pass the road that I planned for my life.”<sup>96</sup>

This reification of the rural/urban distinction along with rural women’s strong will to migrate to cities is further developed into manifesting themselves as self-development subjects. Regarding this, I would like to here mention Xiaohong’s writing as an example of how rural women present themselves as self-development subjects in *Self-Narrations*. Xiaohong spoke of the way in which she, as a nanny, was treated by local urban dwellers and her feelings about her relationships with them.<sup>97</sup> At her first workplace in Beijing, she was unfairly fired without any advance notification. One morning, when she came back to her workplace after staying over at her friend’s home, no matter how long she knocked the door, no one answered, and she could barely find her belongings at the police station. In addition, at Xiaohong’s second workplace in Beijing, she had to endure her employee’s examination of her belongings before she could depart. When she wanted to quit the second nanny job so as to get another easier job in Beijing, her employee insisted on searching her belongings in order to confirm that she had not pocketed anything from the house. She portrayed her feeling of humiliation, frustration, and betrayal at the moment in her writing as follows: “Deep down, I did not want to let her search my luggage at will, but I approved in word. I hated my weakness and powerlessness! Why I could not say ‘No!’ For several years since that moment, I had

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 159-63.

been overcome with shame of myself!”<sup>98</sup> This statement effectively conveys one migrant woman’s personal emotions struggling with the unfair relationship with urbanites.

However, albeit Xiaohong was unfairly fired without a notice and had to bear her employee’s explicit skepticism of her honesty, she wraps up her writing with the following comments:

We (migrant women) are the lowest class of our society. The disparities between the civilization of the urban and the backwardness of the rural and the distinctions between good and bad relationships cannot be ignored. Those differences between regions or between relationships always come into conflict. The whole process of harmonizing from conflict is *a painful rite of passage for progress* (emphasis added).<sup>99</sup>

I would like to also point out that conclusion is a decisive part in any writings. Despite her sufferings resulted from the unfair relationship with urbanites and, more correctly speaking, fundamentally resulted from the post-socialist Chinese social structure, creating migrant rural women, Xiaohong considers the difficulties as “a painful rite of passage for progress” in the end. Instead of blaming heartless urbanites or criticizing the post-socialist Chinese society, which denigrated her to the position of a “backward” rural woman, Xiaohong recognizes her difficulties merely as an individual matter she can overcome by her own efforts to develop herself. Furthermore, she relates an individual problem of her own self-development to a much broader issue—that is, the nation’s progress—with an impersonal tone here in the conclusion part of her narration. While faced with the difficulties of life as a migrant rural woman Xiaohong only tries to find the lessons that will help her own progress as well as the nation’s progress. This impersonal tone found in Xiaohong’s narration reminds us of several exemplary migrant women’s

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 163.

self-narrations in *Fan Hua*, which emphasizes the significance of one's *suzhi* accumulation and self-development despite the difficulties these women confront in urban areas.

Other than Xiaohong, a number of rural women's writings in *Self-Narrations* also arrive at these somewhat formulaic conclusions that are full of affirmative expectations for the future, a tendency of regarding their suffering as a rite of passage for progress, or a doctrinaire tone. For example, Jingjing, who suffered her employee's sexual assault, completes her writing with a positive expectation for her future saying, "Although my current situation is very tough, I believe that when this dark night passes, a bright spring day will be waiting for me."<sup>100</sup> Ling Zi, in turn, recalls her mother, who died in childbirth, in her writing.<sup>101</sup> Although her mother already had nine daughters, she could not be content with them and attempted to have a son again. Her mother could finally have son, but unfortunately, she had to pay for it at the cost of her own life. However, this sad personal story about a rural woman, who were sacrificed within the male-dominated rural society, is unexpectedly completed with an impersonal tone advocating economic reforms in post-socialist China. Zi wraps up her narration with following statements,

*Thanks to the implementation of economic reforms, my older sister could not only become rich through developing courtyard economy, but also lead other rural women in her village to be rich as well. ... My older sister's all the farming lands have been already mechanized. ... If my mother could see nowadays' bright party policy and elevated people's living standards, she might have still felt regret (emphasis added).*

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 22-3.

In addition, Xiaoguo, who writes about the difficulty of getting married as a migrant woman, concludes her writing with somewhat doctrinaire tone as follows:

Before completing my writing, I would like to send a message to other migrant women: now our society is in the era of market economy. In our society, materialism is so dominating that, regarding marriage, the phenomena of contract marriage, fraudulent marriage, and extramarital affairs are emerging mainly due to economic reasons. Please do not destroy your youth by letting yourself be engaged in such aforementioned immoral situations. (Although it is hard for migrant women to get married,) If you choose to walk that immoral road in your life, in the end, only much more suffering would be waiting for you.<sup>102</sup>

Xiaoguo, in her writing, mainly talks about her personal concerns and anxieties as an old maid. It is hard to believe that, in the aforementioned her conclusion part, she suddenly changes the topic and preaches about immoral marriage and relationship. There are no hurt feelings from her sufferings in this decisive part of her writing, but only a doctrinaire advice concerning rural women's social and moral degeneration.

It might not be a coincidence that many rural women in *Self-Narrations* feel the imperative to use an impersonal tone, which goes along with *suzhi* development discourse in the official media, in order to conclude their narrations. All the migrant women's writings in *Self-Narrations* had been first reported in the magazine *Nongjianü Baishitong* before they were compiled and published. The magazine *Nongjianü Baishitong* is sponsored by *Zhongguo Funübao* [Chinese Women's News] and the Women's Federations. *Zhongguo Funübao* can be called a mouthpiece of the Women's federations and the Women's Federations is a "mass organization" with promoting party policy. These two sponsors of the magazine *Nongjianü Baishitong* could provide with a clue to the reason why there is a tension between personal and impersonal aspects in

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 178.

some of rural women's narrations in *Self-Narrations*. Perhaps, rural women might have been fully aware of the political background of the magazine, to which they sent their writings. For this reason they might have made their stories more politically acceptable by rendering themselves as ideal women to *suzhi* development discourses, which are prevalent in post-Mao Chinese society.

In effect, rural women are not the only ones who speak out in *Self-Narrations*. Even though this publication is mainly composed of rural women's self-narrations, a very small portion of it consists of the editor's short note. *Self-Narrations* is made up of nine chapters with two major parts. Each chapter has editor's short note regarding the diverse themes that rural women's self-narrations would touch upon in the section. Some of the editor's commentary give a message that goes along with *suzhi* development discourse in the official media. This aspect is well manifested, in particular, in chapters dealing with migrant women. For example, Chapter 8 "Migrant Women's Inner Voice" starts with the following editor's note:

.....migrant rural women not only migrate just from the countryside to the city, but also throw out their previous selves, grown up by the land, and then create brand-new themselves during their migration.

Today and tomorrow, there would be countless rural women who are leaving their home and moving to their dream cities.

Migrant women, wish you well (emphasis added)!

These lines remind us of the voice-over script and professional's opinion regarding the meaning of rural women's migration in *Fan Hua*. As the official media depicts rural women's migration as a valuable process which these women can be reborn as modernized women from backward rural women, the editor's note also represents their

migration as a process of rebirth. The following note is from Chapter 9 “Heaven Helps Those Who Help Themselves:”

When we are born in the countryside, and we are born into the “unfortunate” girls, please do not give up ourselves.

We cannot choose our home, our parents, and our gender, but we can choose our attitude toward our fate.

Happiness does not come from heaven. Amongst ancient and modern heroine outside China, there exist many rural women. *They did not admit and give up their fate and make themselves proud. They bravely go forward to follow their ideals* (emphasis added).

The above few lines from the editor’s note in Chapter 9 stresses the significance of the individual rural women’s own efforts to overcome their unfortunate fate as rural women.

Akin to the ways in which *Fan Hua* introduces many exemplary rural women who fulfilled their dreams, the editor’s note even mentions ancient and modern heroine and requires rural women to try to become another heroine in this era by achieving their life dreams with their own efforts. This editorial commentary in *Self-Narrations* plays a very similar role with the voice-over scripts and professionals in *Fan Hua* by speaking the same voice with *suzhi* development discourse.

To sum up, *Self-Narrations* cause rural women’s personal stories to be parallel with impersonal endings. In the process, some of their multiple personal stories are grouped into one type of impersonal conclusion to be in harmony with *suzhi* development discourse. As the impersonal voice takes charge of these stories, all the sufferings they have as rural women—such as, gender inequality, gendered oppressions, local people’s censure, mistreatments from urbanites, a lack of basic social benefits in cities, and sexual harassments—are reduced to individual matters. Regarding this, I would like to also

mention the order of organizing rural women's writings in the publication. *Self-Narrations* first starts with rural women's painful stories about their suffering as a rural woman, which are categorized as one chapter under the title of "Humble Fate." But in the last chapter "Heaven Helps Those Who Help Themselves," there only exist happy stories of those who overcome their unfortunate fate as a rural woman by their own efforts. Rural women in the last chapter write about their experience of escaping their humble fate to become a CEO, a university graduate, a communist party member, etc. A rural woman even narrates her experience of traveling abroad very proudly in her writing. By disposing of rural women's sufferings first and then narrating the overcoming of difficulty last, their sufferings are passed as something that they can someday overcome. No matter how severe, the hardships suffered by these women are legitimized as a foundation for progress or better life in the future. And rural women in the publication merely attribute the cause of all their sufferings to a matter of self-development and endeavor to look for ways to better their lives solely within themselves.

In this context, rural women's stories in *Self-Narrations*, while full of potential to promote rural women's interests from a feminist perspective, also fails to capture the fundamental structural problems in post-socialist China—similar with those in *Fan Hua*. Rural women in *Self-Narrations*, as a subaltern group in post-socialist China, narrate all their difficulties and sufferings originally resulted from the structural contradiction in post-socialist Chinese society in detail. And these women let the public hear their personal struggles for respect, dignity, identity, and subjectivity as independent individuals in *Self-Narrations*. Nevertheless, they do not dig deep into the real cause of their sufferings, but only depict themselves as self-development subjects, who can

overcome their sufferings on their own. The very tension in the text between their personal voices and impersonal voices make this valuable publication just another example of embodying *suzhi* development discourse, that prevails in the official media.



### 3. RURAL WOMEN “TALK BACK” IN NEW DOCUMENTARY FILMS

As we can see from the previous sections, TV documentary programs in the official media do not deal with the real root of the hardships and sufferings of migrant rural women namely the policy-caused uneven development in post-socialist China. The official media one-sidedly emphasizes the positive impact of rural-urban migration on women laborers in terms of their socio-economic “success” and *suzhi* betterment, even covers rural women’s sufferings with their “noble sacrifice” for the nation’s progress. In the mainstream publication of rural women’s own narrations of their migration, their voices are somewhat split. Despite rural women’s vivid personal stories about their sufferings, their writings also possess some impersonal aspects, which are in line with *suzhi* development discourse. To continue investigating the question raised at the beginning of this thesis namely, “can rural women have their voices heard in the public space in post-socialist China?”, I have to turn to marginal sources from which different voices that address the root of rural women’s sufferings can be heard. This section explores independent media dealing with the experiences of migrant rural women and discusses whether and how this relatively new form of media captures what is taking place to the rural women behind the prevalent *suzhi* development discourse in post-socialist China.

Several Chinese media scholars recently discussed the necessity and significance of alternative culture to domestic socio-cultural issues not dealt with by the official media. Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel examine the China's New Documentary Movement as one of the most notable examples of alternative culture in post-socialist China. By calling these independent documentary films components of "alternative archives,"<sup>103</sup> they redefine the meaning of the alternativeness: "The intention (of producing new documentary films) is ... to record events and *give voice to people normally overlooked in the mainstream official and commercial media* ... (emphasis added)."<sup>104</sup> Such alternativeness is manifested in the themes, forms, spaces of production and viewing, and archiving characteristics of the new documentary films.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, in many new documentary films, we can hear the voice of subalterns in post-socialist China—such as, peasants and workers. Compared to the very small quantity of the official media's TV documentary programs about rural issues let alone the issue of migrant women, a number of new documentary films have addressed these topics that are ignored politically and commercially in the official media. Those films that have engaged with rural women themes make for an impressive list, ranging from *A Home Far Away from Home* (1993), directed by Chen Xiaoqing, *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (1997), directed by Li Hong, to the more recent release such as *Bing Ai* (2007) by Feng Yan and *Ghost Town* (2008) by Zhao Dayong, to name just a few.<sup>106</sup> New documentary films have thus created a different public space.

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<sup>103</sup> Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel, "Alternative Archive: China's Independent Documentary Culture," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry et al. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 135-54.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>106</sup> New documentary films dealing with migrant rural women's issues form the following incomplete list: *A Home Far Away from Home*, directed by Chen Xiaoqing (1993); *Bing Ai*, DVD, directed by Feng Yan

This section supplements Berry and Rofel's concept of new documentary films as "alternative archives" by focusing on the way in which new documentary films touching upon issues relating to rural women and their migration in post-socialist China. I will pay particular attention to the relationship between the camera and rural women in new documentary films as a methodology of capturing the alternative qualities of these films. A camera often captures not only voices of rural women but also their surroundings and their non-verbal articulations. Such non-verbal articulations include rural women's gestures, actions, and even their silent motions. Thus, the relationship between the camera and rural women in new documentary films can be served as a space to hear rural women's multiple voices and to receive their nonverbal utterances. Through new documentary films on rural women, this section ultimately seeks to capture the moment when these women disrupts the *suzhi* development discourse both in verbal and nonverbal ways.

My primary focus is on the following three new documentary films: *Last Train Home* (2009), directed by Fan Lixin, *Bing Ai* (2007), directed by Feng Yan, and *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (1997), directed by Li Hong. These films address individual rural women's way of coping with unprecedented gender issues brought on by rural-urban polarization and post-socialist gender politics—such as 1) the separation of migrant mothers in the city and their children in the countryside, 2) young rural girls' bitter experience both in the rural and urban, and 3) the struggle of rural women in the process

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(2007; *Beijing Beisen Yingshi*, *Li Xianting Dianying Jijin*, 2007); *Extras*, directed by Zhu Chuanming (2001); *Ghost Town*, DVD, directed by Zhao Daoyoung (2011; DGenerate Films, 2008); *Lost in Beijing*, DVD, directed by Li Yu (2007; New Yorker Video, 2008); *Out of Phoenix Bridge*, DVD, directed by Li Hong (1997; Women Make Movies, 1997); *Lost in Beijing*, DVD, directed by Li Yu (2007; New Yorker Video, 2008); *Out of Phoenix Bridge*, DVD, directed by Li Hong, (1997; Women Make Movies, 1997); *Unknown Pleasures*, DVD, directed by Jia Zhangke (2002; Seville Pictures, 2004); *Up the Yangtze*, DVD, directed by Yung Chang (2007; National Film Board of Canada, 2008).

of relocation. This chapter evaluates how the aforementioned three new documentary films present implicit contrast to the two materials examined in the first two sections. The focus of my reading of *Last Train Home* is to capture the emotional and psychological impact of rural to urban migration on a young girl who is left behind by her parents who went to work in the city as well as her rejection of being abandoned. At the same time, the agony of an unfulfilled gendered self-felt by the girl's mother is also examined in parallel with my analysis of the young girl's. Through my analysis of *Out of Phoenix Bridge*, I will show young rural girls' attentiveness to the permitted conservatism and gender inequalities in post-socialist China, and their indirect complaints about *suzhi* development discourse. With *Bing Ai*, I would like to address rural women's visions and their self-awareness about the issues in post-socialist society and politics, which *suzhi* development discourse tends to conceal from them.

*Last Train Home* (2009), directed by Lixin Fan, brings our eyes to a rural woman's guilt about her decision to migrate and the issue of the weakening of emotional ties between rural women and their children. This film tells the story of a couple named Shuqin and Changhua, who migrated from Huilong village, Sichuan province to the city of Guangzhou to make money merely a month after the birth of their eldest daughter Qin. The couple was so impoverished that they had no choice but to leave their two children with their grandmother in their home village. They come back home to visit their mother and their children only once a year during the Chinese New Year holiday during nearly twenty years of their migration. Spanning two days on the road, their way home for Chinese New Year is a dull and tough process of endurance. By following the couple's

long journey home from Guangzhou, their workplace, to Sichuan, their home, the camera displays the geographic as well as economic, psychological distance between the city they work and the place they called home, where their mother and children live.

The striking shots of enormous numbers of migrants waiting at the Guangzhou train station for the chance to get the tickets to go home during the Chinese New Year situate the couple as one family among the millions. We can read through the lens of the camera the migrant laborers' complicated expressions such as their weariness from the long waiting to get a train ticket to home, their nervousness about the possibility of not being able to purchase a ticket, the relief and joy of those who manage to catch the last train home, their anger from the conflicts with the police who, in order to remain stability, hinder their way to get to the platform, and finally, the tension between migrants themselves as they elbow one another to get on the train first. After many hopeless attempts at the station, Changhua and Shuqin finally managed to get the train tickets to home; nonetheless, they have to wait another period of long time in front of the Guangzhou station in a crowd of migrants just to get on the train. Their journey home starts with the train, followed by a boat route, then a bus before arriving their home in Sichuan.

*Last Train home* reveals the deeper meaning of the distance between the work place in the city and home back in the country: for Shuqin it means a gap between her two roles, as an economic supporter for the family and her gendered role of a mother. Sitting on the boat, Shuqin talked about how her life has been caught in this split. On the one hand, the countryside is a place abandoned by the government in post-socialist China, which means she had to earn a living in the city to raise her family; but at the same time,

the place is still the home she can never desert because of her children. Shuqin's migration therefore means something more than just an economic opportunity: It is a gender-based burden imposed onto rural women. Chinese scholars Na Li, Wei-Hsin Lin, and Xiaobing Wang explain that Chinese migrant women have to choose whether to leave their children in the countryside or to have them migrated to urban settings.<sup>107</sup> If coming to the urban areas, these children lost the opportunity of receiving public education without paying a huge tuition fee since they have no urban resident status.<sup>108</sup> If being left at home for schooling, these children then encounter what is called "*liushou ertong*" (left-behind children) problem, namely they no longer having a parental presence except for a couple days a year.<sup>109</sup> Chinese media scholar Jenny Kwok Wah Lau also mentions how gender difference affects rural women's migration circumstances and their migration experience by pointing out several aspects such as the unavailability of maternity insurance, the community's censure, and separation from their children.<sup>110</sup> As a result, migrant women are burdened with strong sense of guilt whatever their choice is, to bring the children with or to leave the children home.

Like many women, Shuqin made the realistic choice to fit herself to the prevailing political-economic system and urban-rural hierarchy: She left their children with her mother in the countryside and went with her husband to Guangzhou. Economically she managed to save her family from falling into poverty and her income helped to enrich her children's future. But while a *Fan Hua* TV program or a story in *Self-Narrations* may

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<sup>107</sup> Na Li, Wei-Hsin Lin, and Xiaobing Wang, "From Rural Poverty to Urban Deprivation? The Plight of Chinese Rural-Urban Migrants through the Lens of Last Train Home," *East Asia* 29, no. 2 (2012): 177.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 177-78.

<sup>109</sup> It refers to the problem that appears usually when one or both of the parents work far from home and leave the children in the care of grandparents, other relatives, or alone in post-socialist China, *Ibid*, 178-79.

<sup>110</sup> Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, "Migrant Workers, Women, and China's Modernization on Screen," *Jump Cut*, No.54 (2012).

continue with the obvious “success” of Shuqin, what the film focuses on is the long lasting gendered feeling and struggles that have suppressed by her “realistic” decision—the decision requested by the post-socialist system. On the boat heading home, Shuqin fixes her gaze on the flowing river and looks back upon the years of pain she has experienced after she left her newborn baby and migrated to Guangzhou with her husband. She cried in front of the camera, “Every time I received a letter from home, I cried. I was always in tears. Every time I received a letter from my father, I started to cry immediately and I couldn’t eat anything. I had to eat before reading a letter. Otherwise, I couldn’t eat anything the whole day.” This pain of being an absent mother from her baby diverts her story from the typical *suzhi* development plot. In her story, the economic “success” does not necessarily compensate for her failure in fulfilling her natural desire of being a mother.

In her self-account we cannot find any mentions of the backwardness of the rural society or her strong will to develop herself in the city. Rather, how to fulfill her mother role from long distance becomes the burden of Shuqin and occupies the space of her story. During her limited days at home, Shuqin uses every chance she can to improve her children’s education. Obviously, schooling is still available for them in the countryside. She checks their grades, and sermons them to study harder. She wants to see her children to understand the significance of education as she sees it:

You ranked fifth in the class? You should have done better. Which test didn’t go well? ... You don’t want to study hard? Do well at school please. It will benefit you when you grow up. It’s for your own good. ... A peasant’s child must study hard. Otherwise, you will end up like us.

Following Shuqin home, the film therefore captures what is completely missing in the *suzhi* development plot and the “success stories” of migrant women: Shuqin’s

suppressed desire of being a good mother and her subsequent suffering. In her mind, migration to the city for the material betterment does not bring her any pride nor pleasure as a woman. She did not do it voluntarily. On the contrary, for Shuqin, to be a migrant worker is nothing more than a sacrifice. Her material betterment comes at the price of her pain of being unable to take care of her children. The gathering with her children does not bring much relaxation, fun and laughter either. It is too brief and it only makes the separation more immanent. She becomes rigid and does not know how to make the best use of these few short days spending with her children in person, except for telling them to “Study hard!” The physical distance between Shuqin and her children produced by her migration has made another distance, namely, the psychological distance between them. Her unsatisfied gender self further hurts here. Sadly, although Shuqin’s lecture to her children is in effect the expression of her unfulfilled love and caring, to the children, she is no better than an annoying authority who has brought them no affection nor fun. The children do not understand her sacrifice. The physical distance between Shuqin’s workplace and her home only leads her children to believe that she is just obsessed with money and abandon them in the countryside. This mother-children relation reveals yet another layer of the conflict between rural women’s economic survival and their ways of being a woman in the post-socialist era, a tragedy that some rural women may have to live with throughout their migration if not their entire lives.

Because of the way post-socialist urban–rural hierarchy suppressed rural women’s gender choices, the rural children reject countryside even further. For Shuqin’s daughter Qin, the countryside, though home, is an abandoned place, neglected not just by the government but also by her parents. For this reason, for her, migration is the only



chance she can think of to avoid facing this abandoned status. Like her mother, she does not really long for the city. But unlike her mother, she hates the countryside due to the pain of being an abandoned child who is at the same time prisoned in school. Freedom for her means to be able to have means and money to run away from home and school or, from the abandonment itself. After she moves to Xintang city in Guangdong province and begins working in a factory against her parents' will, she speaks about her migration experience as follows:

I thought it would be good to work in a factory. But I can't really get used to it here. And I have no other friends beside one friend from my hometown. Is life good here? *After all, freedom is happiness. ... Work is tiring but you make your own money. When you are at school, you ask your parents for money. School is like a cage.* You could not go anywhere. Work is tiring, but that doesn't mean you don't want to work. It's painful but still better than being at school (emphasis added).

When she moves to Shenzhen again after coming back home later, she speaks again about her future plan, which is once more not a dream but an escape: "*You can't do anything without money.* Going to Shenzhen, I don't really have a plan. First, I will have some fun. Then, I will look for work. I don't know if I will realize my dreams in Shenzhen (emphasis added)." As she mentions, in the city, Qin enjoys going shopping or getting a hair perm like a Barbie doll. Even though the work in a factory is tough, it gives her small money needed for not having to depend upon parents who want her to continue to study. She is then free from her abandoned home. As such, the film is able to allow the young girl to reveal the full complexity of her desire for migration: She uses it as a way to escape from her abandoned status rather than to develop her *suzhi*.

*Last Train Home*, with its unique filmic strategy, provides us with an opportunity to reinterpret this rural girl's voice, which, on the surface, seems to speak the same

language with the *suzhi* development discourse, but only on the surface. The film gives us more chances to catch Qin's feelings on the rural. One such chance is when she visits her grandfather's grave. For Qin, who was raised not by her own parents but by her grandparents, her late grandfather is the only one she can tell her true feelings to. Having decided to leave her home and move to a city, she pays a visit to her grandfather's grave to let him know her decision and to say goodbye. There, she shares her decision with her younger brother and asks him to visit their grandfather's grave regularly for her: "I will not come back often and I do not want to. *This is a sad place* (emphasis added)."

However, in the following shots, the camera shooting from behind her captures her silent motions as she gazes into the valley from the top of the hill. What she faces is an amazing landscape conveying something exactly opposite with her words: a serene, picturesque, green, beautiful scenery, not a bit of which is associable to anything being "abandoned" or deserted. Through these ambivalent filmic shots, the film leads the audiences to question the true reason for Qin to even describe such a beautiful area as "a sad place." As Qin said earlier, not only her parents, but also her friends have gone to the cities. Her calling it "a sad place" is therefore not to offer a fact, but a description of the way it is abandoned. What has the film clearly captured for the audience is actually the wrongness of the abandonment itself, and that's the sadness Qin articulates. For the rural is by no means backward or low quality, just as she herself is not. Since it is the state's new policy to abandon the countryside, which rejects the future of the rural, the young girl has no other choice but to reject the rejection. That leads her decision of going to the city.

At the very end of the film, the camera follows Qin home after she finishes her work at a nightclub in the city. Her appearance from the back, which the camera captures, is definitely urbanized. Her hair is colored and she now wears hot pants and high heels like an urban girl. This filmic scene reminds us of the voice-over script in *Fan Hua* saying, “Migrant women transform themselves by changing their hair-style, their accent, and even their way of thinking. Migration experiences transform their values, their fate, and their life mottos.” If measured by one aspect of the *suzhi* development discourse, that rural women have to nurture sensitivity of urban fashions, then Qin has already accumulated this quality after her migration. Here a great irony is found in Qin’s migration. Her only chance to reject the fate of being abandoned in the rural home is to run into the city, which ironically seemingly fits the plot of the *suzhi* development discourse; and her acquirement of urban *suzhi*—sense of fashion—is ironical again, since it is gained at the price of her only chance of education in the rural area. This doubled irony holds up a true mirror to the *suzhi* discourse’s exploiting feature of the rural.

As Qin gives up her studies at school and eventually goes to Shenzhen to start working at a nightclub, all of Shuqin’s hopes and dreams for her daughter vanish, the vicious cycle of Shuqin’s fate as a migrant woman repeats through her daughter’s life. However, in this situation, the only thing that Shuqin can do for her daughter is to pray to Buddha while burning the incense: “Oh Buddha, please bless my girl. I don’t know what I have done wrong. But please bless my daughter and protect her from harm. I will come back and pray.” Certainly she has not done anything wrong. If there is someone to be blamed, it is the socio-political structure. For it produces countless migrant workers without providing them a sufficient social security system available to them, nor chances

for them to fulfill their emotional and gender needs. Ironically, the *suzhi* development discourse provides no clue for a migrant mother like Shuqin on how to handle the profound split in her very being as a mother i.e. the split between her role as an economic provider and her expectation of being a care-taker of her children. This rift has caused her so much pain and self-denial that she has to pray to the Buddha statue at her rural home. The alternative quality of the film lies in the fact that by bringing Shuqin's dilemma to the foreground, it reveals what *suzhi* development discourse avoids, what rural women pay for accumulating the urban *suzhi* that has little to do with their actual life as a woman. The film lets us know a tragic story of aggravated relationships between family members behind a rural mother and her daughter's *suzhi* accumulation.

Qin was not the first characterization of a girl who rejected the fate of being abandoned. She was preceded by four rural girls presented in *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (1997). The film unfolds along the journeys Xiazi, Xiao Wang, Afeng, and Jialing take to migrate to Beijing from a small village called Phoenix Bridge in Anhui province in the early 1990s. In order to make this film, Li Hong, the filmmaker, spent one year living with these four girls together at their place at Beijing's suburb. This has allowed the filmmaker to use the vérité style of filmmaking.<sup>111</sup> The style of Cinéma vérité enabled *Out of Phoenix Bridge* to not only visually capture these rural women's tough lives in Beijing but also contain their vivid self-narrations about their migration experiences and even their personal histories. Indeed in the film, the four rural young girls feel

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<sup>111</sup> Cinéma vérité basically refers to a filmmaking style of shooting without a script or storyboard. The filmmaker normally goes to the sight to capture anything that happens in front of the camera and shoots very long hours of footage. The story is afterward created during the process of editing. Even though the vérité style of filmmaking can be said as somewhat backward way of filmmaking, it can unveil the truth or capture subjects hidden behind the crude reality.

comfortable to talk about various topics such as the reason why they chose to migrate to Beijing, their life as rural girls both in Beijing and their home village, their love stories, their thoughts on marriage and work, and their life plans for the future.

The following self-narrations from Xiazi, who has the strongest and the most independent character among the four protagonists of the film, and her mother show how rural women's life in the post-socialist era have been reduced to mundane and hurtful domestic matters:

Xiazi: Better off dead than to live like my mother.... The neighbor told me how my mother suffers. That's life. Who can tell how a marriage will turn out? *This is my happiest time. If my marriage ends up like my mother's, I will kill myself....* I knew life in Beijing was tough, but I wanted to come. *Marriage and kids, it's so boring! I couldn't stand that. Although it's tough here, I am content with that* (emphasis added).

Xiazi's mother: *My husband and mother-in-law are awful.... If it weren't for Atai and Xiazi, I would've gone out to work.* I wouldn't have come here (to remarry to Phoenix Bridge) (emphasis added).

Their desire to move to the city for independence might sound analogous to many exemplary women's voice in the official media going along with *suzhi* development discourse. However, they do not blindly portray the rural as the backwardness. Rather, Xiazi and her mother are pointing specifically to the gender politics and gender inequalities that have recurred in the post-socialist countryside in post-socialist time, which *suzhi* development discourse normally avoids mentioning. These rural women are fully aware that the gender inequality recurring in the rural space of post-socialist China will deprive them of dignity, subjectivity and any non-material ideal they may have as women. And they make their voice heard.

The recurring gender inequality in post-socialist China has been a target of criticism by scholars and critics. Chinese feminist scholar Jinhua Dai notes that whereas during the Mao-era women were required to behave like men under the slogan of ‘what men can do, women can do too,’ post-Mao discourse insists on gender difference.<sup>112</sup> The commodification and polarization has easily transformed gender difference into gender inequalities and allowed a conservative, backward turn in terms of women’s liberation.<sup>113</sup> Feminist scholar Tamara Jacka also points out that “as the billboards around China’s cities testify, the rise of a commodity economy and consumerism has seen the image of woman as sex object being manipulated in the burgeoning advertising industry in much the same way as it has been in the West.”<sup>114</sup> The predominant image of women as mother or, by extension, as guardians of social order and morality has been bolstered in post-Mao discourse on gender difference. It embodies the state’s eagerness to promote social stability against post-Cultural Revolution cynicism and the undesirable consequences of implementing market economy. As such, “the liberated woman as defined by revolutionary (male) norms” in the Mao-era are now replaced by “the re-inscription of an explicitly male-dominated traditional cultural norm.”<sup>115</sup> The recurred gender inequality, therefore, caters to the burgeoning service market and its need of social stability in post-socialist China.

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<sup>112</sup> Jinhua Dai, “Gender and Narration: Women in Contemporary Chinese Film,” in *Cinema and Desire—Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, ed. Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow, 99-150. (London: Verso, 2002), 119-22.

<sup>113</sup> Regarding the allowed conservatism and gender inequalities in post-socialist China, please see Dai, “Gender and Narrations,” 99-150; Emly Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988), 14-40; Tamara Jacka, “Post-Mao Reforms,” in *Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in an Era of Reform*, 40-53. (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>114</sup> Jacka, “Post-Mao Reforms,” 40-3.

<sup>115</sup> Dai, “Gender and Narrations,” 119.

This is the gender politics against which the rural women in *Phoenix Bridge* speak about their suffering. If the *suzhi* development discourse portrays the rural as the source of the gender inequality, the rural women in the film see the recurring gender inequality as the cause of rural decay. As this decay deprives women of their subjectivity, it is terrible than death in Xiazhi's mind. The alternative quality of this film lies in its timeliness and honesty to preserve the voice of rural women's spontaneous feminist judgment on the post-socialist rural life, which is hard to hear in *suzhi* development discourse.

As the film reveals, it is to refuse to be reduced to a domestic rural servant by post-socialist gender politics that makes Xiazhi cherish her desire to develop herself as well. She does so not exactly for the purpose of bettering her *suzhi* for economic success:

I don't like cleaning. *I would like to learn hairdressing.* I am not learning that now and I need to earn more money and save some to learn hairdressing. This (housemaid) work is driving me crazy. *This work has no future. But if I learn hairdressing, I will be able to find my future-spouse in my workplace* (emphasis added).

As she actually visits one hair salon in Beijing, she expresses her will to learn the skill of hairdressing such as: "I came here to learn hairdressing. Money is not the main thing. *I came to learn and it is not about money.* I already have some money I earned.... The fact that I have come here shows that I would like to work here so as to learn (emphasis added)." One thing different from the *suzhi* discourse here is the way Xiazhi separates her desire to develop from bettering her economic status. The film shows that for Xiazhi, keeping interest in things she likes to do is itself the goal, and is more important than money. In doing so, Xiazhi is making a conscious rejection to be commodified and minimized to the thing-like status—the fate which post-socialist gender politics imposes

on women laborers. If *suzhi* development discourse urges women laborers to become better and quality commodities to fit the urban-centric economy, Xiazi aims to go against the status of commodity by reassuring herself that her subjectivity, passion, and interest have higher meanings in life and are free from complete domination of capital. Therefore, Xiazi does not believe the vagueness of the *suzhi* discourse nor has a blind fantasy for *suzhi* accumulation in the city. She is fully aware of the limits of her futureless job as a housemaid but she is determined to escape those constraints by maintaining her interest and passion as a way to obtain true development of her gender self.

Although rural women do not criticize *suzhi* development discourse directly in the film, the *vérité* style of filmmaking leaves room for protagonists' subversive voices to rebel. Afeng, one of Xiazi's cousins living with her in Beijing, talks about her bodily experience as well as her physical existence as a way of criticism of the city: "As I imagined it, Beijing was perfect (before I migrated). But now it is a big disappointment.... Back home, my period was monthly, but now I get it every 2 weeks.... It's tough living away from home." Continuing her discomfort with urban living in Beijing, Afeng had the following conversation with the filmmaker:

The filmmaker: How long have your sister wanted to buy a city residence permit?

Afeng: A few years.... If I have \$7,000 (, which is the amount I can buy a city residence permit), I would put it in the bank. ... *Then, I would stop working and just eat* (emphasis added).

The filmmaker: Then why your sister wants to work in the city?

Afeng: She is just afraid of working in the field under the sun.

The filmmaker: Aren't you afraid of working in the field back home?

Afeng: No, I'm not. I don't have any choice.

The filmmaker: Will you work in the factory, too?

Afeng: No, I won't. I can't read and I feel awkward about it. *I might not be able to take the pressure if I work in the factory* (emphasis added).

The filmmaker: Do you need to be literate?



Afeng: To be literate is necessary everywhere nowadays, but I'm not. ... *I don't plan to live past 30. Life is too exhausting* (emphasis added).

From a perspective of *suzhi* development discourse, Afeng can be read as a weak and ignorant woman without the will to develop herself. Unlike many exemplary migrant women in the official media who have fulfilled their life dreams through migration, Afeng rejects any opportunities of development even after her migration. Afeng's self-narration can be seen as a failure story, except that for her this failure was voluntary. Her voluntary preference and her bodily feelings challenges the *suzhi* development logic that rural women will automatically improve their quality through migration experience. She reveals the absurdity of this logic by showing how *suzhi* acquirement, just like the urban resident card, actually suppresses life and normal bodily needs such as eating and resting. Her self-narration is thus a rebellion against *suzhi* development discourse in the name of life itself. Rendering rural young girls' subversive voices and their perception of the problems of *suzhi* development discourse to its viewers is another alternative quality of this film.

Unlike the aforementioned two films, Feng Yan's *Bing Ai* is not a film about migrant women living in cities; instead, this film pays attention to a rural woman living in a small village in Hubei province. Nevertheless, we can draw similarities between rural women both in cities and countryside through this film. Through the window of *Bing Ai*, we can hear another rural woman's self-awareness and her vision regarding the society and politics in post-socialist China. The title of this film, *Bing Ai*, is named after its protagonist, Zhang Bing'ai. Bing'ai, one of millions of ordinary rural women in China, grows oranges with her sick husband and her two children along the bank of the Yangtze

River. As the Chinese government begins the construction project of the Three Gorges Dam, her family's livelihood becomes threatened by the government's order of relocation. In 1996, when the filmmaker first interviewed Bing'ai in order to make this film, her family was among the many residents who were requested to relocate since her village was to be submerged before the dam project was completed. Bing'ai stubbornly refuses to move to a government-designated housing. In 2002, when the filmmaker visited her again, Bing'ai's family was one of the ten percent of the residents who did not accept the government's compensation and did not relocate. The close relationship and rapport between Bing'ai and the filmmaker, which have built over the course of eight years, helps *Bing Ai* to touch upon diverse themes of the protagonist's life, ranging from her sense of justice manifested in her resistance to relocation to her life history as a rural woman in post-socialist China—such as her sadness at seeing the abandoned rural area; her love for her farmlands and her orange trees as a source of her family's income; her sorrows for the babies she had to terminate due to government policy; and her love stories about her arranged marriage.

While dealing with the issue of relocation, the film foregrounds its protagonist's subversive voice against *suzhi* development discourse, the local cadre and the post-socialist state policy. Contrary to the *suzhi* discourse, Bing'ai depicts the rural as something precious and expresses her love for rural areas and rural value. The precious countryside appears to the audience when Bing'ai talks about what does land mean to her as well as the orange trees she has cultivated since her marriage:

If you work hard in the countryside, you won't be any worse off than in the city. We get everything. ... It's difficult for me to leave land. *Land can give you everything. Land is the most precious thing.* You can plant anything on it. Land gives us food. Only the land can support us. Life in the city is much easier. Life

here is harder. But I can't make any money in town. To be honest, I am not as bright as city folk. Doing business and cheating is not my thing (emphasis added).

What the land means to Bing'ai revives the set of values that have completely erased by the *suzhi* development discourse. As one of the millions impacted by the dam project, who have to pay the price for the development and modernization instead of the government, she by no means considers the rural area as a place of backwardness. For her, the meaning of the land is not about richness or money from the beginning. It is about roots of life and achievements in life. She believes that even though working in the field is physically harder than working in the city, it is a type of work fits for a certain kind of honest people, and herself is one of them. Bing'ai therefore does not feel the need to migrate. Her small hope is that she can just stay near her farmlands without moving far away for the rest of her life.

Determined to stay where she is, Bing'ai also develops her political awareness and skills of negotiation as a rural woman. When Bing'ai was continuously forced into relocating to a government designated housing area despite her resistance in 2002, she began carefully studying the migration policy such as *Zigui County's Three Gorges Dam Migrant Relocation Plan* in order to negotiate with local cadres. In the process of negotiating with local cadres about land rights, she directly indicates the fact that rural residents were abandoned by the government, which puts more value on urban-centric economic development over solving the rural problem:

The local cadre: You just need to move to a place we designated for you.

Bing'ai: A place you designated for me, the land you gave me permission to build on, first of all, has no electricity or running water. Secondly, it's too far from my farmland. But I would be willing to move there if you flatten the land for me and assign me a plot of farmland there. ... *If I was a village official, you would have*

*given me a permit long ago. If I was the village head, the village party secretary or an official, you'd definitely give me permission. If I had money, you'd give in* (emphasis added).

The local cadre: Now you're accusing us of being corrupt. Look if my pants are made of real leather.

The above conversation between Bing'ai and the local cadre reveals that an ordinary rural woman can become very perceptive about the ways in which a number of local cadres are engaged in corruption in post-socialist China. She is able to speaking out confidently against the local cadres' injustice and demands her own land rights to them.

However, despite her persistent resistance, in the end, Bing'ai has no choice but to surrender to the pressure from the local cadres and sign the agreement of relocation. On the day after Bing'ai signed the agreement, she recounts her resentment and bitterness towards the government and their local cadres, which do not care much about the interest of rural population. She said frankly in front of the camera:

I'm determined to survive whatever it takes! I'm going to feed myself and carry on with my work. I'll survive, you just wait and see! I can't wait to see what will become of them. They certainly won't come to a good end. Just think how much money they make. Their pockets are full of other people's money. It's not fair! They don't have a conscience. I have to say this.

Notwithstanding her submission, Bing'ai's critique against the local cadres is in effect highlighting a pivotal feature of rural women's lives that is missing from *suzhi* development discourse: The true obstacles to the progress/development of the rural in post-socialist China are not the low *suzhi* of the rural, but power, capital, and personal relationship, which *suzhi* development discourse has concealed.

Bing'ai's critique extends to the state's gender policies and their impacts on women. This is well manifested as she talks about her abortion experience due to the

government's one-child policy. She speaks of her physical and psychological torment from her forced abortion:

The others I got rid of because I didn't dare have any more children. We would have been fined. Contraception has failed many times. One I had while on the pill. One I had despite having an intra-uterine device. I was duped every time, my own fault. No idea how I got pregnant. *That's why my body's in a complete mess. ... I'm afraid of getting pregnant again. ...* Once when I was out of money and I had too much work to do, so I had to wait until the sixth month to abort. Usually, a fetus is fully grown by the sixth month. It is a tiny body then, I know. The little fellow was quite healthy, too. ... It was this big; all muscles and flesh. Just like a rubber doll (emphasis added).

The repeated forced abortions, as a measure to carry out this one-child policy, function as a war against the body and heart of a woman. The fragility of the fetus or unborn infant life and the cold measure of abortion bring traumatic experience to motherly nature of women. For a mother, an abortion is a denial or interruption of her motherly self and her potential ties with a child. This rupture is so violent that she feels the urge to fulfill her interrupted motherhood by talking to her aborted babies. As captured by the camera, she tries to make her unborn sons understand her situation: "I had no choice. It wasn't my fault, but the government's fault. If the law had allowed it, I would have had *you*. But as the law forbids it, I had no other solutions (emphasis added)." As the camera reveals, the invisible mother-son tie she managed to maintain serves as a rupture and a resistance to the government's policy in the heart. Her laments about her bodily suffering and her chats with her aborted babies should be seen as a direct response to the government and its heartless policy in the name of a mother. Justifying the one-child policy, the *suzhi* development discourse argues that the "rural population as a tumor—large in quantity and low in quality," and reducing the numbers of this population will expect to help

raising the *suzhi* to fit the national economic development.<sup>116</sup> In *Bing'ai*, this true, touching filmic moment reveals the absurdity of the above argument: What *suzhi* or quality could Bing'ai really acquire while having to give up the motherly love in exchange for the development? Rural women in post-socialist China are deprived of many gender and emotional choices due to the post-socialist neoliberal regime. Nonetheless, they actually articulate their visions of the society and politics from the experiences of their gendered selves, and do make their choices whenever they can. The alternativeness of this film lies in its capacity to capture such a rural woman's self-awareness about the real gender issues in post-socialist China regardless of the dominant *suzhi* development discourse.

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<sup>116</sup> Yan, "Neo-Liberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism," 495.

## CONCLUSION

The previous sections in this study are part of a process of seeking answers to the question of whether rural women in post-socialist China are able to make heard their thoughts about the *suzhi* development discourse, which has been so prevalent in Chinese society since the 1980s.

As I have explored in section one, in the official media, rural women not only make an appearance but also tell their stories as migrant rural women workers in cities. Nonetheless, these stories do not go beyond the bounds of *suzhi* development discourse on rural women. Although migrant rural women appear in the official media, most of them correspond to the examples of successful self-development subjectivities, who take up only small part of the whole migrant rural women who moved to urban areas. These women are those who overcame their hardships they faced during their migration for themselves; but, somewhere in the cities, there are many more migrant women who failed to become successful self-development subjects. A number of rural migrant women are still suffering from inflictions caused by deep structural problems with the rapid post-socialist economic development—that is, uneven development between the urban and the rural. In the official media, it is hard to find any migrant women’s stories telling the reason why they had to leave their home and migrate to cities; their emotional conflicts caused by the inseparable relationship with their family members left in the

countryside; and their thoughts about the widening discrepancy between urban and rural areas in post-socialist China in their own way. Instead, there are only those who achieved economic success through their own efforts or those who consider their hardships as rural women as valuable opportunities to learn some life lessons. Most of these women can be interpreted as good examples of those who succeeded to improve their *suzhi* through the means of migration. While the official media presents to the public a series of “model migrant women” who exemplify the work of “*suzhi* improvement,” it also demands intellectuals’ veneration messages for these women’s sacrifice for the economic development and their efforts to improve their personal qualities. Stressing individual migrant women’s power that is able to overcome their sufferings—in effect, caused by the fundamental structural problems from the uneven development between the rural and urban in post-socialist China—on their own, multiple voices of rural women are encoded into one unified voice fitting into the *suzhi* development discourse delivered in the official media.

Rural women’s own writings I analyzed in section two have more potential of providing with their personal stories with a feminist perspective. However, in many rural women’s writings, their personal voices are paralleled with impersonal segments. Rural women talk about their personal struggles for respect, dignity, identity, and subjectivity as a rural woman living in Chinese society in their own writings. Indeed, readers can encounter rural women’s stories touching upon abundant issues—such as the difficulties of living as a rural woman; rural women’s unfulfilled desires for growing up through education; their love, marriage, and divorce; their family issues; their painful search for a meaningful life in rural society; their migration experience; and their success as a rural



woman. The core value of their writings lies in such personal voices entangled with sensitive gender issues that many rural women are suffering both in rural areas and urban areas. Despite the potential of being able to promote rural women's interests in terms of gender equality from a feminist perspective, their writings do not touch upon the real issues that undergird their sufferings. Instead, rural women in their writings represent themselves as self-development subjects, who can conquer their hardships on their own, similar to how rural migrant women appeared in the official media depict themselves. Many writings that maintain personal voices on their sufferings as rural women have somewhat impersonal conclusions with doctrinaire advice concerning other rural women's social and moral degeneration. The very tension between rural women's personal and impersonal voices in their writings makes their valuable writings into just another example going along with *suzhi* development discourse targeting rural women.

Unlike in the official media and their writings, in new documentary films, rural women speak about their understanding of the gender issues that lay beyond the reach of conventional public media and even criticized the post-socialist gender politics that has brought them unprecedented physical, emotional and psychological sufferings, even harmed their gendered selves. *Last Train Home* touches upon a rural mother's guilt and pain caused by the split demands the post-socialist rural policy has imposed on rural women, namely, the split to be an economic provider for her children and a care-taking of her children. The film also deals with a young rural girl's grief over being abandoned not only by the government but also by her parents, as well as her rejection to this abandonment. This emotional trauma caused by the rural-urban hierarchy and involuntary migration of rural women are unprecedented and will accompany them for

decades, even throughout their entire lives. *Out of Phoenix Bridge* reveals young rural girls' perceptions on their migration, which do not fit into and even rebel against the mainstream ideology as articulated by the *suzhi* development discourse. In the film, we can meet a migrant rural girl being in full awareness of the recurring backward history that reduces women into domestic servant or laborers without brain or subjectivity in the name of commodification and capital. The girl, therefore, consciously protects her interest, passion and subjectivity and separate them from the business of money-making. Another young rural migrant girl in the film rejects to develop any *suzhi* on top of her already heavy workload and declining bodily conditions. She subverts the logic of developing *suzhi* by talking to the camera in the name of the very mortality of human beings and life itself, an aspect completely erased by both the capital and the official media. *Bing Ai* represents a rural woman's love for the land, her self-respect and moral claim of being a rural laborer vis-a-vis the urban laborer, and her critical vision on the political reality she has to deal with in post-socialist China. The protagonist in the film utters her criticism to the large scale top-down relocation of peasants and voices out her pain from her interrupted gender-self against the procedure of one-child policy.

In many ways those new documentary films featuring rural women have captured multiple voices these women use to speak back to the *suzhi* discourse targeting them. And, the "alternative" quality of these films lies in the directors' efforts to provide rural women with a new, interactive medium they can use to talk back to the hegemonic discourse. This was made possible, as scholars have pointed out, thanks to the encounter between a young generation of independent filmmakers who dare to let go stable jobs on the one hand and on the other, introduction of low cost, portable DV camera into China

since the late 1990s. New documentary filmmakers have conscious pursuit of truth and archive-creating beyond the realm of ideology, and the portability and affordability of the DV camera makes their projects practical. The union between independent filmmakers and the portable DV camera in turn create the connection between filmmaking and the experience of rural women on a personal level, thus capturing these women's otherwise inaccessible spontaneity in the daily life. New documentary films taken with DV cameras could then allow today's subaltern groups in China, including rural women and migrant women, to utter, in verbal and nonverbal ways, what is in their mind and heart without going through a script nor an editorial scrutinizing the single medium of writing, as I analyzed in section two. The alternativeness of these individual films lies in the trust between the rural women and the filmmakers. Such films may or may not have implications for greater autonomy in social and political context in post-socialist China. The films analyzed in this research are not made by rural women themselves. But this trust between the rural women and the filmmaker as the cultural co-workers indicates a new possibility in theorizing the question of subaltern representation.

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