
VANESSA L. FONG

Harvard University


China has long been portrayed as a collectivist society where the state, the family, and political economy define, control, and overwhelm individual subjectivities. While this portrayal has been useful in highlighting the hegemonic power of various institutions of Chinese society, it has often caused the scholarship on China to overlook the significance of private life, individual agency, and marginalized experiences. A collectivist, top-down approach was often the only approach possible, given limited scholarly access to data under a Maoist government (1949–1976) that tried to place all aspects of private life under state control. By the 1990s, however, the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was embracing globalization and allowing and even encouraging privatization. The increasing prominence of individualistic values and lifestyle diversity in this most recent era of Chinese history demand scholarly approaches that go beyond a focus on collective experience. The three books reviewed in this essay represent a refreshing new movement in the study of Chinese society that sheds light on the blind spots of overly collectivist and top-down interpretations by focusing on the subjectivities of individuals negotiating between powerful forces of globalization and the state.

Yunxiang Yan articulates the need for an “individual-centered” ethnography of Chinese life when he introduces Private Life under Socialism as his answer to a question frequently posed by his students in the United States: “Why is the

0010-4175/06/946–953 $9.50 © 2006 Society for Comparative Study of Society and History
Chinese family so economic, and are people always so rational?” (p. xi) Yan answers that Chinese people are not really as bound by social, economic, and political rules as they appear in most scholarly portrayals of Chinese society. Drawing on a brilliant synthesis of survey data, local statistical records, and longitudinal participant observation, Yan shows that private, idiosyncratic, individualistic, sentimentally motivated behaviors were present in Chinese society even in the 1970s, and also that such behaviors are on the rise as modernization and globalization erode the power of the family and the state.

Yan first entered the northeastern Chinese village of Xiajia in 1971 as a destitute seventeen-year-old migrant, and stayed there as a farmer for seven years. As an anthropologist, he returned to visit the village seven times between 1989 and 1999. By the late 1990s, he found that modernization and globalization were dismantling values and practices that the scholarship on China considered defining characteristics of rural Chinese life, such as arranged marriages, pre-marital chastity, filial piety, elders’ control of property, desire for high fertility, and the subjugation of women and youth. His longitudinal perspective enables him to trace the decline of these values and practices through a beautifully written ethnography of villagers’ private lives.

In the 1970s, villagers spent almost all their time attending meetings and working together on collective farmland and infrastructure construction projects, while the collective government provided grain, cooking fuel, emergency financial aid, free schooling, old age support for childless elderly people, basic medical care, a performance troupe/propaganda team, public security, and loudspeakers (with no on/off switches) that broadcast news, propaganda, and entertainment to every home. By the time Yan returned to the village in the 1990s, however, all this had disappeared; the collective headquarters and 400-seat village auditorium had been demolished, and not a single mass meeting had been held since 1987. Villagers had enlarged their houses to create more private space for individuals and couples, and spent most of their time working on their own land and absorbing cultural flows of globalization and modernization from the mass media and the urban areas where many worked as seasonal migrant laborers. The moral community of the village became increasingly irrelevant and ineffectual against those who flouted traditions in pursuit of their individual interests.

But Yan’s argument is not that privatization created private desires, but rather that it enabled individuals to pursue private desires that had existed even when the public life of the village was flourishing. Through a series of sometimes tragic, sometimes humorous and surprising stories, he shows that Xiajia village had long been a tapestry of idiosyncratic lives that sometimes defied social norms. He tells of how a villager fell in love with his wife in 1979 when she offered him half of a muskmelon she found in the cornfield. Then there is the story of how, in 1961–1962, the village’s Communist Party
Secretary arranged a marriage for his daughter Wang Shuqin, who was in love with another man. Wang Shuqin kept scissors under her pillow and threatened to kill herself whenever her new husband tried to have sex with her. Against her father’s wishes, she got a divorce and married the man she loved, with the help of the Women’s Association, the commune-level Communist Party Secretary, and the local court. As a result, her father refused to see her for the next two decades. Wang Shuqin’s marriage to the man she loved was lasting but not happy, as he frequently beat her.

Women were not the only victims in family conflicts. Yan tells the story of the woman who reproached her widowed father-in-law for having beaten and overworked his wife, saying, “Don’t you ever think you can play the tyrant at home anymore. Let me tell you, I am a capable person with a middle-school education; I was sent to this family by the ghost of my mother-in-law to fight you” (111). As a result of constant conflict with his co-resident daughter-in-law and his son, who often sided with her, this father-in-law killed himself in 1990.

Interweaving careful analyses of demographic statistics with vivid portraits of the everyday lives of villagers, Yan highlights the dramatic changes that occurred between 1949 and 1999. By the 1990s there were no arranged marriages, and brides and grooms rather than their parents dominated decisions about spouse selection and postmarital residence. Romantic love had become an important part of courtship and marriage. Premarital sex became increasingly common, especially between those already engaged to their sexual partners. Filial piety became less important, and the elderly lost authority as well as power. Young adults usurped their parents’ roles as household heads, and many sons now claimed their inheritance as soon as they married. Bridewealth went to the new couple rather than the bride’s parents. Women became empowered as neolocality increased, conjugal bonds became more important than filial bonds, parents began to rely more on daughters for old age support as sons became more loyal to their wives, and wives assumed most of the responsibility for taking care of homes and farmland while husbands went to work in urban areas. Fertility declined dramatically, both because of local officials’ strict enforcement of fertility control policies and because of declining desire for high fertility. The latter resulted from women’s empowerment, the rising costs of education and marriage, and the increasing acceptability of having no sons. Yan attributes these changes to a variety of factors associated with globalization, modernization, and the state—the influence of the mass media, socialist laws and propaganda against the subjugation of women and youth, land privatization policies that granted land to individuals instead of families, the cultural and economic effects of opportunities to work in urban areas, and the growing isolation of individuals and families from the village community that had once enforced traditional moral norms. By seamlessly connecting large-scale historical changes with the intimate details of everyday life, Yan shows how the transformation of rural China resulted from complex,
sometimes painful negotiations between powerful social, economic, and political forces, and diverse individuals pursuing their private dreams.

The flip side of Yan’s village-based study is Li Zhang’s *Strangers in the City*, which explores migrants’ lives after they leave the countryside. This groundbreaking study demonstrates that a focus on individual subjectivity is essential for understanding populations that are marginalized by public discourses. Rural-to-urban migration was rare under Maoist policies that made it almost impossible for migrants to get work, housing, or food in urban areas, but it exploded after economic reforms began in 1978. Though migrants are relegated to the margins of urban public life, they have flourished in the rapidly expanding private sphere. They are building private businesses through personal relationships and hastening the privatization of housing and political power. Just as they usually fell between the cracks of state policy, Chinese migrants have usually fallen through the cracks between urban and rural studies in the social sciences. Migration has been an increasingly important topic in macro-level studies of demography and political economy, but such studies tell us little about migrant subjectivities. Zhang’s innovative approach sheds light on the agency, desires, and experiences of this understudied group.

Between 1994 and 1999, Zhang interviewed about 110 migrants, made daily visits to their markets and their housing compounds in an enclave (Zhejiangcun) on the outskirts of Beijing, grieved with them as their housing was demolished during a government crackdown, and followed them as they subsequently fled to a city in Hebei and to another Beijing suburb. Zhang’s ethnography is filled with vibrant, often deeply moving migrant voices that counteract many of the stereotypes perpetuated by urban residents. For instance, a wealthy twenty-four-year-old female migrant scoffed at how urban residents looked down on migrants: “Look at those arrogant Beijing xiaojie [ladies]—they work in state-owned units but make little money. . . . How can they be so proud? Just for the piece of hukou [residence permit] paper? . . . Don’t they realize that today’s society belongs to those of us who have money?” (p. 44) In contrast to discourses that denigrated rural migrants as backward carriers of rural tradition, many of Zhang’s interviewees portrayed themselves as bold entrepreneurs whose embrace of capitalism made them more modern than the urbanites who looked down on them. They legitimized this self-image by pointing to the historical prominence of their home area (the Wenzhou region in Zhejiang Province) as a hotbed of commercialism and commodity production, which began there as early as the Tang dynasty (around A.D. 674). Regional origins defined migrants’ occupations and their social networks: in Beijing, migrants from Xinjiang ran restaurants that served regional specialties, those from Henan sold vegetables and recycled trash, migrants from Hebei worked in construction, women from Anhui worked as maids; and migrants from Shandong peddled from tricycles. Zhang focuses on a group of migrants from Wenzhou who specialized in garment businesses.
In the 1980s, when the Chinese government began lifting restrictions on private enterprise and residential mobility, Wenzhou villagers began migrating to cities throughout China, often moving from city to city in search of better opportunities. People, loans, and gifts flowed back and forth between migrant communities and their hometowns. Migrants who established successful urban businesses often brought relatives and friends from home to work for them, both to fulfill kinship obligations and to have trustworthy workers. Successful workers eventually started their own businesses. Men dominated Wenzhou migrant businesses, doing the more prestigious work of procuring supplies and securing business deals while their wives did or supervised most of the clothing production at home. Wives who went out into the business world risked being accused of unchaste behavior. Husbands, on the other hand, often had affairs and visited prostitutes as they participated in the sexual culture of the business world. Conflicts between husbands and wives were frequent. Even more exploited were young, female, non-Wenzhou migrants who lived and worked in their employers’ households, and could not sleep, eat, or go outside without their permission. Their wages were so low that they could not afford food, transportation, or entertainment in Beijing, and they had no legal protection against employers who abused, overworked, or underpaid them. Many of these women started out hoping to get rich quick and return to their villages, but ended up prolonging their stay as they became attached to urban lifestyles or migrant boyfriends and reluctant to return to their villages for marriage and most likely a permanent rural life.

Urban residents blamed rising crime rates on rural migrants, and imagined migrant enclaves as cesspools of organized crime. Theft, robbery, extortion, and the dealing and abuse of illegal drugs were indeed common in migrant enclaves. Yet Zhang found that the Wenzhou migrants she knew were more likely to be victims than perpetrators of crime due to their wealth and lack of police protection. Indeed, these migrants blamed the rising crime rate on the corruption and neglect of police, who seldom protected migrants and were easily bribed by criminals, whether they were Beijing natives, Wenzhou migrants, or from other areas. Fear of crime led them to concentrate themselves in an enclave.

The earliest migrants rented rooms from residents of suburban areas around Beijing. In the early 1990s, however, some wealthy migrant “bosses” started constructing migrant housing compounds. These were highly desirable because they had security guards and because most residents shared close-knit, hometown-based social networks. Wealthier migrant bosses bought and managed marketplaces where migrants could sell their goods. Housing compounds were constantly at risk of being torn down because of laws that denied migrants the right to own or build on land, but migrant housing bosses used gifts, bribes, and banquets to turn local officials and police into patrons who helped them get around such laws. Migrant market bosses used
similar methods to negotiate for control of their marketplaces. Such arrangements could be understood as a form of migrant resistance against state efforts to control them, but also as accommodations to the clientelism pervasive within the state.

While migrants succeeded in cultivating patrons among local officials, these patrons could not protect them from higher officials during crackdowns. During Zhang’s fieldwork, in the winter of 1995, a crackdown occurred with the blessing of China’s top leaders. After a corruption scandal that led to the dismissal and prosecution of Beijing mayor Chen Xitong and many members of his government, Beijing’s new government decided to demolish Zhejiangcun. Their goals were to prevent the rise of an independent base of migrants’ spatial, political, and economic power, to eliminate the criminality that urbanites blamed on migrants, and to publicly demonstrate a clean break from the corruption of Chen Xitong’s government (rumored to have taken bribes from Zhejiangcun). Despite intense lobbying and pleas from Zhejiangcun migrants, landlords, local officials, and even Zhejiang and Wenzhou government representatives, Beijing’s government ordered local landlords and migrant bosses to tear down the housing they had built without permits, and then sent work teams with bulldozers and armed police to demolish whatever landlords, bosses, and tenants had left standing. Some migrants found new housing in scattered Beijing locations, while others fled to more remote areas. Zhang followed one large group that fled to another Beijing suburb, and another that moved to the small city of Sanhe in nearby Hebei. Though they were warmly welcomed by the officials of these areas, who hoped they would stimulate local economies, the migrants were stymied by these areas’ distance from Beijing business centers and their lack of well-developed bases of consumers and businesses. By April 1996 most of the migrants had returned to Zhejiangcun, where they rebuilt clientelist relationships with local officials, and even gained further legitimacy by expanding such relationships while placing themselves under greater state surveillance.

*Strangers in the City* is highly original in the way it blends an attention to individual subjectivities with a clear analysis of the big picture of the workings of the state. Zhang traces the threads of power from the homes of migrant families to tense meetings between migrant bosses and officials. She presents theoretically sophisticated arguments about how power works in the political economy of late socialism, grounded in a riveting account of the uneasy relationship between an ambitious enclave of migrants and anxious state officials.

*Popular China* goes even further than *Private Life under Socialism* and *Strangers in the City* in highlighting the triumph of the neoliberal individual over socialist collectivism. Most of the volume’s authors refer to the 1990s as a “postsocialist” rather than a “socialist” or “late socialist” period. As Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz argue in their introduction, “The tension
between state and society, although it does not completely disappear, loses its centrality. The new central tension is between different aspects of globalization” (3). Taken together, the chapters capture a snapshot of the rich diversity of 1990s PRC subjectivities. The editors’ skills are reflected in the remarkable coherence and uniformly lively, engaging style of the individual chapters.

Some of the contributors emphasize how an increasingly neoliberal, globalized political economy opened up possibilities for individual freedom, the pleasures of wealth, achievement, and consumerism, and the excitement of participation in a competitive global culture. Andrew Morris (ch. 1) shows how Chinese fans of Chinese and foreign (especially American) basketball teams celebrated a postsocialist emphasis on consumerism, individual achievement, and competitiveness on a global stage, as exemplified by the Handsun Footware motto “I believe you can fly”—which Morris compares to “the state’s unofficial new mantra, ‘I believe you can find a job and health care’” (p. 10). Amy Hanser (ch. 8) finds that the urban youth she interviewed developed mobile, autonomous, and competitive identities as they looked for jobs in the market economy. The celebration of wealth, upward mobility, and career success is also evident in the tabloids examined by Yuezhi Zhao (ch. 6), and in the women’s lifestyle magazines explored by Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen (ch. 7).

Yet inequalities were pervasive in this brave new world. Deborah Davis (ch. 10) draws on interviews, statistical data, and real estate advertisements to argue that the privatization and increasing commercial value of real estate has strengthened male control over family property and reversed the earlier feminization of domestic space in Chinese cities. In his analysis of interviews with urban residents in China and recent Chinese immigrants in the United States, Richard Levy (ch. 2) finds a contradictory mixture of deep anger about corruption and a sense that corruption is an inevitable part of a system that has often benefited interviewees personally. Perry Link and Kate Zhou (ch. 4) find powerful expressions of publicly suppressed cynicism in hilariously subversive rhymes that critique corruption and inequality and circulate by word of mouth.

The tension is not just between globalization and socialism, but also between these forces and traditions rooted in pre-revolutionary Chinese history. Robert Geyer (ch. 11) examines interviews in two books (Li Yinhe 1998; Zhou Huashan 1996) about Chinese gays and lesbians who drew on global discourses as well as private experiences to construct sexual identities. These were always in tension with powerful Chinese cultural expectations that subjected them to stigma, loneliness, the need to keep their sexual preferences secret, and overwhelming social pressure to marry and have children. Leila Fernández-Stembridge and Richard P. Madsen (ch. 9) draw on Chinese scholarship and popular writings about beggars to highlight the tension between dominant perceptions of beggars as social and moral failures and beggars’ own attempts to identify with a historical tradition of professional begging. In
their analysis of their own interviews with rural women as well as articles published in *Rural Women Knowing All*, a magazine run by urban Chinese feminists, Paul G. Pickowicz and Liping Wang (ch. 3) argue that rural women are often trapped by poverty, patriarchal traditions, and their own sense of familial duty in unhappy marriages arranged against their will, and situations of domestic and sexual violence.

Though Pickowicz and Wang perceive the increasing outmigration of rural men and the feminization of agriculture as contributing to rural women’s suffering, other authors in the volume show that the lives of both male and female urban migrants can also be unpleasant. Anita Chan (ch. 8) exposes the brutal, exploitative conditions faced by migrant workers in her analysis of private letters sent to women migrant workers at an illegally locked-down factory where a fire killed eighty-seven workers and injured forty-six. The letters were later found in a trash pile by a Chinese researcher who passed them on to Chan. Most were from the workers’ friends and relatives who were living in similar conditions in other factories, or were waiting for them in their home villages. In these letters Chan finds horrific stories of workers’ loneliness, twelve-hour workdays, occupational diseases, illegally low and sporadic wages, and overwhelming pressures to send money to family members.

Li Zhang (ch. 12) also tells harrowing stories of the hardships suffered by poor and vulnerable migrant laborers, along with more ambivalent stories of the relatively wealthy migrant businesspeople that Zhang focused on in *Strangers in the City*. Though the migrant laborers Chan and Zhang describe go to cities in pursuit of the same freedom, consumerism, and access to global cultural flows celebrated by more privileged members of their society, they often find themselves trapped in the dark underside of the globalizing political economy.

Together, these three books vividly portray diverse Chinese individuals flying, struggling, and sometimes drowning in an increasingly globalized, neoliberal political economy. By examining private life as well as public discourses, they illuminate experiences that have long been marginalized both in Chinese public life and in the scholarship on China. Even as they highlight individual subjectivities, they also argue that these subjectivities are shaped and constrained by complex relationships with the state and the political economy of globalization.

**REFERENCES**
