

What I would suggest is that the knowledge produced by these technologies is a knowledge that is quite differently constructed. Subjects are not constituted as objects of knowledge in a science of the individual so much as they are classified into a system of signs that locates them as factors in a historical drama, a master narrative about the consciously directed progression toward socialism. The location of actors in this narrative becomes a mode of inquiry into a discourse that represents itself as more truly “scientific” than any claim to knowledge of the bourgeois social sciences—in the discourse of historical materialism, as it is spoken by the post-Maoist state, history itself becomes the fetishized object—a teleological project that authorizes the repression of human freedom and masks the entrenchment of a system of state power.

What we are observing here is perhaps not altogether a disciplinary technology in Foucault’s sense but something that resembles more what he called a “semioteknik” that to work must make its subjects visible to the panoptic gaze of an invisible and anonymous power as well as create a visibility that is produced at large via the circulation of signs throughout the social body.⁴⁴ Signs play on the surface of subjects, reordering their outward practice rather than their inner psyches. It is not that these techniques fail to affect one’s sense of self, but they do so more in terms of a submersion of the self into a moral category, a state of selflessness that merges into the collectivity, rather than through an elaboration of the self in all its particularity. The goal is not so much the orthopedic refashioning of the individual so that deviance is made to conform to a norm presumed to be already present in the social body as a whole but the radical re-formation of that very social body, in which old practices are displaced by new, in the utopic projection of a new social reality.

Finally, although the spatial metaphor of the panopticon may still apply as an adequate figure of the operation of power in the Chinese socialist state, it must be amended to suggest that its working is contingent on the hypervisibility of the apparatus of power and its operations on the social body. The tower at the center is not entirely a darkened space inhabited by an invisible gaze but an illumined stage from which the party calls, “Look at me! I make myself visible to you. Your return gaze completes me and realizes my power.” To repeat the opening line of our story, “Everyone is talking with great approval of how Zhou Yixiang won his plaque.”

5 NEO-MALTHUSIAN FANTASY AND NATIONAL TRANSCENDENCE



In March 1991 I arrived in China with my husband and two young children. From the moment we stepped off the plane in Shanghai, we sensed a reaction to the plurality of our children that was almost palpable. As we walked the crowded streets, the vendors, mostly elderly women, would tap out a tattoo with their wooden clappers to the accompaniment, “You liangge yo-o-o” (There are two of them). One asked why we had been allowed to have more than one child. My husband replied that it was because we were foreigners. This answer seemed to satisfy by putting us into a special category, not unlike China’s national minorities, who are generally known to be subject to different policy restrictions regarding birth limitation. Although I was well aware that reproduction was a matter of intense public scrutiny in China, I was nonetheless unprepared for the extension of this scrutiny to my family, despite our being so obviously marked as outsiders. We never experienced this attentiveness as hostile; rather, it registered as astonishment, not unmixed with approval. But this focused attention from strangers made our having two children into an anomaly that had to be explained again and again. The surprise that our condition aroused began to make me wonder whether the idea had become established in China that people from “advanced industrial nations” voluntarily did not have more than one child. I began to ask myself, To what extent had the meaning of the one-child family policy expanded from a mere remedy for underdevelopment to become a sign of the modern itself?

In this chapter I focus on the discursive construction of China as a nation that is “excessively populous” (*renkou guoduo*). In suggesting that this notion is one that is actively constructed, I am not trying to argue whether China is indeed “overpopulated” but rather that we should look more closely at what the issue of population is made to mean in post-Mao political discourse. This issue yields a certain “surplus value” that has made population a very productive

discourse throughout the reform era, dramatically reshaping people's sense of national purpose. Therefore, I direct my discussion toward the ways in which the phenomenon of overpopulation is experienced in everyday life. In this context we see at play complex images of the body as a consuming or producing body that articulate the pedagogical imperatives and disciplinary practices of the Chinese socialist state. Given the tremendous power of population discourse to shape people's concerns about the national destiny, we must also consider how it figures in oppositional discourse, as well as in popular expressions of hope or despair.

The issue of population penetrates so deeply into the national psyche—it circulates so widely among different social interests—that it begs the question of what gives it such hegemonic power. No policy is more resisted at the level of popular practices than the one-child policy, and yet no other policy has greater power to reinvigorate the imperative for strong, centralized control. At the height of the student movement in 1989, when students and intellectuals all over China were demonstrating in support of expanded political rights, the issue of reproductive rights was never once mentioned. Indeed, population was raised by the demonstrators as one of the crucially important problems faced by China today, one that must be handled at the level of national government. How can we understand the popular acceptance of such a painfully austere policy that has so much power to restore the statist ambitions of party leadership?

Raising the Quality of the People

Following an animated discussion of Chinese cuisine, our host turned to one of the Chinese guests and said, "China should, by rights, be a great and prosperous nation." The implication was that China had somehow fallen far short of this expectation. This produced a lull in the conversation, as we all contemplated the implications of such a failure.¹

The railway compartment contained two women. One was middle-aged, dressed in a white polyester pantsuit. Her sunglasses made it difficult to read her face. She seemed almost asleep at times; at others, she stared out of the window with a sour expression that seemed to register extreme distaste bordering on despair. This was her first trip to the mainland after her flight to Taiwan as a young girl. The other woman was in her twenties, returning home from Shanghai after escorting a friend on her way to study in Japan. The older woman explained she was visiting relatives left behind

so many years before. "My uncle told me Shanghai was a beautiful city." Her tone clearly registered disbelief. Indeed, the *bund* and other famous sites of the prerevolutionary colonial city looked shabby and worn. Eventually, the filth of the train and the surly unwillingness of the train personnel brought forth the agonized question, "What is wrong with the Chinese people, why can't we do anything right?" The younger woman calmly replied, "The quality of the people is too low, and the reason that the quality of the people is too low is because there are too many people."²

The fieldwork excerpts above illustrate the degree to which a sense of despair about the national destiny pervaded China's urbanized citizenry in the early 1990s and how closely this sentiment was tied to the issue of population. In particular, the second passage is exemplary in that the woman from Taiwan, as an outsider, was casually instructed by a young woman with words that might have come right out of party circulars addressing the issue of population quality for the benefit of basic-level functionaries. What is striking about these examples is the degree to which they suggest the everyday contexts in which these concerns circulate in social discourse. What has made the problem of population so ubiquitous to social life?³

With the announcement of the one-child family policy in 1978, population has insistently been raised not just as a problem but as a principal causal factor in China's failure to achieve its national destiny. However, the 1980s witnessed a subtle but profound shift in China's discourse on population from an emphasis on quantity to quality. The significance of this shift has spread far beyond the domain of reproduction as an object of state control and scientific study into the very heart of the Chinese national imaginary. Population quality has become central to an emerging Chinese cultural critique that, as the Chinese economy has opened out to the world, has turned in on itself, reassigning the onus of underdevelopment from Western imperialism to factors endogenous to Chinese society. The impact of this notion is marked by its apparent ease in traversing the boundaries between party rhetoric and everyday speech, between establishment intellectuals and dissident critics. In its wide circulation throughout Chinese society, the issue of population quality orchestrates popular sentiment with the aims of a Communist Party intent on reconstituting its hegemony in the post-Mao era. And yet this issue also provides the means to launch a powerful oppositional politics as a sign of the failure of socialism in China. To understand fully its complex dimensions in Chinese political discourse, we must track its circulation among its many discursive locations. Moreover, we must also track the issue historically, noting its resonance with

Chinese constructions of modernity early in this century as well as its connections to the global reorganization of capital in the late twentieth century.

The notion of population quality covers a wide range of discourses and practices: birth control, childrearing, sanitation, education, technology, law, eugenics, and so forth. It is difficult to convey how pervasive the project of raising population quality has become in party rhetoric in the last half-decade.⁴ The party focuses on the presumed low physical and educational quality of the population, its ignorance, its excessive size, its lack of discipline, and the genetic impoverishment of minority or isolated populations. But official rhetoric, even when it is most vague, becomes tremendously elaborated within the language of everyday life. The comments that people make about population quality often express popular concerns about China's ambiguous position as a socialist nation in a world where it must confront the rapid industrialization of the "four little dragons" (Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore) and Japan, as well as the collapse of socialism in the Eastern bloc. At times, this language conveys a widespread despair over China's ability to attain a modernity that continually eludes it. At the same time, by invoking concerns about stability and social control—the fear of *luan* (chaos)—the problem of population produces willed consent for a strong, centralized state. Implicit in this fear is the fear over China's inability to transform its massive population into a disciplined citizenry that can be harnessed for a unified national purpose. Hence, we have an important linkage here between the issues of quantity and quality and their prioritization in the national agenda.

These fears about social disorder must account, at least in part, for the apparent hegemonic status of the one-child family policy, perhaps the most stringent population policy in world history. In its dramatic demographic distortion of the Chinese population and in the pain it produces for individual families and women, this policy suggests a monumental form of national self-mutilation. And yet, while it is easy to get people to talk about their thwarted wishes concerning reproduction, it is almost impossible to elicit direct criticism of the policy (at least to a foreign researcher). Must we assume that this reluctance to criticize the population policy openly is a measure of how much the power of the state is internalized within the speaking subject? To suggest so would obscure the complex ways in which population provides the means to articulate concerns about the nation that circulate well beyond state discourse.

To understand how pervasive this issue has become, we can begin by tracing its trajectory in the last decade. The notion of quality may have achieved its first post-Mao prominence in Bo Yang's controversial essay "The Ugly Chinaman." This essay by a Taiwanese author, first published in 1985, was quickly intro-

duced to a mainland audience, where it had a profound impact on Chinese intellectuals.⁵ The compelling issues it raised about cultural impediments to the development of civilization and democracy in China set off a period of intense "cultural self-examination" (*wenhua fansi*). Not long afterward, a major report on rural poverty sponsored by the State Council firmly laid the blame of China's backwardness onto a deficiency in the "quality" of the population. This report was used as reference material in the writing of the television series *Heshang*, which pointed toward the massive size of the rural poor as a primary factor in China's economic backwardness.⁶ Yet despite this association with oppositional voices pressing for political reform, the issue of population quality has far from disappeared from state planning in the years since the crackdown. Rather, it seemed to achieve renewed impetus, occupying a privileged position in the eighth five-year plan launched in 1991.⁷

Even more impressive to the ethnographer is the degree to which the notion of population quality suffuses everyday speech to articulate concerns about China's present and future. But it is a multivocal concept, meaning different things in different contexts: in party rhetoric, in eugenics discourse and law, and in discriminating or articulating specific subgroupings or social interests (intellectuals versus workers, Han versus non-Han ethnic minorities, core versus periphery) within the larger mass. This is most apparent when people (including party officials) in the 1990s "joke" that the best development policy for China would be to kill off half its population or when intellectuals suggest that more play should be given to competition and "survival of the fittest" or bemoan the fact that those killed in the crackdown were students and not peasants. The latter examples, especially, draw attention to deep rifts in the imagined community of the nation in which the mass of rural poor is seen by some members of an intellectual elite not just as an expendable surplus but also as a serious obstacle blocking China's drive to attain wealth and power. Clearly, this idea of the low quality of the population plays well among urban people and intellectuals, especially when the referent is the unwashed masses of China's economic periphery. Indeed, the construction of *pianpi* (isolated) areas in the political rhetoric of the last half-decade points to a widespread consciousness of a dramatic reterritorialization of China in which rapid development has become concentrated in the wealthy coastal provinces better integrated into the global market.

But how does this notion play in the places that are labeled as "backward" and "peripheral"? A *getihu* (entrepreneurial householder) from the interior of Fujian Province traveling home from the city of Xiamen in late May 1989 told me that the economic reforms are only "on the surface" and will spread to

villages such as his own only when there is political reform. The inhabitants of the hinterland do not necessarily place the causal factors of their poverty and backwardness within themselves but point instead toward their distance from a government that disvalues and excludes them from the selective and highly circumscribed locations of special economic processing zones.⁸

Yet there can be no question that this premise of improving the population lies at the very heart of the party's efforts to restore its hegemonic position in the post-Mao period. The unwashed masses are the *raison d'être* of the state—they are what constructs a pedagogical project that is anterior to any discussion of political reform. Following Foucault, we see “sexuality” (in its broadest sense as the sexual reproduction of the population as a whole) as the entity that becomes “the theme of political operations, economic interventions (through incitements to or curbs on procreation), and ideological campaigns for raising standards of morality and responsibility: it was put forward as the index of a society's strength, revealing of both its political energy and its biological vigor.”⁹

In the population discourse of the reform period, the massive size of the Chinese population is blamed for dissipating the effect of all modernizing efforts. However, the project is not limited to reducing the growth rate but is extended to “raising the quality of the people” (*tigao renminde suzhi*). This idea suffuses party policy from the imposition of birth quotas to its ideological practice of “building socialist spiritual civilization.” To some extent, the project of population is directed at defining socialism against its capitalist “other.” Reproduction becomes the locus for the imposition of a planning rationality that will demonstrate the superiority of socialism. In this sense, China's population policy exemplifies or even raises to a new level what Foucault defines as the rationality of the modern state: the management of the population, for its own sake, rather than for the enrichment of the monarch, is a rationality of the state that is “proper to itself.”¹⁰ The long-term commitment to the birth policy is to bring production and reproduction “into a proper balance.”¹¹ Society is viewed as a vast machine subject to the fine-tuned regulation of a strong central governing authority. In official speeches in 1991 celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the party's founding, Mao himself was credited with saying in 1957 that lacking a birth policy is a form of “anarchism.”¹² Western practices of voluntary “family planning” are dismissed as characteristic of a capitalist liberal autonomy unsuited to China's stage of development. If China's many millions of peasant households were to make their own reproductive decisions, the population would rebound at an unimaginable rate.

This rationality takes on elaborate form in the pedagogical functions of the state. The project of raising the quality of the people is at base an educational

project, and many of the activities deployed toward this end are educational in character—the issuing of books of general knowledge (health, childrearing, law, technology, and so on), the disseminating of this knowledge through adult education programs, the holding of local and national competitions to test this knowledge, and the bestowal of status honors to households and local party organizations for achievements demonstrated in these areas. Here we see that the issue of population becomes the means to express the persistent problem of how to produce a modern citizenry out of undisciplined masses, a problem that acquires new urgency with the dissolution of collective agriculture and with the new freedoms accorded to the household economy. Implicit in this project is the discourse on the quality of Chinese labor that must be contextualized beyond national borders to acknowledge the evaluative gaze of global capital. Given the opening of China's borders to transnational capital flows, the success of the economic reforms becomes contingent on the selling of Chinese labor on a global market, with its more rigorous norms of discipline and skill.

However, the population policy is also seen as a “play on time” in its stringent application for rapid results. For the national leadership, the last ten years of the twentieth century are seen as a critically important turning point invested with tremendous urgency. Production must be developed to insure the stability of the socialist system. This urgency has only intensified with the collapse of socialism in what was the USSR. Yet the policy does not address primarily fears of a demographic crisis (the threat of famine) but fears of a cultural and political crisis. It is explicitly conceived as a strategy to speed the pace of development so that China might attain its rightful place in the world before the rate of population growth renders such a transition impossible. China's population policy is a test of national will, a race against time and history.

The issue of population quality is not limited to the projects of the state but is tremendously elaborated at the level of everyday practices. Perhaps I was exposed daily to this set of concerns because I had very young children with me during my field research in 1991. My infant son, especially, became the medium through which people would discuss at length the differing qualities of children's bodies East and West. I found myself caught up in a complex mirroring process, one in which China's internalized sense of lack was becoming expressed, sometimes in explicitly concrete ways, through the material body of my infant son. People would squeeze his arm or leg and comment appreciatively about the hardness of his flesh, the pallor of his skin, his size, the depth of his cranium. The appearance of my children in public places would invite the occasional person to deliver impromptu lectures to anyone willing to listen. The conclusion would be that “the quality of body” (*shenti suzhi*) of Western

children was higher. They were larger, more supple, and had a glow of health presumably lacking in Chinese children.¹³ This focused attention to my child's body reflects a deep and abiding concern that relates bodily quality to national strength. Early in this century, a modernizing national elite rejected Confucian ideals of scholarly cultivation that associated physical frailty with cultural refinement. Mao, who had been an avid physical culturist in his youth, also clearly linked physical strength to the revitalization of the nation. This pervasive articulation between bodily vitality and national transcendence continues in present Chinese cultural practice.

This attention was not limited to my son's physical condition but was closely related to his intellectual development. People would comment on his responsiveness to others, his eagerness to explore things, his strong will. These traits were praised as indicators of superior intelligence and creativity, but the subtext here is clearly that they also produce a less controllable child. This ambivalence is heavily inscribed in the word *pi*, used to describe naughtiness in children. When parents complain that their children are *pi*, one detects a secret satisfaction mixed into their irritation. One senses the dilemma of being caught between fears of social disorder and cultural stasis. This shows itself both in the subtle critique of the Chinese tradition of paternal authority as constraining creativity and intellectual freedom and in the concern often expressed that the next generation of single children will be overindulged, self-centered, and difficult to control. Yet on the afternoon of June 4, 1989, as I talked with a male university professor about the bloody crackdown in Beijing, he said, pointing to his daughter: "Her generation will not stand for this. And that, too, will be a kind of progress."

This concern with children's physical and intellectual development translates directly into the accelerated development of a commodity culture beginning in the mid-1980s. The child becomes an intensified site of commodification, as well as providing a site of remodeling the cultural and physical resources of the nation. One's child becomes the focus of a lavish expenditure of newly commodified, highly processed nutritional supplements and gimmicks that promise to increase the intellectual development of the child. The commodity becomes the supplement for what is lacking in the national culture, an expenditure that is made to fill in what is missing. The child's body becomes the repository of expended value, presumably justified by its heightened "quality," which compensates for the loss of more reproduction. The figure of the child, by means of the very practices intended to enhance its development, comes to express not only concerns for the national future but fears about the loss of class position on the part of urban parents who experience an intense anxiety about their ability

to maintain a foothold in the middle class. In the highly volatile atmosphere of reform-era economics, which has witnessed the mercurial rise and fall of fortunes and the possibility of almost undreamed-of wealth, none of the old strategies for status enhancement remain secure. One's single child must therefore be prepared for the greater competition of the marketplace not just in China but on a global stage as well.¹⁴ Indeed, this heightened concern among urban parents for the quality of children's bodies is closely linked to their fears of falling into the mass. The incredible elaboration of "modern childrearing" practices among this class is an urgent project of maintaining a critical distance between themselves and these "others."

This popular concern with physical and intellectual quality has to be understood within the context of a national narrative, structured on the premise of Enlightenment history, in which China's developmental progress has been arrested in the realization of its early promise. Intrinsic to the idea of the nation is an identity that is deeply historical; the "people" must also retain an identity that is primordial in character. And yet it is precisely this primordial character of the people that marks them with the negative characteristics of an unenlightened mass, irrational in its belief in the supernatural and not responsive to the claims of national purpose. Once again, we return to the problem of the fear of the crowd. How can its unruly nature be made over into a disciplined citizenry? To constitute a popular sovereignty fundamental to the notion of the "modern state," the "people" have to be remade into national subjects by means of a national pedagogy that reveals to the people their image as national subjects. The people cannot be invested with political sovereignty until they have been subject to an extensive and prolonged remodeling, a "qualitative" transformation of the population. This construction of the people as unready for the political process has a history. Indeed, some of the eugenics discourse of the post-Mao period eerily echoes that of Chinese eugenics proponents of the 1920s.¹⁵

Early in this century, among Chinese intellectual circles, the discourse of race improvement became closely tied to concerns for national renewal. Eugenic theories, originating in Europe not long before, provided Chinese nationalists with a powerful explanatory framework to understand China's weakness. Some of these early eugenics proponents saw the "degeneracy" of the Chinese people not as an outcome of "natural selection" but as a direct result of the destabilization caused by the intrusion of Western imperialism. Fears of national subjugation and racial extinction became inextricably tied in the national discourse of that time.¹⁶ Eugenics offered the promise of "cultural selection" (*wenhua xuanze*), the scientifically managed propagation of the people to supplement

the natural processes of selection destabilized by foreign imperialism. While eugenics thinking was important among elites, it was never programmatically pursued, although the Guomindang government was sympathetic to many of its aims.

Eugenics was rejected outright by Mao, who saw it as a tool of imperialism. Indeed, the discourse of class elevated the rural masses as a progressive force in history. Mao's pronatalism was consistent with his trust in the masses to provide the motor force for China's development, at least until the devastating famine of 1959–62 signaled the limits to his politics of mass mobilization. The return to the concern with population quality in the post-Mao period mirrors earlier eugenics thinking in suggesting that the low quality of the Chinese people is due once more to the destabilization of natural selection, with the causal factor this time being Maoist economic policies, which placed insufficient controls on reproduction. The issue of population quality now goes much further than the debates among a small elite to become the very ground for constructing political authority in the post-Mao period.

In China the project of modernization suffuses everyday life with its language, its reform of practices, people's consciousness of commodities, their access to them or their lack thereof, and the symbolic value of these things that far exceeds their practical uses. Commodities become the markers of a stage of development, the tangible indicators of a society's wealth and vigor. There is a certain pride of achievement in this. A constantly recurring conversational topic is the recital of the material ways in which one's daily life has been enriched by the ownership of washing machines, color televisions, refrigerators, and so forth. Indeed, the various projections of different birth rates and their consequences for the future are not uncommonly charted in terms of the availability of just these sorts of commodities. This illustrates all too clearly Václav Havel's suggestion that the "really existing socialisms" fall prey to a commodity fetishism more extreme than in any capitalist society because it leads to the surrender of human dignity in exchange for these symbolic markers of modern life.¹⁷

At play here are images of the body as consuming bodies or producing bodies. In the discussion of China's population as an overlarge, ignorant, and backward mass, the Chinese body is seen as primarily a consuming body, its productive capacities made quiescent by the egalitarian policies of the Maoist era. The consuming demands of this body are out of balance with its productivity. The birth policy is intended to coordinate population and economic development, to bring them into an ideal alignment that will speed progress to the attainment of *xiaokang shenghuo* (the state of being "comfortably well off"), as

frequently defined in terms of the purchase of commodities as well as in living conditions more generally—housing, care for old age—and with visions of a lifestyle that is actively purveyed in television programming and advertising.¹⁸

To turn unproductive consuming bodies into producing bodies disciplined to consume appropriately requires a concentration of resources by limiting population growth. This issue is the crux of the issue of quality versus quantity. For there is apparently not a universal consensus among Chinese population experts on the necessity of such a rigorous policy of population limitation. One recent account of China's current population crisis reports that there has been some debate within academic circles over whether the principal contradiction is quantity or quality (the need for education). But the author uses the quality argument to stress the supremacy of the quantity issue. The population exceeds the ability of a modern nation to meet its increased educational needs.¹⁹ Only with increased quality in education can Chinese labor become sufficiently productive for modernization. At work here are the complex forces of the global restructuring of capitalism that has moved apace with China's reform years. The global market for labor mirrors back an image of Chinese labor as cheap but undisciplined. The attainment of civilized status by rural townships signals not only the successful production of new national subjects but also the readiness of a disciplined workforce to be absorbed into the global economy.

The "eugenic" aspects of China's population discourse are therefore primarily focused on improving education and nurture. While the eugenics discourse does entail what Foucault refers to as the power of "disallowing life itself," it purports to do this in a decidedly egalitarian fashion.²⁰ "Eugenics" is used in the Western-language literature as the translation of the Chinese *yousheng youyu*, which means more literally "good birth, good nurturing." In its broadest sense, the meaning of "yousheng youyu" refers precisely to the concentration of resources in childbearing and -rearing that will produce a higher-quality population through improved medical care, nutrition, and education.²¹ The idea is to reproduce less in order to reproduce better. In this sense, the project of *yousheng youyu* is intended to redress the perceived inferiorities within the Chinese people themselves. Even when the project is phrased in terms of "improving the race," it is still aimed at improving the conditions of nurture, rather than reflecting a concern for racial purity. According to Foucault, the "eugenic ordering" of Western society "was accompanied by the oneiric exaltation of a superior blood."²² In China the "stuff" to be eugenically ordered is not blood and the extirpation of all threats to its "purity." What is important is downsizing the population to allow for the disciplined ordering of bodies subject to a central educating authority.²³

Having suggested that Chinese eugenics discourse is focused primarily on the supposed deficiencies within the dominant ethnic group of Han Chinese, it would be mistaken to suggest that it ignores China's ethnic minorities. But its application here must be understood in the complete context of how China's internal "others" are constituted as a total object of knowledge against which the national narrative of progress and modernity is constructed. Ironically, the national minorities have been subject to more relaxed birth policy restrictions than has the Han majority. Many of these groups are quite small in terms of total population size. Yet the current eugenics discourse, when it does focus on statistics of congenital defects both physical and mental, often takes its examples from cases where a large number of these appear in isolated minority populations or in places that are defined as backward and remote, which leads to inbreeding.²⁴

Here it would appear that population size takes on an inverse meaning—the supposed inferiority of the minorities is due to the smaller size of their population providing a smaller marriage pool. One wonders whether we see here a scientific rationale for the construction of national minority populations or those from the "remote" countryside as congenitally backward to a degree that goes beyond mere ignorance or what can be redressed through improved education.²⁵ The obvious danger of this is in the possibility of forcible restriction of reproductive rights among isolated populations deemed to be inferior. This possibility looms larger with the passing of a eugenics law in 1991 that may bring the force of law against transgressors.²⁶

Consuming Labor

There can be no question that the birth policy has been the very center of party activism at the local level throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. This alone suggests a critical repositioning of the locus of party control from production to reproduction. As one township-level official remarked to me in 1991, "We used to manage production; now we just manage babies."²⁷ In the Jiangsu countryside, local party leaders, when talking about "ideological work," brag of achieving 100 percent compliance with both the birth policy and cremation. The land is too littered with bodies both living and dead, dissipating resources that must be concentrated. Results are not only expressed in percentage points of compliance with the birth policy but also in terms of phantom population statistics of the unborn.²⁸

The central government's resolve to continue its stringent birth policy is clearly stated in the eighth five-year plan released in the spring of 1991. The

rhetoric insistently reasserts the importance of birth limitation as equal to that of economic development. But it also acknowledges that at the local level the two have been, in the past, "grasped hold" of with differing degrees of activism—"one hand hard, one hand soft," economic development being given greater priority.²⁹ And yet in southern Jiangsu, where I did field research in 1991, the policy is pursued rigorously in many rural areas. An article on the "Sunan model" also appearing that year claimed that in some areas of this region, demographic changes that took one hundred years to achieve in the West had been accomplished in only ten years.³⁰ The birth policy is frequently stated to be a massive effort unprecedented in history, and China's achievement in birth planning, to be a contribution to the world. Clearly, there are large stakes at play in demonstrating the superiority of the socialist system.

The birth policy is at some level a form of signifying practice that defines a sense of purpose and reconstructs the will of the party from the central government down to the basic-level organizations. Especially during the demoralized years since Tiananmen, the party has been obsessed with the idea of reactivating its "paralytic body," commonly expressed as *fahui zuoyong* (to play a role, to deploy energies) in the renewal of its leadership role. Nowhere is this clearer than in press accounts of model birth policy workers. These accounts follow the conventions of those which represent model party members more generally. One of the most ubiquitous themes is the notion of party work as consuming labor, a labor that expends completely the energies and even the physical bodies of party members. This theme of consuming labor is exemplified by the film *Jiao Yulu*, which was required viewing for all party members in 1991. As mentioned earlier, this film dwelt with particular emphasis on the theme of selfless labor as embodied by this model party secretary who carries on his ceaseless endeavors for the people while attempting to cover up the ravages of stomach cancer that visibly consume him and eventually result in his death.

Birth control work lends itself splendidly to this theme of consuming labor. It is acknowledged as the most difficult task of local government and is referred to as "the number one difficulty" (*diyinan*). It is therefore a perfect medium through which the party can represent to the "masses" its spirit of self-sacrifice and commitment to the national good. But this theme of consuming labor takes on specific images in the case of birth policy workers, who are often women. Not only do they lose their health, youth, and even their personal safety to the demands of this labor, but the cost to them may also include the sacrifice of their children and the welfare of their households. Birth policy work is so demanding that it virtually requires the dereliction of women's roles as mothers and household managers.

In one profile of a model birth policy mother that appeared in the national press, the most detailed aspect of the narrative is the “unnatural” refusal of this woman to fulfill the obligations of her social roles.³¹ Ties of kinship and friendship are given no consideration in her impartial treatment of all out-of-plan births.³² This public rectitude is the implied standard for all party cadres. What seems extraordinary, however, is the degree to which this woman is praised for abandoning her roles within the family. She “risks everything” for the “work of the party” and therefore “fails to fill with credit” her role as mother. Foremost in her failure is her apparent neglect of her three children, who are abandoned during the day like “orphaned swallows.” Her son falls off a bridge and lies unconscious for hours. A neighbor scolds her, “How can you neglect your children?” Weeping, the woman strokes her son’s head and answers, “My duties are so heavy, I can’t divide myself, but can only do an injustice to my children.” She is therefore not an unfeeling mother but one who sacrifices her children to a higher responsibility.

This sacrifice, however, points to a contradiction in the text that goes unexplored. How is it possible for a woman who so resolutely pursues the termination of out-of-plan births to have three children herself? Did she have them before the one-child family became the desired norm? And what does her overabundance of children imply for the legitimacy of her work? Must she sacrifice her children in this way so that she can convince others to give up their reproductive hopes? Does her maternal neglect signify a denial of the value of children implicit in the lost pregnancies of other women?

But her children are not the only ones to suffer; her household economy also languishes from neglect. She absents herself for days, doing intensive work on recalcitrant cases. Her pigs die, and finally she decides not to raise any animals because she can not look after them properly. With the economic reforms, other households, engaging in household sidelines, prosper one by one. But her household remains poor. Her elder brother asks her, “Why do you expend your energies uselessly on this task?” She answers: “I am a party member. I must not think of the cost to myself.”

At the end of the account, this birth worker is described as aging and worn from fifteen years of “cultivating a wasteland full of thistles and thorns.” And what are her rewards? She has gained the love and esteem of the women in her community. To demonstrate this point, some of them are quoted as saying that they often think of having more children. But they don’t dare to come up against “Old Yu.” This statement attests less to the affection between Yu and other women and more to the divisions between women, between those state functionaries whose subjectivities are clearly inscribed within state-inflected goals, whose rewards appear in the form of status honors from the party

hierarchy that certify their contribution to the future of the nation, and those “unenlightened” women who still have their subjectivities more narrowly circumscribed by their duties to kin and family. These women functionaries are the very image of *funu*, which Tani Barlow glosses as “national woman,” whose liberation launched her as a political subject harnessed to the interests of the state.³³

In a second account, picking up many of the same themes, a woman birth worker is physically attacked and beaten into unconsciousness.³⁴ Nevertheless, after the incident she insists that her attackers not be arrested or forced to pay penalties, as long as they truly understand and support birth policy work. The guilty parties are put into a difficult position. Even if popular sentiment initially supported their action as a righteous blow against oppressive government, the birth worker’s refusal to bring down the full fury of the law turns the moral balance against them. They have no choice but to comply, apparently moved to tears by her selfless response. We see here how such birth work becomes a kind of “euphemized violence.” Persuasion through “thought work” and social pressure, the approved methods of obtaining compliance with what is still policy rather than law, becomes supplemented through direct appeal to coercive possibilities. One local cadre reported to me that in recalcitrant cases the local government would stop all electricity and water services to the household, in short, “not allow one to live” (*bu rang ni shenghuo*).³⁵

Moreover, coercive measures are made to look like not only “persuasion” in these representations but even “nurturance.” The social isolation of the birth policy worker, produced by a loyalty that transcends kin and community, is redressed by her role as a caring party member. Her dedication and offers of help in her official capacity induce tears and emotion in her “work targets.” This emotive component is critical in the claiming of moral ground while covering over the exercise of coercive means. Party work induces tears—of gratitude and of shame. Weeping almost always marks the capitulation of the “recalcitrant case.” Intrinsic to the party’s project to restore its relationship to the masses is its self-representation as a closely tied friend and benefactor, a *tiexinren* (a person stuck to one’s heart). Ideal birth policy workers must therefore be willing to lavish care and attention on their targets. In these accounts, women who consent to abortion are shown to be moved to tears by the flood of thoughtful attention during and after the procedure that must stand in marked contrast to the perfunctory character of most health care in China. This cultivation of obligation and sentiment is obviously much more labor intensive than the more brutal expediency of coercive measures, although as suggested above, the two go hand in hand.

This woman’s dedication to her work leads her to an even more thorough

dereliction of her nurturing role within the family. She goes off to deal with a difficult case, leaving her feverish son at home. He dies and is buried under the yellow earth. The same earth that covers her son also covers centuries of the history of the Chinese people. Their need is greater than her own need to assume the role of mother. This theme of historical continuity is important; it underscores the timeless cycle of blind reproduction uncontrolled by a central planning intelligence. Despite the accumulation of centuries of Chinese history, the place is defined as the quintessence of *luohou* (backwardness) for which the only remedy is the disciplinizing intervention of the birth policy. This relationship between *luohou* and overpopulation is not demonstrated; it simply goes without saying.

What, then, is this consuming labor producing? In her work on the bioeconomics of nineteenth-century European discourse, Catherine Gallagher looks at the symbolic circulation of value between images of productive and nonproductive labor. The bodies of working-class men and women were seen to have been diminished by the displacement onto others of the value they created in the extraction of surplus value from their labor.³⁶ In post-Tiananmen China, the bodies of party members engaged in the laborious activity of party work are shown to be expended in the massive effort to modernize a vast agrarian state. Others become wealthy, but the dedicated party member neglects her own welfare and that of her family in the extravagant expenditure of time and energy demanded by the expectations of her role. Whether or not we believe that party members are selfless, dedicated people or ambitious political opportunists or something in between, what cannot be denied is the tremendous amount of energy deployed to project this image of the party and its members as a laboring body producing productive (if not reproductive) bodies and not a parasitic growth on the social body. Despite all the cynicism of a posttotalitarian age, the trope of self-sacrifice remains as a potent sign of the nation-space, a marker that claims for its bearer a heroic role in China's struggle to "come to its own."³⁷

The Indicators of Social Disorder

In the discussion above, China's vast population is currently constructed unproblematically as "illth" and not "wealth."³⁸ The word "illth" is the word John Ruskin used to critique Malthus's suggestion that a growing and healthy population ultimately leads to catastrophic ends, famine and plague, as the outer limits imposed on population growth. Nineteenth-century bioeconomics reversed the wisdom of an earlier political economy that saw populousness as a sign of a nation's health and vitality. The definition of population as "illth" is

also linked to twentieth-century discourses which emanate from Euramerican places and which point to the underdevelopment of "third world" countries as rooted primarily in their population problem, rather than in unequal exchanges of wealth and power, capital and labor, on a global scale.³⁹ Hence the attribution of overpopulation in the late twentieth century carries with it tremendous disciplinary power in the significant sanctions that work both materially and symbolically to put the nation in its place in the global community. Yet despite the tremendous disciplinizing power of population discourse on a global and national level that disvalues bodies in their sheer numerosity, popular practices continue to assert the value of bodies in their singularity. What should not be ignored is the tremendous pain caused by lost or terminated pregnancies because of the stringent application of the one-child family policy imposed on China's population. The party-state openly represents the modes of resistance to this policy as a problem of incomplete pedagogical work. Less explicit is any discussion of the "hunger" for bodies that the policy produces. One exception is the issue of care for the aged. Homes for the elderly are supposed to take up this responsibility, a promise generally regarded as overly ambitious given the burden that the aging population will place on single children in the next generation. Another exception might be the recognition that the demographic imbalance between the sexes attributed to the birth policy will lead to a large population of unmarried men, who will turn to alcoholism, prostitution, and hooliganism because of their exclusion from a "normal" family life.

Less explicit are other ways in which the "hunger" for bodies might link with the discourse of social disorder. The liberalizing atmosphere of the post-Mao period has given rise to a new kind of journalism dedicated to the investigation of the underside of society. One of the recurring themes in this new genre are stories about the traffic of bodies, mostly the sale of women and children. This traffic has become an important sign of the forces of social disorder that have been unleashed by the economic reforms.

The traffic in bodies is made possible by the new mobilities of the reform period. Organized rings of human peddlers abduct, transport, and sell human beings across vast geographical spaces. Most ubiquitous are women from the poorer interior provinces (Sichuan, Anhui) who are transported to the more prosperous coastal areas and sold as brides. Stories of this kind abound in the new legal pictorials that can be bought on almost any urban street. They are consumed by an educated, urban elite, and yet the sensationalism of the reportage verges at times on the pornographic. This is especially true of stories about the traffic in women that linger on the depiction of rape.

The true scandal of these stories is the frightening way in which they repre-

sent the reduction of women and their reproductive power to the status of mere commodities, a scandal that is reflected in the escalation of bride-price exchanges, what the state refers to as “buying and selling marriages” (*maimai hunyin*). The stories of rape or “first night” rights taken by these brokers in human beings highlight the theme of women as commodities that can be possessed (used), exchanged, and even returned for resale if they fail to satisfy the buyer. The theme of woman as commodity is exemplified by the photographic display of women being bought and sold in the marketplace that accompanied the sale of a highly celebrated book of reportage devoted to this social issue.⁴⁰ The “market” that moves women’s bodies across the length and breadth of China in a series of complex, hidden exchanges becomes quite literally concretized in the depiction of these women as caged in an unnamed location, presumably a marketplace in fact, scantily clad with price placards hanging from their necks. That these photos are “staged” is almost indisputable. The photographs themselves bear the record of when the images were shot, dated only a few weeks prior to publication; the “models” are clearly the same in each shot, but with their clothing exchanged.⁴¹

When urban people talk about the phenomenon of the abduction and sale of women, it is as if they were speaking about a foreign country. Perhaps this explains the heightened shock delivered by a famous piece of reportage about a Shanghai graduate student who was abducted while en route to Beijing to do research and sold to a peasant household in Shandong. The scandal of this story is the movement of embodied value out of its “proper” circuit of exchange. The educated, refined bodies of urban elite women are found to be infinitely substitutable with poor peasant women from Sichuan and Anhui in the commodification of women’s bodies, presenting a confusion of bodily values that violates the sanctity of an imaginary divide. The urban identity of the victim intensifies the vicarious horror of the reader, a horror that derives from the distance the narrative is compelled to construct between city and country.⁴²

And yet, with the suburbanization of the peasantry in the wealthy coastal regions, the divide is constructed more along the axis between coastal areas and places of the interior—the very divide that these women traverse as commodities. This imaginary distance, therefore, is constantly crossed by the exchange of women that tends to flow toward economically more prosperous regions. Forced abduction by human peddlers (*renfanzi*) is only the extreme end of a continuum. The flow of women from poorer villages seeking to marry into wealthier areas includes many who go voluntarily; some may fall into the hands of unscrupulous “marriage brokers” who then sell them to the highest bidder, depriving them of any choice in selecting a mate. How widespread this

new social ill has become in the last ten years is difficult to fathom, but the social commentary on it has virtually exploded. One indication of how common this traffic is perceived to be is indicated by the short fictional piece “Baoying” (Retribution) about a man who abducts and sells a young girl, only to return home to find his daughter has been stolen by another trafficker.⁴³ These stories about the commodification of women raise an important corrective to those apologists for China’s reproductive policies who suggest that an indirect benefit lies in an enhanced status for women as desirable commodities in short supply in a highly competitive “marriage market.”

This flagrant display of the forces of social disorder in the semiofficial press not only titillates; it has a much more serious role in constructing hegemony for the party. In making disorder so shockingly visible, these stories reinforce fears of the return of “chaos” and enflame the public concern for social control (not to mention the way they construct the low quality of the population). However, another, more subversive reading of this literature makes visible the suppressed popular concern for what can only be understood as a dearth of bodies. The abduction and sale of women and children point toward an unfulfilled hunger for bodies that are seen not as consuming but producing bodies, essential to the reproduction of the household unit newly empowered by the economic reforms.

But this traffic in bodies is not limited to this illicit trade by human peddlers. It also appears in the sanctions used to discourage out-of-plan births. In many areas, fines are used to penalize excess births, although the amount may vary in relation to the known wealth of the household. Wealthy, independent, entrepreneurial households may pay fines in the tens of thousands of yuan. In some cases, the fines appear not to act as a deterrent but as a de facto tax on out-of-plan births. The unabashed readiness of more prosperous households to pay the price leads one to suspect that having extra children may be a new form of conspicuous consumption in the countryside. This suggests new dimensions of resistance to the allocative power of the state in which its penalties become the basis for status enhancement.⁴⁴ Moreover, the fines are not always applied equally but often only in those cases in which the offending household is known to have financial assets, operating, in effect, as an indirect tax on wealth.

The modes of resistance to the policy are too numerous to catalogue; a fascinating project might be to attempt to categorize them according to the *Sanshiliu ji* (Thirty-six stratagems), the classic Chinese text of cunning intelligence, of wile and warcraft. The first stratagem, “cross the sea under cover” (*mantian guohai*), more freely translated as “hiding in plain sight,” is amply illustrated by a woman of my acquaintance from an entrepreneurial peasant

family who hid in a friend's apartment in the walled compound of the Provincial Party Headquarters throughout her pregnancy so that she wouldn't be forced into an abortion she did not want. Once this woman gave birth she was fined fifteen thousand yuan (roughly three thousand U.S. dollars). She subsequently named the boy "Wanwu" (literally, fifteen thousand) but was persuaded by her university-educated brother to change the baby's name to the more literary "Tao," which has a homophonic association with "to run away." Indeed, the last of the thirty-six stratagems is, "When all else fails, run away" (*zou wei shang ji*).

This leads to another theme in the reportage of social disorder: the appearance of a growing "floating population" (*liudong renkou*) that has been loosened from its bureaucratic moorings in the household registration system. Some of these itinerant people consciously use their newfound mobility to gain reproductive freedom.⁴⁵ Many take up trades that connect them with the marketplace and the petty commodity economy grown increasingly vibrant in the period of the reform. Although this gypsylike population is able to slip through the bureaucratic structures of control, it has increasingly become targeted by the state as requiring stiffer regulation, particularly with regard to the birth policy. However, the floating population as a discursive category includes more than just itinerant entrepreneurs: it also refers to the flow of peasant laborers who traverse the distance from the impoverished periphery to the more prosperous coastal provinces. The presence of large numbers of homeless laborers, living on the streets or housed on the ground floor of the high-rise construction sites they are hired to build, generates a good deal of discussion about social disorder and the comparative value of bodies. Although their cheap labor fuels the explosive expansion of the reform economy, their very presence raises the specter of social disorder and political instability. They are the uncivilized crowd that has not yet been made into a modern citizenry, the unsightly but indispensable presence in the heart of China's civility.

This affiliation of the floating population with the marketplace as commodified labor allows yet a further subversive reading of the state's own discourse on the value of bodies. The official disvaluation of too many bodies as excess, as dissipating and debilitating the wealth and vitality of the nation, is confronted with the revaluation of the body in the marketplace where its productive and reproductive powers become commodities to be bought and sold. The marketplace provides an autonomous zone in which bodily value can be reconstituted in opposition to the regulated values of the state not just as commodity but as household labor power in a growing entrepreneurial economy. I do not mean to valorize the market uncritically as a zone of freedom

when here it so clearly represents unfreedom for women. My intention is merely to locate a social space for the active revaluation of bodies that counters its disvaluation in the population policies of the state.

Central to my argument is the suggestion that "population" is not a self-evident problematic of political economy but is first and foremost a discursive category that must be understood in its broader context of signification. Population discourse in post-Mao China, as it has elsewhere, expresses concerns about the circulation of value and the potential of the nation to transcend its position of weakness and poverty to become a major actor in the international community of nations. Moreover, any attempt to identify the concern with "population quality" as belonging exclusively to the state would misunderstand its broad articulation with a wide array of interests and concerns in post-Mao China, all of which produce different meanings and different political registrations for what appears discursively as the same language. Mapping the complex ways in which notions about population circulate throughout Chinese society helps us to account for the hegemonic power of China's population policy, as well as to locate the agency of ordinary people in defining what population means in the context of their immediate concerns and future hopes. The notion of population quality can be seen as perhaps the most pervasive currency of exchange in "the politics of perception and experience" throughout the period of China's economic reform.⁴⁶