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**CONTESTED SPACE, CONFLICTING DESIRES:
“BECOMING” “GIRLS” IN URBANIZING RURAL CHINA**

A Dissertation in

Curriculum & Instruction and Women’s Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the poststructuralist perspective of subjectivity and discourse, this ethnographic project traces the construction of “girlhood” within various contested discourses in a changing Chinese rural locality. In tracing the clashing lines where normative discourses of femininities bump against a historically constructed “rural” discourse and globalized neoliberal discourse, I position rural Chinese girls as embodied subjects moving through social, political, economic and cultural relations of a locality that carries with it elements of the pre-modern, modern and postmodern.

I focus particularly on how rural urbanization, the emergence of privatized rural vocational schooling, and changing notions of romance, marriage and sexuality offered complicated new ways of “becoming” “girls.” Against the backdrop of this larger social landscape, I further examine how girls are subjected to and coping with the complex demands of an urbanizing rural China that is ever-more closely connected to the global order of neo-liberalism yet deeply entrenched in an authoritative socialist order. I contend that this contradictory project of “becoming” “girls” as narrated through the girls and other members of the community, reveals that both “rural” and “gender” are not static identities, but rather social relations that function as truth effect of certain regulative discourses.

Besides the conceptual endeavor of tracing the construction of “girlhood” in the shifting order of rural modernity, this dissertation also explores some critical epistemological issues of feminist ethnography in writing the “Third World” “other.”

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Staging an opening tale of the exotic other: The mad woman and the bad girl

“The time was in early 1920s in a rural village in southern China, Anhui Province. A young woman was heading home after a visit to her newly-wed step-daughter in a nearby village. Her step-daughter was one year older than her. Two years ago, she married her second husband who was twenty years senior and last year, she gave birth to her first son at the age of nineteen in the family’s wood storage room.

“It was already dark when she began to walk home along the river bank. The moon was high above the sky, casting her wavering shadow into the river. Minutes earlier, she failed to get on the last ferry over to the other end of the river, now she had to walk home through a long route in the dark woods. This was her first time walking alone in darkness. As she passed through a deep mountainside pool, she recalled the story of the drowned ghost and suddenly saw a shadow following behind. Scared, she burst out to tears. As she yelled for help, the birds in the deep woods made a splash of noise, cutting through the quietness of the night. The young woman screamed and fell on the narrow dirt road in the wildness.

“When she finally arrived home in tears screaming, her husband was furious and yelled, “No one died, what are you crying about? Where the hell have you been?” It was then he noticed that she had passed out. A few moments later, the young woman finally woke up, but she did not come back to her consciousness. Now she was crying, singing, praying and cursing all at the same time. Her eyes stared straight into the air, recognizing no one. She went--crazy.”

This mad woman is the mother of my husband's paternal grandfather. In a series of essays documenting his family history, he wrote about his mad mother in a heart-wrenching memoir titled "the arrival of my mother." I was stunned the first time when I read grandpa's story about his mother – someone he recalled as having a miserable life. He wasn't born when his mother went crazy at the tender age of twenty. It was only later after he heard the story from his mother and other relatives that he reconstructed what he thought happened that night to cause this dewy young girl to become a mad woman in the short span of two years after her second marriage. He wrote in detail about how the sixteen year old young girl was forced to marry someone who was severely ill and became a widow the third day after her marriage. She then re-married grandpa's father, who was twenty-years her senior. But when giving birth to their first son, she was forced to labor in the wood storage room by her mother-in-law, because a senior relative had just died and it was considered bad luck to give birth during the funeral period. That year she was nineteen. Her first son died a year later. This young woman was also forced to bind her feet as a young girl – a patriarchal practice forced onto many Chinese women at the turn of the twentieth century. But she resisted fiercely and broke the binding cloth so many times that eventually she was known as the girl with a pair of weird half-bound feet.

The story of the "mad" Third World young woman is familiar to me. Feminist scholars Margaret Wolf (1992) and Aihwa Ong (1987) have explored alternative feminist readings of Third World young women's stories of being seized by spirits. Whether in the cotton field in Taiwan or on the shop floor of modern factories in Malaysia, through reading contested meanings behind "madness," feminists produced their arguments about the gendered experience of the Third World female subjects through different historical contexts. "Madness" as it often reads, is constructed as a certain kind of resistance of women towards either a patriarchal order or the newly developed industrial discipline.

In this particular story from a son's recounting of his mother, I almost sensed a young woman's resistance to her charted path and insistence on personal dignity. Is her "madness" a final breakdown and rejection of the regulative codes of femininity pressed on a young woman in those old days of rural China? In a quest to read into this exotic tale of a "mad woman," I constructed my own feminist narrative of "a woman's resistance." But when I sought grandpa's confirmation for such a re-interpretation of his mother's "madness," grandpa looked at me and said, "She went mad, because she was very scared walking back alone that night. That's the story." He never again offered me more details about his "mad" mother.

To start my story of girls in rural China with a tale of a young woman going crazy, almost one hundred years ago might seem a rather self-exoticizing gesture. But if this story sounds familiar to the imagination of those of my potential readers, I am now going to offer a parallel monologue of a rural girl of similar age living in the same locality, but in the year 2007. In an interesting juxtaposition to the "mad" woman's story, girls nowadays in those same rural villages are often labeled as "turning bad" and going wild. Both "madness" and "badness" seem to indicate a certain kind of identifications of rural girls/young women as "out of order." While the story of a young woman going mad might have been locked in a speculative past, these girls' stories are just beginning. I wondered who the "turning-bad" girls are. Why are they considered "turning bad?"

Monologue: Why I don't go to school anymore?

Date: Oct.9th, 2007

Speaker: Xia, 18, a hair dresser apprentice, dropped out of school after the second year in junior high school (8th grade).

Location: Inside a tiny hair salon named “E 剪” (“E Cut” hair salon) in the rural Chinese town Xiuning, Anhui Province.

“You ask me why I don’t go to school anymore? I just don’t wanna go anymore. Well, actually when I first started junior high, I was appointed by the teacher as the student assistant for her English class. Unbelievable, yeah? But then after the second year, I didn’t want to study anymore. You can’t imagine what a mess my classes were like at that time. It was such a fun time though! The teacher talked in the front, and we students were just chatting, switching seats and even having fights sometimes. Our first headmaster had no way to ‘control’ us, so the school had to send another teacher in. He failed as well! ...When I finally told my dad earlier this year that I didn’t want to go to school anymore, he was furious and beat me up with a thick, thick stick. He almost broke my leg for this! Then I yelled, ‘my brother didn’t go to school either, why should I?’ My brother only finished his elementary school and refused to go to school anymore no matter what. Then my dad asked him to write a letter of guarantee that he would not blame my dad in the future. I said I could write a letter of guarantee as well. So I wrote, ‘I, Xia, guarantee that I will not regret dropping out of school!’ (Xia raised her voice and slowed her tone as if she was reading out the letter of guarantee formally to her father in a determined manner). I was really scared of my dad for that one time, but eventually I didn’t need to go to school anymore!

“My dad is a bad-tempered person. And I am just like him, I’m not good-tempered. I’ve always been fearless ever since I was young. My elder brother is different. He’s timid. So my dad always takes me out to places, because I’m not afraid. Then after I dropped out of school, I wanted to work as an apprentice tailor in a local garment factory. But my dad said with my kind of personality, I definitely couldn’t sit there very long. So then I wanted to learn hair dressing, my dad opposed me again and said, ‘You are a young girl! What will other people say if they see you

touching men's heads and offering them a massage with your hands!' My dad is just one *lao fengjian* (old feudalist)!' (Translated and adapted from conversation in Chinese, FN 10/09/2007)

Xia's story might sound surprisingly unfamiliar to those who have assumed a certain image of rural Chinese girls. Her refusal to go to school, the chaos she described in her rural schooling experience, her description of herself as fearless and rebellious in contrast to her brother's timid personality, her critique of her father being an old feudalist and a plan for a future in the newly developed rural town center, were wrapped in a loud and out-spoken manner. If rural girls have often been projected as the "innocent and naïve" other, Xia both rejected that "innocent" image and also did not seem to care about becoming a model girl subject through the academic educational route. It is hard to define her in any way.

What lies parallel between what we are going to hear in the subsequent chapters about today's rural girls and the beginning tale of a young woman who lived almost a hundred years ago, is how discourses of either "madness" or "turning bad" are produced and circulated to regulate certain boundaries of "girlhood" and "young womanhood." The emergence of the "bad" girl subject in a Chinese rural locality at this particular moment is far more complicated than the simple assertion of girls turning bad. What does it mean when villagers and teachers repeatedly commented that girls are turning bad these days? Are they talking about the same thing? Are there more complicated layers of meanings underneath this discourse of the emerging "bad" girls? Is the "bad" girl talk a discourse that shifts and functions as a regulative norm marking the boundaries of a certain kind of "girlhood"? If so, what is this norm of "proper" girlhood and how does it shift amidst a changing Chinese rural locality? And what is this certain kind of "girlhood" that is held as desirable at the present moment? Consequently, who are the "turning bad" girls that are being guarded against and feared?

If we tune in further, this discourse of “badness” seems to fracture into overlapping and contesting pieces. Junior high school teachers I talked to often depicted their girls as simple and naïve “rural” girls and quickly pointed me to the girls attending the newly established vocational schools in the town center as “turning bad.” The vocational school teachers too, would quickly assure me of the “purity” of their girls who are still “rural” in nature, but accused girls on the street as turning bad. Then there was talk from villagers about how young people are becoming lazy, leaving hard farm work behind and switching to temporary factory work. Even worse, ever-increasing numbers of girls are now coming home with a pregnant belly after one or two years of work outside. “The young kids are just having it easy and girls are losing all sense of themselves these days,” my grandmother-in-law would often lament. Furthermore, what many NGOs and development projects have taken for granted – the value of schooling – seems to be disrupted. While teachers I interviewed often lauded girls as better students because of their obedient attitude, they also mentioned in dread that academic schooling has lost its spell on rural students. A new ‘studying is useless’ mentality has swept the rural community. “It’s hard to control girls these days, they are different from my generation of women coming from the rural background,” another vocational school woman teacher added.

Resisting the rural way of living, resisting schooling, even resisting factory work, coming home with pregnant bellies, and lacking “proper” manners, these seem to be what circulate as discourses mapping the “bad” girl. But it also makes me wonder why girls are often being singled out as specifically in danger and turning bad? It reminds me of Sharon Stephens’ (1995) argument about “children at risk – and as risks” (p.11). As she eloquently states, “There is a growing consciousness of children at risk ... there is also a growing sense of children themselves as *the risk*—and thus of some children as people out of place and excess populations to be eliminated, while others must be controlled, reshaped, and harnessed to changing social ends. Hence, the centrality of children, both as symbolic figures and as objects of contested forms of

socialization, in the contemporary politics of culture” (p.13). In substituting her argument about “children” to late teen rural girls, we can gradually come to terms with the deeply felt, profound anxiety underneath the incessant talk about “rural girls turning bad,” often not only incited in the immediate local community, but amidst a nation’s modernizing context as well. To position girlhood and the discourse of “girls turning bad” against the backdrop of such an “anxiety” is the focus of this study. As I will show in the following chapters, rural girls are indeed situated as “symbolic figures and objects” of the contested aspects of a nation-state’s modernity project. I will focus on particularly how this works in a rural locality with historically entrenched social relations of inequality.

To situate girlhood in the shifting order of China’s modernizing project, let me offer some brief glimpses of my ethnographic context. As a fast-rising economic power house, China is now on a national modernization project of urbanizing rural space and transforming the surplus rural population into industrial workers. This results in clashes, feelings of loss and bewilderment, anxiety and uncertainty about the changes happening in the local rural community. This uncertainty is not only felt at the local level. At the government and state level, massive migration that marks the very nature of this modernity project not only has the potential of threatening the stability of the local community, but also the very order of the modern nation-state itself. It is in this new order of instability that I am going to examine the production of “rural girlhood” and discourses surrounding the contradictions of such a symbolic figure. It is particularly interesting that my field, the rural town Xiuning is located exactly at the intersection of this modernization project. Situated in between rural villages and the peripheral of the urban administrative system, this small rural town by the mountainside can be viewed as a protocol of rural towns across the country.

Along with shifting discourses on “ruralness” is also the changing meaning of schooling. While academic schooling has long been viewed as the only outlet for rural youth to acquire the

privileged “urban” social identity, nowadays a new kind of schooling has rapidly emerged in the rural areas – privatized vocational schooling. Both private schools and vocational schooling are new developments under an expanding market-driven economy in recent years. Yet despite the fact that this new development is encouraged by central and local government, many villagers aired their resistance. Some of the girls I interviewed welcomed this new schooling discourse and the possibilities it offers, others rejected it. So it is also important to understand the production of rural “girlhood” against this backdrop of shifting schooling discourses. What kinds of new possibilities and subjectivities are created through the emerging privatized vocational schooling discourse? And how are these new promises of “becoming” interacting with “rural” identity and normative discourses of femininity in producing different forms of subjectivity for girls?

The notion of “turning bad” also contains heavily sexualized connotations. In a rural locality where arches have been built for centuries to emphasize the chastity of widowed young women, the “pregnant” body of girls becomes a disturbing sight and marked sign for many. Some blamed it on the loosening of morality due to modernity, others suggested rural girls were victims who fall prey to a disordered massive migration project. If “ruralness” and “schooling” can be viewed as sets of changing social relations that map the discursive formation of a new kind of “girlhood,” then the contesting order of sexuality poses dilemma directly onto the material body of the “girl.” What projections do girls encounter while simultaneously negotiating the shifting order of rural urbanization, privatized vocational schooling, and sexuality? How has growing up as a girl been produced and transformed in this rapidly changing period as China emerges as a global power? Specifically, how are girls subjected to and coping with those complex demands in a contested rural locality that is ever-more closely connected to the global order of neo-liberalism yet deeply entrenched in an authoritative socialist order? These questions about the meanings and constructions of rural girlhood are what I will explore in this dissertation.

Writing girls – the paradoxical movement into an ethnography of girlhood

There is another reason I started my writing project with the “exotic” story of my grandfather-in-law’s mother. While I have eagerly pursued an interpretation and truth behind the “mad” woman, grandpa flatly rejected to further locate his beloved mother under my voyeuristic eye. His rejection, as it often flashes back in my memory, seems to be an important symbolic gesture that points me to the paradoxes of ethnographic writing. As a form of academic writing, ethnography has long engaged in the scientific and rational meaning-making analysis of the other. Yet it is also a writing filled with moments of ruptures (Chow, 1992; Richardson, 1997; Trinh, 1989; Visweswaran, 1994; Wolf, 1992). While we can, as researchers, continuously try to read and pin-down stories of others, there are always moments that throw into dilemma the certitude of an ethnographer’s order-making and expose the limits of any writing project with layers and layers of complications. In my own field work and writing process, there are girls rejecting to be interviewed. Their refusal to participate takes me into questions of the willingness of girls to talk (Chow, 1992) and the nature of ethnographic retrieval of subjectivity (Visweswaran, 1994). There are other moments -- when portraying myself as a “big sister” to facilitate conversations, I suddenly became aware of the voyeuristic researcher inside of me and wondered how much I needed to know and for what purposes. Or when the girls wrote to me about their troubles and worries long after I left the field, yet I was too far away to help or even offer constructive suggestions to their complicated rural reality of disparity. These are some hidden emotions which often seize me in the research process and writing moments.

As a poststructuralist feminist writer, I understand that narratives are constructed within certain discourses embedded in larger social power relations. The very act of writing poststructuralist ethnography is to make visible the formations of such narratives. Thus, the narratives of the girls are viewed more as an interactive process of meaning-making between the

subjects and discourses, rather than a fixed individual uttering “truth” of herself. Through narratives we become subjects, since we live “storylines” and as Rath (2001) points out, “people are made and make sense of their lives through the stories available to them, then they attempt to fit their lives to those stories” (p.127). Or as Butler (1997) repeatedly reminds us, “power acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion, and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject’s ‘own’ acting ...” (p.14). Writing narratives is writing about the very constructedness of our own subjectivity. Then -- possibilities of rewriting open up once we are able to deconstruct and detach the fictional “identity” from deeply entrenched mode of narratives, be it social, cultural, political and personal. As we continuously engage in narration, de-construction and re-narration, stories become larger than ourselves. But even with such an ideal poststructuralist mode of writing, I still need to constantly remind myself of the complexities of this very paradoxical movement between “identity” and “narratives.” Girls sometimes do hold dear their own narratives, and I want to be able to honor their complicated life stories with all the raw emotions while engaging in an intellectual deconstructive reading of these same stories, in hopes of generating renewed stories of “becoming” not only for these girls, but girls in many other circumstances.

This paradoxical movement of wanting to hold narratives both as “fictional” and tangible also applies to my sometimes contradictory usage of “girls” both as a category of invention, and also as the very real “girls” who have allowed me into their lives. On one hand, situating girlhood amidst local, national and global contesting discourses, I seek to use Foucauldian discourse analysis to delineate and disrupt the very constructedness of girlhood and femininity in the changing Chinese rural locality and question the categorizations of “bad” girls. Yet on the other hand, I also intend to tease out the textures and emotions of the lived experience of girlhood through girls’ narratives. As many feminist ethnographers (Britzman, 2003; Gonick, 2003; Puri,

1999; Richardson, 1997) have astutely reminded us, in attributing the narratives to “women” and “girls,” we run the risk of reinforcing an essentialist reading of women and girls as fixed gendered subjects when we are attempting to disrupt the very category of gender as a process of normative repetition. This risk of writing in between discursive analysis and embodied narratives is what I will engage in carefully throughout this dissertation. I do not see any possibility of escaping such a slippery line in ethnography, since both “girls” and “narratives” are essential in this type of writing. And the paradox between a rational deconstructive reading and the emotions and ruptures of real happenings in the field will always permeate and haunt the interactive process of ethnographic research and writing.

No writing is innocent (Clifford, 1986; Flax, 1992; Lather, 1993; Trinh, 1989). So instead of hiding behind my researcher’s mask, I do intend to let my readers know that I start off with a paradox and situate my writing within that perpetual tension of desiring to know, yet facing the very limits of my own knowing. For many feminist ethnographers as Britzman (2003) has poignantly argued, ethnographic writing often becomes a complicated back and forth process of making meaning and questioning the production of narratives. These narratives not only include discourses of the communities, national and global policies, and the narratives of girls, but also the very discourse of the ethnographer’s own analysis. So as you will see, in each chapter I have attempted to construct a cacophony of speech, ranging from Foucauldian deconstructive analysis of the formations and ordering of “ruralness,” “schooling,” and “sexuality,” to the very minute negotiations of subjectivity that saturated the girls’ narratives in such a shifting order, to a final disruptive moment that poses a suspension to my own very act of reading the other. I also seek to move in-between my rational analysis and the creative voice that constantly taps into the energy and emotions of a life that goes beyond the pinning-down of meanings.

Citing Foucault (1972), Gonick (2003) has beautifully illustrated the contours of girls’ studies as she inquires, “how it is that girls as female/feminine subjects ‘are gradually,

progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thought etc” (p.39). In a similar manner, while examining “girlhood” as a process of becoming and a discursive invention produced through often contesting sets of discourses, I will also use girls’ narratives through direct quotes, not in an attempt to pin down the “truth” about them, but to further tease out the textures of girlhood as experienced by girls themselves. Particularly, how the different discursive namings of “good,” “bad,” “rural,” “urban,” “traditional,” “modern” have interwoven into the girls’ negotiation of a contentious process of becoming in between “rural”, “school” and “sexed” subjects. It is interesting to note that the girls are often very fluid in terms of sliding back and forth between these categorizations of “girls.” Some times they accuse other girls of “turning bad.” Other times, they confide in me of “turning bad” themselves, but declared with different underpinning of meanings. If “turning bad” has been activated through the community as a negative sign of degeneration, the girls’ take on this very act of “badness” is more complicated and multi-layered, hinging on their strategic positions in situational contexts.

So it is really within those situational contexts of sliding back and forth that my ethnographic writing starts. “The story of a life might be less than the actual life, because the story told is selective, partial, contextually constructed and because the life is not yet over. But the story of a life is also more than the life, the contours and meanings allegorically extending to others, others seeing themselves, knowing themselves through another’s life story, re-visioning their own, arriving where they started and knowing ‘the place for the first time’” (Richardson, 1997, p. 6). These words from Richardson I think has captured the meaning of my own writing project.

Let me give you some context of how this project first started.

Entry point – the contour of an ethnography of girlhood

The very idea of this project starts with pure coincidence. When attending a conference on qualitative research, I met another Chinese graduate student who was doing research with a large U.S. foundation on girls' education in rural China. Her introduction of the situation in rural China triggered my interest. As I mentioned her project to my husband, a research possibility came into being. My husband talked about the situation in the rural village he came from and the easy access I could potentially get through his family connections there. It all sounded like a perfect ethnographic opportunity, a lone ethnographer going into her field as an unaffiliated yet affiliated person. I was particularly thrilled at the possibility that I did not need to get access through a NGO or U.S. funded research institution, since that would dramatically change the power dynamics within a research process as this other Chinese graduate student would soon tell me.

I did not know what I would “discover” or “encounter” at all the first time I went to my husband's rural village and the town of Xiuning in the summer of 2006. As someone who grew up in urban China, the rural is wrapped in almost foreignness and ignorance for me. And I was in for a big shock as I would soon record in my field notes. The rural villages and town center are drastically different from what my husband had remembered from his childhood and what he portrayed to me. Clashing images of deserted farm lands, rapidly erected buildings, older villagers farming at the outskirts of the town and rural youth cruising on motorbikes in darkness, hit me with waves of confusion and disorientation. The rural town of Xiuning as it turns out is indeed a protocol of a rural China that is changing fast, almost every day. And the girls I was about to meet dwell exactly at the tip of such rapidly shifting waves.

Through my husband's family connection, I was able to first gain access to two vocational schools. One vocational school rented the spare dormitory building from my father-in-law's tea factory. The other was located next to his factory. However, soon after I asked for formal permission from the principals, I was denied access. But I did keep in contact with some

girls from these schools. The majority of my research is conducted in a third vocational school which I gained access to when I returned to the field again in 2008. It used to be the only public vocational school in town, but now it is funded by a real-estate tycoon. Because my husband's family has been on good terms with the real-estate investor, I was finally able to secure access to talk to a class of girls in that school. These girls were in their third year in junior high school and had just transferred to this vocational school. This particular class of girls were enrolled in tourism and hotel management major. I have tape recorded the conversations I had with these girls either during noon time in their dormitories or at the nightly independent study period in the classroom. Within the one and half year time span, I have traveled back and forth between the rural town Xiuning and my own hometown, so I was able to trace the girls from their very first few weeks in the town center until they started to work in a local folk tourist site. Some of the girls are still in contact with me via email and some even started their own blogs. So besides tape-recorded conversations, and my field notes, this writing also consists of some of the email and blog entries from the girls.

Each chapter starts with the bigger contesting order of "ruralness," "schooling" and "sexuality" and then moves into the gendered process of such an ordering. Girls' narratives are then juxtaposed and teased out in detail along with such larger discourses. Chapter two offers an analysis of the construction of "ruralness" against the background of rural urbanization. Chapter three focuses on the shifting schooling discourses and the construction of the "modern" girl. Chapter four zooms in on the vexing issue of "sexuality" and displays how girls come to terms with this contested order in drastically different manners. Also, I have tried to remain accountable for my own possibly normalizing analysis through a suspended moment at the end of each chapter. In the conclusion, I will walk back through this journey of reading and writing the girls and pick up on some of the epistemological issues in feminist ethnographic writing through a

fictional dialogue between English speaking feminists, Chinese feminist writers, myself as a feminist storyteller and the girls.

Now with no further delay, let us turn to the details of a complicated telling of rural girls' stories.

Chapter 2

Contested Space and Conflicting Desires – Reading “Rural” (and) “Girls”

I changed a lot in these two years
 I used to be so frumpy like those rural girls
 Now I know how to dress up
 People in my village can't even recognize me anymore.
 Do they gossip about me turning into a “society girl”
 I don't know
 Well, those girls who went out to work earlier than me
 They wear those revealing clothes like *those* “society (street) girls”
 They did
 Not me

Yiyi, 16, a rural vocational school student who wants to become a tour guide

“So why are you interested in talking to us? Yuehua asked, excited about our upcoming interviews, “I mean no one's ever interested in what we have to say and you are even talking about interviews with us? That's funny!” I was sitting with several sixteen-year-old girls in their dorm and it was an early spring noon in 2008. Several days ago I was finally granted permission to interview a group of girls enrolled in a tourism and hotel service class in a local vocational school. Most of them are third year junior high school students who have recently transferred to this vocational school to continue their so called “skill training.” For many of them, it is their first time leaving their village homes to stay in the rural town center. I had just met them a day before and was introduced as Teacher Cai by their teacher Ms. Wang at the end of their formal class session. It was an awkward moment when Ms. Wang introduced me and asked the girls to welcome me by clapping. Being positioned and introduced formally as “the teacher” was not in my plan and it certainly did not help with my explanation of why a graduate student from a U.S. university would want to talk to girls in a small rural town in China. I was worried about my upcoming conversations with the girls.

But then -- as I finished my scattered words, I glanced over the classroom and felt surrounded by the energy of enthusiasm and curiosity. “Your English must be very good then,” someone shouted. “So how is the U.S.? Is it a fun place?” Another girl yelled at me without missing a beat. All this energy left me feeling relieved and puzzled at the same time. Relieved -- because out of all odds, my being introduced as the teacher did not seem to generate the usual awkward teacher-student sort of hierarchical order. My worry about them being silenced by an authoritative figure was not the case here. Puzzled -- because these are not the rural girls I had expected to meet. Long before encountering them face-to-face, I have read about them much too often in those developmental studies concerning Third World girls’ education and modernity. Rural girls in China certainly are portrayed with a sense of passivity and mentioned as victims of a closed, under-developed and static patriarchal society. The mission for many researchers from Western or urban Chinese contexts going into rural fields is usually to describe the miseries that the rural girls have suffered, offer solutions for their empowerment and transform them from silent and oppressed females to “*real persons* to be admired by the society” (Zhou, et al., 2001, emphasis is mine).¹ So you can imagine my surprise when I was faced with a group of sixteen-year-old girls who were not only not shy, but shot questions right back at me with a commanding sense of curiosity.

After the session was over, Ms. Wang, the teacher approached me and said in an almost apologetic manner, “Please bear with them. You know they have just come from the countryside and know no manners at all. What can I say about young girls these days? When I was young, I hardly dared to raise my head in front of my teachers, but girls these days are so straight-forward even in front of their teachers. They seem to be too curious about anything they don’t know. It’s hard to manage them.” She of course, like many others assumed that researchers needed

¹ Quotes directly cited from a 1996 Chinese government sponsored research project, entitled “Investigation of Rural Girls’ Education: Problems and Countermeasures”. The written paper was translated into English and published on *Chinese Education and Society*, vol.33, no.5, September/October 2001, pp.4-28.

cooperative informants who would speak in order. Her comment though seems to further complicate the stories about these rural girls – is it their “ruralness” that she is blaming for their lack of “proper femininity?” Or is it the changes that are happening in this modernizing “rural” locality that Ms. Wang is insinuating has made these girls “out of control” and “hard to manage” compared to her generation of women coming from rural backgrounds?

Later when Yuehua asked once again for an explanation about my sudden presence in the more causal setting of their dorm, I replied, “I am here to listen to your stories and your thoughts, because most people often think of girls coming from villages as very traditional ...” Barely before I finished the sentence, the eight girls in the room burst out into laughter and started to shake their heads. “It’s not like that.” I heard several voices whisper in the background.

This intriguing episode of conversations with the rural girls and their teacher unraveled the complexities of what it means to grow up as a girl, or more exactly a “proper girl” subject in this changing Third World rural space. Quite contrary to the composite, singular ‘third world girl’ figure as victims of male control and of so-called traditional cultures and religions (Mohanty, 1991), the meanings of “girlhood” seem to take on rather complicated and contradictory explanations and re-interpretations from the girls and the teacher I encountered. As several preeminent feminist youth theorists (Davies, 2000; Gonick, 2003, Johnson, 1993; Walkerdine, 2001) have observed, the experience of growing up a girl has been complicated by two sets of central tensions. The first set of tension is imbedded in the very process of growing up and the construction of the self. As illustrated by Davies (2000), each youth must learn to participate in the common storylines that are shared by other community members in a particular social, cultural and historical context. At the same time they also need to knit through these discursive discourses a distinctive narrative of their own and make themselves into recognizable subjects to the community. The complication with such a process of being constituted and constitutive of

oneself as a rational and knowable subject is that the discourses and practices that shape a particular subject are sometimes shared, but often in contradiction with each other. So each person inevitably has to take up multiple and often contradictory subject positions. And the self, is thus revealed here not as a humanist coherent and stable object or thing, but as an interactive and often shaky process of constant negotiation of self-other boundaries and contradictory storylines. This discursive process of being spoken and speaking oneself into existence constitutes the central tension in adolescent experience of growing up. In other words, one has to somehow successfully produce oneself as a coherent subject with a distinctive storyline while submerging seamlessly into often contradictory social constructs.

For girls, this contentious process of growing up is further complicated by the often contradictory normative discourses of femininity and personhood. While becoming a legitimate and recognizable subject often requires the active taking up of common storylines and asserting oneself into preferred categories of membership, proper femininity in contrast is often constructed in terms of selflessness and non-desiring. Thus, the contradiction seems apparent that to be a proper girl subject, girls need to demonstrate careful management of their desires and maintain an order of containment and passivity. But to assert themselves as competent and “empowered” human beings, they are also required to participate in the masculine storyline of desiring and agency. The humanist and individualist model of the person as the self-determining, masculine and rational self thus excludes the ambivalent positions girls have to negotiate within relations of power and powerlessness, desire and self-containment, agency and passivity (Davies 2000, Gonick 2003).

It is in this light that researchers such as Gonick (2003), McRobbie(1991), and Walkerdine(2001) start to take up girlhood as a site of analyzing competing discourses as well as an experiential process that is grounded in sociohistorical, material and discursive contexts. That means instead of simply being a biological process, girlhood is largely socially constructed. So to

become a particular kind of girl is never an easy and static position to assume. It is rather an interactive and ongoing process of negotiating the often contradictory discourses of femininity and personhood that are embedded and evolving in a particular historical, social and cultural milieu. Noting the different experiences of middle and working-class girls in Western contexts, those researchers also point out that girls from different hierarchical social positions often encounter such normative discourses of the self and femininity in very diverse ways. What their arguments suggest is that instead of taking on the humanist model of agency and judge and write Third World rural girls as the non-agentic Other, a poststructuralist writing necessarily needs to engage in the reading of Third World rural girls as subjects produced in historically and culturally specific way by the social landscape in which they live. And just like their Western counterparts, they are constituted both as agents and effects of competing discourses. To become a Third World “rural girl” is thus never a less complicated process than those encountered by the middle-class First World girls.

So where do these feminist theories on girlhood leave us in this entry into an ethnographic field of “rural” “girls”? The seemingly contradictory remark made by teacher Ms. Wang could serve as an interesting entry point into both the geographic and social landscape of a changing “rural” locality and the ambiguous and complicated world of rural girlhood. The comment she made about rural identity as lacking in proper feminine manners suggests a certain ideal of femininity which marks the “rural” body as undesirable and abjected. Yet, at the same time, she quickly follows her own argument by suggesting that these “hard to manage girls” are produced by the rapid changing rural urbanization which unsettles the traditions of a rural community. Rural girls of her own generation, as she commented are different from today’s adolescent girls and somehow knew how to manage their demeanor as proper female subjects. Her comment intrigues me because “rural identity” is elicited here to produce a very complicated argument about a particular kind of femininity that is emerging in the process of a nation’s rural

modernity. She is certainly not inventing these contradictory versions of proper girlhood. Rather she is a historical and social subject who is taking up competing discourses about rural identity, modernity and girlhood in this particular urbanizing rural locality. If “empowerment” or “to live like a real person” is described as the ideal goal for rural girls in many developmental projects, then Ms. Wang’s comment cuts into this simplistic and hierarchical duality of “active personhood” and “passive rural female” and brings us squarely into the messy social landscape in which girls dwell.

I wonder whether according to developmental standards, these out-spoken and curious girls are considered already “proper empowered subjects” since they are apparently not as silent as many Western researchers have assumed. But if so, why are they still largely considered illegitimate and even becoming increasingly unrecognizable in their own communities? It seems to me that something more complicated is going on if we probe the notion of “proper rural girlhood” a little further and ask a different yet important question: “proper” according to whose and what standards? To raise issues on girlhood from such a troubling perspective necessarily brings our attention to hidden assumptions and discourses in larger local and global contexts concerning gender, development and nation, including those very assumptions made about girls’ education and a nation’s modernity. Reading from a poststructuralist perspective, the experience of growing up a girl is now a troubled one that begs inquiry into the competing discourses behind the scene. For those “rural” girls I have grown acquainted with, it seems that besides negotiating the two sets of contentious process as of growing up a girl that I have outlined above, they are also forced to busily engage in (or inevitably fail to?) producing themselves into a particular kind of girl who will satisfy the demands and gaze of a nation-state’s project of rural modernity. And this “becoming” not only involves geographic displacement of the bodies of rural girls and their traveling through shifting boundaries of the rural and urban, but also the constant negotiation and interpretation of the self-other discursive boundaries between the ambivalent (not) rural and (not)

urban identities. Following the above line of arguments, this chapter examines how the contesting discourses on “rural identity” and “modernity” interact with the normative discourse of femininity and produces certain ambivalent positions for today’s rural Chinese girls. Of more interest is how these out-spoken and curious young minds are negotiating their complicated entry into young womanhood in this transitional world where the boundaries between rural and urban become unsettled and the social landscapes are rapidly disembedding.

I realize that in traditional ethnography the chapter about locality often serves to offer the readers a realistic witness that demonstrates a certain sense of authenticity. If that locality happens to be somewhere in a Third World place, then this chapter will also work to offer an orientation about this faraway exotic land where the stories of the natives are about to be unraveled. This chapter certainly is written up partly for that purpose, since I have been in the rural town Xiuning for almost two years, interviewing girls, villagers, teachers and government officials. It also seems imperative to offer my Western readers a sense of what this “rural town” of China literally looks like, since so many of the people I interacted with in the U.S. context still hold the impression of a rural Chinese place as the epitome of a pre-modern and backward society without realizing that those rural Chinese towns share much more of the same challenges and dilemmas with the rural towns at this end of the globe.

But this chapter intends more than such a realistic account of a rural community. Instead, writing and reading about this rural space serves up two primary purposes. First of all, following Appadurai’s (1996) framework, I will examine this rural locality as a historic product that emerges in a globalizing world. In other words, as you will see the social landscape girls dwell in is an ever-changing Third World space which is also closely connected to globalization and expanding neoliberal discourses. I intend to disrupt and complicate such taken-for-granted notions of “rural identity” as static and purely geographic and “rural girlhood” as passive, both of which appear frequently in studies done on Third World girls’ education and modernity. Instead,

for many of the girls, villagers, teachers and government officials I interviewed, to talk about “rural identity” seems to be a complicated meaning-making process from a series of competing social relations that are embedded in national and global power hierarchies.

Following this complicating framework of “rural locality” as a historical and global product, it is then possible to imagine girlhood being a real yet fictional ethnographic site of competing discourses of rural policies, Third World national modernity, global neoliberal discourse and normative femininities. That is the second and the main focus of this chapter. Many girls’ studies scholars have noticed that rapid global change has created new meanings, demands and opportunities in how girlhood is defined in the West (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; McRobbie, 2000; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). Following their line of argument, this chapter offers a related observation of how the lives of Third World rural girls are also closely connected to a globalizing economy and a nation-state’s modernization project. Furthermore, as Davies (2000) has argued, to become a subject involves “the ability to read and interpret the landscape of the social world, and to embody, to live, to experience, to know, to desire as one’s own ... through the available practices” (p.22), then for those girls I have grown acquainted with in the past two years, the question becomes what if the landscape they are dwelling in is itself rapidly changing? To become a rural girl in this sense is an utterly complicated process of reading and interpreting meanings of new and old, local, national and global. It is about taking up often contradictory discourses of femininity and personhood and being able to strategically create a coherent storyline and position oneself within each situation. Yet often times, as Ms. Wang’s contradictory comment has illustrated, this becoming a proper female subject is never an easy and monolithic process.

In this chapter, some glimpses into a changing rural social landscape where the girls dwell will be offered first. Emerging from these literal, historical and social descriptions of the rural town Xiuning are the competing discourses that are in circulation about becoming a certain

kind of “rural” subject amidst the national project of rural urbanization. I will then offer a gendered analysis about how girls are situated within such contradictory discourses of becoming a rural female subject. In other words, how new meanings compete with older understandings of girlhood and create constraints and possibilities of becoming a girl at this particular time. Lastly, I will invite you to some heated episodes of “wild” girl talk that disrupts the simplistic depiction of those Third World female subjects as either passive objects or heroic subjects. Local knowledge as Appadurai (1996) argues is about producing reliably local subjects that can be recognized and organized. However, dwelling in instability and facing the challenge of the disembedding of such local knowledge and social relations (Giddens, 1991), the rural girls of today are certainly engaging in much more complicated and also creative identity work of participating and subverting the coming and going storylines of their “rural identity” and “proper girlhood” simultaneously. Before tuning to their stories, let us first take a detour through the changing rural landscape that girls dwell in and interact with in their everyday life.

Locating a changing rural community – the contesting discourses of “rural” space and identity

The rural county Xiuning has its history dating back centuries. It is located in a mountainous area in southern Anhui Province. According to what the older people in the villages told me, the county’s name Xiuning symbolizes peace and tranquility in Chinese, which is part of what life used to be like in this rural area. Ancient migrants coming from the northern part of China fled here to avoid warfare. The numerous mountains have protected this area from serious disruptions from the outside world throughout the centuries, but these mountains also cut off its connection with the active merchant developments in other nearby coastal cities. If once peace and tranquility are what was sought and valued by the rural villagers who migrated here, now the

major concern for the government officials who are in charge of this region's development is how to transform and modernize this "underdeveloped" and diverse rural county into a booming urban town. Massive construction of new roads, commercial and industrial districts, real-estate apartments in town centers, and large-scale farming have been undertaken. These will eventually replace family peasantry. As one local investment government official told me, "We used to be a poor region, but now with the construction of highways nearby, I am confident about our new opportunities of development." The development he refers to is part of China's "small town development project" that aims to expand the market economy further into the rural areas of China and transform agricultural laborers into industrial workers and potential consumers in those new towns.

Modernization is surely underway in this rural town. When I came in the summer of 2006 to conduct an initial fieldtrip, the highway from my urban home to the city near Xiuning had just opened after years of construction. What used to be a grueling six hour ride along the narrow and steep mountain-side road now only took three hours through numerous tunnels. The unraveling scenery was far from my idea of what rural was. If this was once a rural county of peace and tranquility, now it is all action. A recently built long road connected the main street in the town center to the newly expanded district, "the development zone," a few miles away in the midst of what used to be farmlands. The "development zone" is now where over forty privately owned industries are located. Those include mostly local industries such as tea and food processing plants and garment factories. These newly built modern factory buildings stood in conjunction with deserted farmlands and old villagers' houses in the outskirts of the town. Some other dusty and still under construction big roads were spread out and cut through the segregated farmlands with chunks of rocks piling up on the roadside. Construction sites are everywhere within and at the far end of the newly-expanded areas of the town. It soon turned out that in the next two years of my coming and going, what I would witness is a landscape of constant change with new

buildings erected at every corner of this once rural county. As a matter of fact, the deserted farmland not far away from the home of my grandparents-in-law soon turned into a construction site – a four-floor dormitory building belonging to a local garment factory appeared almost overnight when I returned to the field three months after my visit in the fall of 2007. What used to be the quiet and dark outskirts of a rural town now became a hustling and bustling construction site for most of the night, with workers' yelling, truck's uploading and downloading and even fireworks cracking. And all this busy action of turning the countryside into massive urban construction sites is exactly -- as what the local investment officer told me -- his version of "a promising future of the booming urban town." Certainly the changing landscapes are what grabbed me intensely and immediately in my initial contact with this rural Chinese town.



Figure 1. The outskirts of the town: farmlands and new apartment buildings



Figure 2. Under-construction new road

Along with the changing geographic landscape is another hidden landscape that I gradually came to know – the social landscape of the changing lives of rural residents, especially those young girls who left their rural homes in search of an urban dream. If modernization as Giddens (1991) argues is the disembedding and restructuring of social relations, then what it is like for young generations of rural residents to walk through their lives in such a changing geographic and social landscape? What do these changes mean to them? And what do they mean to the contested imagination of a rural community in transition?

My most immediate and acute experience with the changing rural social landscape and the lives of young men and women dwelling in such a changing space is through a walk down the street with a girl I grew acquainted with in a nearby vocational garment school². It was a Saturday night and girls in the garment school did not need to work during the night and one girl invited me out for a stroll down to the main street. Her vocational garment school which later turned out to be a factory was located in the “development zone.” To get to the main street in town, we now had to walk through that newly built “modern” road, which by the night was submerged in darkness since electricity for lights was yet to come. As we walked near the town center, the space started to light up and I noticed the many Internet bars, electronic game rooms, small restaurants, hair salons, photo studios and clothing stores dotting the street. The street was also filled with motorbikes during the night as young men cruised around the town in hordes. The young girl got excited about the busy street scenes since it was only the second month she was in town from her village home. Then suddenly she asked me in an almost secretive manner, pointing to a tiny store with some dingy and pinkish lights, “Did you see that massage parlor over there? We have many of those in town now. You know what that is, don’t you? I saw those girls

² This is another type of vocational school, different from the vocational school I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter which offers a wide variety of classes ranging from stream-line technical training classes to tourism and hotel service class that some of the girls I interviewed participated in. I will give more detailed description of the different types of vocational schools in the third chapter which deals with schooling and girlhood. Also, since I was denied access to this garment vocational school after an initial contact, I could only contact some of the girls during their rare occasions off the shift.

working there, alluring guys in.” I was almost shocked in disbelief about what she just told me when she dragged me to the other side of the road and whispered to my ear, “Did you see those guys? You need to be careful, these are young gangsters gathering every night in front of the Internet bars. They just like to call out to girls.” Just as this 16-year-old was teaching me street-smart tricks, we were stopped by three young male friends of hers, cruising the street on motorcycles just like the other young men. I got nervous as she chatted with them in the local dialect I couldn’t fully understand³ – the young men were staring right at me and I felt very uncomfortable by such a direct male gaze. This was the street where I strolled with my husband a few weeks ago in the warm summer breeze. This was the same street where I saw crowds of older women and men doing a localized version of ballroom dancing in the front of the little square we had just passed. In a moment, this inviting and harmonious small rural town street seemed to put on a different persona: an air of restlessness intermingled with excitement filled the dark street and narrow alleys.

Then as we walked towards the Internet bar where other girls were waiting for us, I noticed the modern style nine-floor hotel where I once stayed. What I did not notice at that time is the dingy narrow alley bordering the hotel. It was filled with massage parlors and Internet bars. As she led me into one of these Internet bars, I found myself surrounded by bare-chested and smoking young men attentively playing their video games and occasionally checking out the incoming girls. There were only a few young women hiding in the corner, chatting with online friends. Two of them had just came to town from their village homes and apparently knew nothing about online chatting. They sat there with me and refused to join. “I heard people will get addicted to the internet and it’s no good. This is not good.” One girl explained to me why she was

³ Because of China’s long history of self-sufficient peasantry society, people lived in stable communities for over two thousands of years with relatively few interactions, so each region developed its own spoken Chinese with varieties. Although the English word *dialect* is often used to translate the Chinese term *fangyan* (literally, regional speech), the lack of mutual intelligibility between the major *fangyan* is different from the normal English use of the word dialect. People from Xiuning county in Southern Anhui Province speak Hui *fangyan* in this case. And I am from the mid-east coast of China where people speak Wu *fangyan*.

not interested in the internet, but she stayed nevertheless and watched the other girls laughing and screaming as they exchanged lines with their online friends from elsewhere. As I sat amidst the smell of sweat and smoke inside the crowded Internet bar, I realized that I had just encountered the other side of what life was like for many youth in this rural town – part of the social landscape of a changing rural community.



Figure 3. An Internet bar

The promising picture of an urbanizing rural town started to unravel under the cover of darkness. When I told my husband and his family about the massage parlors, crowded Internet bars and the youngsters cruising the street in hordes, they immediately warned me against going out during the night again. “The town is getting dangerous now. I’ve even heard people doing drugs these days,” my sister-in-law told me, and then she added, “Especially don’t go out with those society (street) girls. They are no good.”

Amid the contesting versions of the rural town emerges a complicated picture of a transitioning rural space. The space of the rural town apparently holds different ideas for the government officials, the villagers, town people, the young men who took to the street in hordes

and the young women who found new pleasure in the Internet bars. The seemingly contradictory discourses of “promise” and “danger” that are used to describe the space of the rural town by the officials, villagers and town people illustrate the clash of values as the rural town transitions in a ragged manner from its agrarian tradition to a market-driven modernity. If this once tranquil rural county has been nostalgically remembered by my husband as an Eden of peace, then the process of industrialization, marketization, and rural modernity certainly unsettled his sense of a homogenized “rural community” which he calls home. The nation-state’s discourse of a promising rural-urban transformation intermingled with the villagers’ discourse of suspicion of the breaking-down of community boundaries and old ways of agrarian living and values. Along with this disembedding of social relations is the inevitable migration of rural youth who are now considered “surplus rural labor,” into the rural town center. Yet this displacement of the bodies of youth into the open and unsupervised space, as we will hear soon from the conversations with the governmental officials, is also guarded with vigilance. Opportunities and dangers seem to be alluring as their ambiguous “rural identity” is simultaneously being shaped, resisted, and re-shaped within such a contested social landscape. So what is the history and social context of “rural” China? And what sorts of competing discourses have emerged about the “rural” and the migrating mass of “rural youth”? More importantly, how have these discourses shaped the experience of growing up as “rural youth”?

To offer a brief history, the rural county Xiuning is roughly 2,151 square kilometers (830 square miles) with 12 townships and 190 villages. It has a population of 274,000, but besides the 30,000 urban residents who have permanent residency in the town centers, the rest are all registered upon birth as “rural populations.” The rural/urban disparity is largely reinforced through the worn-out yet still existing *hukou* system (the residency permit system) currently with 64% of the total Chinese population registered as rural. The initial purpose of such a separate

registration system since 1951 is to promote urban development and prevent large-scale rural migration. Thus, rural dwellers were largely confined to their villages and kept separate from urban populations who enjoyed state welfare benefits. Moreover, farm prices were regulated by the state and kept low to subsidize urban consumers and processors (Gale & Dai, 2002). But since the 1980s, China's burgeoning and increasingly market-based economy along with the demands of the global capital for cheap labor generated a massive migration of rural residents into urban factories in search of a better living. In the county Xiuning alone, around one quarter of its rural population (60,000) are now working as migrant factory workers in bigger cities in other provinces.

But for many of the migrant workers, though urban space is no longer a far-away dreamland, their presence in the urban space is nevertheless often marked with temporality and unstable employment and livelihood. Because despite the government's loosening up of migration policies from rural space to urban, the worn-out household registration system is still held in place to tie the rural subjects to their rural social relations. Rural residents might be allowed to physically move to any place they want, but they nevertheless are always bound to their "rural status" through such a registration system. Their officially recorded rural identity means that they can not enjoy the same education, health and employment benefits as their urban counterparts. For example, unemployed migrant workers do not usually receive government subsidies and the children of migrant workers can not go to regular elementary and high schools in the urban areas. Thus, most migrant rural workers remain to be called their homogenous name - the "peasant," though most of the peasants in China today are doing anything but farm work. In this sense, rural identity rather than simply indicating one's geographic place of birth has been largely associated with complicated historical relations of a lower economic and social status and with poor welfare benefits. It thus comes as no surprise that as someone growing up in the urban area, I remember the naming of "peasant" as a derogative category often used by urban residents

to insult someone who is undesirable, narrow-minded, or simply ignorant. Even to this day, “peasant workers” still serve in the imagination of the state and the urban residents as potential targets of danger on the urban street because of their unstable migration status. Regulations are often tightened specifically towards those migrating populations. “Rural” as a geographic term and a social economic category thus are infused with social meanings of an inferior and undesirable identity.

In recent years after China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the Chinese government has begun to shift its efforts to raise rural incomes and promote a “new” countryside slogan, despite the arguments among Chinese scholars about the meanings of this “newness.” The new shift towards localized rural development speaks of two major concerns of the state. On one hand, the Chinese government is concerned about possible social and political instability that could result from the large-scale massive rural-urban migration. The government continues to limit the flow of rural people to big cities by maintaining the resident permit system and tries to engineer and control migration patterns by encouraging small city and town development. On the other hand, massive migration to urban cities has also resulted in rapidly decreasing numbers of rural people who remain in farming and the majority of the farming laborers still work on tiny semi-subsistence farms, earning incomes a little over one-third of the urban average in China. The new membership in WTO, however, will inevitably expose China’s farmers to competition from highly efficient overseas producers. How to develop a new mode of efficient farming and maintain a sustainable pool of flexible labor in local contexts becomes a key issue in China’s rural development plan. The most recent policy along with such economic and political concerns is the “small town and new countryside development” plan, which is implemented in rural towns like Xiuning and results in the rapidly changing rural landscape we have seen at the beginning of this section.

To understand further the connotations of this “newness” in building the countryside, I interviewed the director of the local Merchants Bureau. According to him, the major issue facing the rural county is the contradiction between low productivity of farming on one hand and surplus rural laborers no longer needed on farms on the other hand. So the focus of new “rural urbanization” project aims to channel agricultural laborers into expanding local rural industries and encourages them to seek out ways of earning a living other than farming. The plan is to relocate massive rural populations in local processing, garment and construction industries, and to promote large-scale farming through land consolidation and commodification. As the director explains to me the blueprint of an efficient future is “farming with technology,”

We are steadily carrying out our plan to move those peasants out of farmlands. We encourage them to seek out opportunities to work in those non-farming industries. But to guarantee the stability of those big urban cities and the sustainable development of the local rural communities, the central government has required our local government to develop more local-based industries and try to keep and channel those rural peasants working in nearby towns rather than massive migration to big cities like what they did years ago. If we can successfully move more people to the town center and not be dependent on their farmlands, then it’s possible that lands can be consolidated into large-scale farming⁴. And then with advanced technologies and equipment, the efficiency of farming can be greatly improved. But the primary concern now is to steadily transform those surplus rural populations and train them into skilled workers so that local industries can be developed further.

Apparently with the background of globalization and the influence of neoliberal discourse, the meanings of farming and rural ways of living have now been invested in a language of efficiency, mass-production, commodification and profit. What the local government official suggests is not an uncommon proposal for improving the living conditions in rural areas. As Edmondson (2003) observed in her study of a U.S. mid-western rural town, following the neoliberal ideal of the “free market,” farms these days are read as “factories in the field” with the

⁴ Under Chinese law, land is state-owned, so peasants only have the right to use the land, but not as private owners of their farming lands. However, in recent years, a series of new legislations have been passed to allow the transference and purchase of the “right to use the land.” This means that although the land is still considered a state property, private users (the peasants) can sell and buy the usage right of the land.

ever-present need to expand and increase productivity. And the local rural communities are often read through the neoliberal ideologies based on the material value and cultural capital a community will bring. Value-added local products are considered desirable commodities, and a labor force is assumed to be ready and waiting. Moreover, economic progress through diversification and the intrusion of large companies into local communities are the most common proposal in providing job opportunities. Even rural ways of living itself becomes a commodity as more rural towns are packaging themselves for tourism as a way of generating market value. The Chinese small rural town development plan holds a very similar agenda in its effort to drive peasants out of their farmlands and channel them into diversified rural job opportunities through policies that encourage larger-scale local industries. In the county Xiuning, it means promoting private entrepreneurship in food-processing and garment industries and continuous expansion by seeking investments from outside larger companies. However, as Edmondson points out in what happens in the rural American context, under the guise of a local economic stimulus project lies the fact that many of the new jobs that are created under the market-driven neoliberal discourse are nevertheless often low paying, hazardous, and offer little job security. Also, with such a push towards commodification, this “new” national modernity project increasingly casts the rural life and identity as backward and undesirable.

So how does this market-driven “new” rural modernization project construct the experience of rural youth? If modernity is now understood as a set of social conditions and a cultural project, then these changing rural policies also produced new desires and subjectivities and stirred up anxieties and uneasiness. For rural youth, the invitation to participate in the rural urbanization project necessarily leads to new meanings of growing up in a rural community. Since rural life is largely cast as backward and undesirable by both the government officials and many villagers, and migrating to local urban space becomes a viable option, rural young people jump on the opportunity to participate in an imaginable subject-making process. According to the

government officials, the ideal scenario that will solve the problem of surplus rural populations is to steadily transform and absorb rural youth into qualified industrial laborers. Through working in factories as “skilled” workers, those rural youth will then participate in the modernization storyline of purchasing themselves an apartment in an urban town center to qualify them as legitimate urban subjects. While working physically in an urban factory will not make one an urban subject, the new small town development policy makes sure that purchasing an apartment in the local urban town center is what is needed to finalize one’s social transformation into an urban subject. Thus, what this subject-making process entails are two sets of ideal transformation of oneself. First of all, one has to successfully transform him/herself from an inefficient, unruly and lazy rural subject into a “proper” industrial laborer. Through earning a living as a wage laborer, the rural subjects who are channeled to leave their village homes are then “offered the opportunity” to obtain an urban identity by purchasing an apartment as desirable consumers with their earned wages. As the director of the local Merchants Bureau further explains,

Our current plan is that through government initiatives, the factories can delegate 20% of its lands to build apartments and sell those to qualified workers. So the factories still maintain their right to use the land, but the workers will have their own property right to those purchased apartments and qualify themselves as ‘urban resident.’ With a purchased apartment in the urban center, this second generation of rural peasants can be integrated steadily into small town development processes. However, the major problem with why this plan can’t be fully implemented is that those rural kids are of such low quality and they can’t meet the demands of the factories.

While quick to point to youth as the reason for a hard-to-implement policy, what the director seems to leave out in his discussion about the potential and pitfalls of a rural development plan is that most of the jobs created by the local garment and food-processing factories are as Edmondson (2003) observes in the U.S. context, short-term, low-paying jobs with few financial securities and employment beneficiaries. Through my occasional conversations with factory employers, very few of them expressed their interest in participating in such a costly

move towards the benefits of rural laborers. This stark reality of unstable and low-paying youth employment nevertheless is often overlooked in the rhetoric of a “promising” rural-urban transformation project. With tides of high-turnover-rate jobs opening everyday, rural youth are invited to imagine themselves as able to transform themselves and live the hyper-advertised “mainstream comfortable life” by working hard in factories and gathering enough money to purchase their own urban homes which they might in actuality never be able to afford. For the majority of those youth don’t deliver, their low quality due to their rural roots then is incited as the major contributing factor of their own failure. Thus instead of examining the potential dilemma in the scheme of small town development, the rural youth are blamed for their own inability to participate in the modernizing storyline and transform themselves in a speedier manner into productive and consuming urban subjects. Becoming a certain kind of consuming “urban subject” as constructed through neoliberal discourse might be the ideal unified way of living for today’s rural youth, the path of that transformation nevertheless is that of a hard, if not almost fictional feat for many.

For many youth who can not legitimately become an urban subject through purchasing a costly apartment in town centers, they are always inevitably constructed by other storylines and desires incited by modernity. The young men who took to the streets on motorbikes and the young women who found new pleasure in connecting to the outside world through the Internet are taking up ways of living that are quite different from their parents and grandparents generation. For many of the youth who now commute to and reside temporarily in the county town center, they share part of the modernizing storyline with the government officials and many other rural residents who cast rural village life as just hard and boring routines, backward and undesirable. But their new found desires for a modern life are often met with suspicion from their rural communities. For older generations of peasants, rural life and identity is read as a way of living that values community, family life, self-sufficiency, social trust, proper familial respect, all

of which have been the traditional moral order of Chinese way of living for more than two thousand years. The routines of everyday farming is regarded as solid hard work compared to the on and off daily work youth take on in the rural town center. Noticing how the girls I am interviewing are all looking for factory or service-sector jobs, my grandmother-in-law commented,

The young kids these days are really having a good time enjoying themselves. They no longer do any hard work anymore. They only want short-term work. It's easy and fast money. To work in a construction site, I heard one can earn up to 70 yuan (10 US Dollars) a day. In the old times, we need to start planting seeds in the spring and then wait until the fall to harvest. No wonder no kids stay in the villages anymore.

And the grandfather shook his head and added,

Young kids these days are spoiled and have no manners and sense of responsibility at all. They only think about going out to those short-term work to earn money for themselves. In our time, we have to respect the parents and offer our earnings to them. But it's not the case anymore. Whatever the young kids earn these days, they spend it all. I heard that many kids in our village spent hundreds and thousands yuan to buy this and that, those useless things. And all they want to do is to play in those Internet bars, game rooms and dancing discos.

The nostalgia for life as pure, simple, orderly and not contaminated by "money" is often incited by villagers and rural teachers who expressed their distress with the shifting scenery of rapid industrialization and commercialization. And not surprisingly this generation of youth who are invited by the nation-state to "leave farming" and participate in a "modern" life marked by consumerism is blamed, since unlike the previous generations, they no longer desire what their elders desire and have no investment in continuing such a simple and orderly way of agrarian living. The consequences of modernity as breaking down "the web of moral and emotional, family and neighborly bonds" (Bauman, 2001, p.29 as cited in Edmondson, 2003,p.78) have been translated into a local discourse of viewing the youth as embodying those social problems. Their

presence in the unsupervised urban streets consequently becomes the symbol of modern instability that threatens the stable attachment and boundaries of village life.

But even within the discourse of agrarian tradition, the attitudes toward a rural identity are not uncomplicated. As I have briefly outlined before, rural ways of living and producing have been historically constructed as an under-privileged social identity which is deprived of comparable social benefits and status under the socialist government's household registration system. Because of centuries-long agrarian tradition, peasants are considered to be self-sufficient subjects who have their land as their means of living, so as a social group, they are largely excluded from the central government's plan of social welfare. Even if there are reminiscent talks going on about the traditions of a rural community, rural identity is never a desired social category. So in an interesting twist, even for those villagers who talk nostalgically about the past rural life as that of devoted hard work, simple, pure and not contaminated by "consumerism and money" and those who make comments about other rural youth as lazy and spoiled kids, they never fail to utter their desire for their own children to leave the rural way of living.

Rural space and identity is thus revealed here as a complicated site of competing discourses with a distinctive Chinese characteristic and simultaneously bears the marks of global neoliberal policies. The urbanizing rural space is read with ambivalence by both government officials and villagers. For the government officials, it is read as a space of "promise" if the backward ruralness can be transformed into an efficient, profitable and commodified modern space. But the transformation and migration of the huge numbers of so called low-quality "surplus agricultural labors" into the urban space is regarded as both a necessity and a major problem since the rural bodies are often imagined as rough, lazy and unruly as contrasted with sharp, dexterous and disciplined industrial bodies. The flow of rural residents, especially rural youth into urban town centers thus is also guarded with vigilance and scrutiny. As Pun (2005) observes in her study about migrant women workers in China, "rural bodies are imagined as

abject subjects – that is, the dark flip side of the new, modern, and desirable identity” (p.14).

What this new, modern and desirable identity entails is the cultivation of a “proper” subject who is said to be willing to subject him/herself to the constant surveillance of industrial disciplines and exhibit oneself as a “responsible, efficient and skilled” industrial laborer. Through transforming oneself into such a “qualified” proper industrial laborer, the rural modernization storyline then further invites the rural youth to participate in the desires of consumerism and offers the feeble promise of changing one’s official status from rural to urban through becoming a particular kind of consumer who can contribute to the real-estate economy stimulus plan. However, to complicate this official modernizing storyline, the invitation of rural youth to become consumers and industrial laborers are often met with mixed feelings among the villagers and rural teachers I encountered. As my conversations with my grandparents-in-law and other villagers revealed, the consequences of rural modernity with the loosening up of traditional familial and community values are often projected in a discourse directed at the youth.

In the midst of such a series of unraveling scenarios is the ambivalent image of rural youth and the experience of growing up. If youth is once considered simply a rite of passage in terms of taking up assumed adult roles within families, then facing the new demands of a nation’s modernizing project, the experience of growing up is apparently infused with often conflicting meanings and thus becomes far more problematic. On one hand, rural modernity and the emphasis on individual transformation brought about by neoliberal discourse offered new storylines of becoming a “rural” youth. The invitation to transform oneself into an appropriate “urban” subject opens up new possibilities for youth to actively negotiate their “rural” identity.

On the other hand, as Johnson (1993) has poignantly argued in her study about Australian youth in the 1950s, “the more a society perceives itself as unstable and precarious in its legitimation of the social order or the social norms of its culture, the stronger is the image of youth and its use to register these anxieties” (p.36). Her observation connects well into the stories

of a modernizing rural locality and the conflicting assertions made about rural youth by the government officials and villagers. Youth is projected here as both symbol and victim of modernity through which feelings of uncertainties and anxieties of a rapidly changing rural space and identity are expressed. For rural Chinese youth dwelling in an ever-shifting social landscape and caught in-between these contradictory discourses of their local rural communities and the national project of rural urbanization, to become a “proper” subject is inevitably marked with ambivalent desires and complicated negotiations of the physical and psychological boundaries of those hierarchical categories of the rural/urban and traditional/modern. If becoming a recognizable and legitimate “self” involves participating seamlessly in available storylines, then the often irreconcilable demands of maintaining one’s rural roots as required by the local community and simultaneously embarking on the imagination of transforming oneself into a qualified “urban” subject, set today’s rural youth at the edge of an ever-complicating process of transitioning.

Of particular interest to me are the gendered experiences of these new processes of transition which gradually surfaced in my conversations with villagers, teachers and officials. Though youth has always been incited as a symbol of local communities’ uncertainty and conflicting feelings about modernity, conversations about “girls turning bad” spark far more attention and concern. In an almost similar manner to what Ms. Wang explained to me at the beginning of this chapter, these “hard to control” young women quickly become the focal point as the conversations went on about what is happening in this shifting rural space. In the next section, I will look into how complex demands of tradition and modernity bump against discourses of femininity and create contradictory and complex positions for girls. In other words, how do the shifting and embattled meanings of “rural identity” complicate the experience of growing up as a girl and the imagined “proper girlhood”?

Locating Girls in the changing rural community – the contesting discourses of “proper rural girlhood”

The conversations about “girls turning bad” came unexpectedly after my initial visit to a rural junior high school in the summer of 2006. I had just arrived at the rural town Xiuning at that time and after initiating the question of the status of girls’ education, I was quite surprised to hear from the teachers that girls were doing better than boys in junior high schools. “It is about the attitude, girls have a better learning attitude and listen to teachers,” one teacher explained to me. Sensing my disbelief, another teacher quickly added, “Our school is a rural school, you know. We are not in town. Girls here are very different from those girls in vocational schools. Their schools are all in town and those girls always hang out in the street, shopping and dating. They are no good. The boys in our school might be hard to control and rebellious as they always escape to those Internet bars in town. But our girls are rural girls, they are very simple and naïve, they only play around nearby.”

Later when I told the teacher in a vocational school about the comment made by junior high school teachers, she seemed very concerned about this comment and quickly corrected me, “This is not true. Our girls are coming directly from those junior high schools in the countryside. They are different from those society (street) girls who might be turning wild these days. Besides, we lock the school gate most of the time, and only allow our girls to go out on Mondays. We have a very strict, what we call ‘military supervision system’ to prevent the students from contact with girls and boys in the society. You know, even if our girls are good, it’s always better to pay some extra attention to keep them away from bad societal influence.”

It is interesting to note here that these two schools are closely located within about ten minutes walking distance. So even if the junior high school teachers are talking about their school being “rural” as defined by traditional social relations, geographically speaking, it is at the fringe

of the expanding town center. The teachers' comments nevertheless suggest that despite the rapidly unraveling rural social relations in the process of urbanization and modernity, the connotation behind a "rural identity" still holds its meaning when it comes to definitions of "proper girlhood." The deliberate attempts from teachers of both the junior high and vocational schools to distinguish their "rural girls" from "girls in the society" seem to illustrate some interesting gendered processes of youth and rural/urban transition.

First of all, it is worth it to point out that all the girls I encountered in my fieldwork describe themselves first and foremost as girls from the countryside, which means that "the society (street) girls" who reside in the county's town center are also coming from rural backgrounds and considered themselves rural girls. So why do teachers make the deliberate attempt to associate ruralness with "good" femininity as against those "turning bad" girls in the society who are rural as well? Or to be more exact, why is this distinction of "rural girls" versus "society girls" uttered in a matter of fact and common sense manner when all girls in actuality are "rural girls"? How are the identificatory meanings of "rural girls" and "society girls" constructed? A further related interesting and important note is that boys are seldom mentioned in those two separate categories of the "rural" and "society (street)." Boys simply are referred to as boys. That leads me to question the hidden assumptions made about "ruralness" and "society" and how these assumptions play into the normative discourse of femininity that defines "girlhood."

At the surface level of the teachers' comment, it is easy to identify that those teachers associate "ruralness" with a sense of naivety and obedience, but it is important to point out that this association only applies to girls. In my conversations with villagers and teachers as I have explained above, "rural boys" has never been activated as a separate category in opposition to "society boys" the same way as the category of "rural girls" is constructed as against so called "society girls." The hidden assumption seems to be that, while rural boys have largely been accepted as "natural" trouble makers because of their masculine identity, rural girls are often

positioned as better students because of their compliance and “good attitude” associated with passive and confined femininity. But with the small-town urbanizing project, boys as well as girls are encouraged to seek out chances to transform themselves through factory work and consumption into “urban” subjects. That means increasing numbers of boys and girls are now in the midst of migrating physically into the open space of rural town center.

If “proper girlhood” as what we illustrated at the beginning of the chapter is often marked by containment and non-desiring, then the appearance of increasing numbers of restless rural girls wandering by themselves in the unsupervised space of the town center certainly threatened and troubled the conception of a traditional femininity in the rural community. For villagers and teachers, the assumption about proper femininity seems to pass down naturally from the agrarian tradition when girls were largely confined to the private space and rarely ventured outside their immediate surrounding. The categorization of the “good rural girls” then articulates a desire and anxiety among villagers to keep the girls within the supervision of the adults, their families and the school. Girls who are under supervision and remain in the more private space can be justified as being “good” in comparison to rural girls who are now wandering around in the open and unsupervised public space of the street.

Furthermore, the construction of the categories of the “good rural girls” versus “turning-bad society girls” also indicates a gendered process of youth transitioning from rural to urban space. For the local community, rural boys’ exhibition of uncontrollability is largely accepted as part of the process of negotiating their way into a modernizing open space, but girls in contrast are considered vulnerable to the modern storyline and needing protection. Thus, transgression into the public space, as in contrast to containment to the supervised and more private space of the school and rural homes, is articulated as one criteria of distinguishing so called “good rural girls” from “girls who are turning bad.”

Another important discourse teachers and villagers often make of girls turning bad is many rural girls' new found desires in consumerism encouraged by an increasing market-driven economy. The "good rural girls" are often imagined as those who seem to have nothing to do with the rapid changes happening in the town center. Rural urbanizing processes might have elicited new desires for youth to engage in consumerism (buying clothes, participating in trends, etc) and new ways of communication (Internet, cell phones, online chatting), the good girls are supposed to remain "innocent" bystanders who are unaffected or able to resist such a modernizing storyline. As one mother proudly tells me of her daughter in contrast to her niece,

Once one relative bought a pair of jeans for my daughter, the trendy kind with two big pockets in the back. My daughter took a look and told me that she didn't want it, because those weird clothes are for "those girls," not her. One of my relatives' daughter is not so good as my daughter. She's been affected by bad societal influence. Always following the trend from other girls in town – buying new clothes, flaunting about her wavy long hair style, even got a cell phone hanging on her neck as an adornment. She is no good, not polite, and don't want to study anymore. I confiscated her cell phone once and she even got revenge by snapping my cell phone. She is of such low quality.

"The bad societal influence" this mother mentions in this case refers to many rural girls' newly found desires in self-expression through dressing styles and the newest electronics. If you browse through the main street of the town center, it is hard not to notice the increasing numbers of franchise clothing stores opening every once in a while. For many young girls migrating to the town center, the slogan of the "comfortable mainstream life" and the image of well-dressed urban middle-class couples advertised outside the walls of the real-estate construction sites are what capture the immediate imagination of an "urban dream." In China's recent economy stimulus plan, rural consumers are now considered the major target as a potential expanding market of China's next economic move. Rural girls might have become the desirable consumers where the commercial interest of the market-economy lies, however, the explicit desires exhibited in those enthusiastic self-expressions through acts of consumerism seem to transgress the "normal" code

of a subdued and passive femininity for the local community. As the aunt expressed in her concern of her niece's aggressive gesture of taking back the cell phone, this girl's series of acts in re-inventing herself through clothing, hair styles and a new cell phone is read by the aunt as symbols of decadence and disobedience, and resulted in her final conclusion of her niece's lack of proper quality. While purchasing an apartment, an act of ultimate consumerism as constructed by the official discourse is largely considered legitimate and imperative, the rural girls who explicitly participate in consumption in contrast are held to be symbols of a community being corrupted by consumerism.

In the above two episodes, "ruralness" is activated as a meaning-making identity specifically associated with the upholding of a confined femininity. Furthermore, "ruralness" is set to be the opposite of "society" which the community views as a dangerous and unsupervised space that threatens not only the subjects of "proper rural girls," but also the very borders of the rural community and village life itself.

According to St. Pierre (2000), "each society has its regime of truth ... the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (p.497). For the rural communities in Xiuning County, the shattered and changing meanings of rural lives within the nation-state's modernizing storyline certainly have made the "truth" about agrarian ways of living problematic and complicated. If as Davies (2004) argues making meaning of a certain identity and truth is activated not only through participating in desirable categories, but more importantly through the abjection of the other to guard the borders of one's own identity, then what we have just witnessed is exactly such a process from the local community. The uncertainty about the flows of migration and shifting social relations as a consequence of modernity is projected onto the gendered body of the rural girls. Through the deliberate articulation of the "good rural girls" and the othering of the "society girls" who are considered physical and psychological transgressors of

traditional feminine codes, the villagers and teachers struggle to hold onto their sense of a rural past which is tearing apart amidst the chaos of urbanization. “Ruralness” in this sense is set up to construct an imaginable “proper girlhood” that is innocent from the consequences of modernity (the physical movements that threaten the borders of the rural community, the desires of consumerism in opposition to rural self-sufficiency). The projection of “ruralness” and “society” onto the bodies of the adolescent youth is thus decidedly (although seemingly natural) a gendered one, exactly because of the gendered nature of the notion of youth transition and rural/urban transformation. For the local community, the consequences of modernity are understood as inevitable. But this exploration and transgression to the world outside the borders of the community as a self-determining individual is regarded as a masculine adolescent experience (Johnson, 1993; Aapola, 1997). So while rural boys are encouraged to explore and enter the dangerous “society”, rural girls who enter the storyline of modernity are quickly being brushed off as the illegitimate, abject other by their communities.

The female figure, as observed in many other Third World feminist writings, has always been held as the bearers of traditions that need protection amidst the rapidly unraveling world of modernity (John, 1996; Narayan, 1997; Mohanty, 2003). The construction of the “good rural girl” is exactly such a contentious fiction uttered from that desire. It is fictional, because eventually those “good rural girls” will have to go into the urban town center looking for jobs. Here, it will be interesting to ask a tentative question: what the villagers and teachers will make of their imagined “good rural girls” once they enter into “society”? Will they be by default considered “turning-bad society girls” once they transgress into the unsupervised space of the “society”?

The answer to this question, however, is complicated by another set of discourses – the modernizing storyline. In an interesting twist to the local community’s projection of the “rural”

and “society,” the modernity discourse taps in and complicates this storyline about the subjectivities of girlhood.

If you still remember, Ms. Wang, the vocational school teacher we met at the beginning of this chapter, has offered her own ambivalent and contradictory version of “rural girlhood,” which quite interestingly illustrates the struggling interplay of the demands of modernity and rural values. In her role as a vocational school teacher training future industrial laborers, she expressed her distress with the “rural girls.” As she explains further to me,

These rural girls might be naïve and simple, they are sort of having everything in their face. But maybe because of their parents’ lack of education, the problem with these rural girls is that they are so impolite and talk in such a direct and loud manner. For example, if I give them a task to do, they have to ask for every reason and detail why they have to do whatever they are told. The girls in my class are very outgoing and it’s hard to regulate them. What we need to do is to “correct” them. One day they will enter the society and if they still behave like this, they will definitely hit the wall soon. You need to be more aware of your manners when you enter society.

“Ruralness” ironically is activated here to signal a “lack of confinement” in the girls as they questioned endlessly the purpose of the tasks they are assigned to do. It is clear in Ms. Wang’s comment that to enter “society” as a legitimate subject is to be able to desire as one’s own and behave in a common-sense manner. Her understanding of girlhood and modernity offers a contesting view of the “society” and the meaning of femininity which bears more similarity to the government officials’, but rather different from the teachers we have just spoken to. Under a modernizing storyline, “society” is elicited to signal a modernizing space that rural girls eventually will have to participate in. It is also a space where social relations are constructed very differently from the rural communities where people are organized in a relatively stable local context and human relationships are constructed in a straight-forward and close manner. Daily routines of farming and chores are intrinsically meaningful, rather than merely habit for habit’s sake (Giddens, 1991), so every detail and purpose of a single act is often explained carefully to

the younger generation to infuse the simple act of seemingly repetitive action with values and meaning.

Entering the modernizing society in contrast is an individuating process that requires the individual to be able to signal oneself as a self-responsible and composed subject who understands his/her social positions. A new kind of order and codes of behavior are required. The straight-forward, curious and loud manner associated with the “rural” is thus viewed as ragged and improper for an industrial mode of femininity which requires a different kind of confinement. It is about a more strategic play of carefully-managed-femininity that signals one’s arrival as a proper industrial laborer. Girls in the modernizing storyline are encouraged to transgress into the open space of the “society,” but they need to follow a new set of norms – the industrial norms of surveillance.⁵

As illustrated through Ms. Wang’s emphasis on “correcting them,” the body of the “rural girls” is again projected as the Other to an industrial code of femininity that needs to be regulated. But this time, it is about the regulation of these young curious minds to function properly in the “society.” Through the two contrasting storylines of rural and urban, tradition and modernity, it is interesting to note that “society” is perceived in a contradictory manner both as a dangerous space that might pollute the naïve ruralness of the girls, and as a modernizing space that the “undisciplined” rural bodies have to correct themselves to fit into. At the center of these complicated and contesting meaning-making discourses of the changing social relations is the projection of the gendered body of the rural girls as the abject other. “Badness” as attributed to the bodies of the girls is repetitively taken up by different parties. But the construction of the “bad girls” and the activation of the meaning-making category of “badness” is not a single trope of

⁵ I will discuss more about this theme of “becoming a gendered modern subject” in the next chapter on schooling and transitioning into the work place of the rural girls.

discourse. Contesting discourses of tradition and modernity conflict and converge with normative discourses of femininity to designate certain girls to the category of "badness," through which "a desirable yet impossible female rural/urban subject" is made imaginable. For the local community, "badness" is constructed as physical and psychological transgression of borders carried out through female rural bodies. In contrast, in the modernizing storyline, the rural body and manner are attributed as that need to be "corrected" for girls to become "proper female subjects." This double expulsion of the body of the rural girls as "bad," "impure" or "improper" bears astounding resemblance to Elizabeth Grosz's metaphor of "dirt." As she argues that "dirt" containing:

[N]othing in itself ... Dirt is that which is not in its proper place, that which upsets or befuddles order ... Dirt signals a site of possible danger to social and individual systems, a site of vulnerability insofar as the status of dirt as marginal and unincorporable always locate sites of potential threat to the system and to the order it both makes possible and problematizes. (Grosz, 1994, 192)

Her poignant observation directs our attention from seeking the "truth" about why girls are turning bad to *how* and *why* girls are being projected onto the category of "badness." So far in this chapter which delineates the historical and social construction of a "rural identity," the complicated interplay of discourses on rural and urban, tradition and modernity interacting with normative discourse of femininity has produced some intricate expressions of what counts as valid and valued forms of femininity and what are ruled out as the "abject other." For the local community, girls' transgressing of borders is what has activated the category of "those society girls" as "turning bad." Following Grosz's argument it is exactly because such an act of transgression upsets and befuddles the agrarian way of order and the associated normative discourse of femininity. For the vocational teacher who is charged to reproduce qualified female industrial laborers, "ruralness" in contrast is articulated as needing "correction," exactly because the straight-forward and uncontainable curiosity exhibited by the rural girls is read as a challenge

and potential threat to an industrial and modern order of surveillance. It is interesting to note that the villagers, teachers and officials all see girls as behaving in an “inappropriate” manner according to their repertoires of discourses, but without realizing that these discourses are contradictory in terms of defining what an “appropriate” rural female subject is. And this is exactly how socially structured phenomenon are being held to individualistic blame. Girls are being interpreted as “choosing to be bad,” but both their transgression into the “modern space” and their unacceptable rural manner illustrate the ambivalent positions (Gonick, 2003) they have to take up within the demands of contradictory discourses.

So for rural girls who are subjected to the discourses of rural and urban, tradition and modernity, becoming a “rural/urban” girl seems to be an intricate play of “selving” (Davies, 2000, p.137). Situated at the brink of entering the open and unsupervised space of “society,” becoming a young woman now bears the burden of dis/entangling the complicated process of a series of meaning-making of often conflicting regimes of truth: how to make oneself out of one’s “rural roots”? How to participate in the desires and demands uttered in the modernizing storyline? More specifically, how to negotiate an ever more-complicating gendered category of “good” and “bad” femininity which is often constructed in opposition to the humanist version of the active, empowered and autonomous personhood? For these rural girls, to make meaning of the self as a recognizable and appropriate subject always involves a simultaneous process of making meaning of the world. In this case, it is a world with complicated and often contradictory discourses in circulation about “rural,” “urban,” and “good/bad femininity.” So in a paradoxical movement, while the rural girls are constantly being projected onto the position of the abject other to guard different sets of order, they are also very much engaged in their own complicated border-work of negotiating subjectivities that are caught within contradictory discourses. In what follows, after a long detour through the historical and social backgrounds of the contesting rural identity and the

discourses about “girls turning bad” that have subjected rural girls to some ambivalent gendered positions, we will return to the dormitory room where my conversation with the girls first started as they shook their heads vehemently against my claim that they are traditional. The not-so-spacious room is now packed with eight girls, giggling and chatting. The energy is high in the air as the girls grew excited about their stories becoming the focus of my dissertation.

They can’t recognize me anymore – Girls negotiating a changing rural identity and “proper girlhood”

“Where shall we start? I mean I have million things to tell you, but what do you want to hear?” Yiyi asked as I announced that we would formally start our interview sessions in their dormitory. The digital recorder has been turned on and to ease the awkward beginning moment, I followed the usual routine by asking everyone to introduce themselves. Without any pause, Yiyi jumped into the conversation, “Oh, we are all coming from similar backgrounds, we are all from the countryside. Yeah?” she then paused and surveyed the room for other girls’ confirmation before she repeated herself affirmatively again, “Yes, we are from the rural.” Sitting across her in another bed, Yuehua cut in to explain further, “That is -- we are not from the urban.” Other girls started to add bits and pieces of their lives into this description. “Yes, our parents are rural migrant workers”; “We stay home with the grandparents in the villages.”

It should not surprise me that the girls’ self-description would start with the immediate taken-up of their rural identity and its opposition to the “urban,” since I have come to understand through my conversations with the teachers and villagers, how “rural” as an identity infused with inferior social relations has invoked complicated meanings for rural residents. Yet still -- I was surprised. I did not expect such an “innocent” question of self-description would immediately disclose my obliviousness of the stark power hierarchies between me as an “urban subject” and

the girls as “rural subjects.” When initiating the question, I was expecting some “innocent” descriptions of one’s family background, one’s hobbies, one’s plan for future, etc. After all, it seems unimaginable to me that an urban girl would start her self-description with “I am an urban girl, not from the rural!” But instead, unanimously the girls offered their self-description as a collective story of their “rural identity.” Their choice of the marked category of the “rural” as their prior identity reveals an acute awareness of the girls about how their subjectivities are constructed within the less-privileged rural social relations. As I soon realized it also signaled a departure point into girls’ complicated negotiation to re-interpret and make meaning of their “ruralness” within shifting storylines of modernity. “Ruralness,” as it turned out in our conversations, carries with it the ambivalent feelings of self-consciousness, inferiority, resistance, pride and transformation in girls’ lives.

Those Rural Women – Abjection of the Rural Mothers

The phrase “*fu ren*” caught my attention when Yiyi started to talk about a male classmate in her previous junior high school. “There is this guy in our class who is very tedious and calculative about every little thing. Well, he is obviously a guy and good looking as well, but his character, what can I say, just like those rural women. ‘You are just like a ‘*fu ren*’ we laugh at him like that all the time. He is just so calculative and meticulous about those tiny things. But the same time, he’s so superficial and bragging about how good he is all the time. We can’t bear him.”

Her usage of “*fu ren*” to refer to the tedious manner and superficial personality of a male confused me initially as I understood it from its literal meaning, this phrase should mean “woman.” So I checked with her again about what she meant by “*fu ren*.” She explained to me it

means “rural women.” That guy is like a rural woman? That doesn’t make much sense. Soon, this phrase appears again in another episode about the teachers.

Yuehua: Our English teacher is like a *fu ren* (rural woman). She always talks about those things like the oil price has raised again, or some other grocery stuff are more expensive these days. All those tedious things, she can talk for a whole class session. Ah – I’m just so fed up with her tedious talk.

Yihuai: What do you mean that she is like a *fu ren* (rural woman)?

Yuehua: En -- we just use that phrase all the time.

Yiyi (confirms): *Fu ren* means that she is just like a rural woman.

Yuehua (jumps back in): Yes, yes. When we laugh at someone or get annoyed at someone, we often say, “You are just like a *fu ren* (rural woman)”. You know those people who talk in a tedious manner and don’t make much sense, we call them “rural woman.”

As Yuehua’s final comment concludes, the girls explained to me that *fu ren* (rural woman) is the most frequently used phrase to insult someone within the girls’ circle. It is taken up as a derogative naming of someone who might be tedious in manner and speech, lack of clear logic or serious meaning-making, or meticulous and calculative of his/her own interest. While the designated meaning of this phrase might be gender-neutral as in the above case that the tedious guy was also being teased as the “rural woman,” the seemingly arbitrary taking-up of “rural woman” instead of “rural man” in constructing such a meaning-making category is intriguing. As conveyed in the girls’ discussions, the derogative usage of “rural woman” certainly carries with it the hidden assumptions that linked “ruralness” and “femininity” to signal a kind of lack as in contrast to “normal” personhood. I have overheard such usage of “the rural woman” in conversations of the villagers as well as the urban residents frequently. So this is not the rural girls’ own invention. What particularly strikes me is that previously the girls seem to cling onto their own “rural identity,” but now we get this – *those rural women* -- an identity they most probably will have to assume one day if they fail to transform themselves into an “urban subject.” It is more intriguing as I noticed that when girls activate the category “rural woman” as a derogative naming of the other, it is often uttered in a voice of innocent pleasure and sense of

moral superiority, as if the “ruralness” they are articulating in their critique has nothing to do with their own identity.

If the paradox about “the rural identity” seems unconscious in girls’ taking-up of “rural woman” as a derogative category, it soon becomes more explicit when it comes to talk about their rural mothers. The “rural mother” figure as we will see in the following episode represents something the girls seem to dread.

- Yihuai: So what do you think is the difference between you and your mother’s generation?
 Lingdi (interrupts before I barely finish my question and excitedly points to her head): Here, here, here!
 Yuehua (explains): thinking!
 Huizi (emphasizes again): The biggest difference is definitely our ways of thinking.
 Yuehua: Our ways of looking at things are so different.
 Huizi: They are very conservative. I mean “stubborn mind.”
 Xiaorong: Yes, they are very conservative.
 Yuehua: Their mind is so rigid, not as flexible. They don’t know how to turn their head around.
 Lingdi: They are like those old folks ...
 Huizi (interrupts): I used to have a teacher who said that Chinese are just like that – if someone told them one way of doing certain things, they just stick to that way. Like my mother’s generation, she’s like if this other person said such and such, she blindly listens to it and believes that. It’s just like that.
 Lingdi: Yes, yes. Someone else said something’s good, or not good, if many people talk about certain thing ---
 Huizi (jumps in): then she will think this is good, or that is not good.
 Lingdi (nods in agreement): En, en. Like my mom, whatever I want to do, she will disagree. My dad is different, he has his own opinion and always supports me.
 Yiyi: Yeah, my mom – I think my mom is like those rural women who didn’t really go to school. She doesn’t know better. But my dad will listen to me.

Beginning with Lingdi’s excited gesture pointing to her head, the girls engaged in a heated discussion about how their rural mothers are just like those “rural women” who “know no better.” The biggest issue girls seem to take on with their mothers is their old way of thinking, which was later clarified as following others’ opinions without one’s own mind. Here, there are two layers of complicated meaning-making and identity work taking place in this short exchange. First of all, as subjects who are invited to desire as their own a modernizing storyline of self-

transformation, the young girls are quick to point out what is viewed as lacking in a rural identity as symbolized in their mothers. As we have discussed earlier in the chapter, in the agrarian tradition where community is valued, who one is is often a matter of one's position within families and communities. Thus, one's proper identity is derived more from relationship with other members of the community. However, with the modernizing storyline, one has to signal his/her arrival with a sense of specificity, which means to create one's own storyline as an autonomous, rational, self-determined humanist self amidst often contradictory discourses. Apparently, Lingdi's embodied gesture pointing specifically to her head signals such an acute awareness among the girls of how to participate in a discourse of modernity as a legitimate subject – a subject who departs from her “ignorant and obedient” rural mothers. It is interesting to note here that in girls' conversations, the negative connotations associated with the “rural identity” are often projected onto their mothers and other female figures. In contrast, the “rural father” often enters into the picture as a supportive figure. As Lingdi's comment reveals, the rural father is presented as someone who supports and understands the girls' ambitions and desires, because he “had his own opinion.” For the girls, the rural fathers seem to represent an ideal of a self-determining self in the process of rural/urban transition that they themselves want to become. The gendered response of the girls towards their parents thus illustrates the potentially contentious negotiation with the complicated demands of femininity as passive and confined and the desire of acquiring the empowered masculine mode of an autonomous self as incited by the modernity storyline.

On another level, to become such an autonomous female subject caught in between tradition and modernity is always a shaky project. It is exactly because as Davies (2004) argues, that “the categories are multiple and fluid,” and “we are always in some sense both and neither of the binary categories” (p.3). In the case of the rural girls as we have elaborated in the previous sections, they are being invited to participate in a modernizing “urban” identity, yet at the same

time positioned ambiguously in their rural identity. The discourses that shape girls' sense of the self simultaneously position them either as the "abject other" needing correction to conform to an industrial code of femininity, or as the "corrupted other" needing regulation and protection from the rural communities. For girls situated within such complicating discourses, it seems inevitable that to signal their arrival as an appropriate "modern feminine subject" involves what Davies (2004) calls the "expulsion of the other" (p.3). It means that the establishment and maintenance of the borders of the 'I' as a knowable, recognizable subject is often achieved through not only participating in desirable categories within higher power hierarchies, but also from "a negation and use of others who are constituted as different" (Davies, 2004, p.4). So in a paradoxical manner, the rural girls are being projected as the "Other" by various parties in their attempts to guard different versions of borders. At the same time, the girls themselves are also engaged in their own version of negation – the othering of "rural women" and their rural mothers. It is a complicated border-work to repress that othered "rural femininity" within themselves and to establish themselves as the more autonomous modern version of the female subject.

The abjection of the rural mother reminds me of what Kristeva (1982) talks about in children's violent vomiting out of the mother's milk. The milk's double status of having become part of oneself and of representing the mother makes the act of vomiting a symbolic gesture of establishing the self through abjecting the mother within oneself. As Kristeva writes, "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I claim to establish myself ... During that course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (Kristeva, 1982, p.3). In this sense, the girls' seemingly paradoxical act of claiming "rural" as their defining identity and then the unconscious and conscious expulsion of "rural women" and "their rural mothers" can be taken up as illustrations of a complicated meaning-making process of a young feminine self that is negotiating the in-between demands of rural and urban, femininity and personhood.

Taking on the cities -- Participating in urban imagination/desires

Girls' complicated reading of the changing rural/urban social relations in constructing their sense of self is further illustrated through our discussions about what they interpret as rural and urban and the meanings entailed in such different spaces. The girls had arrived at the town center several months ago and their initial excitement of leaving village homes and residing in an "urban" town center has been gradually replaced by a sense of boredom as the girls complained to me that besides clothing stores, Internet bars and a few streets, there were not many things to do in Xiuning's town center. Nevertheless, when I asked about their initial idea about becoming a tour guide (the girls are enrolled in the tourism and hotel service major in the vocational school), their eyes lit up and their voices grew louder as they depicted to me a life of exploring the boundaries outside their immediate rural communities.

Yihuai: Since when did you start to get interested in becoming a tour guide?

Xiaorong (immediately jumps in): I like to travel.

Meifang: I like to travel too. I can wander around in all those different places.

Lingdi: I heard people say that a tour guide can even go abroad. I want to go to.

Yuehua: To go abroad, I think you need to know English.

Xiaorong: I think so too. You don't know English, how can you go abroad?

Lingdi: Well, then just travel around the country. I really want to go to different places.

Xiaorong: Me too. I really want to go to see the world and experience something.

Yihuai: So you all want to go out to places? Where do you want to go?

Aiai (excitedly): Cities, cities, the bigger the better!

Yihuai: I heard that you have already been to Shanghai? (Aiai's parents work as migrant workers in Shanghai)

Aiai (voice lowers down): Well, it's so-so. Nothing much. I only had time to walk around after 7pm, so I didn't get to see a lot of things.

Several Girls (yelling): Her dream is Provence! (the place that appeared as the setting in a Chinese romantic TV series the girls are watching currently)

Yiyi (abruptly interrupts): I just feel that my world is so small and limited.

As summarized by Aiai's exclamation "cities, cities, the bigger the better," the urban is set up in girls' imagination as a space of excitement and more importantly signals a departure from the confined boundaries of their immediate rural identity and communities. In their heated discussions about "seeing the world," the urban cities are activated to offer the girls a sense of establishing themselves as an imaginary free-traveling autonomous female subject as in opposition to their mother's generation of confined femininity. With the help of the media (mostly romantic TV series), girls who seldom had the opportunity to travel to the rural town center by themselves before, are now offered glimpses of a middle-class urban female youth experience. The dream of traveling by themselves outside the community and even to "Provence," an exotic foreign place, is the secret bond among these curious young minds who often look down upon other "obedient" rural girls' lack of desires. The urban dream also holds important symbolic meaning for the girls as they navigate the limits of their rural identity and the possibilities of an opening-up modern storyline.

Yet when the fantasy hits the reality, the storyline changes. In a paradoxical manner, Aiai, who previously excitedly yelled about her desires to go into "big cities," suddenly dropped to a quiet voice when I inquired about her experience in Shanghai, the biggest city and business center in China. Her parents had worked there for several years as migrant workers and last summer she went to visit for two months and helped in the small restaurant her parents opened at the outskirts of the cosmopolitan city. I was expecting some vivid and exhilarating sharing of her fantasy coming into reality, but instead I got a very dry, brief and cut-off reply that "there is nothing much." Soon I realized that many of the girls have actually traveled to some urban places with their parents, but their physical presence in the urban space is often marked with a sensitivity of their "rural" identity – an experience very few of them reflected as "exciting." Another girl Wei later explains to me a similar experience,

I went out with my parents several years ago to a city. We took the train and that was my only time ever taking a train. But – oh, I even forgot where I went. It was just like we went there and my parents went to the local textile market. They were doing clothing business at that time. That was all I can remember about the city.

If the fantasy about traveling to big cities, which generated such heated atmosphere minutes ago, can be read as a declaration from the girls of their attempt to break away from a “rural identity” and confined femininity, then the real experiences of traveling to urban cities with their parents seem to drag the girls back to their awareness of their own “rural identity” as inferior. Quite different from their fantasy as the free-will traveler assumed by the middle-class urban heroine they see in the romantic TV series, rural girls’ presence in urban space, is more often out of necessity in assisting their parents with finding a better living. That explains Aiai’s comment that she never really had the chance to explore the city in daylight. In their reluctance to elaborate on their “real” urban traveling experience, followed by Yiyi’s final and sudden shift of topic (I just feel my world is so small and limited), the power hierarchies of the urban and rural girls’ experiences cut through the rosy fantasy the girls had previously enthusiastically participated in. My “innocent” inquiry created an atmosphere of uneasiness.

But “urban” -- with all its hidden meanings did not drop out of our conversation. As Yiyi continues,

Yiyi: I definitely will not return to the countryside. 365 days a year, always under the sun and wind. No.

Wei: I have the same feeling. I don’t want to stay in the countryside anymore. I think I can expand my horizon even if I simply just stay in the town.

Yihuai: What do you mean expanding your horizon?

Wei: Like last time when we were having a debate about the benefits and dangers of going online. Everyone wants to say something good about going online, but we know so little about the Internet. Like I heard before there are some famous people opened their own business through the Internet, but I know so little and can’t really talk about it.

Yiyi: Yes, I just feel that I have very little knowledge about the outside world, and our life is just so simple and ordinary, we know so little about the society and the world.

Wei: I really want to go out. But haven’t got the opportunity yet.

Yiyi: I think now that we are getting this diploma in Xiuning, this is, well, an urban town center, so I think they will have some more formal job opportunities laid out for us after this, maybe going into some big hotels? I think it'll be better for us to really go into the society and experience the world.

Wei (reconfirms): Yeah, I really want to go into the society and experience the world.

In this exchange, the two girls Yiyi and Wei shifted the imagination of the “urban” from the previous fantasy talk to a more realistic account, which they see as holding a more feasible meaning of self-transformation. The “urban” in their conversation has been changed from the “big cities” to the rural town center of Xiuning. For them, the rural town center represents the “society” that they eventually will have to negotiate their entry into. It is interesting to point out here that Wei’s home is located very close to the town center just at the roadside of the newly built street leading to the “development zone”. It is by no means a rural village as I had imagined. Very few of the villagers in her community are still engaged in farming and the farmlands have been mostly turned into construction sites because of the close proximity of her village to the town center. If the boundaries between the physical rural and urban locality have been blurred and disrupted by the expanding small-town development plan, the psychological boundaries and hidden social hierarchies associated with these two identificatory categories nevertheless still hold significant meanings for girls who are struggling to make sense of their own “appropriate” social positions. They attribute their lack of “society” knowledge to their rural roots and envision opportunities for “formal” jobs and “real” experiences of the world from their transgression into the open space of the urban town center. At this moment, the boredom the girls have felt about the town center with its limited activities is being replaced again with a fantasized version of the small “urban” town as a desirable space that they can break away from a confined rural femininity and achieve their own sense of transformation.

In both conversations, the girls exhibit a complicated understanding of the “urban” space. Despite their unfavorable physical interaction with the “urban” space as a geographic locality,

they never seem to cease from continuously re-constructing the “urban” as an imaginary fantasy space holding symbolic significance for them. Their eagerness to “go into the society and experience the world” in either big cities or the small rural town center embodies the ambivalent struggles girls take on to make meaningful of a transitional world which simultaneously shapes their own very sense of self as a “rural” subject.

If these girls appear to be too eager to break away from a confined and appropriate “rural femininity” in the previous episodes, then in another interesting twist, “rural femininity” has also been taken up by the girls as a source of pride to distinguish themselves from urban girls.

Yihuai: So do you think there’s any difference between rural and urban girls?

Yiyi: I think so. For example, like doing housework. We rural girls usually do a lot of housework, but those urban girls can’t. They don’t know how to do housework. Then – yes, maybe they get to know new stuff like the Internet earlier than us. But except those, I don’t think there’s much of a difference.

Wei: En, not so much difference. But they might see more of the world than us. They see more things.

As Yiyi later revealed to me, her parents were building a new house during the summer and she was assigned the task to cook for all the relatives and villagers who came to help with the building project. “I have to cook like more than ten people’s meal every day. My parents said that since this is summer time and you are not going to school, you should help out at home. I was so nervous at the beginning. It was like a whole day’s preparation and cooking for so many people. But now I feel proud of myself, almost in disbelief that I handled the situation. I cooked for more than ten people everyday for a month!”

As McRobbie (1991) observes in working-class British girls’ experience, “cooking the family meal was recognized as a major responsibility and the girls assumed an air of self-importance when they talked about it” (p.52). In a similar manner, while eager to explore the

open and unsupervised public space of the “urban,” the rural girls nevertheless take pride in their domestic skill as an expression of a qualified femininity in comparison to the “urban girls.” Yiyi obviously used her “domestic skills” to project a lack of feminine quality in the “urban girls.” The urban girls might have more freedom to explore on their own, but both Yiyi and Wei in establishing their own sense of “legitimacy” suggest that while they can gradually acquire the modern female subject’s freedom by participating in the “urban” space, the urban girls’ innate lack of proper feminine domestic skills is beyond repair. Their attitude constructs an interesting twist to their previous eagerness of breaking away from “proper rural femininity” which demands careful management of relationship with others and a sense of selflessness. The girls, in validating their own unique experience growing up a rural girl in transition to the urban space, reciprocate such a “proper rural femininity” with their desire to become an “autonomous” modern female self. The complicated taking up of different and often contradictory discourses on rural, urban and femininity thus creates a distinctive storyline of becoming girl as a complicated and conflicting process.

They can’t recognize me anymore – Negotiating rural and urban identities/desires

Besides the enthusiastic urban imagination girls take on to construct their sense of self, dressing up has also become an important metaphor in negotiating their identities. Girls’ investment in self-expression through dressing styles has often become the target of discourses, relegating them as “turning bad.” If you still remember, earlier in our discussion, the mother even went so far as to suggest that her niece’s indulgence in clothing and the newest electronics has made her a low quality subject that has been polluted by bad societal influence. The budding desires for beauty and fashion trends exhibited by these teenage girls are viewed as symbols of a community being corrupted by consumerism. Much to the dismay of the local rural communities,

the incessant desires of girls seemed uncurbed. The topic exploded as the girls took turns to accuse their parents of being “old feudalists” and conservatives in critiquing their dressing styles.

Yihuai: So what do you usually like to do?

Several girls (jump in and excitedly shout out at the same time): Shopping! Buying Clothes!

But we don't have enough money. No money.

Yihuai: Oh, so who gets you your clothes?

Several girls (again shouting out repeatedly): Me! Me! Me!

Huizi: Me and my parents definitely have very different ideas about buying clothes.

Yuehua: Sometimes I get myself a jacket or a T-Shirt, and my mom always comments that it's so small and you won't be able to wear it again next year. She's like that all the time, makes me sick!

Lingdi: Yes, if I get some clothes for myself, my mom will definitely yell at me 'Oh, you got such a weird thing again!'

Xiaorong: Yes, definitely. It's such a horrible experience to shop with my parents.

Yuehua: And they always give you big lessons on what you wear.

Meifang: They are like those old feudalists.

Yiyi: I think it's more about their conservatism. Like you get a pretty and trendy new piece, and you are happy about it. Then they will say something like, 'what do you think you look like in those kinds of clothes.'

Jiahui: Yeah, my grandma said that I looked like a “bad” society girl. Like a bad girl, because of my newly cut bangs. It's the trend, but she's like, what a society it is now. Those barbershops got no skills. They cut all these weird hair styles.

Huizi: Yeah, like those clothes your parents got for you are always like those for the kids, so childish.

Xiaorong: I guess in their eyes we never really grow up.

From the girls' perspective, buying clothes themselves and dressing up seems to assume a different set of meanings. In this exchange, girls put specific emphasis on how buying clothes and choosing to dress up according to their own sense of style signals a departure from childhood and offers them a sense of independence and autonomy from their parents. It is this expression of desire that seems to be problematic for the parents and the rural community members who often position girls as children, needing protection amidst the unraveling rural traditions. The new hair style and a piece of trendy new clothing can easily put girls into the category of “turning bad.” This tight regulation of girls' bodies and desires is a recurring theme found in girls' studies globally. Citing Grosz (1990) and Prendergast (1995), Gonick (2003) argues that,

[T]he body is a network of social signification, a meaningful and functional subject capable of being read or interpreted symbolically, in terms of what it hides. The body is constantly threatening to reveal the desirous girl. The combined effect of this predicament for the good girl is the requirement of a constant awareness of the rules surrounding the use of the body, rules that involve not only prohibitions and constraints, but also pleasure and desire. A girl's production and repression of her body demands, therefore, a perpetual watchfulness that might best be summarized as a 'regulation of the self'. (p.76)

For these rural girls, the simple act of dressing up involves exactly such a complicated meaning-making and perpetual watchfulness of their own bodies which take on symbolic meanings both for their parents and communities and for their own sense of self. As meanings of rural and urban, good and bad femininity, entangled to produce an ambivalent network of social signification, the strategic move to simultaneously assume and resist the subject position of the "proper girl" surfaced as an intriguing yet important task for the girls' self creation of identity. As our conversation went on,

Yihuai: If you are into dressing up, will your parents say something?

Yiyi: If you dress in a trendy manner, those villagers will always talk behind your back, say something like 'who knows what she is doing now'. Every rural village is like that.

Huizi: They will say something like 'she doesn't look like a student, she's like those girls in the society.

Yiyi: Some parents will be very against girls dressing up, some parents are OK. But most parents will say something like girls need to be like girls, you are still young now to care about dressing up stuff.

Yihuai: So then when do you start to care about your appearance and dress up?

Meifang (laughing out loud): It's when that seed starts to grow in your heart.

Yiyi: It was around junior high. I think it's like something happens naturally among your peers. You start to compare yourself with others. The first year in junior high, I didn't care much about how I looked. But since the second year and third year in junior high, girls start to change. I mean when you dress up in a good way, you feel more confident in front of others.

Wei: Otherwise, you feel bad about yourself, low self-esteem.

Yiyi: Yes, it's more like a psychological thing.

Yihuai: So then all the girls start to dress up around 13 or 14?

Yiyi: Well, those nerdy type, the girls who only care about studying, they don't really care.

Meifang: All their minds are on studying.

Other girls (in a demeaning tone): They don't even have many thoughts.

There are several layers underneath the girls' discussions about the different attitudes exhibited in dressing up. First of all, as Yiyi suggests at the beginning of the exchange, the

girls' desire to participate in trendy styles is often read by the community as the first sign of a rural girl transgressing into dangerous physical space and an uncontrollable, desirous psychological state with connotations of female sexuality. The girls are fully aware of how their taking-up of self-expression and urban desire through dressing up can end up relegating them to the category of "society girls" against their current under-control and "innocent" student identity. While carefully disciplined femininity through appropriate make-up, clothing and manner is part of the Western modernizing storyline for the adolescent female subjects (Johnson, 1993), in the rural Chinese context, being a "good" girl often means negation of the explicit exhibition of feminine dressing styles. In parents' assertions that "girls need to be like girls," or "you are too young to dress up," explicit expression of feminine desires through dressing styles is read as taboo for adolescent girls and vigilantly guarded against by the adults. The desirous girl as Gonick (2003) suggests needs to be hidden from the public eye.

Yet for the girls, dressing up assumes a different and important symbolic meaning. As Meifang laughs, "it's when that seed starts to grow in your heart," dressing up then becomes a symbol of girls' own awareness and assertion of their desires despite all the opposition from the parents and communities. The act of behaving against adults' prohibitions on bodily adornment offers the girls a sense of pleasure and excitement in claiming their own desires and bodies. Besides the significance of taking control of one's own body, trendy styles also signal a rural girls' gradual transformation from her rural past to a potential future urban subject. As Yiyi later explains that it was during the second year in junior high school that she started to take cues from other girls in this process of self-transformation. The physical transformation becomes a source of pride among the girls, because as Wei and Yiyi suggest, it entails the psychological transformation from an old-time, confined rural girl to a desirous female subject with the ability to connect to her inner self and confidence. Despite the fact that they might be relegated to the "bad girl" category since they have transgressed the requirement of a more

confined femininity, the girls nevertheless strategically constructed their desire as a more superior understanding of how to become an autonomous modern self. The good-behaving schoolgirls who never seem to invest in dressing up are being projected as having no opinions of their own, the same way as how rural mothers are being abjected as the symbol of passive “rural femininity.”

The ability to read against and re-interpret the potential danger of being labeled as “turning bad” is often taken up by the girls as a countering strategy in constructing their own version of an “appropriate” and desirous self. And interestingly, the first step to achieve that “new” self is through the proud declaration of “not being recognized” in the community.

Yiyi: In these two years, I changed a lot. Well, I grew up a lot physically. But really, in the past I was so frumpy like those rural girls. Now I know how to dress up, so I changed a lot. Sometimes those villagers can’t even recognize me. When I passed by them in my village, they didn’t recognize me and asked ‘that girl’s from whose family?’ After they figured it out, they would say something like ‘oh, now you are a young woman’. But I really don’t know what they think of me.

Yihuai: So villagers didn’t gossip about you like what they did to other girls who dress up?

Yiyi (laughs): I think it’s OK for me. I didn’t wear those clothes that barely cover your body. Those girls in my village who went out to work in factories earlier than me, they might return home with those revealing clothes.

Yihuai: So how about you, Wei?

Wei: Of course, there will always be village people gossiping about how you dress. (pauses for few seconds and changes her tone). Wait, no one really talks about me. Oh, I am the good girl in their eyes.

Yihuai: So you will continue to maintain the good girl image?

Wei: No, not really. I think I will change with time. About doing make-up and dressing-up, my dad said just dressing up in an appropriate manner, not too trendy. So I think I’m OK in his standard.

Yiyi: I think those city girls might be dressed up in a revealing way, very few of us will dress that way.

For Yiyi, who giggled as she made her statement that the villagers could not recognize her anymore, the possibility of her not being recognized as an “appropriate” female subject might be of some concern at that moment, but she seemed more eager initially to let me know that she has achieved a sense of satisfaction with herself as she departed from other frumpy rural girls.

This change is all desirable within the modern storyline of consumerism and developing a sense of an autonomous self. Taking pride in not fitting into a recognizable subject position in her rural community, Yiyi, like many other girls I have talked to, constructs for herself an illusory storyline of becoming a desirable modern “other” to her rural identity through dressing up. However, the contradictory demands on proper femininity of the tradition and modernity soon caught her again as she was quickly forced to shift her focus to re-project herself as the “not-bad girl” in her rural community. Citing Walkerdine’s notion of “splitting”(1990, p.151), Gonick suggests that “the desire to constitute oneself as good means repressing the reviled parts of the self and projecting them onto an Other”(2003, p.65) . In an attempt to justify her self-expression through dressing-up as a “legitimate” and subtle form of transgression, she employs the image of the “real” (or imaginary?) bad girls – girls who went into the society and factories years before her. These girls’ allegedly revealing dressing style is read by her as an explicit expression of sexual desire. Yiyi uses that “othered” image of the society girl to project herself as taking up an “innocent” way of self-expression. Through an inevitable act of “othering,” Yiyi is able to strike back on the intricate balance to maintain an “appropriate” femininity within contradictory discourses and signal herself as a subject who understands how to do self-expression within boundaries.

As Yiyi is trying hard to balance out the contradictions and create a coherent storyline of herself as an “appropriate” female subject in both the traditional and consumerist modernizing discourses, Wei offers an interesting twist in her rejection to be the “good” girl. Initially positioning herself alongside Yiyi’s story, she soon realizes that she has always been positioned as the “good and obedient” girl within the rural community. With that realization, she abruptly rejects my suggestion about her keeping the good girl image and asserts that she too would embark on a transformation. And Yiyi legitimizes Wei’s desire to depart away from her “good girl” position (also her own desire) by strategically concluding with another act of “othering.” This time the urban girls’ excessive desires are pitted against the rural girls. In Yiyi’s final

comment which returns to her “rural identity,” the two girls seem to reach solidarity that their desire of dressing up can be regarded as “innocent” self-expression of rural girls who might be transgressing certain codes but always within watchful awareness of proper boundaries. The “good girl” image with its passive and powerless position thus is strategically replaced and redefined by girls’ own constant re-invention of “appropriateness outside/inside the boundaries.” And this perpetual watchfulness and re-interpretation of different social positions are indeed as Gonick (2003) summarizes, symbols of girls’ engagement in the “regulation of the self” as legitimate subjects.

In such a series of complicated meaning-making through the boundaries and possibilities of a carefully-managed-femininity, the girls juggled discourses of old and new, demands of Chinese rural and urban identities, and positions of empowered personhood and confined femininity. They strategically created their own storyline of becoming a legitimate female subject who can simultaneously be rural and urban, good and bad or deliberately and temporarily be neither of these (though as we have now understood from poststructuralist theory, it is often an illusory position embedded in the power hierarchies of rural and urban social relations). Of particular interest is how the categories of the “(not) good girl,” “(not) bad girl,” “rural woman/mother/girl,” “society girl,” and “urban girl” are consciously and unconsciously taken up, expelled and re-interpreted by the girls at various occasions and often with contradictory meanings. Dangling in-between the desires of “not being recognized” and the simultaneous regulation and re-positioning of the self as the “recognizable subject,” these girls are engaged in complicated negotiations of their ambiguous positions within relations of power and powerless, desire and self-containment, agency and passivity in a shifting rural locality. As Walkerdine (1990) explains, “inherent in the discursive positionings are different positions of power. Individuals, constituted as subjects and objects within a particular framework, are produced by

that process into relations of power. An individual can become powerful or powerless depending on the terms in which her/his subjectivity is constituted” (p.5). In this regard, through a series of acts of abjecting rural mothers, society girls, rural girls, urban girls and the “good girl” position, and in simultaneously legitimizing their transgressing into urban imaginations and dressing up, the girls who are caught up in the contradictory demands of being an imaginary and impossible “proper girl subject,” managed momentarily to take up within the fractures of these discourses a position of “appropriateness.”

Their loud and curious manner in this case becomes their way of collectively constructing such a sense of agency, even if it might only be illusory or temporary. Through sharing of life stories, girls seem to be able to put together an alternative story of reading against the grain of what “proper girlhood” is, as defined by the local community and the modernity discourse. Their collective stories of seeking autonomy within boundaries can be read as moments of power. If as subjects they are perpetually being subjected to contradictory discourses located in hierarchal power relations, then during those numerous noon-breaks in their dormitory room, through high-pitched yells and low-voiced ruminations, in their constant re-creation of meanings of being a rural girl, the collective act of telling stories creates a sense of solidarity among the girls in the possibility of shifting the storyline of what a girl should be within all the constraints.

* * * * *

As Yiyi excitedly proclaimed at the opening of this chapter, “I have changed a lot,” the transformative journey of the girls will continue as we venture into their lives in schools and their transitioning into the work place. For now, as I conclude this chapter on the contesting meanings of “ruralness” and girls’ complicated meaning-making of their gendered positioning within such shifting discourses, I recall an incident that happened during my visit to Yiyi’s village home. It

was a cold winter day in 2009. I returned to the rural town Xiuning for the last time before departing to the U.S. to “write up” my ethnographic study on “rural girls.” By this time, I had finished my data collection (an interesting concept, meaning tape-recorded conversations?) and felt relieved to shed off my sometimes awkward role as a researcher. So, in a light-hearted mood something slipped out of my mouth as I walked with Yiyi around her village home. Glancing over the beautiful hills with early sprouts of green tea trees, breathing the misty and fresh air of the rural mountainous village, I proclaimed cheerfully, “how wonderful it is to live in this rural village. Life is simple and undisturbed. The sceneries are beautiful and air so fresh. I wish I could stay here longer.”

Yiyi rolled her eyes. She turned to me and yelled, “Wait until you stay here forever like me, getting bored for not being able to go anywhere. How I wish I could change places with you!”

A moment of silence followed between the two of us. In my search for words, I was forced to face the undeniable: As an urban subject I can choose to come and go and as a researcher I can choose to write up girls’ stories this way or the other once I leave the field. But it is always their life down here that will continue on with or without me. And no matter how much I have agitatedly reflected on my guilt and anxiety about the power hierarchies in writing the “rural” life of the girls, it is always a very different thing to live through such experiences.

This is about whatever I have written above.

Chapter 3

From School to Work and Then? -- Reading “School” (and) “Girls”

“The girls in my village mostly walked down the same path
 Went to factories before finishing junior high
 Then worked and worked
 Then got married few years later
 Then had kids
 But –
 Is this the only way I will end up living?
 I heard myself screaming NO
 I just want to become an *ordinary* person
 Having an *ordinary* job
 Living an *ordinary* life
 Just Not Like *them*
 Just Not traveling down their path.”

Yiyi

In my last fieldtrip to Xiuning in the early spring of 2009, Wei, whose home was close to the town center, invited me and Yiyi over for a visit. If you remember from our earlier conversation, Wei is the girl who called herself the “good girl,” but hesitated when I asked her whether she would maintain such an image. That conversation happened almost a year ago. Both Yiyi and Wei had been in their new vocational school for more than one semester now and were waiting anxiously for the uncertain upcoming employment opportunity. This time during my visit, Wei’s elder cousin had just given birth to a baby. In her excitement of becoming an aunt⁶ for the first time, Wei took us to see the baby. Her cousin turned out to be only twenty. But she

⁶ In Chinese tradition, especially in the rural areas of China, extended families of several generations usually live in the same village. So people with even more than three generations of blood relationship are considered relatives. In this case, even though the baby is Wei’s cousin’s, she is still considered an aunt.

had already worked in a nearby garment factory for four years, met a guy from another village and got married last year.

Afterwards, seemingly running out of things to do in the village, the three of us sat down in the gloomy dining room at Wei's and started our usual pastime – chatting. The conversation went naturally to her cousin as Wei added bits and pieces about the different lives of her two cousins, “This cousin you just met, she is my eldest cousin and she is always the good one. After finishing her junior high, she went into a garment factory and never changed her job. She worked there for four years and got married and had a baby. Everyone in my family and the whole village always say she is such a good young woman. The only thing that's not so ideal is that she still married someone from the village. Her mom was hoping for something different for her marriage, but still you can say nothing bad about her.

“And then I have this other cousin, who is just one year younger. Oh, she is a wild girl even when she was young and everyone in my family says that she is really turning bad these days. She didn't want to go to school anymore after the second year in junior high, and insisted on dropping out. Afterwards, she has been drifting between different jobs, never stayed in one factory long enough. And I heard rumors about her dating different guys, not settling down. She is definitely the bad girl in our family.”

Just as Wei was making all the righteous talks about her “good” and “bad” cousins, her tone suddenly changed with an interesting mixture of shyness and pride, “Yihuai sister,” she leaned forward as if to tell me a secret, “I think I'm a little bit turning bad these days now.” I was puzzled for a moment about what she meant by “turning bad” and she went on with a giggle, “I now enjoy going online and doing chatting stuff. I know teachers and parents are saying it's no good. But isn't it fun!” Her smile now spread into a full blossom as Yiyi, the other girl yelled, “I just know it!”

“But -- seriously,” Wei continued, her voice dropping into a solemn tone, “my parents were so upset when I first insisted on dropping out of junior high to get into a vocational school. I was always trying to be the good girl, you know, but I just got so tired with academic schooling and I wanted something different for myself. My dad was furious at the beginning and said that no matter what, I should continue to senior high school. ‘What’s the good of going to a vocational school, you’ll end up being a maid in some hotel,’ he would say that. But I really don’t want to go on the academic track anymore. It’s so boring and I just don’t want to live such an ordinary life anymore. I told him that I would try my best to pass the tour guide exam and become a tour guide. My parents got so upset with me, even now my mom still doesn’t understand what went wrong with me that I turned into this indulgent girl. I guess they are just used to this all-time good girl image of me.”

Yiyi nodded upon hearing Wei’s concerns about being a good girl and the uncertainty about the future, “Yes, it’s like if you can’t go on with your academic schooling, you’re doomed. But that is so hard for most of us. Most of the girls in my village walk down the same path. Some of them went out to factories before getting their junior high school diploma. Then they get married a few years later and have kids. I asked myself many times if I would end up this way. I don’t know. I just want more for my life I guess. So I always struggle with myself. Sometimes, I just want to be an ordinary person, you know like Wei’s good cousin. But other times, I don’t want to end up like that. I mean I want to be like those normal people, who have a normal and ordinary job, and then enjoy a normal and ordinary life, but not like these other village girls. I just don’t want to end up like them.”

Wei and Yiyi’s complicated negotiations of “good” and “bad” girlhood, their resistance towards academic schooling, taking-up of the new emerging discourse of privatized vocational education and their struggles and dreams towards an uncertain future of work, offered us some

glimpses into the changing world of school and work for rural girls in China. Their ambiguous attitude towards schooling poses some interesting twists to common assumptions made about girl's education and modernity in Third World context. Under the development framework, the meaning of schooling is closely tied to girls' voice, sense of self and empowerment (Seeberg, 2007). Consequently, Third World rural girls are often depicted either as victims of patriarchal families needing empowerment from schooling, or as hard-working, empowered figures who succeed in schools when given opportunities.

While acknowledging the importance of such works in their advancement of girls' schooling and equity in Third World context, I found myself wondering about a different set of questions intrigued by my conversation with Wei and Yiyi. If schooling is about the empowerment of girls, then who is the "finished product" of an empowered female subject here – the "good" cousin who finished her nine-year compulsory schooling and went on to become a "good" factory worker, or the "bad" cousin who not only resisted schooling but also factory work? Or maybe Wei and Yiyi, who rejected academic schooling and took on the new discourse of vocational schooling? And if schooling is taken to be the transformative force behind girls' development of self-worth, then Wei and Yiyi's rejection of academic schooling as an escape from an "ordinary life" seems to contradict the common belief between girls' sense of self and schooling. A more pressing question arises as I notice that the schooling of Third World girls is mostly framed as an issue of universal human rights but rarely situated within the changing Third World rural locality that is becoming increasingly connected to the global economy and neoliberal policies. In this case, as Wei and Yiyi stated, only a few of the girls could actually continue their academic schooling in the villages, then what's after schooling for rural girls-- to become a factory worker? To return to villages? Or to struggle as Yiyi expressed to become somebody – an ambiguous image of a "normal person" who departs from the "ordinary life" of

rural girls? The taken-for-granted notions about girls' schooling and empowerment seem broken down here.

If these questions unsettled and complicated the linear storyline of Third World girls' education and modernity, they are nevertheless questions heatedly discussed at the center of girlhood studies in the Western context. The schooling of girls has always been an ambivalent project as many feminist girlhood scholars point out. Framing femininity as a socially constructed set of ambivalent positions, Gonick (2007) argues about the ir-resolvable contradictions of occupying a gendered identity. The modern demands of becoming an autonomous self, yet maintaining a relational sense as the feminine subject poses a central dilemma in girls' education. As Johnson (1993) noted in the context of 1950s' modernizing Australia, schools struggled to construct an ambiguous "modern girl" subject who was now recognized as capable of transforming herself into a self-regulating modern citizen, yet still needed to remain a sexed subject with her femininity under control and preparing for her future nurturing role as a mother.

This dilemma between femininity and personhood is further complicated by the normalizing practices of schooling as one of the modern apparatuses of social regulation for girls coming from different social-class backgrounds. Drawing on Foucault's theory of governmentality, Walkerdine (1990) argues that the fear of the masses resulted in the use of knowledge strategies to make them governable, which leads to the pathologizing of working-class or minority children as something of a problem within the bourgeois middle-class order of the autonomous and rational self. She further observes that in Britain, working-class girls are often held up as lacking. Either because of their deviant passion, viewed as an excessive emotion in the rational discourse of schooling, or of their passivity towards "serious" academic work and social activity which signals their natural lack of reason. Thus, the working-class girls are set up to bear the burden of the impossible in their schooling. On one hand, their deviation from the middle-class norms of rationality means that they are closely guarded against and regulated to become

“docile subjects.” On the other hand, in the current era of “government of freedom,” they are also required to remake themselves as autonomous, reflexive subjects – the right kind of “employable” subject. So for girls investing or not investing in schooling, they are always already being defined and constructed as educational subjects through the institutional practices and discourses of schooling. While many middle-class girls who seem to be succeeding, suffer emotionally, juggling between the contradictory demands of being nurturing and selfless as a feminine subject and being competitive and self-assertive as a modern bourgeois subject, working-class girls are often made to “recognize themselves as lacking, deficient, deviant” through normalizing schooling practices with only a few of those clever enough, allowed to escape (Walkerdine, 1990, p.38).

Adding a further layer to this argument is the shifting meanings of schooling itself through different historical, social, local and global contexts. Education has undergone significant changes in its meanings and in the kinds of subject it is understood to produce (Gonick, 2006, 2007; McRobbie, 2000; Walkerdine, 2001, 2003). Writing about the Western context, Aapola, Gonick, & Harris (2005) note that the new economic context of de-industrialization has resulted in large-scale reorganization of educational systems, with emphasis on training and skilling closely linked to industry. When schooling is being increasingly framed in terms of “choice and consumption,” young people’s educational experiences have become more and more characterized by “individualization, specialization and marketization” (p.60). This new discourse of “choice” and “self-invention” coupled with the “feminization” of the labor market towards service and communication industries, have offered girls new opportunities. However, for working-class girls who are equally invested in the narrative of “girls can do anything,” their limited resources often put them in disadvantage and dilemma in becoming this “new” girl. The new marketed discourse of individualization promises them to be whatever they want in the labor

market, yet simultaneously “classifies the majority of them as only fit for low-end, poorly paid work” (Gonick, 2006,p.17).

These scholars’ questioning of the normalizing practices of schooling and the contradictory demands made on girls, especially those coming from working-class backgrounds, offered me an important framework to explore the subjectivities of girls as they move from school to work in the rural Chinese context. Returning back to my conversation with Wei and Yiyi, both girls’ rejection of academic schooling as personally lacking in meaning disrupts and complicates the taken-for-granted call for “empowerment” through schooling and the hierarchical opposition made about Third World girls as either “empowered” or “under-educated and passive” female subjects. Situated along with girls’ resistance towards academic schooling is their insistence on enrolling instead in vocational schools and their dispute with parents on the “meaningfulness” of this new kind of schooling. While rural parents are skeptical of the limited possibilities such an emerging schooling discourse might offer, the girls are very much invested in the promises made about becoming a “new” subject. It is against such a backdrop of shifting and contesting discourses of schooling that my inquiry about girls’ subjectivities in transition from school to work starts. If rural urbanization has placed demands on re-engineering the rural youth physically and psychologically into “proper” industrial laborers and market consumers, then it is important to ask how rural schooling has tapped into these changing demands and what kinds of subjects are consequently produced. In particular, what is the historical and social context of rural schooling, specifically that of the emerging vocational schooling in rural China? How is rural youth re-constructed and re-imagined through the contested vocational schooling discourses? How is girlhood re-configured within such a shifting schooling discourse? Is the emerging vocational schooling offering girls new subjectivities as claimed in the official discourse?

For rural girls such as Wei and Yiyi, the transformation from school to work seems a particularly ambiguous project as their subjectivities are hinged upon such oppositional gendered categories of “good” and “bad” girlhood, “rural girls” and “normal people,” each with loaded and contested meanings. In her description of the “good” and “bad” cousins who seem to take on different trajectories, Wei is articulating certain discourses within the community that define the boundaries of what is considered “proper” in girls’ transition from school to work. But both girls soon subverted this observation by confessing their internal struggle with such a “proper” femininity as they started to reject academic schooling and factory life as meaningless “ordinary life,” taking pride in what they ambivalently phrased as “turning bad,” and articulating a desire to be a “normal person” as against being a “good” rural girl. Their struggles in-between being “good” and “bad,” “ordinary” and “normal” speak of the often contradictory demands and gendered norms and expectations in girls’ transition from school to work. So how are girls produced through and interpellated into such contingent subject positions of the “good” and “bad,” the “ordinary” and “normal”? How are they making meaning of these contested categories in a new order of school-work transition?

To inquire into these complicated questions, I will first examine how the meaning of schooling and work shifted in relation to China’s small-town development policy, particularly that of the emerging vocational schooling. Then I will offer a more detailed discussion on how girls are made into specific classed and gendered subjects through the shifting modes of regulation and practices of vocational schooling. Of course, situated amidst such shifting and gendered discourses of schooling is the girls’ narrative on how they are negotiating and struggling with the contradictions revolved around such contested dichotomous identifications of femininity/personhood, rural/normal, good/bad girls in this transitional process of becoming somebody. Now first, let us walk back to history and start with a rural county that is proud of its long-standing education tradition.

The production of the “new” rural subject --- Contesting Discourses on Schooling

At the center square of Xiuning county stands the symbol of its pride for centuries: the *ZhuangYuan* Monument and Museum. The name *ZhuangYuan* originates from China’s two thousand years’ long history of imperial standardized examination and is an honored designation to those who achieved No.1 position as the national champion scholar after a series of exams from the local, to the provincial until the national level. Xiuning boasts itself as the Top *ZhuangYuan* County in China with the most number of top national champion scholars coming from the region recorded in history, and local people attribute this honor to their centuries’ long education tradition.

To become a *ZhuangYuan* means decades of learning Confucius canonical textbooks that demonstrates both one’s knowledge in and obedience to the imperial governance. For those who succeeded in the series of examinations, they would be awarded different levels of official positions in the local and national imperial government, the highest dream of ancient students in China. Thus, the road to *ZhuangYuan* signifies a glorious transformation of the self for those ancient rural youth from a mingy, self-sufficient and unstable agrarian living as a peasant to a government position that receives a stable stipend and exerts power working under the emperor.

For many rural youth today, their dream is often not so different from those of their ancient ancestors. As I have illustrated in the previous chapter, because of China’s historically and socially produced economic disparity between rural and urban and the strict population control policy, rural residents are tied at birth to their “rural” identity which excludes them from benefiting from most of the social welfare that urban subjects enjoy on a regular basis, such as health insurance and unemployment compensation. Since the early 1950s, the establishment of the household registration system tightly restricted the circulation of rural residents into urban

space. That means for rural youth, besides enrolling in the army, the only other way to become a “legal” urban subject and enjoy socialist state’s benefits is through schooling. Before the early 1990s, if a rural youth can successfully survive the fierce competition through various local, provincial and national standardized examinations⁷ and make it into either government sponsored professional high school or college, then the government would be in charge of locating a position for those former rural subjects in a state-owned work place called *danwei*⁸. A job position in one of those state-owned enterprises in the local town center or other small and big cities secures the formal transfer of one’s social relations and status into the urban residential system with stable stipends, health insurance and better educational opportunities for the future generation. This process is often mentioned by the villagers as “jumping out of the peasant gate” and “getting an iron bowl,” which means that by becoming an urban subject with government secured job positions, one finally can enjoy the same life-long employment and social benefits as those who were born in the urban space with such privileges.⁹ Thus, schooling and passing

⁷ Chinese high school and university admission system is based on provincial and national standardized exams. It was first started in 1949, briefly stopped during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 and resumed from 1977 until present. Students usually apply for several different majors under different tier-levels of universities. Then depending on their testing scores and that particular region and year’s enrollment ration, students are admitted based on both their application choice and testing scores. So for example, if two students from the same province apply for the same major and same university that year, and only one ration is allowed provincially for that particular major and university, the one student with higher score get enrolled and the other student will need to wait to see whether his/her second application choice will take him/her in. To have more information on the standardized examination and college enrollment system, further refer to note 5 in this chapter. Another important note, the standardized exam system was stopped during the Cultural Revolution, because schooling was generally condemned as a bourgeois form of normalizing the proletarian mind. For four years from 1966 to 1969, all levels of schooling were stopped and urban youth were sent to the countryside to re-educate their polluted minds. Very few rural youth who were deemed “red” and “revolutionary” enough were granted the limited opportunities to go to universities with a central curriculum on proletarian revolution doctrines from 1970 to 1976. For more information on Proletarian Cultural Revolution, refer to Law, Kam-yee & Brooker, Peter. (2003). *The Chinese Cultural Revolution Reconsidered: Beyond Purge and Holocaust*. Palgrave Macmillan.

⁸ Danwei generally refers to a workplace that is either a government bureau or a state-owned enterprise in urban townships or cities. It is the designated name for work units in China, but it is more than a unit of productive enterprise. It represents a certain kind of social organization that is closely connected to the state-owned central economy. According to Naughton (1997), Danwei “had multiple social, political, and economic functions and a permanent ‘membership’ of workers with lifetime employment” (168). For more information on Danwei, refer to Naughton, Barry, *The Economic Foundations of a unique institution*, in Xiaobo Lu & Elizabeth J. Perry (Eds). (1997). *Danwei: The Changing Chinese workplace in historical and comparative perspective*. An East Gate Book by M.E. Sharpe. Inc.

⁹ However, since the adoption of market-economy in the early 1990s, the government was no longer in charge of allocating and securing jobs for professional high school and college graduates. In China, this process of marketization in terms of dismantling government controlled job-allocation system for urban subjects and rural college graduates is called “breaking the iron bowl”. Since then, rural youth who manage to go to professional high school or college would

numerous local, provincial and national standardized examinations become the ultimate dream for any rural youth if they want to escape from the under-privileged rural social position into a stable socialist welfare system.

It is important to point out that besides potential social mobility, from 1950s until early 1990s, an escape through schooling was also the only way for rural residents to physically move to an urban town center if they intended to reside in the urban space permanently. Under the government's strict state-regulated central economic system, the rural population was largely constricted to the countryside with limited mobility because food stamps and other necessary grocery ration tickets were only distributed to urban residents. During those decades, purchasing something as simple as eggs, oil or sugar required the combination of money and ration tickets. For rural residents who were assumed to be self-sufficient, they were only allowed to keep enough grain and food for basic daily living and for exchange of other necessary groceries. That means if a peasant wanted to move to an urban area, s/he would not be able to purchase any food or groceries for survival without these ration tickets or stamps.¹⁰ This strict regulation of the rural population is further tightened through the state legislation that banned any activities of buying and selling ration tickets. Ultimately, it is through this regulated rural/urban disparity that the urban identity becomes the privileged social position enjoying socialist state's various benefits of free housing, health insurance, and life-long employment and stable pension. It was only in 1993 that the ration tickets system was finally abolished after China adopted a market-driven economic

have to find jobs in urban areas on their own.

¹⁰ Ration tickets and food stamps are an important part of China's state-regulated central economic system prior to the adoption of market economy. It started from 1955 and was abolished in 1993. Under the state-regulated system, everything is distributed on a ration to the urban residents, ranging from industrial materials to daily groceries such as oil, cloth, meat, eggs, and rice. That means to purchase almost anything, one would need both the ration tickets and money. And the ration tickets are distributed monthly from *Danwei* (state-owned enterprises and government bureaus) on a limited amount based on the calculation of one person's daily living needs. For rural residents, the policy is different. They are only allowed their ration food within the rural community's production, but without the ration tickets. In that way, the government was able to regulate and decrease the value of agrarian work and subtract the surplus values from peasants' work to support heavy-industrial development. So in this manner, the rural population were tightly regulated to the countryside, because without the ration tickets, they would not be able to purchase anything and survive in the urban areas.

policy and was in dire need of large numbers of cheap laborers to work in newly-built foreign-invested companies in urban developmental zones. That was when rural residents were first allowed to physically move to urban areas to seek self-employment, but of course with no entitled social benefits.

Interestingly though, for many teachers I interviewed, those old days of rigid rural/urban regulation was remembered nostalgically as a time of “good” schooling, despite the dire condition of most schools. As one teacher explains, “The students were motivated, because that was their only way out. Parents put high hopes on young kids’ education and teachers were very well respected. Yes, that was a hard period of life, but also a pure and orderly living. Those who could study well studied as hard as they could in schools, those who were not the studying types, simply went back to peasantry.”

Of course, the possibility of becoming an “urban” subject through schooling is always slim. For one thing, it is the pure ratios of youth who can finally make it to the college level. In my interview with the county’s chief education officer, he mentioned that out of the roughly 4,500 junior high school graduates (9th grade) every year in the county, only less than a quarter are qualified through tests to advance to the only two local senior high schools (around 1,000 – 1,200)¹¹. And if we examine the same pool, only 5% of those rural youth (around 200 -250) can survive the national college entrance exam and make it to college, most with scores only qualifying them for third-tier or fourth-tier junior colleges. In fact, my husband who went to the same first-tier top university as me, is known as the only one in his generation so far in the nearby

¹¹ In the Chinese schooling system, the twelve years’ education before college is divided into three parts. The first six years (U.S. 1-6th grade equivalent) is elementary schooling. The next three years (7-9th grade) is the junior high school or middle school. Students go to junior high schools according to their residential areas. The following three years (10-12th grade) is the senior high school years and students have to go through a provincial standardized exam to be admitted to different levels of senior high schools. For rural youth, because of the limited numbers of senior high schools available, most of them do not have the opportunity to continue to senior high schools. As an additional note, it is common in both urban and rural junior high schools to put students in advanced, middle, and low-level tracks with a school entrance exam. The rationale behind the tracking system is to make sure that with limited resources, the best students can be guaranteed most of the attention from the teachers and not be disturbed by “bad” students. In the rural areas, students are usually put into different tracks by grades from their elementary school standardized graduation exam.

22 villages to succeed in becoming an “urban” subject through surviving the standardized testing system into a national-ranking university.¹²

Besides the hierarchical standardized exam system, the national standardized subject matters and teaching materials centering on the cultivation of good citizens have also put rural students at a large disadvantage. For example, for many rural youth, who might have never heard of a single word in English on tape-recorders, they are tested on the exact same content as their urban counterparts in the provincial high school and the national college entrance exams. In terms of the teaching materials, as one elementary school teacher passionately explains to me, “Our rural kids are so pitiful. A lot of the things in literacy textbooks seem to be so far away from their lives. Like the other day, there was this lesson talking about a kid helping his parents mop the floor. My kids came up to me and asked me what was mopping floor. You know, in the countryside, we don’t have hard-wood floors. If a family has concrete floor, that’s considered very decent. Not to mention many kids come from homes with mud floors. There are even spaceships or submarines in the textbooks, which are way beyond what the rural kids can ever imagine.”

This disparity between rural and urban education seems further intensified as rural youth enter junior high school. Teachers in a rural junior high school mentioned with dread, the recent national education reform that promotes the so-called “quality education” or otherwise termed

¹² Until recently, all Chinese universities were public with rationed enrollment plans each year. Universities are grouped into four different tier levels based on the general academic standings. There is one fourth-tier level college located in the greater cosmopolitan urban center in the area where most of the local rural youth who survive the standardized testing system would end up because of their comparatively low testing score. To be able to go to a better university located in bigger cities, one has to reach a high enough score in the national exam. But there is a “trick” here in terms of defining a good enough testing score to qualify one as good enough to go to a first-tier or second-tier university. The Chinese standardized provincial high school entrance exam and national college exam is a highly regulated testing system with admission-ratios allocated to each greater administrative regions in a hierarchical manner. The two major cities where the country’s most prominent universities are located, Beijing and Shanghai, are given predominant rations in terms of the numbers of students from the two cities that can be admitted to college each year. Then the rest of the rations are distributed accordingly to each province. So for students coming from already privileged educational backgrounds in Beijing and Shanghai, their actual admission score to the same major in the same university is always significantly lower than that of a hard-working rural student who is very much disadvantaged from the beginning and survived from rock-bottom to the same position.

“all-round developments.” The intention of the 1999 national education reform is to produce “high-quality 21st century talents and citizens” to compete in a globalized world through encouraging extra-curricular knowledge and practices. However, in actuality this intention is measured through the same sets of standardized exams, testing students on an even wider-variety of contents, sometimes beyond the textbooks. For teachers in this rural junior high school, this new education reform poses an impossible dilemma in rural academic schooling. Rural students are already trying to cram textbook contents that are often far-detached from their immediate life. With limited Internet access, school libraries and bookstores, the extra-curricular testing seems to be “out of reach” for even hard-working rural students now. Instead of succeeding in transforming themselves into the future “quality talent,” rural youth are further disadvantaged and normalized as the “disqualified” student subject through the “quality education” policy.

On one of my trips to one girl’s village, she showed me her former elementary school which has undergone a major renovation. Standing out against the newly-finished, bright white front wall is a line of super-large-font, red-painted words, which caught my attention as our three-wheel tiny motor-cab cruised by. The line reads: “Experiencing the studying life today, enjoying the happiness of success in the future.” Groups of small young children were playing in the front yard underneath the big “success” sign. That particular scene and the children’s seemingly carefree and innocent faces reminded me immediately of my own childhood years in a well-funded urban elementary school. The difference -- I was playing under a gilded glittering sign that ingrained in me the concept of becoming a “useful talent for the nation.” While urban children grow up being invited to imagine themselves as “future talents and quality citizens,” I am not sure how these exuberant rural children would gradually come to grips with this red sign about the limited choice in their lives and a vaguely defined success leading to an even more vague future. There seems to be a hidden tinge of urgency under this otherwise cheerful discourse of “experiencing” and “enjoyment.” As many teachers mentioned to me there is an urgency to

“keep our kids at school,” to re-direct them to this naked truth that the only “real success” for rural youth is to transform themselves into a “legal” urban subject through schooling.

Even though I felt very uncomfortable with the narrowly defined vision of schooling and “success,” I gradually came to understand teachers’ concerns. All of the twelve girls¹³ I talked to on a regular basis did not finish their junior high school. Some of them dropped out in the 7th or 8th grade, others transferred to vocational schools at the beginning of their 9th grade. They are only a small example of the larger trend. According to the teachers, it is not only the fact that more rural youth are dropping out of junior high schools that worries them, more of it is the students’ and parents’ increasingly dismissive attitudes towards academic schooling. If schooling used to be defined as the only way to a “success” of transforming a rural youth into an urban subject, this idea is largely challenged today under market-economy and rural modernity. As one teacher elaborates,

Now the community has a new discourse of ‘studying is useless’. Many parents these days are out somewhere working as migrant workers. It is an easy calculation on their side. If your child is fortunate enough to survive the exam and goes on to high school, but then fails the college entrance exam, well, basically all the money you invest in the child for the three years in high school is gone and the child is left with only book knowledge, but no technical skills at all. But if their kids can learn some skill and get a skilled trade job or just get into a factory after 8th or 9th grade, then he can be a master-technician when someone else’s child is only freshly graduating from high school. Besides, there aren’t many decent, stable government jobs these days for high school graduates, and everything is about money. So you see, there is no value in schooling anymore. Kids have no motivation to study hard as in the old times. It’s hard to keep them in school when everything is about immediate profit and then no stable jobs are guaranteed these days even for college graduates. And we teachers are here talking the same old thing: studying hard, going to higher level of schooling and then getting a stable job. Students don’t listen to our old talks anymore. They

¹³ I have talked to nine girls in the jointly-owned vocational school. Half of the jointly-owned vocational school is called the carpentry and civilian school which is owned by a real-estate tycoon. The other half is called Xiuning No.1 vocational school which offers other skill-training such as electronics, molding and hotel service and tourism. The girls I interviewed are in the hotel service and tourism major in the No.1 vocational school. One other girl are from Qiongzong Tailoring Vocational School, which I later describe in detail. Another two girls are friends of the tailoring school girl. One worked in a hair salon and another used to work in a garment factory and just gave birth to a baby at the age of sixteen when I first met her. I will talk about more about their stories in chapter four on sexuality and girlhood.

leave for the ever-increasing vocational schools, which to my mind is simply short-term training with no prospects.

This teacher from a junior high school sniffed bitterly as he made his final comment about the emerging vocational schools. Undeniably, vocational schools have started to pick up stride in the larger discourse of rural schooling, but the emergence of this new type of schooling serves particular purposes and has to be read against the backdrop of China's complicated process of a regulated rural modernity.

Different from junior high school teachers' point of view of the money-chasing, short-sighted parents, the county's chief education officer told me another story of vocational schooling. According to him, the promotion of vocational schools is a move towards generalizing quality high school education for rural youth and it is the rural parents and youth that lacked this vision of proper skill training,

For most rural kids, they can't go on to normal high schools. So now we're promoting vocational schools. Isn't it great that now we have an average 60% senior high school enrollment rate and we are planning to push that to 85% by the end of 2008 if we can successfully get more kids into vocational schools. The central government emphasized a lot on developing rural vocational schools, but the problem we have is those parents. People here are very into our tradition of *ZhuangYuan* mentality. It's good that people are valuing education. But now times have changed and they need to see the reality. Only so few rural kids can actually go on to college. And nowadays even with college degrees, stable jobs are not necessarily guaranteed. I think skill training is the new way to go. But the parents and kids, they look down upon themselves and insist on 'dead' learning. I think it's a major problem in their mentality. If kids can't advance academically, they give up and never think that vocational school is a promising way.

Both the teachers' concern of rural youth dropping out of schools and the officer's push to enroll more rural youth into vocational schools, hint at the hidden reality facing this generation of rural youth. While they seem to be enjoying more freedom in terms of rural/urban migration, they are also constantly being labeled by the central government as potential "surplus rural laborers" that might pose major problems to China's fast developing market-driven economy.

According to a 2006 report from Xinhua Net, the central government official newspaper website, the pressure to “transform” and “relocate” surplus rural laborers in China is increasing every year. In the year 2006, the estimated figure of surplus rural laborers is 150 million, and the figure increases by 6 million every year. Among rural youth, the central education bureau reported that roughly 10 million every year are out of elementary or junior high schools and many of them lack necessary skills to “transform” themselves into “useful workers” and consequently become “redundant” in village homes.

The issue of surplus rural laborers is not uniquely a Chinese problem. As Bauman (2004) argued in *Wasted Lives*, the “superfluous populations” or “human waste” is an inevitable outcome of modernity and its order-building and economic progress. It is a

[c]ode name for the appearance of a number of people who, instead of helping the smooth functioning of economy, make the attainment, let alone the rise, of indices by which the proper functioning is measured and evaluated all that much more difficult... In a society of producers, they are the people whose labour cannot be usefully deployed since all the goods that the existing and prospective demand is able to absorb may be produced, and produced more swiftly, profitably and ‘economically’, without keeping them in jobs. In a society of consumers, they are ‘flawed consumers’ – people lacking the money that would allow them to stretch the capacity of the consumer market ... Consumers are the prime assets of consumer society; flawed consumers are its most irksome and costly liabilities. (p.39)

Occupying a staggering 70% of the whole population, with only 10% of total land suitable for farming, the rural people of China were once channeled by both state and market into flexible cheap industrial jobs, which fed the miracle of China’s fast track rise to global economic power. However, with their astoundingly large numbers and increasingly unstable employment opportunities, the “rural” presence also cast a shadow behind this miraculous project of China’s globalization. As the export-directed Chinese economy started to show signs of decrease in the global financial crisis, huge numbers of rural laborers who have awkwardly occupied the shaky position of disposable industrial workers were once again made “redundant,” this time by global

capitalism. For young rural youth coming of age, the so called “golden age” of migrant work in the 1990s and around the turn of the century now seems an ever-complicating reality as the global capitalist system faces its own crisis. They are simultaneously being incited by industrial capitalism to desire becoming industrial producers and also modern consumers, yet living at the edge of such a capitalist order, that any minute they might be cast as the “surplus” that the system irks and dreads. They are the loved and hated placed at the center of the already tense workings of a local socialist sovereignty and the global neoliberal logic.

It is against this backdrop of complex dilemmas that rural vocational schooling is proposed and promoted by the socialist state with a strong hand in maneuvering rural populations from falling out of the neoliberal logic before many have even entered it. Vocational schools can serve as a buffer in terms of regulating potentially threatening “free-floating” rural migration patterns of the past two decades by allocating rural youth to industrial jobs and regions in school-organized packs under measured surveillance. They are also envisioned as an important training ground that would transform rural youth into a more “desirable” subject within the neoliberal order – a subject with self-discipline, “market skill,” and the possibility of self-transformation and self-reliance in case of being made redundant again. In one word, the emerging rural vocational schooling is a concerted attempt by the state to maximize the “potential” of rural youth as a population while minimizing the instability and lurking dangers behind the unleashing of such rural “potential.” Their bodies and energies are both desired and feared. They need to be re-integrated into the rank of the “desirable” through pulling themselves out of the danger of becoming “redundant” in a time of unstable industrial employment. Though, how that path should be charted remains as vague to rural youth as to experts in China.

But there is one thing for sure. If the concept of rural vocational schooling can be successfully “sold” both to local industries and the rural population, as one expert from the national vocational education association writes (Xiao, 2008), it will be an important strategic

success towards stimulating and expanding domestic consumption, a necessary move. China needs to transform from an export-directed economy to a consumer-economy, if it is to continue its economic growth. So it is not surprising that when I inquired about the funding for vocational schools, the education officer explained that private funding is the major source behind rural vocational schooling. Out of the seven vocational high schools in the county, six are privately opened and owned. Only one was formerly state-owned and after it received investment from a real-estate developer in 2003, it became a jointly-owned school, administered by the local education bureau, but funded by the private owner. Half of the school is called the Carpentry and Civilian school which only admits male students. The other half of the school still goes by its original name, Xiuning No.1 Vocational School with skill-training majors ranging from electronics, molding to tourism and hotel management. The logic behind the privatization of vocational schooling? “It is a win-win situation,” as the officer continued, “the private enterprises can lessen the local government’s financial burden. And the government gives them tax-cuts and other benefits by investing in schooling.” In such a manner, rural vocational schooling is tightly tied into industrial capitalism under the cautious regulation of a socialist sovereignty and tagged with the popular slogan of “promoting general education for all rural youth” and “offering rural youth choice in their education.”

So what kinds of subjects are produced through the complicated discourses of rural vocational schooling? An interesting incident revolving around a school gate and the building of a school wall might offer us some insight here. After being turned away from two private vocational schools¹⁴, I finally gained entry into the jointly-owned vocational school at the town

¹⁴ One school opened by a former local government officer and functions more or less as an intermediary agency transporting rural students to the coastal factories. Another school is a garment factory in itself which offers three months training. Both schools initially agreed to grant me entry, but after I started to interview girls, they banned me from entering their gated school/factory space. More details on this matter will be discussed in the last chapter regarding power relations in the research process.

center. As I mentioned, this is a school sponsored by a real-estate developer who has stayed in the U.S. for eight years and was known in the local area as a philanthropist. In a 2007 local newspaper interview, he elaborated on his intentions of investing in this rural vocational school. For him, the major problem in Chinese education is the traditional test-driven system which fails to reach to the majority of rural youth and is constrained to “dead” textbook knowledge. “As a modern citizen, there are several important questions one needs to ask him/herself: Who am I? What is society? What is nation/state? What is the world? What is future? Otherwise, they won’t be able to develop a sense of social responsibility. I hope my school can educate rural youth to become self-responsible and hard-working people. If they can possess these two traits, even if they might not be good at academic schooling, at least they can work and live in a responsible manner and not become a liability to the society.” His remark represents the point of view of elite proponents in the Chinese society, as Ong & Zhang (2008) observes, who “stress the need of the laboring masses to improve personal attributes such as civility and self-discipline in order to sustain China’s role as a global player” (p.14).

In following up his idea of cultivating the rural youth as the uniquely Chinese subject par excellence combining both modern self-discipline and traditional values, the carpenter and civilian school he invested in is the only school in the county designed without a fenced iron gate. Modeled after many U.S. universities’ symbolized front gate, his school is built with an open arch gate standing in the middle of a flight of stairs leading to the main buildings along the hillside. In contrast to the “modern” concept behind “the gate without a gate,” the design of the gate is very traditional, which is rarely seen in China these days but more of a resemblance of those huge Chinatown arch gates in the United States. On top of the arch is the name of the school, *DeSheng LuBan*, which parallels the intentions behind the design of this specific symbolic gate. *DeSheng* is the brand name of the investor’s real-estate company and now has been made famous through a best-selling book he wrote years ago about the training and disciplining of workers which

promotes the same set of core education values he articulated in the interview. *LuBan* is the famous ancient figure known as an expert carpenter. Obviously, for this elite investor, the name and design of the school represents important symbolic meanings – that of producing self-disciplined yet traditional rural carpenters who can then be successfully made into a modern human capital brand.

However, his intentions seem to miss the target in the local community. The first time I went through the gate myself at noon to meet with the girls in their dorm, I was immediately caught by two teachers sitting behind the “open” gate. They checked my identity and let me in. After I told the girls this incident, they laughed. Apparently the teachers were there to make sure no students could sneak out of the “open” front gate during school hours. Instead of an automatic iron fence gate, now teachers took turns to serve as “human” guards under an intentionally open school gate. The vice-principal of the school complained about this “eccentric” design as he mentioned to me how much effort they had to put in to guard against students who could easily slip in and out of school. To make matter worse for him, the investor also designed this side of the school without a fully-enclosed high-walled fence like most of the schools in China. So even with the human guards at the gate, students could still make it to the street simply by sneakily walking some extra steps to an open area down the school yard. “It’s like we have to play seek and hide with the students,” the vice-principal shook his head while pointing to some trees and bushes, “without the school wall and closed gate, it is just too many students to guard against and they hide behind those trees when they see teachers coming, but then easily jump over the few stairs and vanish into the street.” Apparently for the local teachers, the elite ideal of educating the rural youth into the self-disciplined subject may sound appealing, but to transform these unruly minds and undisciplined bodies, overt-discipline is needed. So two weeks after I interviewed the school principal, I found out that the open area -- the “secret” entrance I had been using to get into the school -- was closed with a newly-erected school wall.



Figure 4. The poster reads: “Xiuning Carpenters, Excellent national labor brand”



Figure 5. The “traditional” yet “open” front door of the Carpentry School and Xiuning No.1 Vocational School

This story of the “open” school gate and the building of the school wall epitomizes the contentions behind vocational schooling and the kind of subjects it is to produce. In a parallel storyline, the other private vocational school I was allowed into for a brief time offers a more

extreme example between the discourse of producing self-responsible upwardly mobile neoliberal subjects and the overt regulation of the unruly and distrusted rural youth. In the advertising brochure I was handed, that school boasts about two predominant features. In one paragraph, it reads, “Our school is founded with the market-demand as the direction, and quality schooling as the principle. We have established long-term cooperative relations with famous domestic and international companies, such as Lenova computers, TCL electronic, Panasonic, and Philips. Over 4000 quality skilled talents have graduated from our school and are now working in these famous companies. And one third of our graduates have advanced into managerial positions.”

According to a teacher I interviewed, this particular vocational school like many others in the area does not offer direct training itself. It functions more like an intermediary agency packing and transporting rural youth to coastal computer and electronic factories. Despite its claim that the program runs for two years, most students stay for only half a year or at most one year before they are located to a factory job as assembly line workers. So what used to be called *Dagong*, a term referring to an individual migrant worker seeking work in low-end disposable jobs, is now given a polished new name “*youxiu rencai susong*”(meaning: quality skilled talents supply). The only difference – rural youth now go in organized packs through vocational schools to factory jobs instead of individually through kinship or acquaintance connections. The cost is more than 1,000 yuan (\$150 dollars) a semester with four semesters’ tuition and boarding expenses paid up front (a total of 4, 600 yuan, equivalent of \$650). And no refund is given even if most students end up leaving the school after one or two semesters. The pricy charge is justified through the discourse of promise in the brochure. In an attached letter to students and parents, a detailed list of some exemplary student names are offered with their allocated job positions and their monthly salaries, ranging from \$200 to \$1,700. In this discourse of promise painted with glittering possibilities, it seems that by working hard, rural

youth who graduated from the school can advance to a managerial position with a huge pay check.

Yet, alongside with this rosy future picture of possible self-transformation, this school offers another important set of discourses. In the following paragraph of the brochure, it says: we have adopted a fully-enclosed, half-military mode of discipline in our school. We have specially-appointed officers maintaining order 24/7. Teachers track and supervise students' performance, and administrative personnel dine and live together with students. This strict governance model has produced widely-acclaimed results in students' training and received excellent feedback from our cooperating companies." The minds and bodies of the rural youth envisioned as the abject unruly other to the capitalist discipline is demonstrated here as capable of fitting into the neoliberal discourse of mobility, but with an intriguing play of the discourse of promise and the discipline of overt-regulation. The physical taming process operated through vocational schooling which subjects the rural youth to a new order of industrial discipline is now established and understood as the prerequisite to the mental taming and illusive transformation of becoming an upwardly mobile neoliberal subject.

Thus far, we have seen how schooling in rural China has tapped into the rural modernizing storyline in its production of rural subjects. If once rural schooling has served to strengthen the disparity and order between a state-regulated rural/urban divide, now with the new emerging vocational schooling, rural youth are sought after in the neoliberal fiction of making themselves into self-disciplined and upwardly mobile subjects, since their potential as industrial producers and consumers is what capital and state both yearn for. However, their unruly minds and undisciplined bodies simultaneously expose the limits of such a fiction. Being labeled as the potentially "surplus" population, they might at any moment fall off such a neoliberal logic and become a liability to a system of "efficiency," "productivity" and

“consumption.” In the words of Pun (2005), “the creation of desire and lack is an art of the market economy” (p.13). Further pointing to the Chinese rural context, she argues that “poverty, or on the other hand abundance (surplus labor), as crystallized forms of social lack, are produced and organized by the power of state and capital. Poverty, especially the huge gap between urban and rural societies, is artificially and historically made and, most important, is something that needs to be consumed and refilled” (p.13). This seems exactly the logic behind rural vocational schooling that employs both a discourse of upward mobility and the discipline of overt-regulation. To become a “new” rural subject, rural youth have to first come to recognize themselves as lacking, deficient, and deviant to the neoliberal order. It is through this recognition of “lack” that their desire of becoming someone other than their “poor” “rural” identity is incited. The promise of upward mobility as articulated through vocational schooling in terms of salaries and managerial positions is then activated as a discourse of “meaningful” self-transformation that needs to be consumed. But to achieve such a fiction of “self-transformation,” the rural youth as the abject other of the industrial discipline now have to first willingly subject his/her mind and body under the surveillance of such an order through making themselves “trainable.” The physical overt-regulation that is prevalent in rural vocational school practices is thus justified as the necessary prerequisite in integrating the “rural” subject into the neoliberal order of a future “self-reliant” and mobile subject with market values.

However, within this promising discourse of transformation and the production of “new” rural subjects, some statistics caught my attention. In the two schools mentioned above, the carpentry and civilian school which boasts itself as one of the most publicized rural vocational school in China only recruits male students. In the other school which advertises the salaries of its graduates, it seems that overwhelmingly male students are receiving much higher salaries than the female students, despite the fact that two thirds of its students are girls. This

observation leads me to wonder about the gendered process within the shifting schooling discourse. How are rural girls projected into this emerging vocational schooling discourse of upward mobility and overt-regulation? What kinds of new subjectivities emerged for girls under such a shifting schooling discourse? At the same time, how does this re-configured imagination of becoming a “new” rural subject interact with such loaded and often contentious categories of femininity and personhood, tradition and modernity, “good” and “bad” girlhood in mapping out girls’ transition from school to work? To begin to answer these queries, I now turn to the story of a third vocational school and a so-called “bad” girl who dropped out of this school in less than three months.

The production of the “new” rural girl – Gendered discourses on schooling

Qiongqiong Tailoring Vocational School is located at the far end of the newly expanded development zone at the outskirts of the town. Just a few hundred yards in front of where my grandparents-in-law live, its modern, high-ceiling, factory-style square building stood in sharp contrast with the deserted farmlands and scattered farm houses in its vicinity. An impressive row of shining flag poles cropped up in the sprawling front lawn, with colorful flags flying high above. At the back of its main building was a hustling and bustling scene. A four-story dormitory building was in the final stage of completion. Against the backdrop of some distant mountains and dusty country roads, this modern vocational school seemed to exuberate high-energy, prosperity and promise. Upon entering the huge automatic front gate, I was immediately caught by a feeling of both amazement and disconnection. Under the high-ceilinged, spacious and sparsely decorated modern space, over one hundred girls were bending over rows of brand-new sewing machines, making a splash of busy noise. One middle-aged woman, who was referred to as the “*xiao shifu*” (vice-master) by the girls, was strolling down

the isles and rows, inspecting the progress. In contrast to the carpentry school which only admits male students, I noticed that only two boys were sitting in the corner of the last row.

This -- was quite different from what I envisioned as a tailoring school and very much reminded me of a semi-formal garment factory. I hid my suspicion and chatted with the “vice-master” about the possibility to interview some girls. Soon I learned that most girls were from local villages. According to the “vice master,” these girls generally felt that academic schooling was too much hard work and she even gave me an example of one girl whose parents offered to support her further schooling, but she rejected that and fled to the tailoring school to learn some “practical” skills instead.

To follow up with her introduction of the school, she led me to a wall at the other end of this factory-style space. Above it hung a series of gilded posters of various recognitions. One of the gilded posters read: “Tailoring Training Center for Zhejiang Xinya Garment Company.” The other one, engraved with large, red-painted characters, read: “Training Center for Transforming Rural Surplus Laborers, awarded by Xiuning county government’s ‘Sunshine Project.’” Next to the posters was a large colorful print with pictures and introduction of the school, titled: “Developing abilities through today’s training, succeeding in the world with competitive skills.” From the brief introduction, the school promotes itself as a county pioneer in the numbers of rural “surplus laborers” it has successfully transformed and supplied to coastal companies. Most notably is its proud claim of being recognized as one of the training centers for the Sunshine Project since 2004, as the introduction went on to state:

Since 2004, we have successfully trained 900 rural students for the Sunshine Project and transformed over 800 into non-agricultural industries. This year, we are expecting over 600 trainees to be delivered to our cooperating companies with an average monthly salary of 1,000 yuan (\$150). Quite a few of our past trainees earned a yearly income of over 30,000 yuan (\$ 4,000). Furthermore, many of our trainees have successfully advanced into managerial positions and some of them even started their own business in the garment industry with quite a success. Our school has established long-term cooperating relationships with

many companies in the coastal developed cities and formed a stable system of ‘company + training’ models. Our slogan is ‘guaranteed skill-training, guaranteed employment’. Now, with the ‘sunshine’ of the government’s sunshine project, we are expanding our training scale and investment to offer students a more professional tailoring vocational education.

The Sunshine Project which started in April, 2004 nation-wide is a state policy that aims at transforming the so-called “low-skill rural surplus population” into skilled industrial laborers. According to central-official Xinhua news, since 2004 the state has invested over 600 million yuan yearly (86 million US Dollar) in exemplary “peasant worker” training, focusing on supplies for garment, manufacturing, construction, and service industries which have the largest capacity in peasant worker employment. In the county Xiuning, seven vocational schools were awarded in 2004 as the designated training centers for the Sunshine Project. Four of them are similar “tailoring” schools as *Qiongqiong*. As part of the Sunshine Project, schools like *Qiongqiong* claimed to offer discounts for skill training to rural youth and guarantee their trainees with employment in coastal garment factories. In its “student enrollment” section, the school brochure continued,

Our school enrolls year-around with tailoring and sewing-machine operation training. Upon graduation, students will receive a state-recognized vocational training high-school diploma. We will take care of allocating students to coastal tailoring companies in an organized manner. The overall duration of the training is three-months with a total tuition of 600 yuan (\$ 90). Because our school is a Sunshine Project designated training center, so the Sunshine Project will sponsor 240 yuan (\$35) per person and students only need to pay for 360 yuan (\$55) for our three-month quality training. Plus, our enrollment has no prerequisite educational level requirement.

No prerequisite academic requirements, a short-training span of three months with professional high-school diploma, discounted tuition of only 360 yuan (\$55) total, guaranteed employment opportunity, the possibility of earning up to 30,000 yuan (\$4,000) every year and opening one’s own tailoring business – the rhetoric in this tailoring school’s introduction is gleaming with upward possibilities for rural girls who might have otherwise “failed” in academic

schooling and become a liability as a surplus rural laborer. Knowing the kind of work young women have to take on in a garment factory, I was blindsided by the positive metaphors employed in such tailoring vocational school advertisements. If the “marriage” between garment factory work and a “tailoring” vocational school is of some perplex, a personal history about the very establishment of Qionggiong Tailoring School by the only female boss/principal in town might offer some interesting insights into why rural girls flock to this place and insist on calling their boss “our master.”



Figure 6. Qionggiong Tailoring Vocational School



Figure 7. A traditional tailoring shop

Ms. Tang, the founder of *Qiongqiong*, is a famous figure in town. As the only successful female entrepreneur, her name is often mentioned with awe and admiration in my conversation with girls from different backgrounds. According to a recent local newspaper report, this 46-year-old woman is called the “sunshine woman from the rice paddies.” Starting from her humble beginning as a laid-off worker in a small-scale garment factory in 1983, she first opened a tailoring shop in the town center, making the customer-ordered individual clothes common at the time. As she gradually rose to fame as the “master tailor” in town, many rural girls came to her as “apprentices,” since tailoring was considered a skilled trade for women in rural China for a long period of time. While other tailors were still accepting and teaching limited numbers of apprentices the old-fashioned way as a subsidy to their tailoring business, Tang invested and transformed her tailoring shop into a tailoring training center in 1988. As years went by, most individual tailors are now out of business because more rural residents are buying factory-made clothes rather than having their clothes made. Ms. Tang, in contrast, secured government support in 2004 and formally expanded her tailoring training center into a profitable and locally reputable “tailoring vocational school” which not only trains potential “surplus” rural girls into skilled garment factory workers, but also functions as a lower-tier subcontracting garment factory in itself as I later learned from girls receiving their training there.

While her entrepreneurial spirit and her “forward-seeing” vision of transforming a traditional tailoring shop into a stream-lined modern garment training center/factory are what many others lauded as her secret for success, Tang attributed much of her success to her adherence to the old “master/apprentice” relationship. According to the newspaper report, it is her sense of responsibility towards the apprentices/trainees, unreserved and untiring teaching of tailoring skills, and her selfless extension of help towards the apprentices that won her the recognition from the rural community and that of the coastal cooperating garment factories. Tang’s success as an exemplary rural female figure within the popular rural upward mobility

discourse and her strategic construction of the garment training center/factory as the embodiment of a traditional “master/apprentice” workshop with a modern spirit of self-transformation sets up a distinctive storyline in the making of the “new” rural girl subject. If upward mobility and overt regulation are employed within vocational schooling in its construction of the “new” rural subject, then for many rural girls, the re-configuration of becoming a “new” girl is often spoken through such contradictory schooling discourses of exemplary female-entrepreneurship, re-definitions of employable skills and subjects, the seemingly benevolent paternalist discourse of tradition and protection, and emphasized codes of industrial discipline. The construction of a “good” rural girl with all its contradictory elements seems to occupy the center stage in the gendered process of rural vocational schooling.

For many teachers, the very existence of vocational schooling in itself is often mentioned foremost and primarily as a protective space for rural youth who are still underage to enter the job market, especially the girls. It is interesting to note when first inquiring about girls’ schooling in the rural area, I was surprised by the fact that more girls than boys are succeeding in academic schooling, quite contrary to “common” assumptions. What is not surprising is teachers’ attribution of girls’ better academic performance to their “obedient” feminine nature. Girls are constantly being sorted out and placed into dichotomous categories as the *tinghua* (listening to words, obedient) girls who study hard in schools and the *bu tinghua* (not listening to words, naughty and disobedient) girls who are more interested in the Internet, boyfriends, and prone to “bad societal influences.” For vocational school teachers, girls who end up in their hands are often labeled as the “*bu tinghua*” ones that need extra discipline and protection to prevent them from “turning bad” and extra care to “correct” them into the naturally “obedient” girl that will make a “good” female subject for disciplined industrial work. The “hard work” of disciplining and transforming the “*bu tinghua*” girls into “good” girls is often articulated by teachers as an obligation and responsibility on behalf of girls’ parents. And the strict physical regulation of

girls' mobility and activity is frequently justified and followed by a "mothering" discourse of caring and protection.

Ms. Wang, the vocational school teacher we met in the previous chapter spoke to me in a sincere and concerned tone as she expressed the tiring work of educating girls,

We teachers frequently check out the Internet cafes in town to see whether our students are there. Many girls did not start going to these Internet cafes after arriving here. They've already showed signs of disobedience in junior high schools. Many of them are very naughty. Often minutes after we escort them to their dorms, they would sneak out of school to the street. So not only our teachers, but the school principal and vice-principal also frequently check out these Internet cafes on the street to look for our students. For our girls, if you pay enough attention in disciplining them and also caring about them, then they will grow up without walking down the wrong path. It is an issue of one's sense of responsibility. These young girls are also at such an unstable age with changing ideas everyday. So as teachers, we need to know their every move and thought. What kinds of people she met today, what she said in front of others, how her mood was, these are all important information we need to know. Otherwise, you don't know what's in her mind. For many girls in our vocational school, they might be low in their ability of academic studying, but they have many other things going on that we need to keep track of. Of course they are troublesome and temperamental at this age, but the good thing is they seldom hide things within and always show everything on their face. They are still very innocent girls.

For Ms. Wang, her seemingly intruding surveillance on girls' physical and even mental state is repeatedly emphasized as a necessity to assure the girls' parents who are often migrant workers in far-away cities of the well-being of their daughters -- a common responsibility of vocational schools in the rural community. The depiction of rural girls as simultaneously troublesome and innocent young daughters (Wright, 2003) parallels with the strict disciplining of girls' physical and mental state and the caring "mothering" discourse of "correction" and protection. To make these innocent yet "*bu tinghua*" girls into "good" girls often involves an intriguing combination of strategies from the teachers' side. As Ms. Wang continued,

It's complicated. Like if we find out that they are going out against school regulation during the night or writing notes to boys, we need to give them a good lesson. But you don't want to give them too much pressure; otherwise they'll quit vocational school and run back home. Many of the girls coming to our school

already had bad habits from earlier years and even fight with teachers sometimes. So we as teachers have to control our temper and wait until she calms down to talk sense into her slowly. Some girls are of such bad manner, then I'll have a cup of tea first and calm myself down before talking to her again. You want to give them some regulation, but you can't let them lose confidence and interest in staying in the school. It's always hard to deal with disobedient acts.

As Wright (2003) notes in the Chinese context, the stricter surveillance of female employees in assembly line factories by male managers is commonly justified through a paternalist discourse of taking care of the unpredictable teenage daughters. For vocational school teachers as Ms. Wang's dilemma illustrates, this assuming of parental responsibility is further complicated by the requirements to enroll and retain as many students as possible for schools' survival and simultaneously regulate and discipline them into "good" workers for schools' cooperating coastal factories. Thus, on one hand, overt-regulation such as locking girls inside their dormitory buildings during the night and tracking them down the street is often justified through a similar paternalist discourse of "protecting" girls from learning bad traits. On the other hand, women teachers are often designated to *tanxin* (literal translation: "talking hearts", having a heart-to-heart talk) with girls. As one school teacher commented, "If they miss home and want to leave for home, I would sit down with them and comfort them that sooner or later they would leave home for good. It's just a matter of time. They just need someone to comfort them sometimes." If the regulative practices are employed to train these unruly and "troublesome" girls into disciplined "good" subjects, the "mothering" discourse specifically associated with the role of women teachers serves to make sure that this overt-regulation is not going to backfire and turn girls away from vocational schooling and future factory jobs. As unpredictable daughters, they need both discipline and the nurturing mothers to "talk sense into them." Yet to strike a balance in this complicating act of producing the "*tinghua* good" girls/workers can be challenging for teachers.

For Ms. Tang, Qiongqiong Tailoring Vocational School's boss/principal/master, her success is all dependent on her ability to strive such a delicate balance in discipline and "mothering." Different from many other vocational schools which functioned more like intermediary agencies with coastal factories, *Qiongqiong* is not only responsible for supplying its trainees to bigger garment factories, it also needs to retain "good" girls to work in its own school, which is a local subcontracting garment factory in itself. Assuming the role of an old-time "master," Ms. Tang supervises these fifteen and sixteen year old girls from the production space to their dorms. She arranged a dining place for girls in a nearby farm house and two dorm buildings in the town center. Girls were not allowed to eat out and she frequently followed up girls' schedule after work to make sure that they were not making trouble with boys on the street and had enough rest to catch up with work the next morning. According to Feifei, an outgoing fifteen-year-old who just started training at the school when we first met in the summer of 2006, the master even took care of girls' daily matters. For example, Feifei left 50 yuan (\$7) in the shared shower room and suspected someone else took it afterwards. It was Ms. Tang, the master, who confronted the other person for her later and reminded her to be careful with her own money in the future. This maintenance of the old-fashioned master and apprentice relationship both in an authoritative and personal manner proves to be highly successful in training and retaining the "*tinghua*" (good) girls. It comes thus as no surprise that although girls frequently complained to me about their busy working schedule which often started at 8am in the morning and lasted until 10pm late into the night, they seldom made the connection to target their "master" for such a complaint. As one girl explained to me in a matter-of-fact tone, "Our master said that we had a big order, so now we are rushing to finish the order. That's why we haven't taken days off for four months now." Another girl followed up and let me know that the reason their master banned me from doing any further interviews with them is because "she is concerned about us not getting enough rest, now that we have to work until so late into the night. She's caring for us."

The intricate employment of discipline and “mothering” discourses within the master/apprentice relationship is also used to reward and retain the “*tinghua*” girls and justify the “kicking-out” of the hard-to-transform truly “*bu tinghua*” girls – a necessary selection process to maintain high productivity. As Feifei told me, even though Ms. Tang offered a comparatively lower monthly salary of only 800 yuan (\$115) than other factories, many girls chose to stay after their three-month training period because as a master she treated the girls well, especially girls who were the “*tinghua*” and most productive ones. Once when strolling on the street with Feifei on the girls’ rare night off, I was surprised to spot Ms. Tang and a girl from her school/factory in a clothing store. Apparently, that was a common scene for Feifei as she explained to me that the master often rewarded the hardworking girls with such treats as buying them clothes or other stuff. That is her way of keeping the loyal girls around. But for Feifei, the extravert and straight-forward girl who gradually changed her attitude from appreciation to dissatisfaction about the master, her fate was quite different. One week after she complained to me about how the master charged extra money for water, electricity, meal and material fees in addition to the three-month tuition she already paid, she disappeared from the tailoring school. When I asked the other girls, they told me the master had “kicked her out.” One girl explained, “our master scolded her several times that she was very *bu tinghua* and useless. She is so naughty and always thinks about skipping shifts and having fun. Last time when her parents came over looking for her, the master couldn’t find her anywhere. So of course the master was worried and had to let her go.” Although this incident proved to be a rumor and Feifei returned to the school/factory after several days of absence, when I met her one year later in the summer of 2007, she told me that she did drop out of the school just days before finishing her three-month training. What I did not know for sure is whether she quit it herself as she claimed or was discharged from the school before she could start to collect a salary.

Whether activated through the teacher/student relationship or the old-fashioned master/apprenticeship, it is obvious that the discourses of discipline and “mothering” function together to make sure that the innocent yet troublesome teenage “daughters” are carefully transformed into the *tinghua* good girl combining her “feminine” obedience and patience with industrial discipline, modern machinery skills and productivity as a future worker. However, there is one problem within such a seemingly promising storyline of transformation. It is the issue of “skill.” Many girls chose to come to vocational schools instead of going directly into factories, because of the upward possibility many school advertisements offered. Yet, what is considered to be “skill” and “skilled laborer” is a socially constructed complicated notion. According to Gaskell (1992), “what we take to be noteworthy skill is fundamentally shaped by what is taken for granted in the society, what the social context is, and where and how we learn to do something” (p.115). In the process of rural modernization, the agricultural skills peasants acquired through generations are the first to be devalued as government officials repeatedly pointed to the “low quality of peasant workers” as the major problem facing China’s modernity and the need for transforming those surplus populations into skilled laborers with the ability to operate machinery. It is within this call for skilled laborers that a gendered hierarchy appeared which relegates girls into low-end industrial jobs. As many feminist scholars have noted, the feminization of disposable industrial jobs is justified through the essentialist gendered discourse of “nimble fingers,” which assumes that girls are naturally more obedient and patient with monotonous assembly line work, yet mindless and unambitious thus not suitable for training and advancement (Lee, 1998; Lynch, 2007; Mills, 2003; Ong, 1987, 1991; Wolf, 1992; Wright, 2001, 2003). This gradually increasing gendered hierarchy in terms of skill-training is acutely observed among vocational school teachers in the local community. As one teacher mentioned to me,

For boys who dropped out of the academic track, they have many options from traditional trade to some new skilled jobs, such as carpentry, mechanics, electricians, or car repairs. Well, in the past girls can take on tailoring. That’s

considered a fairly decent skilled trade for girls. But these days tailoring is not popular anymore. Everyone's buying clothes and tailor shops are less and less. So for girls, there's very little they can do other than going to factories.

It is noteworthy to point out that while carpentry, a traditionally male skilled trade, is still largely valued and under the process of "converting" into a nationally famous labor brand as the elite investor pushes his male-only carpentry school further into the market, girls from local villages overwhelmingly cram in and out of the four tailoring vocational schools. For many girls, they thought they were going into the same old profession of learning "tailoring" from a master step-by-step. But, what happens is that they often end up with limited steps of assembly line work due to the demands of productivity. I still remember her excited face when Feifei first told me that she was making a pair of pants for her father secretly. But a year later, when I met her again after she dropped out of the tailoring school/factory, she said that she never finished the pants, because work got busy as orders came to the school/factory and she did the same few steps again and again. "I never learned the last few steps. I didn't make a single complete piece of clothing myself after my three-months there."

When I inquired further about this gendered process of skill training in vocational schools, the teachers too admitted that the so-called "skill-training" for girls was often misleading. As one teacher said,

To be honest, it is very hard to really carry out vocational schooling, especially for girls. We call it skill-training, but if they go directly to these assembly-line factories, it only takes three to five days to get on board. Because girls usually go to these low skill jobs, so what to teach them in our school is really a difficult task for us. I think good working ethics and sense of responsibility are needed and have to be cultivated and that's the main job in our school. Like we send them to a company, and after one year, some girls feel like they are not happy with the job, or it is too much hard work. Then the company thinks she is not responsible, can't adjust to the discipline, and of course can't contribute much to their company. Then, as a result, her salary is kept low.

Cultivating girls' sense of responsibility and commitment is often emphasized alongside the observation of the low-skilled jobs girls are relegated to. It seems that despite the acute awareness among teachers of the structural gendered constraints in the transitioning from school to work, girls are still overwhelmingly being blamed individually for their "failed" transformation into the "new" good girl who is also a good factory worker. Girls like Wei's "bad" cousin or Feifei, who lacked interest in the so-called "serious" work, and showed resistance towards factory jobs are often categorized by teachers and villagers as *bu tinghua* and indulgent girls. They are the troublesome daughters who failed to become disciplined workers and thus have truly "turned bad." Their lack of commitment to subject themselves to industrial discipline is explained in various ways to justify their becoming cheap disposable labor. What is startling for me is that, as Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody (2001) poignantly write, "this carrying over of the self seems to be a one-way process whereby an emphasis on such thing as 'commitment' is not necessarily reflected in pay, status or conditions of work" (p.69). They are certainly speaking of the conditions of many rural girls as they seek to become "somebody" in this transition from school to work.

The issue of skill and commitment, as Cockburn (1983) argues, is not about skill, but rather an issue of power and control over the value of labor and production. Under the neoliberal order, as Wright notes (2001), the value of female work, paradoxically, lies in the power of the discourse of her valuelessness. As we have heard from the teachers, the profession of tailoring, which used to be considered a skilled trade for rural girls, underwent a devaluing process as girls entered in hordes into the "modern" garment assembly lines which instead of teaching them step-by-step tailoring skills, segmented the making of clothes into individualized operational procedures. Furthermore, the neoliberal demand for cheap labor often intertwines with a localized notion of an essentialized "traditional" femininity in its explanation of girls' natural suitability for the so-called low-skilled and mindless jobs. However, as both Ms. Wang and Ms. Tang sought to

do with their “mothering” practices, the devaluing of girls’ work is not to be mistaken as if they are not worth keeping around. To sustain girls in factory jobs, the devaluing discourse needs to be nurtured in an almost contradictory manner together with the promise of upward mobility and the “motherly” care of protecting the “good” girls from a fast-changing society and transforming the “*bu tinghua*” unruly girls into the “*tinghua*” and employable “good” subjects.

So for rural girls, it seems that they are being subjected to a contradictory double bind which keeps them in an impossible plot of “becoming” a “new” girl. On one hand, it is the neoliberal incitement of self-management, entrepreneurship, upward mobility as exemplified through the embodied figure of Ms. Tang who successfully transformed herself from a laid-off garment factory worker to a modern boss/master and the promises she made to her apprentices of moving up the ladder as a master tailor/supervisor and even opening their own tailor shops through training in her school/factory. On the other hand, under this appealing tale of self-transformation is the structural constraints of the devaluing of the so called female work and the paternalist discourse that functions together with industrial discipline in defining and regulating “proper” femininity, equating good girlhood to “*ting hua*” (listening to words, obedient) workers.

According to Foucault (2003), “the subject constituted itself, in one specific form or another, ... through certain practices that were also games of truth and practices of power” (p.33). And we are freer than we think we are, exactly because of the fractures and fissures within often contradictory and competing claims of truth that expose us to the fiction of our very constitution. Then, with all the complications revolved around discourses of academic schooling versus vocational schooling, upward mobility and structural constraints of “female work,” and the contested meanings of “good” and “bad” girlhood, how are girls negotiating their entry of “becoming somebody” in this transitional phase from school to work? How are they, as the living embodiment of these historically and socially constructed sets of contradictions, constituting themselves as the “new” girl and living through these fractures and fissures? To have some

glimpses into this often contentious process of “becoming,” now let us return to the girls’ dormitory room where the conversation as always is heating up.

The good girl, the super woman, and the ordinary person – Girls negotiating transition from school to work

“So tell me something about your schooling?” I asked as I recollected in my mind my own seemingly endless school years of drills and exams with some fading memories of rare hanging out with girlfriends. I was ready for some resonating stories if not complaints, spilling out from these young girls who recently dropped out their last year in junior high school. But instead, the room burst out into a big splash of noisy laughter as the girls gushed, “Oh, that was fun,” and each started with their own fun stories of schooling. What emerged as fun are lengthy exclamations of “boys fighting in school,” “sneaking out to the Internet cafes,” “standing up against teachers in class,” or even just gossip about teachers. While the girls were busy jumping into and sharing each other’s funny stories and mimicking excitedly the very minute details of each event, I sat there dazed for a while before finally catching up with what was going on. My gut reaction? This is not the school-talk I was expecting. None of the excited exchanges seemed to have any relation with the serious topics I was expecting to record. But then as I listened, it dawned on me – perhaps it is the “fun” part that gives meaning to their very existence in schools. Was I, in my “serious” feminist researcher mode, clinging too agitatedly to my own notion of a “meaningful” and agentic story of girls’ reading against the grain of schooling, and thus disappointed at hearing just “fun” stories of “trivial” events? Or was I, as the secret “nerdy girl” that the girls are now casually disparaging, finally coming to see the story of schooling being told from the other side of the line?

Schooling, as Hey (1997) observes in her study of girls and friendship, is a contested site of social relations. As she asks, “was school seen as a social site for meeting friends as well as a source of academic prestige, status and display? Or alternatively was it predominantly the source of boredom, antagonism, disappointment and general social disempowerment, which only the solidarity of one’s close friendship redeemed? How are they (girls) invested in school?” (p.43). As is obvious from this opening tale, I came to understand schooling from a very different social perspective than the girls I was sitting and interviewing. As I was exposed again and again to my own privileges of growing up as an “urban” subject through this research process, I was now once again thrown into the motion of listening and understanding what appeared to be “hidden” for me, but lived as everyday “truths” for these girls. What I want to make clear before directing you, the reader, to my lengthy quotes coming directly from the girls, is that despite this best intention of mine for deep listening and understanding, the following lines are not just girls telling their stories. The motions of those moments are long gone and the traces of “truth” are meanings carefully reconstructed through “I” the researcher. Instead, these are the re-telling of girls’ stories from a researcher in her endless search to pin down meanings and understandings of her “othered” objects/subjects -- rural girls. As I attempt to (re)tell girls’ stories with all their raw emotionality (Richardson, 1997; Walkerdine, 1990) while exposing my own very situatedness as a researcher in this act of re-telling (Chow, 1992; Haraway, 1988; Trinh, 1989), please be prepared for any jagged lines and emotions lingering beneath the seemingly rational analysis of the subjectivity of the “other.” Now follow me as I “carefully” trace back to these vibrant moments filled with girls’ voices/stories.

“The girls in the advanced class only know how to study!” – (Re)telling of academic schooling stories

Yihuai(seriously asks): So what classes are you interested in?

Lingdi: The physics class is fun.

Yihuai (really surprised): Oh, you are the first girl that I've heard that likes physics class here.

Lingdi (laughs out loud): The physics teacher, he's got some problem with his mind ...

Yuehua (jumps in): He's out of his mind.

Lingdi (continuing): He's funny, so I like the physics class.

Xiaorong (excitedly adding): He will lose his temper ... I mean when he's mad or something, he loses his temper with us.

Yihuai (again more surprised and confused): Really? So why is he funny?

Huizi(emphasizing again): He's funny, he's really funny with his manner, super funny!

Lingdi: Yeah, his brain is ... he's just out of his mind...

When I finally steered the conversation of schooling from school fights to something I could tangibly make meaning of, the girls offered me the above storyline – a teacher loses his temper randomly at his students and that becomes the fun prize of the day. An interesting class remembered by the girls not because of its content, but rather because of a “horrific act of the teacher” from my point of view. Their logic of “fun” and the flow of the conversation, I have to admit, were not making much sense to me at the beginning. For these girls, at least at that moment, this “fun” seems to extend to every aspect of schooling, except for the missing conversation about the subject matter itself, as they continued in their description of their academic schooling experience.

Yuehua: Our class—like I sit in the front rows, so the few front rows are OK, but the rest of the class, especially those in the back are all bent over on their desks.

Xiaorong: It's so funny in every class, everyone's just bent over their desks. Can you imagine – with all the heads bending down, sleeping.

Huizi(confirming): Everyday except the few students in the front rows, the rest of the class are always for sure sleeping – with their heads down.

Yuehua: The teacher must be really mad, I think. He must be really bored with himself talking.

Xiaorong: It's really funny!

Huizi: Yeah, like I am in the third row and people sitting behind me are usually all dressed in black and then you turn around and see a black sea of clothes and heads bending down. All black.

Xiaorong: It's really funny! (everyone laughs)

Yihuai (turning to Meifang): So how is your class?

Meifang: I'm in the advanced-track class, so except the last two rows, the rest are all very attentive.

Yuehua (surprised): Oh, you are from the advanced-track class? That's a lot of pressure.

Meifang: Yes, a lot of pressure.

Yuehua (interrogates further): So why are you in vocational school?

Meifang (matter-of-factly): Not good enough for regular high school, so end up here.

Yihuai: So what do you usually talk about?

Meifang (scornfully): just studying stuff.

Yuehua (cutting in): Bunch of bookworms!

Meifang (continuing in a detached manner): The other girls are always like ‘this question is so difficult’. We girls in the last two rows are just talking about love.

As Xiaorong continuously screamed animatedly “it’s really funny,” I, on the other hand, as you can imagine, was looking for an explanation of this group of dropouts’ take on schooling as “fun.” Following McRobbie (1991) and Willis’ (1982) observation of the working-class British girls and boys’ experience with schooling, for the rural girls it seems that academic schooling with all its elements of overt-regulation and boredom, holds few tangible meanings. Thus, much of the girls’ energies as McRobbie (1991) notes seemed to be channeled into making school-life tolerable, anywhere they could “have a laugh.” Indeed in these girls’ conversation, the themes of boredom and fun appear intermittently together. But if their seemingly careless attitude towards schooling, denial of teachers’ authority and disparagement of “hard-working” bookworm girls in advanced-track classes leads you to the conclusion that they are a group of rebellious yet mindless girls, then Yiyi’s description of how the girls ended up in the lower-track class points to the other side of their “fun” talk,

“My junior high school – when we first entered, they immediately put us into different tracks. I was actually doing quite well in my elementary school years, but I didn’t do well on my math graduation test, so I ended up beginning my junior high in a lower-track class. At the beginning, I felt very bad. But then gradually you saw all these other students didn’t seem to care, so then I just let it be. I think it (whether one can do well academically) has a lot to do with the learning environment. If I could start with an advanced -track class, everyone’s taking schooling seriously, I wouldn’t end up like now. Also, I think teachers are very important. The teachers in my school are really not very nice. They’re like, look down upon you from deep in their heart. And my head-teacher in my old school was not like the teacher here (in her vocational school) even *tanxin* with us (literal meaning: having heart-to-heart talk, here refers to talking about one’s personal life matters). Like if you’re dating, he’s not only totally against it, but also uses extreme measures to humiliate you. Of course we all resent him.

Actually, he never cares about students' daily lives, he's only into grades. The only thing he cares about is your grades."

Coinciding with Yiyi's insight into how she has become a "careless" student, many girls traced back their deviance towards teachers in their second year in the junior high. So in other words, these rural girls did not necessarily enter their junior high school as "rebellious" and "careless," but rather as Fine (1991) similarly notes in her ethnography of a New York City high school, "dropouts" ended up taking up that position often through systematic "framing" and displacing them as such. For many rural girls, the moment they were assigned to lower-track classes, their fate was written as "hopeless" in terms of academic advancement. If they have ever dreamed of becoming an "urban" subject through schooling, it was made clear to them at the early age of twelve or thirteen, that possibility of upward mobility through academic schooling was over. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the authority of the teacher, which is tightly connected to the meaning of academic schooling, was dislodged and consequently denied. The teachers' continued insistence on academic achievement and overt-regulation become increasingly read by the girls more as "the random one of the prison guard, not the necessary one of the pedagogue" (Willis, 1982, p.72). For these rural girls, their decision to drop out of junior high seems to be precipitated by an overt-regulating academic system that is deprived with any personally meaningful concept of upward mobility. Having no intention to keep the majority of the students for advancement, the basic rural schooling system with its overt-regulation and narrow focus on academic performance indeed "framed" and "setup" girls for failure. It is interesting to note that Yiyi has drawn a comparison between the strategies teachers used in her junior high school and vocational school. Her vocational school teacher's *tanxin* strategy, which is read by her as a personal and caring gesture, worked to make her feel included and she indeed stayed. The meaning of taking up vocational school as you will see momentarily is constructed by

the girls as in total contrast to their academic schooling experience, despite similar overtly-regulating disciplines and “dry” lecturing formats.

If we listen carefully further, in the middle of Yiyi’s talk, she suddenly proclaims, “If I could start with an advanced-track class, I wouldn’t end up like now.” Following Walkerdine’s (1990) argument against reading anti-school behavior as simple resistance, what we hear is that underneath the façade of the girls’ “fun” talk, there are complicated layers of emotions and feelings of resistance, hidden pain and anxiety over academic failure and loss of a possible dream, coping and survival in a disadvantaged rural academic schooling system, and also strength and hope in continuing their journey of becoming somebody. As Yiyi continued her talk of schooling in a matter-of-fact tone, I realized further that her proclamations actually come from her observation of the changing nature of schooling as a “consuming” and realist business,

Actually many of our rural kids are fairly smart, maybe even better than urban kids. But if you didn’t do well in the elementary graduation exam and ended up in a low-track class, then you’re definitely hopeless, since it’s not only totally chaos, but no teachers care about you. However, if your parents know the tricks in schools and understand the importance of planning your academic life, then like you know your kid didn’t do very well in the elementary graduation exam, then you pay some extra money to the junior high to ‘buy’ your kid into the advanced-track class.

For these academic-dropouts, their seemingly careless attitude is certainly interwoven with acute awareness and reflections on the very unequal nature of academic schooling as Yiyi articulates the fact that one can “buy” a better education even if s/he might similarly fail the entrance exam at the beginning. If their rejection of academic schooling can be read as a consequence of the structural denial of their very entry into an upwardly mobile storyline, these girls’ disparagement of hard-working advanced-track girls, cannot be simply explained as envy of girls who seem to be succeeding in such a storyline. While there might be some hidden pain in looking down upon “bookworm” nerdy girls, often times this disparagement is activated through a discourse of their superior ability to take up the modern storyline of desire and autonomy. If

you remember, when the girls were discussing “dressing up,” they made it clear that the “nerdy girls” never seemed to have many ideas. In a similar manner, when talking about academic schooling, these “bookworms” in the advanced-track class seem to represent the opposite of what these outspoken girls envision themselves to be.

Yihuai: You said there was an advanced-track class in each grade?

Yiyi (interrupts): The advanced class is very strict. The students there take more classes than us. They have eight classes each day and then two hours of class in the night and then another two hours for independent-study.

Aiai: Like in my school, those in the advanced class have to study in the classroom until 11pm.

Yihuai: So girls in the advanced class...?

Everyone (starting to yell at the same time): The girls in the advanced class only know how to study. ... Yes, the only thing they can do is studying. ... Studying from morning till night. ... Always in the classroom ... And their topic is always about exams, passing more exams. We are not like that, we don't talk this way.

Yihuai: So what do you talk about?

Yuehua: We like to gossip and just having fun. Talking about boys, dating, dressing up. Or many times talk about our future. But they are like, ‘Oh, this question is really difficult, that teacher lectures so fast, the monthly exam is coming soon’, just boring talk. I never get close to those girls. I overheard them talking when I passed by, I think their lives are so boring, really boring. Not like us, more colorful, more fun.

For these vocational school girls, the academic “nerdy” girls are the *tinghua* girls, the only thing they can do is study and listen to teachers. It is this obedience that they were poking fun at. Obedience to teachers is repeatedly activated as a sign of having no thoughts of one's own. For the girls, while they are talking about their futures and making decisions for themselves, the “nerdy” girls are imagined as only concerned with “boring” moments of passing one more exam. This perceived comparison is very important in girls' construction of themselves as the modern girl subject with autonomy and a sense of self.

As an academically excelling young girl while growing up, I listened to the girls' critique of the nerdy girls with memories boiling up inside of me. Interestingly, the more I listened to their conversation, the more their statements felt true to me. As I reached back to my own memories,

all I could remember of my junior and senior high school years were drill after drill and exam after exam. Yes, I had written about wanting to become a freelance travel writer or indulged myself in fantasies of romance, but my parents and teachers would make sure that those were just passing thoughts and would never interfere with my academic performance. “All that can wait until you pass this hard-working period” and “Don’t day-dream” are what I was told. Then I realized that indeed this “waiting” or in other words, suppression of desire, can last forever if I were to stay within middle-class norms of continuously establishing my sense of self through “rational” achievement which is rooted in a fear of falling off the edge. It suddenly dawned on me -- that was the reason behind my uneasiness with the physicality and raw honesty of the girls’ talk about fights and boyfriends in school. Growing up as a model middle-class girl, schooling is constructed for me as the only way for advancement and thus displays of such “raw” desires are “inappropriate” to say the least. Failure in academic schooling, even just one exam, was crushing to me. There was a fear lurking and as Walkerdine (2001) points out, it is the constructed fear of middle-class girls in failing to meet the norm, a norm that needs to be guarded at any cost. Within such a norm, schooling is largely activated through the masculine discourse of rationality, while femininity is being constructed as the undesirable opposite, either as passive or emotional and irrational. To succeed in schooling means that girls have to perform into masculine norms of rational academic excellence, often at the cost of suppressing aspects of femininity and sexuality. For many academically successful girls, “femininity is to be struggled over, sometimes renouncing sexuality because the onset of womanhood is too painful to contemplate when pitted against the extraordinary academic efforts she has to make” (Walkerdine, 2001, p.185).

Walkerdine’s incisive analysis of schooling as a historically and socially constructed masculine rational discourse suggests that “successful” schoolgirls often need to carefully detach and guard themselves against both working-class physicality and the onset of their own sexual desire. I finally came to understand what was hidden behind my being drawn into the girls’

energies and their rebellious attitude towards schooling, yet simultaneously feeling uncomfortable about the same raw emotions and physicality displayed in their talk. For both me and the girls, academic schooling is a discourse which regulates proper femininity. In this struggle for femininity, I, as these other *tinghua* girls have “chosen” to participate in the academically mobile storyline. In the search to be ultimately viewed as the “successful” rational being, I have waged an unconscious war of trying to suppress aspects of femininity and sexuality. While performing the “obedient” aspect of femininity is always encouraged in schools, “dressing-up” and “dating” are viewed in the Chinese context as displaying the sexualized desiring aspect of femininity that is to be regulated. It is thus not surprising as Paine & Delany (2000) observed in the rural Chinese schooling context that girls in advanced-track class are often in unisex clothes and short hair, while girls in lower-track are never shy of dressing themselves up and talking explicitly about boys. For the girls I talk to, their engagement in dating and dressing up can be viewed as their rejection of academic schooling by performing aspects of femininity that have been negatively regarded and regulated. Especially, as I have illustrated in the previous chapter, when “dressing-up” is closely connected with the “new” image of the modern urban girl and marketed femininity, such a “rebellious” gesture is further constructed by the girls as their ability to take up new trends as against the “mindless” *tinghua* girls.

Furthermore, if academic schooling used to be the only way of upward mobility into an “urban” subject for rural youth, marketization and small-town development have largely unsettled that tight link. As the teachers suggested, nowadays even if one can survive the fierce competition and get a college degree, jobs are no longer guaranteed. Learning a skill at an early age seems to be a more profitable and less-risky path for rural youth. So for these girls who often view academic schooling experience as both boring and demanding for obedience and conformism, the alluring new discourse of vocational school which promotes “learning skills closely connected to

market demands, individual choices, profitable and flexible employment opportunities”

immediately caught their attention.

There’s nothing to worry about in the past, but now I start to worry – (Re)telling of vocational schooling stories

The second time I went back to interview the girls, I brought them many books, ranging from national geographic style tourism books, to books discussing adolescent sexuality and witty novels written by American and Japanese authors on girlhood with a feminist twist. The girls immediately split all the volumes and buried themselves in reading. Their curiosity always amazes me. Compared with the advanced-track girls I met in other settings, the conversations that happened in the dorm room were always louder, more outspoken and spontaneous. While I had to carefully maintain my image as a model hard-working young woman in front of the other hard-working girls who came to me to seek successful tips for exams, it is in the dorms that I would occasionally let my guard down and just mingle like a big sister exploring life’s many puzzles together. Indeed, the girls who eagerly participated in my interviews might appear to be resistant towards schooling and categorized as the *bu tinghua* girl by their teachers and even by themselves, but as their eagerness in reading extra-curricular books shows, they are nevertheless very much invested in making meaning out of their learning experience. When they started to talk to me about their vocational schooling experience, it seems that it might be similarly “boring” if not more so than their academic schooling. But this time they are facing it with a different attitude.

Wei: The tourism class we are having right now, it’s so boring, all the rote learning stuff. It’s like the teacher lectures and we just listen. If he can combine some more practical knowledge in our everyday life with the textbook, it’ll be much better. Our schedule is

also very strict and the same everyday. We get up at 5:50am, then all the students gather and run two circles in the field. After that, we start our day with cleaning the classroom and then having breakfast. At 7:40am, we start our first class until 11:30am. Then lunch and an hour and half noon rest. Then continue with afternoon's class followed with independent-study periods in late afternoon and in the evening. Everyday it's the same.

Yiyi: Yes, it's boring. I just hope that we can have a more interesting curriculum and some engaging extra-curricular activities in school. So I feel that everyday is full of meaningful activities and colorful.

Everyone (yelling): Yes, colorful and meaningful!

Kaixin: Maybe if we can have a better environment.

Wei: I think if we can have a teacher who can get along well with us. I mean having some common language with us, it's very important.

Yiyi: I just wish that I can feel more "solid" with my life. Not necessarily tight time schedules, but that everyday you feel like it's such a fruitful day, like today I've learned something new or maybe gained some invaluable big or small life lessons.

Meifang (flatly cutting in): What you're talking about is impossible for everyday.

Yihuai: So you mean the junior high school is not engaging enough?

Everyone: Yes.

Yuehua (interrupting in a cheerful tone): Junior high school is fun.

Yiyi (excitedly following): Yeah, in junior high it's like we do whatever we want to do and say whatever we want to say. It's all just play. It's fun. (pausing and suddenly changing her cheerful tone). Our teachers just talk about those big theories having nothing to do with our life. They don't care about whatever in our minds. Especially for those of us in the low-track classes, the teachers – I think they are just trying to finish a task. We are just a task that they need to finish. They don't care about their teaching.

Huizi: The classes are boring.

Everyone (yelling): It's really boring! Really boring!

Wei (attentively): If the teacher can be more vivid with his or her teaching, like the books you gave us with colorful pictures, if the teachers can do a little bit of that, that'll be great!

Aiai: Yeah, like the tourism basics class teacher. He just reads through the book with such a dead voice. His class is just reading through the book, so boring.

Meifang: Yeah, like you are listening to a hollow and boring voice coming from a vacuum.

Yiyi (eagerly and sincerely): I don't know. But I think we have to now realize it's our major and try our best to cultivate our interest in it.

Apparently, for girls who choose to come to vocational school, the promise of becoming an upwardly mobile subject through an alternative and a presumed more practical way of learning is what rekindled their enthusiasm for schooling, despite the similarly strict overt-regulating disciplines, timetables and boring lectures. In this new environment which claimed to invite them for a potential transformation into "new" modern subjects, they excitedly dreamed of a "colorful" experience, wished to feel "solid" about their lives and "learn big or small life lessons, not big

theories.” Yet, if vocational school has been envisioned by these girls as an alternative route for a more meaningful learning experience, they might have just hit the “cold” reality as Meifang indicated “that is impossible,” followed by other girls’ recount of the same boring nature of schooling. But what really stayed with me in this conversation is Yiyi’s final comment in an adamant resolution, “I think we have to now realize it’s our major and try our best to cultivate our interest in it.” Her comment is very different from the earlier discussions on schooling being fun and the complaints about the “boring” stuff. For her and many other girls, taking on vocational school is a “new” storyline. At that moment, the stake to be an upwardly mobile modern subject finally settled in and the rebellious girls are now gradually coming to realize that they have to work hard on this “chosen” path even if it might be equally not as interesting.

For the girls, their coming to vocational school is also articulated as an extension of their sense of “autonomy,” in contrast to their parents’ old ways. They each proudly volunteered their stories of “struggle” of coming to this new school.

Xiaorong: My parents always say that vocational school is not good.

Yuehua: They always listen to other people, never having their own ideas.

Meifang: Yeah, I told them earlier that I wanted to come here to study tourism and hotel management. My parents thought that was for waitressing, and they were really worried. They said, ‘what if male guests want to take-advantage of you and harass you?’

Lindi: Yeah, my uncle thought the same thing. I told him it’s not the same thing. He’s like if you’re gonna work in a restaurant or hotel, then this is probably what you’ll end up with. So I asked the vice-principal from the vocational school to talk to him. After a really long time, finally my uncle agreed. My mom always listens to my uncle, so it was hard to get her approval. My dad usually supports my decisions.

Xiaorong: My dad used to let me decide on my own. But this time after I decided to take vocational school, he’s just against it. Even now he’s still not really talking to me, just bickering about it.

Lindi: In my case, I went home and talked to my dad about wanting to come to this vocational school. I told him that I couldn’t continue my academic schooling anymore. So my dad said if you really want to go, that’s fine. But my mom came over and yelled NO. I yelled back, if you don’t wanna me go, then just say it, but why yell at me. Then my mom changed her tone and said, ‘it’s not that I don’t let you go, but you’re going to the town by yourself. It’s so far away from our village.’ So I agreed that day I wasn’t going. But the next day I decided I still wanted to come. Then I went to talk to my mom again. My mom said but you’ve agreed not to go. I said I talked to other people and they

all thought this was a good option. She said, ‘What if you regret your decision later?’ Then my uncle came over and he was like ‘hotel management? Is it that kind of thing?’ You know he was thinking of those waitresses or maids, serving a bunch of dirty-minded middle-age men. I told him no, it’s not like that. So I put him on the phone with the vocational school principal directly. Finally my uncle talked to my mom about it. In the end, my mom said “if you decide to go, don’t regret it.”

Wei: Yeah, the same here. When the vocational school teacher came over to my school for enrollment, I heard about tourism. I have an aunt who told me years back that maybe I could become a tour guide, it’s a pretty good job, so I remembered. When I heard from the teacher about this major, I recalled it and told my dad. Well, my mom didn’t allow me to go at all. She said I definitely would not be able to pass the tour guide exam, and would end up being a maid in the hotel. If it’s going to be like that, it’s better that I go directly to the hotel where two of my aunts work now. Going to vocational school from my mom’s point of view is a total waste of time and money. But I think maybe there’s a chance for me and I insisted. I talked to them on and on and on, in the end, my dad said ‘if that’s what you really want, then I’ll let you go. Otherwise, you’re gonna complain about me not letting you do what you want.’ So my dad really respects my decision. My mom, she’s still against it. Even after I came to this school for a whole week now, she’s still not talking to me.

Yihuai: So everyone fought to come here?

Everyone (loudly): Yes!

Meifang: I cried and argued with my parents.

Huizi: They’re all against this. I said I would not regret it, that’s the deal. (at this time, Huizi saw a picture on a magazine about cooking and started to talk about how she wanted to be a chef).

Lindi (following her earlier line about everyone thinking she’s going to be a waitress): If they ever let me become a waitress, I’ll eat whatever I need to serve first... (laughing out loud)

Meifang (responding to Huizi’s talk on becoming a chef): But people say that women can’t be chefs. You need to have a lot of strength to handle those heavy woks.

Huizi: I’m thinking about becoming a chef in Japanese cuisine. You know specialize in cold dishes and desserts. My sister-in-law told me about this. That’s why I’m here. She suggested that I come here first to learn some basics in hotel stuff, then I’ll learn Korean and maybe one day I can be a chef in Korea, doing hotel management.

Yuehua: Yes, yes. I’m thinking about the same thing, either learning Korean or Japanese.

Huizi: I’m serious about this idea. There’s a girl, she’s a neighbor. She’s been learning Japanese for some time. Now she’s in Japan already. She’s like working in a hotel and learning Japanese, now she’s in Japan.

What strikes me most in this conversation is the sharp contrast between the parents’ suspicion of the “new” vocational school discourse and the girls’ steadfast determination exemplified in Huizi’s proclamation, “I would not regret it, that’s the deal.” While the girls read vocational school through the discourse of choice and neoliberal upward mobility, rural parents who have lived through unequal rural/urban disparities, remain suspicious of such a discourse of

“choice.” For the girls, their investment in the storyline of becoming a “modern,” autonomous neoliberal subject with employable skills and mobility is what they perceived as different from not only their close-minded parents, but also their obedient, *tinghua* counterparts who still believe only in the old plot of becoming an “urban” subject through drilling and boring academic schooling. It is particularly interesting to note that in order to validate their “choice” as meaningful, these girls emphasized their active effort in terms of coming to this decision. Besides employing help from school-principals and other relatives to persuade their parents, Wei specifically made the comment that she has heard from an aunt earlier about tour guide being a good profession and attended vocational school enrollment meetings herself. If we follow their storylines further, becoming a tour guide might just be the first step of their plan, as Huizi and Yuehua declared towards the end of the conversation the possibility of even oversea working experience in Korea and Japan. In this sense, the girls seem to be actively involved in making “choice” as promised in the emerging vocational schooling discourse.

Yet, while the girls are passionately engaged in their painting of a rosy picture of the future, their parents nevertheless rejected their plan even after their enrollment. Warning the girls that vocational schools might only serve as an intermediate-agent and they might still end up working as waitresses, the parents seem to be like what the local education official and the girls described as “close-minded” and “never think that vocational school is a promising way.” As the girls explained to me, their parents often cite examples of other relatives who enrolled in vocational schools, paid large amount of tuition, yet still did not land a job as promised by the school. Despite the girls’ objection, their parents’ concern is often not without a reason. As I have illustrated earlier, private vocational schools in their attempt to attract more students and collect tuition, often paint an unrealistic picture of upward mobility and promising job prospects and salaries. Rural youth, especially girls who imagined exciting careers or the guarantee of work, subsequently find themselves end up in just another garment or electronic factory afterwards.

Like the working-class mothers Walkerdine (1990) depicted in the British context, the rural parents in a similar manner continuously rejected their daughters' demand and "exposed the fraudulence of choice" as they cautioned their girls that they would still end up working as maids or waitresses after wasting all the money and time on school. If the keeping up of the neoliberal order requires the internalization and hold-up of the notion of "choice" and "becoming," then rural parents through their own experiences from a less-privileged position, persist in "telling their children that 'they cannot have everything they want' and thus shatter the illusion" (Walkerdine, 1990, p.41).

So the clash between the girls' enthusiasm at and their parents' rejection of vocational school can be viewed as the contradiction within the neoliberal order. On one hand, it is the incitement of "choice" and "upward mobility" encouraged by the state and the market towards rural youth, regulating them into consuming and self-reliant laborers for a transforming new economy. On the other hand, it is the still sharp disparity and structural constraints of the "rural" population. With limited resources and information, the work that is available tends to be factory job or short-term employment with no job security. Particularly, as many parents observed, being a new privatized enterprise, most rural vocational schools are more concerned with making profit than providing quality training programs for already disadvantaged rural youth.

But for this group of girls, they insisted that their decision is a deliberate "choice." Later I asked the girls about Ms. Tang and why they did not go to her school. The boss of Qionggiong Tailoring School, seemed to me symbolizes this ideal notion of "self-invention." While expressing their admiration for Ms. Tang as the female boss, the girls dismissed tailoring school immediately as they yelled out, "It doesn't sound good to work there! It's just factory jobs. Plus, they ask you to work over-time with low salary. And you've stuck there." So if you think the girls are just blindly buying into the vocational school rhetoric, their selection of the tourism and hotel

management major proves to be a very deliberate selective process on their part. To become a tour guide offers them a possible plot for “real” autonomy and upward mobility in a “good” profession, instead of being stuck in a repetitive and low-end factory job. The girls elaborated on their vision for a future when I further inquired about their “choice.”

Yihuai: So what kind of life you are envisioning for your future?

Yiyi: I just really want to pass the tour guide exam, then I can travel around, with my own effort and hard work.

Xiaorong: Yeah, of course I really hope I can pass the tour guide exam... I don't know what's gonna happen.

Wei: I really want to become a tour guide. I think it's a good profession.

Xiaorong (now excitedly): Yeah, you can travel to a lot of places. I like to travel and like to meet new people. I think being a tour guide is very good, you can have many friends from different places.

Yihuai(offering them a realistic picture): But being a tour guide doesn't necessarily mean that you can travel all over the country.

Yiyi (in a determined manner): You can get a national tour guide certificate. It's like you start off with a local tour guide certificate. But if you have ambitions and you are hard-working, you can apply and try to pass the national tour guide exam.

Yihuai(noticing the silence of some other girls): Meifang, how about you?

Meifang (who used to be in the advanced-track class, with a seemingly lack of interest): It's hard to say.

Wei (jumping in): My plan is to become a part-time tour guide. So during the peak season, I can work as a tour guide. When it's not so busy, I can help my dad out and learn more from his business. My dad also has a computer in his store, so I can learn all kinds of knowledge through the Internet.

Yihuai: How about you, Aiai?

Aiai: Me? I don't think about this. Having fun!!!

Everyone (jumping in and yelling out): Yeah, shopping.

Wei (continuing her own conversation excitedly): To tell you the truth, I'm even thinking about taking over my dad's business. My dad has his own business in logistics.

Yiyi(explaining to me): Her father is an entrepreneur. She really admires her dad and wants to follow in his footsteps.

Wei (in a very low voice as if worried about being heard by others): I really want to. I want to become a boss one day. Before I thought of becoming a tour guide, I was planning to open my own fashion clothing store. Be a *lao ban niang* (female boss).

Yuehua (now teasingly yelling out in a high pitched tone of disbelief): *Lao – Ban – Niang* (Female – Boss)!!!

Wei (replying back in a slightly annoyed manner): What's wrong with being a *lao ban niang*. Then it's me giving orders instead at being given orders by others all the time.

The girls' decision of choosing the tourism major seems to be both a romantic and realistic calculation on their side. Quite different from the girls I met in tailoring schools who

seemed to be more interested in offering me the minute details of their everyday activities, these girls always chitchatted about their futures, sometimes in a cheerful tone, sometimes in worried agitation. Yiyi and Wei are the two girls who are most adamant about charting a future for themselves as the “autonomous” modern female subjects. For Yiyi, she specifically imagined “traveling around with my own effort and hard work” and that “if you have ambitions” you can become a national tour guide. Wei, the otherwise shy girl, revealed her ambitious plan of becoming a female boss one day following the inspiration of her own entrepreneur father.

Their dream of becoming an upwardly mobile neoliberal subject of self-invention, however, can be a narrow twisting path. On one hand, the door to become a legitimate urban subject through academic schooling is shut and rejected by the girls themselves. On the other hand, it is the reality of most rural girls entering disposable factory jobs. As Giddens laid out in his discussion of self-identity and modernity (1991), “transition in individuals’ lives has always demanded psychic reorganization. In the setting of modernity, the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change.” Thus it requires “pioneering innovative social forms” (p.33). For the girls, dreaming and becoming in a time of social change means they inevitably have to juggle with new social forms and contradictory discourses of the female self. So just as Wei was articulating her dream of eventually becoming an independent female boss, Yuehua teasingly yelled out in disbelief “Lao – Ban – Niang (Female—Boss)”. Yuehua’s dubiousness in the possibility of becoming the “female boss” suggests the complex process these girls engage in when negotiating their sense of self and “autonomy” under the incitement of neoliberal possibilities, the boundaries of femininity, and the classed and gendered structural constraints of work. Wei, who is a girl from a middle-track class in her former junior high school, however, insisted on breaking the imaginative ceiling of what a rural girl can become, as other girls debated the realities facing them.

Wei: Everyone's like, you have to continue your academic track. I really don't want to go on anymore. So I told my dad and he said 'no matter what, you have to stick to this path. Who knows, maybe you'll get a high enough score to get into the senior high school'. I said I really couldn't study anymore, then I told him I wanted to go to vocational school to learn tourism and hotel management. My dad said that was for maids in the hotel. I said I definitely would work hard. So he offered his goal for me: 'you can go to the vocational school, but you have to get your tour guide certificate', that's what he said at the time.

Kaixin: Your dad is really strict with you. Passing the tour guide exam is really difficult.

Wei: Yeah, I asked my dad 'if I really can't pass the tour guide exam, is it ok if I work as a commentator in either the *ZhuangYuan* museum or other tourist sites?' He said if you really tried your best, then it's ok. It's better to work as a commentator than a hotel maid or waitress, always serving other people...

Huizi (cutting into loudly): But even if you start off as a maid, you can still work up the ladder to become a manager.

Yiyi: Yes, if you work hard and have the ambition, I think you'll get the opportunity to move up.

Huizi (raising her pitch): Why do people all look down upon being a maid, I just don't get it. Everyone's like you're serving others as a maid.

Yiyi: Actually being a tour guide is also in the service industry.

Wei: I'm thinking about doing my own thing. Like if you're working as a maid, you always have to listen to the orders of someone else. It's better to have your own business, being your own boss. That's what I'm thinking, even if it might mean that you might run the risk of not earning as much as those stable positions. At least you're your own boss and no one's gonna give you orders, right?

Kaixin: I don't think so. If you work as a maid in a hotel, at least it's not gonna be like -- you work on your own and then one day your little store goes out of business. A job with security is better.

Yiyi: I just feel that boys have so much more opportunities than us girls. Because they can become a driver for bosses, go to the army, or become a chef or car mechanics. These are all good professions. But girls can't do these. Girls can only do those -- like maids or waitresses -- those kinds of jobs that people always look down upon, like it's not good. If I were a boy, I'll go to the army. Everyone thinks it's a very good profession, and good opportunity to expand your horizon and get some real training. But we girls don't have that opportunity.

As Wei continued in imagining herself as a "female boss," Huizi cut in and offered a sharp critique of the low status of "female" work. In a time of rapid social change and uncertainty, figuring out their "best" plot for transitioning from school to work becomes a controversial issue among the girls as they observe carefully from the disadvantaged margins. Huizi and Yiyi insisted on the possibility of mobility even in a looked-down-upon job as maid. Kaixin rebutted against Wei's continuous attempt at selling her "boss" plan by suggesting her

own preference for jobs with stability even if it means she has to subject herself to others' orders. At the same time, the holding onto the storyline of "upward possibility" is also not without ambivalence as Huizi yelled, "I just don't get it. Everyone's like you're serving others if you're a maid." And Yiyi quickly followed with her observation that "being a tour guide is also in the service industry" and that "boys have so much more opportunities than us girls," because their professions are always considered good in comparison to the looked-down upon service jobs for girls.

So on one hand, Wei's continuous pitch at breaking the ceiling of how far a rural girl can go to become a "self-invented" female subject, is carefully debated among the girls with its consequent risks. As Kaixin commented, "if you work as a maid in a hotel, at least it's not gonna be like -- you work on your own and then one day your little store goes out of business." Her preference for job with security seems to be a realistic reminder that with limited resources and money, the neoliberal "choice biographer" narrative might be too risky if not almost impossible for them to achieve. This "self-invention" plot holds its own limit for rural girls.

On the other hand, Wei's strong stand on being her own boss seems to originate from her fear of having to serve others – a widely-circulating gendered discourse that devalues service work. While in the Western context, de-industrialization has resulted in the feminization of the labor market, the industrialization of rural China has a more vexing impact on rural girls' employment. As Yiyi poignantly observed, under the new development in rural market economy, car mechanics, chefs and drivers for bosses become good professions for rural boys, yet for girls, they are largely relegated to disposable factory jobs and low-end service jobs such as waitresses and maids. The largely gendered nature of employment opportunities is what the girls critiqued about as they negotiate the possibility of a job with self-development and upwardly mobile possibility. Thus, it comes as no surprise that despite their realization that "tour guide" is also within the service industry, as a newly developed profession amidst the boom of local rural

tourism, this seems to be a different kind of job that offers the possibility of development and mobility.

As a final note, this neoliberal story of becoming somebody through vocational school with all its complications is acutely taken up by the girls as an “individualistic” endeavor that is both painful and necessary. To complete the circle of becoming, she now has to struggle to not become just “another girl.” Let me share a lengthy quote now which is soaked with the tears of one girl’s journey to this lonesome becoming.

Yiyi: I had a lot of friends in my old school, just having a good time. Then I left them in the middle of my 9th grade and came here. Now I think I really need to learn something here, otherwise I feel that I’m betraying and failing my friends. I promised my three good friends that I was going to stay until graduation. Then I decided that I wanted to come here to study tourism and hotel management. I was frantic these days about what to tell them. What shall I do? What shall I do? When my friends first heard about my decision, they said ‘we really can’t accept it’. It was just a sad moment, we all cried. That whole week we cried and cried. Sometimes, I even cried in class in front of everyone. Then my friends all encouraged me and told me, ‘you really have to study hard there, don’t be like others. Because many people say that once you’re in vocational schools, you’ll turn bad easily. You really can’t be like that, otherwise you’re failing us. You’ve promised that the four of us will stay together and you’ll never leave us for a vocational school. You’re the first one to make that promise, but now you’re the first one to leave and start your own way. So you have to try your best to get your tour guide certificate, in the future you’ll take us to travel around the country.’ At that time I promised myself that no matter what, I’ll try my best, I can’t be like those other girls. Even if I might not be able to get the certificate, at least I know I’ve tried, so I won’t regret it. Then I asked my friends about their plans for the future. They are all like, ‘I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know what to do next.’ So I was really worried and told them, ‘You won’t go out to factories, right? You’re all so young. We need to study some more. Come over to my new school, I think it’s a fairly good place. They said they didn’t know, because their parents would not allow them to come here. So when I first came here, I cried a lot and called my friends a lot. And one time during the school’s first week military style discipline training, they all came over to see me!’

Wei: At that time I really envy her. Because I had no friends coming over to see me at all.

Yiyi: I remember that time we all hugged together and cried. Cried very hard, very hard.

Then they told me, we should not blame you for leaving us. You have your own way to go and now that you’ve chosen your way, don’t regret it and be good. We have no right to blame you and eventually we all have to part our ways. (Yiyi’s tears rolled down her face and her eyes turned red) So I really believe in our friendship. It took me a lot of courage, a lot of courage to walk out of my old life, my village life and my friends. I

used to be like Aiai (another girl who always makes comments about having fun and shopping previously), feeling bored all the time. She's always saying that she regretted coming here, because it's just so boring. I'm telling myself you can't regret it now, you've decided to come and now this is it. I'm always talking to myself, you can't always feel so sad, you can't be beaten like this, you have to work your best and show them. So now gradually I think I'm doing better. Those first days here were just so upsetting and sad, and every time I thought about my old school days, I would cry. Because it used to be such a happy time, now I've got almost no friends here. And when I first came, I was really unhappy, really missing my friends. But now I think I am really brave, just myself, knowing no one and packed up and coming to a new place. I really want to work hard from now on. Oh, I've never thought friendship is so important.

Wei: I don't have such a deep friendship with my classmates. Girls in lower-track classes always play together and have fun, so of course they can develop such a strong bond. For us in the middle-track class, we just get to know each other through studying. At that time the teacher was very strict, so we didn't have time to play and have fun at all. It's only about discussing this homework and that homework. I don't think I have any really deep friendships. I think we have to look forward, the past has passed. We will have a better future, we have to look forward.

Yiyi: Yes, that's what I'm telling myself, the past has passed. I'm surprised by myself that after I came here I really changed. Now I know I have a goal, so even if the classes are really boring and I'm not interested in them at all, if put that in the past I definitely would not listen to the teachers, but now I'm aware of it. Like that introduction to tourism class, everyone's talking about how boring it is. But I force myself to pay attention, 'no, no, you have to listen', because I think this is my major. I've given up so much to come here, so I tell myself you have to study hard and not be like them. Other times I think, well, don't push yourself so hard, it's so tiring. What's so bad about being a maid and just be happy, like other girls? But then another thought came in, I can't be like that. I can't let my parents down. I can't be like other girls, just so ordinary, everyone's like working in a factory or being a maid, I don't want to follow their path. I have to work hard. I'm just really contradictory, sometimes like this, sometimes like that. But finally I said to myself you need to get the tour guide certificate. At least, if you've tried, you won't regret it in the future. Oh, these past years were so simple, and there was nothing to worry about. But this year, I started to worry a lot about my future.

For Yiyi, the decision to come to the vocational school on her own is complicated by mixed feelings. There was the sad departure from old girlfriends and familiar village life, personal pride in making it on her own, determination to change herself and work hard, and the fear of becoming like "them"—"other" girls in factories or just being another maid. Amidst all her tears is her painful recounting of how she is struggling to hold on the notion that from now on, the journey has to be embarked on her own. For both Wei and Yiyi, they faced the painful and inevitable with a resolute gesture. Their repeated insinuation to themselves "the past has passed" takes them onto this neoliberal "individualistic" plot line of becoming a "modern" female self

through ultimate autonomy and self-discipline. This ruptured “new” beginning of transformation is accomplished and completed with a series of simultaneous reinventions and suppression of desires within oneself (now I know I have a goal, “no, no, you have to listen”) and a perpetual fear of falling off (I can’t be like that, I don’t want to follow their path).

Yiyi’s lonesome journey also signals lingering “hope” for those of her friends who failed to depart from their path to factories as they cried out to her, “you have to try your best to get your tour guide certificate, in the future you’ll take us to travel around the country.” In this sense, this individualist journey is reiterated by Yiyi as a carrying-on of a collective dream for all the girls as she savored her past friendships, the only meaningful attachment of her schooling experience and vowed not to let them down. At the same time, this painful transformation is simultaneously understood as an individual struggle. Yiyi’s lonesome and “brave steps into the unknown” holds important symbolic meanings as “real” autonomy and a necessity if she is to “become somebody” against all odds and uncertainties (“But now I think I am really brave, just myself, knowing no one and packing and coming to a new place”).

As Yiyi finally exclaimed in all her “contradictions” that “there was nothing to worry about in the past, but now I start to worry,” the moment the rural girls are recuperated into the neoliberal storyline of individualist upward mobility, they arrive as the “modern” subject, with all the modern “symptoms” of perpetual wariness and worries. It is a struggle that continues.

The Good Girl, the Super Woman, and the Ordinary Person – (Re)telling stories of ambivalently becoming a “girl” subject

“I don’t know why, but I often hope I could be a boy. Boys are adamant and girls are just so indeterminate. I guess this thought is weird to other girls, because they often laugh at me for hanging out with boys.” Yiyi suddenly declared when visiting me with Wei one afternoon at my

grandparents-in-law's place. On the surface, she is a very "feminine" girl, good-looking with long sleek hair and a lean figure, who also enjoys dressing up in bright colors and wearing flowery headbands. But unlike other girls who often talk about boys as romantic subjects, she mentioned several times in our conversations that she wanted to be a boy. Her comment struck me as out of the blue initially, because she is obviously very much invested in performing her femininity. Then I realized her articulation is a desire to be in the "subject position" of a boy, a position of power and adamancy as in contrast to her frame of the feminine position occupied by girls as "indeterminate." It seems that what she articulates is a desire to push the boundaries of femininity and seek a "renewed" sense of self as a powerful and desiring girl. However, this "becoming" a new modern girl subject is one that is to be struggled over as Wei followed Yiyi's declaration with her own version of "becoming," rejecting being *guaiguai* girl.

Wei: I really don't want to be a *guaiguai* (listen to words, obedient) girl. *Guaiguai* girl is not good.

Yihuai: Why?

Wei: Too *tinghua* (listening to others' words, obedient). I know in her eye (looking at Yiyi) she must be thinking I'm really *tinghua*.

Yiyi: I really think you're a *tinghua* girl.

Wei: But I don't think I'm always the *tinghua* obedient kind. My parents don't think that I always listen to their words. But in my classmates' eyes I'm the *tinghua* girl.

Yiyi: I think I'm *bu tinghua* (not listening to words, not obedient), not at all. I always follow my own ideas. If I think this is the right thing to do and I want to do it, I'll go for it even if my parents are against it.

Wei: I'm the opposite. If my parents don't agree with my idea, I will consider their opinions and feelings and rethink the whole issue. Then I'll decide whether I want to do it or not.

Yiyi: If I think this is the right thing to do, I'll go ahead and do it first. If afterwards, my parents still don't agree with me, I'll then tell them why I decide to do this. My dad is usually reasonable, so if I tell him my reason, he'll usually be OK. Like this time I decided to come to the vocational school. I didn't have any plan for this earlier, it just happened one time when a teacher was talking about this tourism and hotel management major in my old school. So this teacher from the vocational school was talking in the front of the whole class and I was chatting with another teacher in the back. She said, Yiyi I think you're suitable for this. You're good-looking, and talkative, you can give it a try. I said, but I don't think I can pass the tour guide exam, because I know nothing about it. And do I have to pass an English test as well? The teacher said to be a domestic tour guide, I don't need English. And she said some relative of hers is a tour guide, so if I want to know more I can talk to her. Then many of my friends also encouraged me and

said, you're tall enough and your looks are good enough, most importantly, you've got a quick wit and sharp tongue. Yeah, that's true, because I like to talk. So then it clicked and I started to take it seriously. That day I went to my dad and told him that I wanted to be a tour guide. My dad was quite surprised, so he said he needed time to think it over and the second day he said OK. But then my mom jumped in, she disagreed. She wanted me to learn 'electronics'. I was not going to learn that, what's useful about that – I can go directly to these electronics factories to work. What's there left to learn? My mom is just like those rural women. So I said why not let me try this? Why should I go to learn 'electronics'? That is for assembly line work. In the end, my mom said, I don't care about whatever you do, but remember from now on it's only you. If you want to go to this tourism thing, better get some good results out of it. So that's how I came. There are quite a few classmates who also wanted to come, but their parents didn't allow them, so they never made it.

Wei: I really envy her for that. Whatever she wants, she'll just do it. But if you're a *guaiguai* girl, then you always have to think about your parents and consider their opinions.

Following her desire to be a boy, Yiyi further proudly positioned herself as the *bu tinghua* girl in this exchange. For her, the desire to be a boy and the position of herself as the “bad” *bu tinghua* female subject signal a sense of “self-reliance” and “autonomy” as she proclaimed without hesitation that “I always follow my own ideas,” and offered a lengthy account of her coming to the vocational school. Refusing to become another “factory girl,” she fought with her mother to become a tour guide. It is interesting to note that Yiyi's sense of self-reliance and autonomy is achieved through a series of “othering” in her narrative -- her mother being the “rural woman,” her friends failing to gain their “freedom” from their parents, and also Wei who was positioned by her as the opposite *tinghua* girl. In another sense, the path of becoming this modern female subject with all its contradictions and ambiguities has to be activated through a series of differentiated and separated categories of “othered” femininities. It is also interesting to note that alongside the abjection of the “rural woman,” is Yiyi's taking up of a new marketed femininity – her good looks. In this case, this emphasis on sexualized femininity is mentioned by her teacher as part of the discourse of success in being a tour guide. As Gaetano (2008) notes similarly in the Chinese context, “in popular parlance, ‘eating spring rice’ refers to young women capitalizing on their youth and femininity to work in retail and service jobs that value qualities

like vitality, deference, sexuality and glamour” (p.635). This specific gendering of the tourism industry seems to serve the girls with new possibilities as they actively search for their niche in an otherwise disadvantaged employment market as “rural” “female” subjects.

While Yiyi was busy reiterating her story of becoming through layers of “othered femininities,” and taking up marketed femininity, Wei also engaged in her own complicated negotiations. As a girl coming from a middle-track class, Wei seemed to be very concerned about being positioned as the *tinghua* girl who always follows rules. It is a position she was called upon and recognized in herself in the past and is now trying to rebel against. In her rejection of the “obedient” good girl subject, she was seeking a sense of “autonomy.” However, she soon felt the knot in-between this desire of “autonomy” and her positioning as a “former” *guaiguai* girl, as she states at the end, “if you’re a *guaiguai* girl, then you always have to think about your parents and consider their opinions.” This is her dilemma of seeking power in the ambiguous positions of “good” and “bad” girl. A good girl, as Gonick (2003) poignantly observes, “is produced through an intricate interplay between relations of self and other, mediated through expressions and suppressions of desire” (p.99). More importantly, she further notes that the achievement of oneself as a girl, as a consequence, is often articulated within exclusive oppositional categories of the “good” and “bad.” It is this dilemma of having to choose between the dichotomous position of “good” or “bad” that Wei found herself in.

With their different academic standings, Wei and Yiyi are constituted as feminine subjects in different ways. Yiyi who gave up the hope of academic advancement after her placement into the low-track class, interestingly could claim without hesitation her position as the *bu tinghua* girl. It is a negative position that has been used to categorize her as the “bad” subject in the schooling discourse. But now she is re-appropriating the exact same “identity” to validate her desires as a modern girl. Wei, on the other hand, was very invested in the academic discourse

initially as a struggling yet hard-working student. She had to recognize herself as the “*guaiguai*” girl to be “appropriate” in her academic setting. Her decision to leave the academic track, as she indicated earlier, is considered falling-off the edge for her parents. So the task for her is to re-constitute herself as an agentic and autonomous subject through a different set of schooling discourses. But now she finds herself caught in the old and new storylines of femininities and selfhood. There is, on one hand, the lingering burden of being good and thus suppression of her “own” desire. On the other hand, the possibility of “turning into a *bu tinghua* girl” if she is to assert her own desires without considering her parents’ opinions. To constitute herself as the modern girl, as it turns out means that she has to be both “good” and “bad” and neither of these at the same time. Her envy for Yiyi might well be that unlike herself, Yiyi is not caught in this impossible dilemma since her “bad” subject position has already been written, through her failed academic experience. Thus her unleashing of desire can be articulated without ambivalence.

Yet who is not caught up in this gendered storyline of femininity and desires? Let us continue as the two girls wondered further about this ambiguous project of becoming.

Yiyi: I think good parents should teach girls what they should and shouldn’t do, like don’t use dirty and inappropriate words as a girl. Actually when parents give their kids lessons, it doesn’t seem to have any effect on the surface, but there’ll be an effect in the kid’s heart. Like my grandma always talks to me, ‘you can’t be too naughty, a girl should not let other people feel she’s too naughty’. Then this idea stayed with me, so I know that girls should not make other people feel she’s too naughty and unlikable. Well, I think that I look as if I’m a very rebellious person, but in my heart ...

Wei (cutting in): actually very *tinghua*.

Yiyi: I think I know what’s right and wrong in my heart, what I can and can’t do. I don’t think parents are always wrong. My grandpa, he’s always talking nonsense, then I don’t listen to him. But my parents and my grandma, sometimes I’ll listen to their words. I might behave as if I don’t, but in my heart I know when to listen. But, if what they tell me I totally can’t accept, or I just think it’s wrong, then I won’t listen. For example, once my grandma said to me, ‘why bother to go to vocational school? After you get out of junior high, then just go to work like these other girls in the village. Go to a factory and then you can get like how much money every month.’ I just can’t stand her talking about this. Why should I only go to these factory jobs? Why can’t I study for some more years? Why can’t I envision something better for myself? Now that I have barely started, why do you think I definitely can’t pass the tour guide exam? Why do you think I’ll be just

like other girls? Then she'll say we can't take care of you anymore, you know how hard life is in the rural villages. Then you better learn to be "*guai*" (meaning: knowing how to behave yourself), don't be like them, dating and then getting pregnant so early, be caught up with those boys. I said I know, I know all that, I won't. Then my grandma said, make sure to keep your eyes wide open and look for a rich guy. Every time she mentions this, I know, I know, I won't be like them.

Yihuai (turning to Wei): Wei, you mentioned about becoming a female boss earlier?

Wei: Yeah, of course I want to. I don't want to be dependant on a guy. I just feel that compared to them boys, we girls are like lower than them socially. That's why I want to be a female boss, a *super woman*. I want to depend on myself, not others. You have to have your own power.

Yiyi: Well, actually not super woman, but just try our best to do our own thing. Like prove to them girls are not necessarily lower or weaker than boys. We don't really need to depend on boys.

Wei: Yes.

Yihuai: So who has influenced you?

Yiyi: Her dad! (Wei's father is an entrepreneur doing his own business in logistics in the rural town center)

Wei: Actually I have my own ideas. Maybe my dad has some influence on me, but he doesn't know that I want to be a super woman. Actually I don't want to tell everything to my parents. Some ideas are better kept from them and shared with friends.

Yihuai: So you talked with your friends about this?

Wei (in a lower voice): Very little, very little.

Yiyi: Because they all think it's not possible. They just let you down.

Wei: Yes, they "beat down" your self-esteem a lot.

Yiyi: Many people are like, 'what? You're just an ordinary person'.

If you are just about to make your conclusion that Yiyi is a tomboy and a disobedient *butinghua* girl, you are probably surprised here that she continued her own story with an astonishing statement that "girls need to be taught to behave properly." Apparently, Wei was happy to hear such a statement coming from her friend who a minute ago seemed to be totally outside the web of contradictions. For an individual to become a "girl" subject, as Yiyi rightly observes, she has to subject herself to proper "social categories that guarantee a recognizable and enduring social existence" (Butler, 1997, p.20). So despite Yiyi's identification with the power of the "boy," she has to be a "girl," even if being a girl means being subjected to confining norms.

For Wei and Yiyi, now finding their common ground as both existing and being confined within the normative feminine norms, they narrated a new discourse of becoming a "super woman" in an attempt to break away and gain a sense of "autonomy." Wei offered this new

image of herself upon hearing Yiyi recount her grandmother's repeated reminder that girls need to learn "*guai*" (behave properly, obedient) and ultimately find a rich guy. She now joined Yiyi's earlier identification with the masculine by loudly asserting that "you need to have your own power." Yiyi, this time, interestingly revoked the naming of "superwoman" even though she agreed with Wei in reiterating her desire to be "autonomous" and not dependent on boys. This -- as it later turned out is a strategic move on her part. Wei mentioned that despite her father's inspiration as a successful neoliberal subject of entrepreneurship and mobility, her desire to become a female boss has to be kept away from both her parents and friends, because "they beat down your self-esteem a lot." While the girls are attempting to rise above their very gendered existence with a new imagined way of being, they are also acutely aware that the old plot of "proper femininity" still has its strong grip on them. And they have to conceal their desire as they secretly carry on as an "ordinary person." There is an ambivalence amidst this interwoven networks of the good girl, the *bu tinghua* girl, the super woman and the ordinary person. These are contradictory subject positions that girls are living simultaneously as they are being invited to inhabit the neoliberal discourse of possibility but are still constrained to a confined femininity and a gendered reality of devalued female work. According to Bulter (1997), "the subject is itself a site of this ambivalence in which the subject emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as *the condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency" (p.14). Her take on subjectivity suggests that while being subjected to these conflicting subject positions, the girls are indeed actively seeking to create alternative readings of themselves as "modern, self-inventing girl subjects" despite the structural paradox within such a plot line. In-between becoming a "choice biographer" (Beck, 1992) and juggling their disadvantaged "rural" identity, the girls are now facing more choices than their mothers' generation, but also carrying more pressure in charting a path of self-invention.

Wei (talking about Yiyi's life in junior high school as a "bad" student): I really envy her. She has such a colorful and exciting experience. I'm just too ordinary. Just so plain and ordinary, I don't like it. I hope my life can be more colorful. I really hope my future can be exciting, not too ordinary and plain. That kind of life is just bland and tasteless.

Yiyi: But sometimes actually, I really envy those girls who get through high school to college. Sometimes I hope I can be an ordinary person, getting into a senior high school in an ordinary manner, then going to college in an ordinary manner, then having a job in an ordinary manner. Everything is so ordinary, that's also good.

Wei: NO, I don't want such a life. Maybe she's been through some exciting and colorful experiences, so she'll think like this. But I won't choose such a life. If you're already so ordinary, then such a plain and boring life, how can you live along endlessly? If I can have some colorful and exciting experiences, then life is tasty. Well, now I'll focus on the basic tourism classes. Then, I'll pass the tour guide certificate and become an official tour guide. If I can do well, if I really have that ability, I want to open a tour agency myself, be a boss myself.

Yiyi: I don't know. I just see that girls from my village all walk down the same path. Some of them went out to factory jobs even before they finish their junior high, then married early and had kids. I know I don't want to end up on this path. So on one hand, I hope I can be an ordinary person, but on the other hand, I don't want to go down their path. I just wish I can be an ordinary and normal person, having an ordinary job and an ordinary life. Just not like them.

When Yiyi let her guard down and admitted her envy for the "ordinary" school girl who can continue on with their academic schooling towards a stable job, Wei who came from a different route pointed to the nature of such a "repressive" life as she rebutted adamantly, "such a plain and boring life, how can you live along endlessly?" She is not just talking about schooling, but also the seemingly stable life that has been promised afterwards. If the fear of becoming a disposable factory worker is that of having to be a "docile" female subject negating one's individuality and a sense of self, then the high road through academic schooling is no less monotonous with a constant demand for obedience and conformism. In the words of Wei, girls who accepted such an order, inevitably, give away their own "sense of self" and are more likely to continue accepting the orders that are yet to come. As for her, she needs imagination and color and taste, even if that might come with risks of falling off the academic order. She imagines herself as a female boss – a new kind of girl as she paints the rosy picture promised by the new market order of entrepreneurship and possibility.

Her imagination of becoming is, however, complicated by Yiyi's ambivalence of both fear and desire of that "ordinariness." She says, "on one hand, I hope I can be an ordinary person; but on the other hand, I don't want to go down their path. I just wish I can be an ordinary and normal person, having an ordinary job and an ordinary life. Just not like them". Her vexed desire of this "ordinariness" seems to resonate with Walkerdine's (1991) childhood memories of growing up working-class. The fear of the reproduction of that ordinariness inside oneself, as Walkerdine (1991) writes of her own struggle, is a fear that "to be ordinary is to be a woman; to be ordinary is to be a worker: terror and desire" (p.163). More importantly, as subjects leaving the protective shelter of traditional norms of being a "girl" and seeking to transform themselves to fit the new individualized discourse of market and self-invention, they are caught in-between their glittering dream of becoming a modern girl and their witness of a rural reality of constraints.

This is their journey of becoming.

* * * * *

Weeks after this interview, I set up an email account for Yiyi. This is the first email I received from her after I returned back to my city.

September, 23rd, 2008

Dear Yihuai *jie* (big sister),

This is the THING you asked me to write. You said you want to put something written by me in your writing – something written by a girl like me, something about my dreams. My dream --- I've thought about it for a long, long time, but still wasn't sure what to write.

As I reflect back on those days I spent with you, feelings become too complicated to express. I've never thought I would come across someone like you, someone from a totally different world. We are people from two different worlds. I saw things I've never seen from you, heard things I've never heard, from you. It is you who make me start to believe there might be a dream waiting for me if I try hard to reach it.

But after all, we live in such different social contexts. Rural girls like us are often not offered many choices. Our life is a series of compromises and acceptance of reality. A dream may never come true even if we work hard for it. Many of my girlfriends are like that. They want to go to vocational schools, but most often their parents will not agree because they think vocational schools are useless places to go. Even if their parents finally agree, many of them start to hesitate, worrying that they will not find a good job after vocational schooling and just throw their parents' hard-earned money into water. So many of my friends have given up and follow the life path so many girls before us have ended up with – even if they never wanted to.

Yihuai sister, during those days with you, do you know how much I envy you? I am dreaming of a colorful life like what you have – but I can't. After all the fantasies, I still have to live my own life. The girls here talk most often about the boredom and emptiness in our lives. I think the reason they feel this way is because they see no hope for a future and have no confidence to even think of a dream. So they are chanting “*mei yisi* (no meanings)” everyday and then fill their days with window-shopping in this tiny rural town and caring for their superficial appearance. Buying clothes and doing make-up have become daily, weekly or monthly rituals for many girls here. I think these girls' fondness of these is just to fill the emptiness in their hearts.

I am one of those girls. But Yihuai sister, I don't want to follow the fate and path of so many girls before me. I really don't want to end up in their footsteps. I will try hard to live a life for my goals, even if I may never reach there. I believe if I work harder now, I will regret less for myself in the future. You will always encourage and support me, right?

Yours,

Yiyi

It is there, I realized I was the “normal” person Yiyi envied of becoming, an “urban” subject charting a path without the same sets of limitations she has to fight fiercely. The “dream” I am talking about is so much soaked and constructed within power hierarchies. A dream may never come true and life for a young girl at the tender age of sixteen is already written with lessons of compromises and acceptance.

It is there, I realized at the same time, that despite our different positionings as female subjects, I, as a seemingly “empowered” feminist researcher, am never far away from their struggles, juggling positions of the good girl, the super woman, and the ordinary person. As one feminist colleague declared after hearing my reiteration of girls’ narratives, “Aren’t we just the same?”

Departing from my own “guaiguai” girl story, I came to the U.S. and engaged in an academic world filled with discourses of “reason” and “rationality.” To be a “super woman” is to become like one of them, to join the clan and speak their language.

I yearn to be both a good daughter and an out-spoken young woman standing on her own, a strong-willed feminist and a good wife and future mother. All at the same time. Those shifts between private and public spaces, those moments of revelations and strategic guise, are perpetually ambivalent positions, I am resisting and taking on simultaneously. Just like the girls.

In my writing of my “othered” subjects/objects, I might have successfully achieved the construction of myself as a rational ethnographer with my sense of validity and existence confirmed again and again through the endless pinning-down and extracting of the many layers of stories of *those* other girls. But I want to proclaim, not secretly, but loudly, as Yiyi did with her own writing in her search of becoming, in the end “I AM one of those girls.” I hope Yiyi will

allow me to use her words, with the awareness that my struggle is always uttered from my own positionalities.

Chapter 4

“Good” and “Bad,” “Modern” and “Tradition,” Pleasure and Danger -

-- Becoming the sexed body

This teacher from the advanced-track class
 He despises me and bad-mouths me all the time
 Why?
 Because I hang out with boys in his class
 And he thinks I'm a bad girl polluting his smart boy students.
 What did he say?
 Like – I'm not going to make it to high school
 Few years later, I'll end up in a factory
 And get married
 And have a baby soon
 That they are heading for a different life
 I despise him

Yiyi

“So what else are you going to write about us?” Yuehua asked eagerly as we sat in the classroom this time during the nightly independent study period. I glanced at the girls gathering around me and smiled secretively, “How about -- love?” Immediately, the room burst into a chaotic sequence of laughter and screams as if a bomb had just dropped. Xiaorong yelled excitedly, “Is what you’re writing about us going to be as interesting as those romantic novels? I hope so, then many people will read it.” Before I could follow up, she continued in an earnest tone, “Yihuai sister, sleep over with us tonight, then you’ll hear all the interesting stories.” Upon hearing Xiaorong’s remark, Huizi raised her fingers and pointed at Aiai and the other girl, “Ask these two girls, they talk about *zaolian* (literal meaning: early dating. Here refers to dating too early according to parents’ and teachers’ standard) all night, always about boyfriends.” Blushing with a shy smile, Aiai protested in a low voice, “No! I don’t!”

“Then you all have boyfriends?” I asked following the lead. The excitement in the air minutes ago was suddenly muffled into an interesting mixture of hesitation with a tinge of eagerness. The girls smiled. The expression in their eyes suggested they were about to tell me something. But instead they unanimously shook their heads one by one, and pointed fingers at each other. Finally, Yiyi broke the chain of accusations and spoke in a serious voice, “I just think girls these days are maturing much earlier, they know about this ‘thing’ a lot.”

“So you mean you’re a late bloomer?” I teased her.

Now laughing out loudly, Yiyi confessed, “OK, OK. I’m early-maturing! I’m maturing early too, I’m just following the trend!”

Yiyi’s self-revelation quickly reenergized the group. The girls were now gushing about stories of “puppy love” and how their teachers had given them some “good” lessons on “early dating.” It is as if for the first time these girls discovered that they could openly talk about “dating” without being put into the “bad” girl category instantly. But they were also very cautious since we were still sitting in the classroom. Yuehua rushed to the front door, double checked whether Ms. Wang was anywhere nearby, then locked the door and waved a victory sign back at us.

Our conversation continued. The topics jumped from random observations about other girls, “slag” or “nerdy,” to romance, marriage and then -- teen pregnancy as Wei made the comment that “these days it is hard to ‘control’ girls.” She was referring to what Yiyi mentioned earlier that more girls in her village got married with a baby in tow at twenty or even younger. “It is because everyone’s out working in the factories at an early age now. Then boys and girls all work together, so it is very easy to have this kind of ‘thing’ happening between them. In our village, we call it ‘that kind of relationship’. Parents don’t know what to say to their kids, because it is too embarrassing to talk about. So ‘it’ just happened.” Other girls followed up with more

gossip and hearsay about girls who got pregnant in their own junior high schools. Everyone seemed to have an opinion of their own to air on this issue.

“I really want to know what was in these girls’ minds when they did such a thing. How could they be losing their self-respect in this way?” Yiyi wondered out loud.

“But – you just mentioned that girls are getting mature much earlier these days and that you girls know a lot about this ‘thing’?” I was a bit confused.

Xiaorong, Aiai, Yuehua and several other girls jumped in and corrected me instantly, “Early-maturing doesn’t mean this ‘thing’. It’s not this ‘thing’. This part is not about early-maturing.” Sensing my confusion, Yiyi continued affirmatively, “What I mean by early-maturing is that you know you really like some guy, and you would like to date him – well, maybe it’s not even dating, it’s just for fun, just kind of playing. But of course, you know there’s a proper limit to this playing.” “Yes, yes, not like this,” other girls quickly cut in, “Not fooling around like this.”

As our discussion heated up on the issue of pregnant girls, Yiyi suddenly noticed that several other girls had retreated to the other corner of the classroom, seemingly due to a lack of interest in the topic. Wanting to include everyone in the discussion, she waved to them and spoke in a loud voice, “We’re discussing why more girls are getting pregnant at an early age in junior high schools and factories these days. Come over!” When these girls still refused to join us, she yelled, “You guys are just so conservative. You’re falling behind the times now.”

Yuehua followed up with a conspiring wink, “The seemingly shy and conservative girls, they are the ones who are more prone to this kind of temptation.”

“Yes, yes!” Yiyi nodded, “Like those very *guai* (innocent and naive) girls. A guy chases her, and then she just falls in love with him. Then that guy asks for ‘a certain request’, and she doesn’t know what to do or how to say no. So ‘this’ happens.”

If moments ago, these girls were still holding derogatory viewpoints about “girls out of control and losing their self-respect these days,” now in an interesting twist, the group all seemed

to agree with Yuehua and Yiyi, and ruefully offered their own observations. “Yes, because these *guai* girls don’t know much about this.” “The ‘slaggy’ ones in my school are not the ones getting pregnant.”

And they finally reached a conclusion, “Maybe because these *guai* girls seldom dare to talk and discuss this kind of ‘thing’. Otherwise, they would know how far to go with a guy. What you can do and what you can’t do. It can happen in a minute.”

These girls’ discussions of romance and marriage, their seemingly contradictory reactions towards “other” pregnant girls as either slutty or *guai*, and their remarks about girls who did not engage in the discussion on sexuality as falling behind the times, lead us into the theme of this chapter. How are girls being constructed and constructing their own sense of self within shifting discourses on sexuality and “proper” womanhood in rural China? Kondo (1997) has insightfully pointed out that “racial, gender, class, sexual and national identities, among others, should be thought through together, as mutually constitutive and defining” (p.6). So following last chapter’s complicated contouring of girls’ transitioning from school to work, in this chapter I will sketch out the journey of rural girls’ becoming young women against the backdrop of a nation’s modernization. This becoming of the “sexed” body is not just a biological process, but rather as Zheng (2004) argues, the young rural migrant female body is “a site where the imperative of state politics and layered configurations of gender, class, and sexuality become legible” (p.85). To become a “proper” young woman in an unraveling Chinese rural locality is a complicated process of negotiating through layers of contested discourses of rural/urban, state/market, and tradition/modernity.

Feminist scholars have long explored the contradictions surrounding sexuality and the bodily experience of becoming a woman (Davies, 2000; Gonick, 2003; Grosz, 1990; 1994; Haug, et.al, 1987; Holland, et.al, 1994; Martin, 1989; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). Following

Foucault's (1978) framework of power and subject, discourse and sexuality, Haug, et al. (1987) have astutely proclaimed in their ground-breaking collective memory work, *Female Sexualization*, the importance of tracing "how it comes about that a particular set of statements clusters together to form what is then understood as 'sexuality'" (p.191). Their remark suggests a new direction in exploring girlhood and sexuality. Instead of focusing on the individual "good" and "bad" choices girls make or employing a dichotomous framework of repression/liberation of sexual agency, it is more critical to examine closely the relevant and seemingly irrelevant discourses/silences constructing the bodily subjectivity of girls.

Furthermore, as many post-colonial feminists point out, the contested discourses of nationalism and colonialism, "tradition" and "modernity" have also been tightly interwoven into the complicated construction of the already gendered and classed body of Third World girls and young women (Chatterjee, 1989; Dong, 2009; Mani, 1998; Narayam, 1997; Puri, 1999; Schein, 1998; Stevens, 2003). Chatterjee (1989) notes in the Indian context that while the British colonists justified their "civilizing mission" as that of saving the "oppressed" women of India, nationalists embarked on a defensive journey of re-locating Indian "woman" in the "modern" world of the nation. In this case, middle-class girls were offered opportunities to higher education and public employment, yet it was their simultaneous adherence to their future roles in the domestic sphere, sexual respectability and the "feminine" that made them the "new" women. As nationalists argued, this "new" middle-class woman was now held as the symbol of a nation with its adoption of Western materiality while upholding its own Eastern spirituality. The "new" woman had to be carefully distinguished from both the westernized women and lower-class women. The former were considered to be sexually promiscuous and devoid of a superior moral sense, while the latter were deemed too traditional and "incapable of appreciating the virtues of freedom" (p.628).

Observing the emergence of the “Modern Girl” in early twentieth century China, Dong (2008) also comments that “while elite women should be ‘modern’ and practice free love, women of lower classes need to adhere to more traditional standards with trenchant fervor” and “elites in China were fighting to take control of the double-edged sword of the Modern Girl that served as the new status marker in the city but could also slash open class lines” (p.206). In both cases, the girls’ bodies were used to enact the struggle between conflicting aspects of modernity (Stevens, 2003). The gender- and class-based tension of sexual respectability shapes what is experienced as the female body quite differently for girls coming from various social-class backgrounds (Puri, 1999).

Sexuality as these feminists have illustrated is an ordering of socially constituted discourses inscribing on and producing the gendered and classed body/subject. Then for today’s rural Chinese girls, located within the complicated workings of a local community of “tradition,” a historically and socially constructed disparity of rural/urban, and the possibility of upward mobility promised by a neo-liberal market economy, how are they negotiating the contesting process of becoming a proper young “woman”? Or in other words, what is at stake in becoming this “sexed” body amidst the often conflicting meanings of what is understood as “sexuality” in the changing Chinese rural locality? In this chapter, I will first provide an overall picture of the new sexual order within the local and national contexts. Through juxtaposing conflicting images I witnessed in the rural town center with media reports concerning rural girls’ unruly bodies, I seek to tease out the contested meanings of femininity and sexuality activated through such dichotomous categories of rural/urban, state/market, tradition/modernity.

I will then bring the discussion back to the vocational school classroom where conversations about romance, marriage and “other” pregnant girls are still heatedly carried on. Far from the victim image that is often prevalent in the media, these rural girls are seeking ways to break through the dichotomous categories that regulate them as either rural or urban, tradition

or modern, “proper” or “turning bad.” Situated as the “sexed” subject within larger contested and shifting discourses, the girls have actively engaged in positioning themselves as the “legitimate” girl-woman subject through continuously marking boundaries between self and other (“feudalist” parents, naïve *guai* girls, pregnant girls, urban girls, girls in the U.S. , etc).

Finally, in the last section I will include another group of girls’ stories in an attempt to complicate what researchers often perceive as the homogenous “rural Chinese girl.” While the majority of my discussion so far has focused on the girls in vocational schools, I have also become acquainted with some other girls of similar age, who drifted to odd jobs in garment factories, hair salons and massage parlors. Between these two groups of girls, it seems that identifications of rural and urban characteristics, meanings of sexual encounters and marriage are highly contested and invested with a variety of different values and judgments. I will use my field notes to recapture the stories of three particular girls I met outside vocational schools. They refused to be formally interviewed by me, but hung out with me throughout my time in town. Their stories diverge drastically from the vocational school girls I have been writing about in this dissertation. I include these “other” girls’ stories here to present a more complicated picture of girls’ lives in the unraveling urbanizing rural space and how girls coming from different walks of life negotiate the process of “becoming” young women amidst the seemingly endless performative acts of “tradition” and “modernity.” I also intend to use their stories to expose the limit of the voyeuristic meaning-making process of ethnographic research. When I grew closer and closer to the vocational school girls who very much admired my presence as an urban, middle-class and upwardly mobile female subject, I felt more and more disturbed and confused by the girls I met on the street whose lives seem to be evolving into utter disorder in my eyes. In bringing myself and my readers back to those uncomfortable moments of encounter, I hope to interrogate the complexities and dilemmas in writing the other and the masses.

But first -- let me take you to the very center of the rural town Xiuning where clashing images of young “womanhood” with drastically different implications are hung on the walls of government buildings and real-estate developments.

“Turning bad?” – Contested discourses on the new sexual order

In the center of Xiuning is the four-story building of the Workers’ Cultural Center, an official organization that exists in most big cities and small towns throughout China with occasional cultural exhibitions. It was close to March 8th, 2008, the International Women’s Day, when I went back to the field. This time I found a large red banner hanging above the front gate of the center, titled “Mobilizing all women in the county to make a contribution to the development of Xiuning.” A banner like this is an ordinary sight in China, but it amuses me that in a day celebrating women’s equality, the local government has intentionally constructed an official narrative of the ideal rural woman who might be an independent laborer, but serves first and foremost as the state’s subject. If this scenario of connecting rural women’s independence with a county/country’s development and modernity seems more focused on the public sphere of women’s lives, the paternal gaze of the state also constantly supervises the “sexual” order of rural womanhood through the governmental Women’s Federation. An earlier report I read about a rural migrant girl’s story offers a good example. A young rural girl from a county near Xiuning recently migrated to a city for temporary work, but was trapped into prostitution. In an attempt to resist being forced into prostitution, she jumped out of a second-floor window and ended up with first-degree spinal damage. After a series of widely publicized reports, this story finally reached Anhui Provincial Women’s Federation. This rural girl was consequently awarded and praised officially as exemplifying dignified and self-respected young rural women of Anhui province (Sun, 2004).

In contrast to such public proceedings and status honoring of virtuous young rural women, the state official discourse also constantly adopts a moralistic position in warning those other rural young women who assume “the role of mistress and concubine” or “sell their body for money in prostitution” as shameless (Wang, 1999). As Sun (2004) notes, in such discourses, the state preaches the ideal of “modern” rural women and promotes young women’s participation in rural urbanization and modernity. The honoring of the exemplified rural women and the condemnation of the “fallen” seem a rather ambiguous and awkward effort. The largely state-orchestrated market economy, massive migration and rural urbanization have shattered and complicated the living reality of rural residents. Instead of publicly acknowledging structural social issues brought forth by such rapid economic change, the state sidestepped contradictions arising from increasing social inequality and focused on employing the sexual body of rural young women to mark boundaries of moral order. So while rural girls are encouraged to envision themselves as future independent migrating workers trudging from the unraveling rural social landscape to the urban space of market and consumption, they are also constantly warned to remain as traditional and docile sexual subjects. The “fallen” rural young women are either shunned from official reports or condemned as “polluting the morals of the community and poisoning the soul of people” (Wang, 1999). Furthermore, this overtly anti-individualistic moralistic discourse “places family, community, and nation above individual woman” and “intended to shape and mold women into citizens who can be recruited into the political, social, economic, and sexual roles carved out for women by the Chinese state” (Sun, 2004, p.112).

The state’s effort to promote “ideal and virtuous rural women” who are traditional, docile and disciplined has largely resonated with my mother-in-law’s generation who grew up with such collective socialist ideals. Yet for today’s rural girls dwelling in a changing order, this state discourse of the “ideal” rural woman is often set squarely against another largely publicized, commercialized image of the consuming and desiring “modern” woman. At the other side of this

rural town in the expanding development zone is a big construction site of urban style residential apartment buildings. Set against deserted farmlands, the large advertisements on the walls of such sites are of particular interest. Images of young urban couples abound. One such advertisement is a series of pictures of a typical urban father-mother-child family. While the father is depicted as playing golf, the mother, dressed in fashionable urban style clothes with delicate makeup, poses with her son in parks and skating rinks. In another such wall painting is the image of a young couple posed in a romantic intimate manner, and the line reads, "Comfortable mainstream life with our spacious apartments." For girls coming from villages, such images of modern and fashionable young women, intimate romance, and urban family and marriage life are often what captured their imagination immediately. Standing against the receding farmlands at its distant background, these commercial images activated another discourse of the individualistic and consuming modern woman, in contrast to the implicitly patriarchal state discourse of a virtuous and docile rural working woman. Strolling along the two main streets in town, I often saw newly-arrived young rural girls lingering outside clothing stores, gazing at glittering posters of young women wearing high-heels, trendy hair styles and fancy clothes. It is here at the town center where rural girls encountered the new marketed ideal of feminine beauty and romantic love, visually enmeshed into an endless public display of desire (Evans, 2000, p.217). Through those real-estate development advertisements, intimacy and family harmony are now increasingly presented as dependent on the married couple's ability to become urban consumers. Those images hold out the promise of happiness, fulfillment and individual possibilities. Yet as alluring as they might appear to be, this projected "modern woman" and her romantic storyline as Evans (2000) subsequently points out, is often constructed through images of subordination and exclusion, which "affirms the oppositional hierarchies between the rural (backward/victim/suffering) and the urban (modernized/fulfilled/successful)" (p.228).



Figure 8. Real-estate development advertisement 1



Figure 9. Real-estate development advertisement 2

So as socialist China negotiates modernity coupled with global capitalism, the rural girl/young woman serves as an important symbolic figure in mapping out a contested order. They are offered a series of often contradictory images of “becoming,” dangling between the state/market, virtuous/desiring, and rural/urban. On one hand, the nation’s increasing movement towards a market economy and urbanizing the “rural” has sought to incite rural girls’ desires through heavily marketed new storylines of femininity, sexuality, romance and family. But on the

other hand, this modernity project is deeply troubled with historically entrenched inequality between the rural and urban. Engineering the less-privileged “rural” into the new market order of desires poses a potential threat to the nation/state’s stability. In its effort to maintain a “harmonious” order of the modern consuming yet traditional docile “rural,” rural girls/young women are now asked to be at once the symbol of a nation’s modernity and its negation (Gilroy, 1993).

To further complicate both the state and market images, I noticed one day a large red-painted slogan at a back street, warning of the increase of AIDS in the local community. After I referred this sight to my sister-in-law, she replied immediately, “Yes, the rural youth are pretty chaotic nowadays. Many girls get pregnant before marriage and some even go into prostitution or become lovers of older men.” Her comment reminded me of an earlier conversation I had with a teacher from a vocational school. After I mentioned in a passing remark that teachers in the junior high school talked about girls in vocational school as “turning bad,” she denied vehemently, “In our school, we have separate dormitories for girls and boys. We close the iron fence on the first floor of each building after 9pm every night. Our girls are definitely not like those girls on the street, because we rarely let them out. If we let them out, even if they’re simple and naïve rural girls, those guys on the street would still come over to them. We will not allow such a thing to happen in our school.”

Thus, behind the state discourse that promotes the virtuous and traditional rural woman and the glossy market discourse depicting the modern consuming urban woman, there lies another hidden yet pronounced discourse of rural girls turning bad. The vocational school teacher and my sister-in-law’s remarks embody the larger societal and state preoccupation and anxiety between the normative order of a socially constituted, gendered process of maturing into “appropriate” young womanhood and the increasing disorder of the body of rural girls amidst China’s economic

reform. This anxiety of the undisciplined sexuality of girls goes far beyond the local rural community. During my fieldwork, a few hundred miles away in my provincial capital hometown, a rare three-day investigation and discussion of a “shocking” story was about to unravel. It started off with an 18-year-old migrant rural girl in the city who was caught throwing her newly-born “illegitimate” son into a dumpster. After reporting that both the young mother and the baby were sent to the hospital and stabilized, the newspaper asked the readers to offer more stories of such migrant rural girls “losing their bodies.” Meanwhile, it was revealed by one nurse in this hospital that last year (2007), over one hundred rural girls came here and gave birth to babies out-of-wedlock, and this is only one hospital. This shocking story and the astounding numbers triggered massive responses from readers. For three days, stories of teenage rural girls having “illegitimate” babies filled the pages. Most of the readers’ reactions are encapsulated by the title of the ensuing report, “migrant rural workers are weak members of the society, migrant rural girls are even weaker, migrant rural girls who have ‘lost their bodies’ are the weakest.” As one reader wrote, “from rural villages to urban cities, it is not easy for a girl to survive on her own. She will definitely feel lonely and thus will become easy prey. A bowl of noodles, or some warm comfort might provoke them to ‘offer their bodies’. These rural girls who had ‘illegitimate’ babies are not ‘slutty’ girls. Many of them are very simple and naïve. Life is going to be hard for them in the future with no husband and a baby in tow.” Other readers followed with comments such as, “If these girls are being exploited, they should report to the police immediately!” “Migrant rural girls should be cautioned not to fall in love so easily!”

The series of reports went on a third day with a commentary from a professor in the local university titled, “Who should be responsible for these rural migrant teen-mothers?” The article started with the sentence, “at the beginning of the Chinese new year, a series of cases of deserted babies shocked our city – a city with a long tradition of superior Chinese morality.” Juxtaposing the fact that abandoning babies is illegal with emotional stories of migrant rural girls, the

professor concluded, “Shall we hold this society responsible? Shall we hold the government responsible? I think it is necessary! Is it because we have paid too much attention to economic development that we have lost sight of educating our youth with a proper morality? It is time now for us to offer them important lessons on tradition, morality and law.”

So when the state Women’s Federation consistently sidestepped the contradictions that economic reform poses for rural women by promoting the image of the “virtuous” woman and condemn the “fallen,” stories of rural girls as victims abounded in the commercial media. The image of “fallen” girls often serves as “a metaphor for the corrosive effects of the market” in the public media and among urban intellectuals (Jacka, 2006, p.53). When “rural” was paradoxically portrayed as barbaric and abhorrent, yet also as the longed-for essence of China’s tradition and spirit, rural girls and young women figure into this scheme as important signifiers. Their “fallen” image and undisciplined sexuality easily stirred up layers of reactions among urban readers. On one hand, it is the sympathy of middle-class urban readers for those rural girls who “lost their bodies/virginity/reputation” upon entering the urban space, unprepared. Depicted as the victim of the market and economic reform, the rural girl is mourned as a symbol for the loss of “traditional Chinese morality” marked by her “out-of-control” body. On the other hand, it is the intriguing play between “tradition” and “modernity” mapped onto this same body. As the naïve yet ignorant subject of the “rural,” rural girls are locked in the urban imagination as the “passive body.” But when incidents of their transgressive sexual behaviors surface, they are often being labeled as not “modern” enough to acquire a sense of self-responsibility. Their “low-quality” and lack of “modern” ideas on responsible relationships have provoked the comment that “rural girls should be cautioned not to fall in love easily.”

Through those discourses of the state, market and the urban media and intellectuals, rural girls’ bodies have increasingly become the battleground for contested cultural meanings of

tradition/modern, and state/market. Often defined by their sexuality as either victims or “corrupted” and “fallen,” they seem to have little room for uttering their own stories. They remain largely marginalized in silence. But despite often being relegated to the position of the “traditional” rural subject, the rural girls I encountered have long been invited to participate in the modern storyline of femininity, intimacy, romance and marriage. Mediated images from TV programs, popular music, novels and advertisements from local, national and even global contexts have become a common pastime for the girls. They are bound to journey through conflicting images of becoming young women at a time of globalized locality.

Now let us return to their stories which also started with some posters on the walls. This time it is the walls inside their dormitory.

“I don’t want to end up that way!” – Girls negotiating the contested new sexual order

The first time I went to the girls’ dormitory, they had just come from their village homes a few weeks ago. Things were pretty basic in the room except for the elaborate and colorful decorations on the walls of each bunk bed. Besides the few hand-made paper-folded flowers and cranes, the walls were filled with large and scattered posters and pictures of young pop stars from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and even Korea and Japan. Two large posters caught my attention immediately. They turned out to be pictures of romantic soap operas. From the girls’ enthusiastic introductions, I learned that these were their favorite shows of the moment called “How to date – the art of war” and “Let’s fight – dare you?” The former show depicted a cross-cultural love story between a rich and prestigious Korean young man and an ordinary Chinese girl set in cosmopolitan Shanghai. The other show was staged in another cosmopolitan city -- Taipei, Taiwan. Adapted from a Japanese comic, the poster shows a fashionable young urban Taiwanese girl standing in the middle holding a backboard. Two young men are playing basketball at her

side, apparently eager to chase after her. And the catch line reads, “Let’s have a heart-to-heart game of love.”



Figure 10. The girls' dorm room with decorations



Figure 11. Poster for Taiwanese romantic soap opera: Let's fight- dare you?

Fictional romantic stories happening in cosmopolitan cities and elite schools between a rich hero and an equally rich or ordinary girl seem to be the most popular genre among the girls

these days. When I asked them about other romance novels they read, Yiyi, Yuehua and several other girls recounted one story immediately.

“There is a really touching romance story. It is about this girl whose boyfriend was killed in a car accident. His heart was then transplanted into another boy’s body. When the girl found out that the boy she just met in her new school had the heart of her beloved one, she fell in love with this boy. This girl is really smart, so even though she’s from an ordinary background, she still managed to get into this elite school where other students are all from rich families. Many interesting things happened. That boy was sort of not really into her at the beginning, since she is ordinary. But one time, because he had heart surgery and couldn’t run the upcoming 5K match, the girl volunteered to substitute for him. This boy was touched, but he was also a little bit arrogant because he was from a rich family and also he felt bad about his own weak physical condition. So he tried to push this girl away many times. But she still pursued her love with such a pure heart. In the end she got his love.”

“Early dating” and romance – a site of negotiation and experiment

Soap operas and novels like those brought the girls new images and the modern storyline of romance. The heroines are mostly from cosmopolitan urban background. Even in those few incidents when she happens to be a rural girl at the beginning, the stories always depict her as entering the urban space and eventually transforming herself into a fashionable and savvy young “urban” woman. In other words, a rural girl’s romance is to happen in the exciting urban space and be marked by her self-transformation. In many of those popular tales of love, the main female characters are also portrayed as successfully balancing her gentle sweetness with an independent spirit. As the new modern girl subject, the young heroines in the girls’ wall-posters often stand in an assertive manner and stare directly at her potential viewers or into the eyes of the male

characters. Their postures convey confidence and comfort with their own sexuality and the gaze of their admirers.

If modernity as Appadurai (1996) has emphasized is about how people can imagine – and sometimes actualize – different lives through the potentials of media consumption and geographic mobility, then these mediated images of romance provide the girls with an anchoring point in their negotiation of becoming “modern.” Quite different from the Western context, where dating is considered normal and necessary in one’s high school experience and even used to categorize girls as “popular” or “nerdy,” in China where “studying hard” is considered to be the norm, junior and senior high school dating is always carefully guarded against by teachers and parents. Girls who are model students in school are those who seem to care the least about their appearance and romance. “Dating” in school is negatively regarded as “early dating,” meaning immature love that one should refrain from. Furthermore, it is also taken as the first sign of “a girl turning bad.” No wonder when I first initiated the topic of “love” and “romance,” the girls all giggled but remained silent as they were aware of potential connotations behind volunteering such a piece of information. After several rounds of finger pointing at each other, everyone insisted that they knew nothing about it. Then, Meifang, a girl from the advanced-track class in her junior high school suddenly raised her hand and announced loudly, “I have a boyfriend in junior high school.” Her announcement broke the silence and other girls who were all from lower-track classes started to question her intensively, albeit with a dismissive tone, “You’re from the advanced-track class?” “Aren’t those girls a bunch of book worms? What do they know?” “They never talk about early dating! They’re boring and only talking about exams.” “There’s nothing I can talk about with them. They’re teachers’ pets! They know nothing.”

Meifang seemed a little bit agitated and quickly emphasized again, “I really have a boyfriend. I was helping him chase another girl, but that girl rejected him and we got close. Other

girls in my class are all about how homework is so difficult, but I talk about love and romance with several other girls.”

What intrigues me in this brief episode is how Meifang as a girl from a previously advanced-track class volunteered to reveal the “forbidden” piece of information about her having a boyfriend and how the group of girls responded. In announcing her “early dating” secret in a straight-forward manner and later emphasizing again her interest in talking about love and romance, Meifang deliberately tried to mark herself as different from other “studying-hard” advanced-track girls who were called “bookworms” and “teachers’ pets” by the girls. If “early dating” and engagement in heterosexual desire have been ruled by the normative school discourse as an “illegitimate” act, Meifang’s transgressive gesture of making a public announcement about it might be viewed as her attempt to construct an alternative storyline of herself. In this case, the “model” girls praised by rural schools and communities as modest and *guai* (innocent and docile) are looked down upon by the vocational school girls as “knowing nothing.” Knowledge in early dating and their enthusiasm in discussing mediated stories of love and romance are regarded by the girls as their ability to exhibit and assert their own desires, no longer confined by traditional modest femininity.

Their curiosity and experimenting with “early dating” quickly expanded beyond real life boundaries into a more updated and fluidly mediated space – cyber space. When I first met the girls in October, 2007, none of them knew how to use the Internet. As a matter of fact, many of them said teachers and parents have repeatedly warned them that “going online” was bad. Yet only two months later when I met them again, everyone had been to Internet bars several times already, even Wei, the girl who was teased by others as the most conservative and innocent one. They all laughed and jokingly claimed, “We’re turning bad now!” Then they quickly explained to me, “Parents often say going online is dangerous, because they are the old generation and all they

heard is bad things.” “The Internet is something new and they don’t know anything about it, especially the benefits and the good parts. So all they can say is ‘you can’t go online, don’t go online, going online is bad.’” “Yes, I’m just tired of explaining to them about it. It’s hard to tell them these new things.” After telling me a few incidents of being caught by teachers in Internet bars, the girls started to share details of their new excitement – online chatting.

Yihuai: So did you meet any new friends online?

Everyone (very excitedly): Yes, yes!

Yihuai: Where are they from?

Meifang: I prefer friends from as far away as possible.

Yuehua: From all over the country.

Wei: I’m ...

Huizi (cuts in): She added someone from Xinjiang province, so far away, a guy who serves in the army there. Unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable!

Yuehua: She even had video chat with him!

Yihuai: Oh, so I suppose you talk to both boys and girls online?

Yuehua (yelling out loudly): No, only boys, no girls.

Wei: Well, girls from our class, I will add them.

Yiyi: It depends. For me it’s more about whether I have anything to talk about with the other person.

Wei: Most often even if you want to talk to girls online, they are not interested in talking to another girl.

(Huizi started to gossip about different girls’ love interest online and revealed that Xiaorong has got a new boyfriend.)

Yihuai: Xiaorong, so you really went to meet some boy from online chatting

Xiaorong (with a shy smile): No!

Huizi(cuts in): Yes, you’re right.

Yuehua (chants repeatedly): He’s from Lantian, Lantian, Lantian.

Huizi: A guy from Lantian, a driver.

Xiaorong (concedes with her silence): ...

(Yuehua now continued to reveal other girls’ secrets)

Yuehua: Yiyi has a cyber guy friend who looks like a bear!!!

Yiyi (embarrassed and protests loudly): What are you saying, you guys! What are you trying to do!

In Appadurai’s (1996) dispersed notion of modernity, social imagination plays an important role in constructing postmodern agency. People everywhere increasingly “seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (Appadurai, 1996, p.4). Technology, especially electronic media offers new resources and new disciplines for the construction of

imagined selves and worlds as an everyday social project. In this story of the girls' online adventure, within the short span of two months, the Internet has dramatically shifted their imagination of the outside world as well as their experiments with romance. The girls who complained to me about the limitedness of their immediate rural locality and living experience, now suddenly found an exciting new way of meeting people and connecting to other's lives throughout the country. Boys and girls who previously lived in their own separate and individual community can now share and even meet each other via video chat. The cyber space temporarily breaks down the boundary of living in the rural community and offers the girls a tinge of excitement in exploring possibilities beyond their reality. This strong desire of reaching outside their restricted and mundane rural life is illustrated by the girls' active search for online friends from "as far away as possible."

It is also interesting to note that online chatting seems to become an extended playground for fictional "dating" experiments as the girls explained to me that they were more interested in talking to boys than girls online. In fact, despite Xiaorong's initial denial, she even managed to transform an online date into a real-life boyfriend. What is so unique and attractive about online chatting for the girls? They soon revealed more of their secrets.

Yiyi: It seems with online friends you have more topics to talk about. It's easier to share things about yourself than like this... (pointing to people around her indicating face-to-face conversation).

Yihuai: So why do you feel it's easier to share things with people online?

Yyi: I don't know. We just talk about anything.

Wei: Yes, whatever I want to say, I just say it.

Meifang: Yes, you can say whatever is in your mind. It's like you can vent about anything.

Yihuai: What do you mean?

Meifang: Like something I don't dare say in real life, I can online.

Yuehua (with a conspiring expression): Yes, like making those jokes! I can't tell you about that. (everyone now laughs)

Yihuai: You mean making jokes with boys?

Yuehua (pointing to Meifang): Yes, there are boys asking her out for dates online.

Huizi (suddenly cuts in): Online chatting can be boring!

Kaixin: It's like everyone repeats, "how are you?" "how are you?"

Mefang: Or are you there? Are you ok? How old are you?

Yuehua: Some boys can be disgusting online too.

Everyone: Say something like “I love you” after a few times of chatting, even worse and more dirty words.

Kaixin: My online friends vary. Some boys are good, some are bad.

Huizi: None of my online friends say dirty words to me. We mostly talk about economics, politics, and life. They always tell me to study hard and no one says anything dirty to me. My strategy is to look up boys with interesting names. But her, and her (pointing to several other girls), they’ve all met those dirty guys.

Yihuai: So what if you meet disgusting guys?

Kaixin: I’ll close his window, shut him out.

Xiaorong: I delete him from my friends’ list.

Yiyi: I have a guy friend who is very nice. Other people always ask you about your age and where you are, that kind of stuff. He didn’t ask about those at all. We share many things about our dreams, the boredom in daily life and worries. I only want to find someone who shares similar interests and thoughts. Those guys who have nothing good to say, I don’t talk to them.

For the girls, the major attraction of online chatting seems to be the fictional yet tangible space it offers in interacting with boys. It is in this space where adults are not supervising that the girls can hide behind their twinkling icons, trying on different personas. Things they dare not say in real life, words which otherwise might be considered “inappropriate,” and romantic gestures that are definitely going to be gossiped about by village elders, are now free flying and exchanged. One time, when accompanying several other girls to an Internet bar, I was surprised at Wei’s change from a seemingly shy and introverted girl to a bubbly personality in front of the computer. She switched back and forth among several different boys’ icons and giggled constantly. When I laughed at her, she turned red, but then threw herself back again into her cyber adventure with boys.

Online chatting also seems to offer the girls opportunities to meet different kinds of boys that they would not otherwise encounter in real life. There are the “disgusting” types who tell dirty jokes and the “good” ones who can talk about politics, economics and share things in life. In this fictional playground, the girls seemed to assert more agency in defining their interaction and relationship with boys. They can disregard “proper” gender expectations and joke openly with

boys. They can choose to shut down any boys they don't like and delete them from friends lists immediately. They can also find "good" boys who share more topics with them than friends in real life. Particularly for Yiyi and Huizi, who often complained to me about having nothing to talk about with the unambitious boys in their rural communities, they seem to be intrigued by the possibility of having more meaningful and open conversations about life and dreams with guy friends of similar interests online. If in reality, talking to boys might label them as "bad girls" by teachers and parents, it is here in cyber space, hiding behind their fictional names, the girls are able to tentatively and boldly experiment with the thin line between friendship and romance.

However, if these mediated images and mobile spaces have offered girls possibilities and imagination for experimenting with "dating" and romance, incidents in their everyday life nevertheless often brought them back to their rural reality. Writing about Chinese migrating workers' changing patterns of intimate relations, Ma & Cheng (2005) point out that traditional conventions and modern experience often overlap and create spaces for new practices and forms of discourse, but they also trap migrant workers at the crossroads (p.324). When I inquired of the girls about their vision of romance and a future partner, the girls offered descriptions such as "gentleman," "sunshine," "caring and sensitive to girls' emotions and needs," and "maybe tough in appearance, but soft in heart." These rosy pictures of a potential boyfriend and husband are often uttered simultaneously with their fear of following the shadowy steps of other older girls' paths before them. As Yiyi mentioned to me one time about briefly dating a boy from the advanced-track class,

There's this teacher who really despises me. He's from the advanced-track class. It's just because I was in good relationship with a boy in his class. So he really doesn't like me. He even bad-mouthed me a lot in front of that boy. Saying something like, I'm not gonna make it in a normal high school. In a few years, I'll work in a factory. Then I'll get married and have babies, just like those other girls. Demeaning stuff like that, just because he is so afraid that I'm gonna pollute his boy student. I despise him.

Yiyi's relationship has resulted in her being categorized by the teacher as a "bad" girl. Becoming a "bad" girl in this sense, does not necessarily need to involve any explicit sexual activity. A friendly or subtle romantic relationship with a boy is enough to label Yiyi as such. What lies beneath this particular teacher's attitude is as Yiyi clearly articulates, the fear of a "bad" girl polluting the minds of smart boys who have opportunities for advancement in the academically mobile world. What is interesting here is Yiyi's reaction towards this teacher's remark. Besides fighting back fiercely against the label of being a bad influence, Yiyi seemed to be more upset at the future this teacher predicted for her – ending up working in a factory, getting married soon and having babies. As we will see momentarily, the girls are acutely aware of many other rural girls' fate before them, but nevertheless they choose to actively resist such confining predictions of their intimate relations.

Marriage – a site of resistance and becoming

Illustrating the connection between modernity and the notion of romantic love, Giddens (1998) traced the evolution of marriage from an economic affair and a state of nature dependent upon the connection of husband and wife with other kin, to "pure relationship" based on the concept of the couple. By "pure relationship," he emphasizes that previously fixed life patterns are now becoming "life projects" of reflexive individuals and intimate relationship becomes a "storyline which the individual in love develops about himself or herself and the other" (p.136). More importantly, this narrative of oneself and the couple is a "forward-looking one" that "meshes with the characteristic orientation of modernity towards colonizing an 'empty' future" (p.138). In other words, romance, intimacy and marriage have been tightly connected and interwoven into one's own storyline of becoming a self-reflexive and meaning-seeking "modern" self.

For these rural girls, their reality is vexed with conflicting messages about romance and marriage. Romantic soap operas and novels offer them images of individualistic passionate love. Images of young women and couples on the walls of real-estate developments in the town center point them to the urban married life of consumption and upward mobility. Yet their own lives are mostly surrounded by the reality of other older girls who are still married in rural villages and remain traditional stay-at-home wives. It is from this contested vantage point that the girls started observations of their own futures.

Yiyi: Parents are often contradictory themselves. When you are young, they carefully watch over you and lecture you all the time....

Yuehua (cuts in): When you are older, they begin to lecture you again

Yiyi: "You are too young to be involved in early dating," things like that (other girls nod in agreement) But when you are twenty-seven or eight and still single, they will be talking again. "Well, it is time for you to think about this thing. Why not go to meet this guy tomorrow and that guy the day after..."

Everyone (yells excitedly at the same time): It's when you are twenty-four or five.... No, twenty-three or four.

Huizi: Twenty-three or four is your parents' breaking point. Once you hit twenty-five or six, your mom is like an ant on a hot pan, really concerned. If you are thirty and still single, your parents, well go straight... (everyone laughs out hysterically)

Aiai: They jump into the river!

Yuehua: I don't care about them then.

Everyone: It's easy to say that now. It's only you, who knows what other girls feel.

Yiyi: No, no. But I think twenty-four and five, isn't this the best time for a girl. What's wrong with being single at that age? I think to get married at twenty-six or seven... Many girls in my village got married so early, twenty-two. Some even have kids already.

Everyone: Some girls from my village are only eighteen.

Yiyi: My village has some too. Only eighteen with kids and married.

Aiai: My village too. Others are like twenty. Twenty and already got married.

Everyone (follows one by one): There are many these days. My village even has a girl who is only sixteen and married.

Aiai: Like in that factory, I know a girl. She had her baby at nineteen.

This discussion about parents' contradictory attitude towards "early dating" and marriage shows the unique situation the girls are facing. While experimenting with intimate relationships is largely considered inappropriate before eighteen or even twenty, once reaching twenty, girls would often find themselves under the expectation of getting married. Particularly as the girls

pointed out, in a rural community where marriage is considered to be an important identity for young women, parents are often involved in deciding on an appropriate suitor. Twenty-three or four is usually considered a breaking point for marriage and it is very common that girls will be asked by their parents to meet different men through match-making to decide a satisfactory candidate as their husband. The romance storyline that the girls are highly invested in through the media, is largely downplayed in such a practice of traditional match-making. So it's no wonder that these girls laughed at and joked about their parents' overt concern about marriage, as Yiyi proclaimed, "Isn't twenty-four and five the best time for a girl. What's wrong with being single at that age?"

While critiquing what they have observed of parents' pressuring young women into marriage, they also expressed their disturbance at other rural girls' decision to get married and have babies at an early age.

Yiyi: I think I'm the kind of person with many thoughts. I always think about what I'm going to do in the future, what kind of life I'll have. Then, I sometimes think of those girls in my village, who get married and have kids really early. So pitiful, I think.

Everyone (cuts in): Yes, I don't want to get married so early.

Yiyi: Definitely not.

Aiai: I feel it's very silly!

Yihuai: So no one wants to get married early, right?

Aiai: It's scary!

Yiyi: Yes, I heard that giving birth is very painful.

Lingdi (yells out loud): No, I'm not gonna get married. I'm not gonna get married.

Yiyi: I just feel it's so horrible to get married.

Yihuai: Why horrible?

Yiyi: It's the end of your freedom. Once you have a baby, your whole life is over, no freedom.

Aiai: You're going to be like those rural women. Everyday it's about domestic work and taking care of your kids ... It's just "su", very "su" (mundane and of no taste and personality). Your everyday has no "romance" and "freedom." It's no good at all! And also

Yiyi (cuts in): And some of those girls, once they have babies, their figures just balloon out of proportion. Then they dress like ... so.... so....

Girls (all laugh out loudly and add): Gigantic clothes!

Yiyi: It's just very sloppy, very sloppy. They don't care about themselves anymore.

The words these girls employed in this conversation convey their strong resistance towards marriage. Described variously as “silly,” “scary,” “painful,” “pitiful,” “horrible,” and “*su* (mundane and of no taste and personality),” marriage is viewed by them as something that marks the end of freedom and self-exploration. Marriage and reproduction are also closely connected as Yiyi suggests she doesn’t want to get married because “I heard giving birth is painful.” The girls proclaimed that they are the ones “with many thoughts” and “constantly thinking about the future,” so what they utterly feared about marriage is to become like “those rural women” confined to domestic work and motherhood and “don’t care about themselves anymore.”

These girls’ attitude towards marriage is not uncommon among rural girls who had experienced the urban space. Beynon (2004) traced rural women’s lives in the city of Chengdu and described several paradoxes they faced after their migrating experience. For most of them, their working experience holds important symbolic values. Besides their developing sense of independence and autonomy, working in the urban space also paints the possibility of escaping from the drudgery and narrowness of rural life. Yet as less-privileged rural subjects, it is almost impossible for these girls to marry into an urban family and stay in the city, so most of them eventually have to go back to old village lives after marriage. Thus girls often seek to postpone marriage as long as possible since it is viewed as a constraint to their freedom. Yet they also know that marriage is not only expected but also necessary to secure a stable future for rural women. Another issue worth pointing out is that for rural men and women, they experience migrating to the urban space and adapting back to rural life quite differently. While young women mostly are fearful of returning to rural life as stay-at-home wives and mothers, young men do not experience such a sharp conflict in returning to customary patterns of obedience, since the traditional marriage relationship favors the rural husband as head of the household. So as Beynon (2004) insightfully points out, “caught between traditional rural ideas of marriage and the role of

women and their new sense of identity, and between hopes for a future partner and the reality of their economic and social status, rural migrant women face an uncertain future” (p.148).

The dilemma many rural young women face in marriage, as several scholars observed, is a future of returning to the countryside with the closing down of possibilities for self-development after experiencing a sense of autonomy and freedom working as migrant workers in the urban space (Beynon, 2004; Gaetano, 2004, 2008; Jacka, 2006). In other words, it is not marriage itself that these girls are fearful of, but marriage leading back to rural villages with rural partners. Thus, if romantic soap operas and novels have offered rural girls emotional longings for an intimate relationship of communication and common interests with future partners, their pursuit of a “pure relationship” rarely stays only at the romantic level. Experimenting with “early dating” and intimate relationships can be self-liberating and interesting for rural girls as they absorb ideals from those mediated urban images of romance, but these vocational school girls at the tender age of sixteen and seventeen also exhibit an observant pragmatic attitude towards intimacy and marriage.

A few months after our last conversation, Yiyi emailed to update me on her life. Now working as a tour guide in a local folk tourist site, she casually talked about her single life.

“I don’t really want to be involved in those doomed love relationships. It’s just not as meaningful. My grandma was always like, “open your eyes and don’t be like other girls getting pregnant so soon and losing all your opportunities.” She’s finally right on that point. Look at the boys in my village, just goofing around doing nothing. What’s the point of being involved with them? I hope my vocational school teacher is right. She said, now we should focus more on becoming a better tour guide and getting into a better position, then we’ll meet people from a higher social status and be married off better. Maybe that’s true.

“For now, I’m very satisfied with my current life. Occasionally I think of love and romance, but I have good friends around. Also, I’ve seen so many real life cases that made me scared of marriage. Some girls got married and had babies so early. They just look so old and really fat. Well, that part I guess is still OK. Mostly, marriage is not what I have envisioned. I’ve seen it myself. There is a girl who married into our village from somewhere else and already had a baby. She looks very young herself, just like me. But I don’t think her husband treats her very well. One time, I even saw her husband hit her. Oh, my goodness. From that day on, I told myself, this girl’s today will never become my tomorrow. I told myself to be cautious about this kind of thing. It doesn’t matter how open the society has become, I need to be responsible for myself and take control of my own life!”

Ideals of romantic love might still be an interesting site of experimenting and negotiating a sense of self for these girls in their pursuit for “pure relationship” other than traditional rural marriage. Yet as they trudged on further through the unraveling rural social landscape into the inviting urbanizing town center, the girls soon realized that romantic love alone would not guarantee a future of freedom or upward mobility. It is highly possible that after all their efforts of transforming themselves into the “modern” subject through vocational schooling and working as tour guides, they might still be forced to return to their rural village life if they end up marrying a “goof-around” and unambitious rural husband. This fear feels very real as they witness older girls’ life paths before them. Love and romance may be something they are yearning for, but it can also be detrimental to their future if they are not careful enough about who they fall in love with. In this sense, marriage also serves as a storyline of “becoming” for the girls – of finding a partner with higher social status and maybe living like the happy urban couple depicted on the real-estate development advertisements. The disparity between rural and urban social status has forced the girls to have a realistic sense of relationship. They might often talk and write about a

romantic wish for a young and handsome boyfriend, but this desire for romance has to be carefully regulated to prevent “other girls’ today becoming their tomorrow.”

So when pure ideals of romance based on common interests and personalities are set against the reality of rural and urban disparity and the ever-expanding influence of the market, profit and consumption, romance and marriage become a rather vexing and uncertain matter for the girls. Falling in love with a rural boy often means returning back to village lives as a traditional wife, something the girls dread. Yet because of their less-privileged rural identity, it is also very difficult to find a comparable urban suitor to settle into an urban life. They might want to taste love, but reality has constantly reminded them to remain “clear-minded” and responsible if they want to escape the fate of other rural girls. Love becomes -- at the tender age of sixteen or seventeen -- a rather realistic matter, as Yiyi writes in a recent blog entry about how suddenly she has realized the importance of “money” in relationships.

“My attitude towards money in the past is – it is necessary but not that important. The most important thing is I can live happily with my beloved one. But now I realize that a happy life with your beloved one is built upon money, like the popular saying these days, ‘Everything is about money!’

Now after my time in town, I gradually realized the importance of money and the horrible side of it! Money can change many things and make many things happen too. I am wondering whether it is possible that anything can really exist without money, like love? Can love survive without money?

I think many girls by now all know that even the most beautiful love needs to have a stable and secure financial base. No romance can sustain the harsh reality of poverty.” (2010/4/6)

Rosy romantic media images of “pure individualist love,” marketed ideals of the urban couple and comfortable family living, and the reality of most rural girls’ marrying back to villages as stay-at-home wives, interweave into the complicated terrain of imagining intimacy for the girls. Striving to become an upwardly mobile subject and staying in the urban space, these girls are acutely aware of the crucial nature of marriage in building their own storyline. Yet restricted by China’s historically and socially constructed rural/urban social and economic inequality, the prospect of “successful” marrying-up remains uncertain. Romance and marriage become a rather complicated site of yearning and fear, resistance and “becoming” for the girls.

Sexual encounters – a site of taking control of the self

In Yiyi’s letter, she also mentioned her grandmother’s warning of not getting pregnant too soon like other girls and losing all the opportunities. Sexual encounters, like marriage and romance, stirred up complicated meanings. As the conversation at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, those other pregnant girls serve as important markers in vocational school girls’ construction of their own sense of self. From the discourse of pregnant girls as losing “self-respect” to the later assertion of them as too ignorant and naïve, the girls seem to suggest that because of their own knowledge in “early dating” and romance, they are different from other “rural” girls who do not know how to assert their own sexual agency. Furthermore, when several other girls refused to participate in the discussion, Yiyi and Yuehua immediately identified them as “conservative” and “falling behind the times.” Just as how they talk about rural young women as pitiful in their marriages back to villages, pregnant rural girls are categorized by these vocational school girls as failed subjects in projecting a modern storyline of upward mobility for themselves. They emphasized time and again how easily it is for many rural girls to lose the vision of their own future and fall into the temptation of romance and/or coercion from boys.

Sexual encounters as these girls objectively assert, often happens “in a minute of girls’ hesitation.” Pregnancy signals that after an unprepared sexual encounter and a momentary slip into disorder, rural girls have to bear the consequences and convert to the norm of marriage. This is exactly what these girls are fearful of – the old storyline of going back to village life because of an unexpected pregnancy.

If you think of the girls’ dismissive attitude towards other pregnant girls as being “traditional,” it is really not the case here. Unlike older people from the village, the girls’ discussion about other pregnant girls is not so much about moral judgment, but rather an emphasis of those girls’ failure to take control of not only their own sexuality, but also opportunities to leave rural life. Like their attitude towards marriage, the girls do not necessarily resist sexual encounters in particular, but rather unprepared sexual encounters that might result in pregnancy. For most pregnant rural girls, they often end up marrying the boy for reputation’s sake. This means being tied to just another rural boy working in a factory and a closed-down life as a rural wife. This is what they dread when mentioning the stories of girls who got pregnant before marriage.

So when we further talked about what occurs if such a sexual encounter happens in their lives, the girls immediately engaged in heated discussions.

Yihuai: What about if this happens in your lives?

Huizi: At our age, you shouldn’t do such a thing. Otherwise, you let your parents down.

Everyone: Yes, we are too young. I would feel guilty towards my parents. You also let yourself down.

Yihuai: Then how about if “it” happens around 20?

Huizi: Oh, then you’re an adult, you’re mature both physically and psychologically.

Wei: I still don’t think it’s OK. If you’re not married, it’s not OK.

Yiyi: Well, your idea is sort of too naïve and traditional. I think if in the future I get a stable job, and have a very good boyfriend, it is not necessarily not OK.

While Wei and several other girls insisted on sexual encounter after marriage, Huizi and Yiyi are particularly articulate about their viewpoints on this rather slippery matter. Huizi indicated that it was OK to engage in a sexual encounter if a girl reached twenty, because then she was a mature adult. Specifically, she mentioned “psychological maturity” as signaling a girl’s ability to make her own decision and take responsibility for her own actions. Yiyi instead, emphasized that her prerequisite is to “have a stable job and a very good boyfriend.” Her insistence on having a stable job of her own before engaging in any sexual encounter might seem odd at first glance, but this is consistent with her attitude towards romance and marriage in previous episodes. The girls might seek to defy traditional norms that are against “early dating” and sexual encounters before marriage, but they also have a pragmatic attitude towards their own resistant storyline. Their resistance is not just a rebellious gesture against any traditional normative femininity, but more importantly, it is balanced and adjusted constantly with their own measurement of a possible upwardly mobile storyline of “becoming.” In this sense, Yiyi’s mentioning of having a stable job of her own is her attempt to assert a strong sense of self and control that she views as important in a future sexual relationship.

However, not all the girls were as interested in all this talk of sex. Kaixin suddenly interrupted the flow of conversation.

Kaixin: Why are we talking about this all the time?

Yuehua (seriously): It’s better to get some information and education now, so that when you are older

Kaixin (shaking her head): No, I didn’t learn anything.

Yihuai: How about everyone else? You rarely talk about this in school?

Yiyi: It’s so embarrassing to talk about it.

Yihuai: But we just talked the whole night.

Yiyi: It’s because we’re all girls.

Wei: We had this biology teacher. He’s a guy, so when it came to the part on the reproductive system, he just skipped it.

Yiyi: What we just talked about, no teacher will accept it. They’ll go nuts.

Yuehua: If they hear we talked about this and see the sex education book you gave us, they'll faint.

Huizi: I think the more you know about this, the less likely you'll get involved in this kind of thing unprepared. It's usually those conservative girls

Kaixin (softens her tone): I just feel a little bit shy talking about this thing ...

Yuehua (teasing): Those who don't talk about it, they think about it more.

Kaixin: Don't point at me!

From their responses to Kaixin's initial questioning of "talking sex," it seems that most of the girls wanted to acquire sex knowledge to make sure that sexual encounter would not lead to pregnancy as other "naive" rural girls did (see Huizi's remark). When they inquired of me earlier about situations with girls in the U.S., I told them about sex education in the U.S. and that very few girls would remain virgins before marriage. The girls instead of critiquing the U.S. girls as being too loose and open, yelled "we're so behind the times now." Strategic and prepared moves in regard to sexual encounters become an important decision tied into these girls' storyline of upward mobility.

This attitude about sexual encounters is especially exemplified in Yiyi's responses. While commenting earlier that engaging in a sexual relationship is "not necessarily NOT OK if I have a stable job myself and a very good boyfriend," she also mentioned in her letter to me that "it doesn't matter how open the society has become, I need to be responsible for myself and take control of my own life!" Her stand is largely shared by girls like Huizi and Yuehua. The girls are not so much confined by the dichotomous "traditional" or "open" attitudes towards sexual encounters. Their "talking sex" is more about a collective effort to position their material body in line with their own storyline of "becoming" and make sure that they would not be like other "open" or "conservative" rural girls losing control of their bodies at an inappropriate time at the expense of having to go back to village lives. Thus, the decision to engage or not engage in sex becomes an important site of taking control of oneself.

Walkerdine (2001) once observed in the British context that what makes teen pregnancy and motherhood a predominantly working-class girls' issue is the fact that these girls do not have a career or even job prospects and the transformation into the bourgeois subject could be quite frightening in its unfamiliarity. Then, what impressed me most of these vocational school girls is their strong desire for a different future and this has translated into their language and action about romance, marriage and sex. Their fear of becoming just another pregnant rural girl returning to village life with her unambitious husband has propelled them to make sure all their experimentation with romance stays on course with a rational calculation of reality and future possibility. Romance, marriage and sex might be passionate pursuits, but first of all, they need to fit into the upwardly mobile storyline the girls have tried so hard to build for themselves all along.

"But a girl's belly always betrays her!" Meifang expressed her concern when other girls were still making comments about how it isn't fair for girls to remain virgin before marriage.

"That's why condoms are important!" I replied trying to inform the girls after all this sex talk. But I was shy myself and not certain about how to say it the right way, so "condoms" spilled out in English.

"What did you say?" the girls were trying to catch up.

"En... condoms... I mean" I was still trying to get "this" into Chinese.

"Oh, you mean *bi-yun-tao*!" Yiyi guessed and then spread to the other girls, "she's talking about *bi-yun-tao*."

"*Bi-yun-tao*! I know it." Aiai yelled out even more loudly.

Now the girls got excited again, "Boys in my class often brought this to class for fun, blowing them out like balloons." "It was so funny!" "Some boys even tell me about the porn videos they watched." "So disgusting!" "Oh, they think we girls don't know anything about it, we're not that naïve!"

As it turned out -- they are more daring than I thought.

“Losing control?” and “Fear” of what? – A necessary failure in reading the other

The vocational school girls might have been consciously weaving a storyline to ensure their fecund bodies and future marriages combine with their dreams of becoming a “modern” girl. Yet, is this the whole story about rural girls? How about girls who have not taken the vocational school route? While going inside vocational schools to interview girls there, I also went out with other girls on the street. Unlike the vocational school girls, these girls refused to be formally interviewed by me and showed no interest in becoming potential heroines in my dissertation. We hung out nevertheless. I got to know them initially through Feifei, the dropout girl in the garment vocational school. Then gradually one by one, they introduced me to more friends. Among them, Feifei, Xia and Ling are the three girls I talked to most frequently. Feifei was working in Ms. Tang’s Qiongqiong Garment Vocational School when I first met her in the summer of 2006. One year later when I returned to the field in 2007, she had already drifted to several different factory jobs. Xia is Feifei’s friend who worked in a hair salon as an assistant at the town center. After dropping out of junior high school at the 8th grade in 2006, she went to DongGuan in south China for a year, working as a waitress. She just returned to Xiuning when I met her in 2007. Ling is introduced to me through Xia. A sixteen-year-old young mother with a three-month son, she previously worked in a garment factory briefly before she met her boyfriend and became pregnant.

A parallel yet very different storyline of rural girlhood is carrying on with these girls I met at other occasions. A storyline I only have scattered field notes to re-collect. A storyline that disturbs me and leaves me with knotted feelings and often no words to describe. I still do not know how to fit their stories within the orderly discussions I had with the vocational school girls.

So I will just present them as scattered happenings from memories and my field notes. Some of these are written as if told by the girls as I recorded in my field note. Others are mixed with my own puzzled reflections.

Feifei, July, 23rd, 2006 “I was a very timid and a well-behaved girl until”

“Do you know I used to be a very timid and well-behaved girl. I didn’t even wear short-sleeves and skirts. Why I didn’t wear short-sleeves? I just felt shy. Did you see those guys in front of the Internet bars. If you wear a skirt and are all girly, they come over to you and whistle at you. That’s why I have this skirt from my aunt, but I only dare to wear it as a lounge dress. One time, I felt hungry and went downstairs for food without changing my clothes, then these three guys came yelling at me with that weird smile, saying things like, ‘little sister, come with us!’ I was really scared.

“Well, later on an older girlfriend took me to places, then I ‘learned to be bad’. She took me to those Internet bars. Sometimes we even skipped our classes to go to Internet bars in a nearby city. There is a street full of Internet bars and we always go there and got addicted. That place ... do you know it’s all those girls, working in the massage parlors, scary, really scary. So now my mom doesn’t allow me to go out with that girl again, saying she’s no good. Oh, that girl is from that vocational school you’re talking about. They are having summer vacation now.

“Do I get scared about guys? Well, I can fight them with my words. Like one time, I was online with this girlfriend. A guy came and said, ‘do you want to make love with me?’ I got mad and fought back, ‘is your mom a chicken (prostitute)? Is that why you know this kind of thing so

early? Then why not go look for your mom?’ That guy got furious and cursed me ‘bitch’. But I don’t care.

“Did I tell you about this other woman in my village? Very slutty. She needs men everyday. So later there’s this person telling her that he could take her to the city of Hangzhou, but asked for 8,000 yuan (\$1250). She did this thing, five days and five nights and got the money. But that guy didn’t take her to the city after all.”

Feifei, Oct.6th, 2007 Seeing Feifei again after one year

I met Feifei again yesterday and invited her over for a visit. I haven’t seen her for a year and only knew that she didn’t work in the garment vocational school anymore, but not sure what she is doing now. She surprised me with her appearance this time. She has put on some heavy makeup and her hair was in a trendy style. She wore a pair of candy-color big hoop earrings. A gigantic hair pin dotted one side of her hair. Her eyes seem puffy with glistening eye shadow and smudged black eye liner. When she laughs, the old Feifei comes back, reflected through cheerful eyes.

It turns out that she works at Qiongqiong Garment Vocational School for less than three months before going to another factory. A boy she worked with introduced her there. She said, ‘the boss is a young man with a girlfriend, so we can get a lot of days off. But it’s weird, those guys work there. They took me to their shower place and these were all men there. Upon seeing us few girls, they started to take their pants off and urged us to come along. I didn’t go, but another older girl went in. I guess nothing really happened, but I quit that job after a while. The guys were like, ‘why are you leaving us here to get bored.’

When Feifei was telling me this, she was standing by the window. I noticed her nails – they’ve been polished into a fashionable long narrow shape and painted with a vibrant hue of red.

She lowered her head and seemed absorbed with playing with her nails. I listened in shock, but said nothing and showed no emotions.

Then we started to talk about going online and she lit up again and insisted on showing me her own web space. ‘My space is really good!’ She is using an online symbol-filled language that only the 90s-born generation know. Then she showed me her pictures. I couldn’t recognize her. The make-up was heavy. Her cheerful eyes are covered up by this sexy and mature look. Some pictures showed her kissing another girl and she labeled that album “two bitches.” I didn’t know what to say. If I was not doing this research, I might never meet girls like her in my life since I have always looked down upon those small town girls pretending to be sexy and selling their ‘cheap’ looks. Yet now these pictures are from this girl I know – Feifei.... She’s standing right next to me and asking me excitedly, ‘Do I look pretty in those pictures?’

I dodged her question and asked instead, “when did you learn how to do make-up?” The old Feifei came back again with a shy smile lingering on her lips. “I taught myself. I watched other girls for a while and practiced. Not good, right? Do I do makeup at home? My parents usually don’t say anything, but those old rural women in my village, they can be very mean about this. So I don’t dare to do make up at home, but when I’m working, everyone puts on makeup. If guys see you without makeup, they feel you’re directly from the countryside and look frumpy.’

I didn’t get what she meant about the boys and makeup, so I asked her again about her work. What is she doing now? She seemed evasive and told me that she was not working formally, just looking after someone’s shop to earn some money.

I grew a little bit concerned. What is Feifei doing now? She doesn’t seem like those girls who can hold secrets.

Xia, Oct.9th, 2007 “My life as a waitress in DongGuan”

Xia is Feifei's friend who works in a hair salon as a head-massage girl. I met her days ago through Feifei and now she is talking in an excited but matter-of-fact manner.

"I just came back from DongGuan. You know that place? I worked as a waitress in this place where my brother-in-law works. Sometimes we got off work at 3:30am. So my brother-in-law told me not to go out after that, because DongGuan is a dangerous place. I heard of a girl who went out during the night and got raped and murdered. I came back because Xiuning is safe.

"The bosses in that place are very generous. One boss sort of likes me and asked where this little sister is from. Then he told me that he would give me 4,000 yuan (\$600) a month to be his lover. I said, what the heck! You think you are really someone with all your money? So I told my brother-in-law that I didn't agree. Well, that boss actually treats me fairly well even after that. He gives me 100 yuan (\$15) tip whenever he comes over."

Ling, Oct.11th, 2007 "Do you know where Feifei works?"

I don't know how to go on. Today I went to look for Feifei. Xia showed me the place the other day and we didn't see her for days. I followed my memory and found out – this is not a dormitory as I thought, but a massage parlor. Feifei was not there and I do not even know what to think.

I rode all the way to Xia's hair salon. Xia was there and there was another girl chatting with her. She had a three-month old son and looked much older than Xia. It turned out that girl was only 16. Her name is Ling.

Ling seemed reserved, but when I asked about her feelings of becoming a mom, she smiled, "It's really easy, no feelings at all. I was playing with my friends that night, having dinner and dancing until 11pm. Then around three, I felt an acute pain, so I went to the hospital and went

into the delivery room at 6am and had my son at 6:10am. Big sister, if you like babies, why not have one yourself?” Then she told me suddenly that she was going to get married at the end of this year. I didn’t ask her about her baby’s father, not sure whether she wanted to tell me. Is it because she sensed my hesitation and curiosity that she volunteered this piece of information about her upcoming marriage? Compared to Feifei and Xia, Ling is more silent. Only when I took pictures of her son did she start to laugh.

After Xia introduced me as a friend of Feifei’s, Ling’s expression grew a little bit strange and then she asked me, “Do you know where Feifei works? She’s working in a massage parlor, you know that kind of place? But don’t tell her I told you this. It’s her choice and her freedom. She chose this herself.”

When we departed, Xia and Ling reminded me again not to tell Feifei they told me the secret. Ling repeated again, “This is her choice. You know, everyone has their own freedom, we can’t say much.”

Xia & Ling, Oct.18th, 2007 “Can we have Feifei at the birthday party?”

Last night was Xia’s 18th birthday. The only two girls invited to the party are me and Ling. The other guests are all boys and older men. Ling asked again, why not invite Feifei over. She asked about that several times yesterday morning already. This surprised me, because she did not seem to distance herself from Feifei after telling me all the stories. Xia said her hair-salon boss who hosted this party for her did not want Feifei here. A massage parlor girl is no good. Last time, Feifei came to the hair salon with another girl and her boss asked for a massage, but said afterwards that he didn’t like them and didn’t want to see them again. When Ling raised the whereabouts of Feifei again, Xia yelled to her boss, it’s that chicken (prostitute), she’s sort of

pretty, right? Earlier, Xia had told me that her boss might have a crush on her and telling her ‘why don’t the two of us have a baby?’

Xia was drunk last night. Later on, another older man joined the dinner party. She was so drunk and started to yell. She pointed at the older man who was said to be a real-estate broker and yelled, ‘this is my boyfriend!’ Everyone was shocked. I started to get dizzy as to how many boyfriends Xia had over the last year. I was dumbfounded, then a cream cake flew over my face.

Ling called me this morning. She seemed to make me as her close friend now. Maybe because I was the only one patient enough to carry her baby for her last night and accompanied her to look for a place to breast-feed. She told me that after I left, they stayed until 3 or 4. Xia was so drunk and sang Karaoke the loudest.

Feifei, Feb.1st, 2008 Online chatting

Yihuai 17:24:54

Feifei, finally I found you again. Where did you go? I couldn’t find you anywhere.

1+2=? 17:25:25

Big sister, I miss you too.

Yihuai 17:26:09

Where are you now?

1+2=? 17:26:21

I’m home, but not in my Xiuning home.

Yihuai 17:26:48

Where are you exactly?

1+2=? 17:27:25

Not far, about one hour away from Xiuning. Next time you come over to my place, I'll take you to my home....

Xia & Ling, Mar.5th, 2008 The dinner

I met with Ling and her husband, Feng, again. They've been playing mahjong day and night for several days now in a friend's home. They got married in February after Feng finally managed to give Ling's family 50,000 yuan (\$7,000).¹⁵ When I congratulated them on their marriage, Ling laughed and yelled, 'he cheated me into this marriage. I'm still under age!' Later I learned that their marriage was only ceremonial, but not legal, since Ling was still under age. Their baby son could not get his birth certificate either because of their "illegal" marriage status.

The most dramatic part of the day was -- we met Xia unexpectedly on the street. Both me and Ling have been looking for her. She quit her job in the hair salon and no one seemed to have any idea of her whereabouts. Some said she went back to DongGuan to be a waitress, others said she went back home. Then there she was. It turned out she was working in another hair salon closer to the town center. This girl is more fashionable than ever. She wears a shiny trendy jacket, a pair of tight jeans with high heels. Her hair is drawn into a bun with a glittering hair-pin on top. She was all smiles too, "Big sister, you came back again. Let's go for dinner, I'm hungry!"

When we sat down, with news tumbled out, Xia first asked me whether I have seen Feifei again. I said not yet. Then she said, "Do you know, Feifei has been sold to Guangdong province

¹⁵ In rural Chinese tradition, the husband's family is supposed to give the wife's family a certain amount of money to show their sincerity. When I was in Shanghai, Ling's husband Feng called me out of the blue, to tell me that they might not be able to get married after all, because Ling's father asked for a huge amount of money. I was very concerned. But two months later when I returned to the field, they got married. Although their marriage is one recognized only by the local community, but not legally, because of Ling's underage status.

in the South!’ We were all shocked and I asked her how she knew this. She said she was in touch with Feifei until a few weeks ago. ‘You know, Feifei is a chicken (prostitute), right? She came over to me one day and told me she didn’t want to work in that massage parlor anymore. But she owed the boss 6,000 yuan (\$800), if she couldn’t pay back that money, she couldn’t run away. So I met her again later online and she told me she was going to GuangDong and asked me whether I could lend her 200 yuan. She also asked me whether I wanted to go with her. Of course, I would not go, it’s so dangerous. Well, the place Feifei worked is not very safe. Her cell phone was stolen four or five times in one month. So she always has to get new cell phones, of course then she owes all this money.”

Everyone at the table turned to me and said, don’t go looking for her anymore. Feng, Ling’s husband was even more serious, “This kind of person, you should get away from her. This is the dangerous type.”

Then something even more shocking came. Xia announced to everyone, “I am pregnant! Yes, yesterday I took the test. I’m two months pregnant!” My mind started to spin, since I had no idea who her boyfriend was. Is it the guy she pointed out at her party or her boss or someone else? An unexpected pregnancy, something so grave and serious to me, sounds like – just a piece of news happening. I didn’t see more emotion coming from Xia. She continued her meal with great appetite, “My boyfriend is very rich. He just bought an apartment in town. More than 200,000 yuan (\$30,000), paid off at one time. Very rich!’ I noticed that when Xia was saying this, Ling’s expression turned a little bit awkward. She padded her husband’s shoulder and said, ‘This guy here, he worked so many years and has nothing.”

I asked Xia about her plans for the future – “getting married?” With her usual care-free attitude, she laughed, “Not sure yet! I’ll get an abortion, maybe.”

When the topic turned to whether to have a boy or girl, Xia raised her voice again, “I want a boy. Girls are being f**ked by others. Boys f**k others.” My ears really turned red upon

hearing those words coming out of a young girl. Everyone else laughed. Sex and dirty words as I have already realized are not taboo among this group of young girls. But do these brazen girls really know about sex?

Ling, Mar.6th, 2008 “That woman slept with her neighbor”

“Did I tell you I had my son only after being together with Feng for ten days. Wait a sec, even less than that. Oh, how mad I was towards the end of my pregnancy. He went to a hotel room with this girl I know. A slut. She slept with many other guys.”

I was at Ling’s mother-in-law’s home in a nearby village when she told me her story. I did not know how to respond and the two of us just sat idly in the front yard facing the creek. Should I say something about sexual knowledge, I wondered. Then a motorbike cruised by through the muddy narrow path in front of us. When the man and woman on that bike went pass us, Ling laughed and said in my ear, “That woman, she said her husband’s balls were not good, not satisfactory enough. So she ditched her husband and slept with her neighbor.” Xia nodded, ‘This woman is something! Well, it’s her husband’s fault, because he’s not good enough. But this woman, well, if she wants to find someone satisfactory, at least not someone living next door. Isn’t that weird that you see both men the same time and so close.’

Apparently, I was the only one left there shocked.

Xia, July.1st, 2008 “Don’t tell anyone else. I’m pregnant again.”

Another few months have passed since I last saw Xia and Ling. I went to see Xia in her hair salon. She seemed very happy to see me again and asked me where I have been. She said she was bored working here. At one point, she said she was going to see her future parents-in-law, but a few minutes later, she changed her story and told me she was going to break up with her

boyfriend. I asked her about her abortion last time, she said even though her boyfriend's parents wanted her to have the baby, her boyfriend insisted on an abortion. So she had an abortion. She seemed calm.

The next day, she came to where I live and suddenly burst out into tears. It turned out that when she had her abortion, her boyfriend got back with his ex-girlfriend from junior high school and told her to go away and move out of his apartment immediately. So now she lives in her new boss' home.

She came to see me again the third day and told me, she is pregnant again. Tomorrow she was going to leave for the abortion clinic her ex-boyfriend's parents had arranged for her. The only thing she seemed utterly worried about is that she has gained weight again. Then we chatted and I got to know that her older brother was conceived before her parents got married too. Her maternal grandfather insisted on an abortion, but her father said 'this woman is mine.' So her father took a self-made bomb, threatened to burn down the house, and stayed outside for several days, then her parents got married.

She talked on and on for the whole afternoon. When she was about to leave for work, I asked her what was her plan for the future? "You need to take care of your body, two abortions within such a short period of time are really not good for your body," I said. She fell silent. I pushed on with an uncontrollable urge to make her aware of the consequences of her own actions. "Why didn't you use any contraceptives?" I asked. She fell silent again and then brushed it off with a laugh, "I don't like to use those!" "But then you'll get pregnant again!" I continued to press on. She fell into complete silence, said goodbye, rode away on her bicycle and finally disappeared into the background of deserted farmlands, muddy new road and some distant apartment buildings.

By the way, I never saw Feifei again. She had indeed disappeared.

* * * * *

When Martha Gellhorn, famed for her fearless war reporting, visited war-torn China with then husband Ernest Hemingway in 1941, she was in for a shock. A long-time leftist, Gellhorn went to China with great enthusiasm and compassion, but left a few months later with unbearable nightmares. From the few letters that are left, in which she moaned about her China trip, the horrible toilet condition in China counts as one nightmare, but that was no comparison to the sense of hopelessness and disordered morality she felt existed towards the masses at the bottom of Chinese society. As she wrote in a letter to Allan Grover, “China was awful in case you want to know. So was the whole Orient. I do not feel cozy in places where the poor literally never straighten their backs, and seem to be born, live and die in mud” (Gellhorn, 2006, p.111).

I read this piece of information in a Chinese literary magazine while conducting my fieldwork with girls on the street and in vocational schools. Gellhorn’s initial enthusiasm about going to China and her later repulsion at the disorder she felt about the masses at the bottom of the society, take me into a deep reflection on my own encounters with girls from different settings. While it was more than expected to continue conversations on sexuality with girls in vocational schools, the girls on the street shocked me with their explicit sexual language, open attitude towards sex and utterly disordered sexual life. Compared to their open remarks on men’s sexual ability and elaborate “dirty” jokes, I seemed like a shy and reserved young woman with my constant fixation on being “proper.” Yet at the same time, I was pained to see them involved in series of unprotected sexual relationships, abortions, becoming teen-mothers and even going into prostitution. For a group of girls who seem to be so uninhibited by the so-called “proper”

sexual code of femininity, why is it that they are also so oblivious to taking care of their own bodies and the consequences of sexual encounters?

Xia's reaction to my inquiry about her failure to use any contraceptives sounds similar to the working-class girls in Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody (2001)'s book. In their research on pregnancy and social class, a young teenage girl who engaged in a sexual relationship with an older man constantly dodged the researcher's question of whether she understood that her action would lead to pregnancy. The researcher felt betrayed, frustrated and helpless. This is a working-class young woman who claimed to want to become a lawyer, yet her very actions suggested otherwise, as if she was setting herself up for pregnancy and a thwarted dream. The authors conclude with a psychological analysis of the fear among working-class girls of transforming into a foreign world of the "middle-class" order. Having babies as they suggested seems to be a more reliable and familiar way of holding onto an identity both for the girls and their families. So could this be the explanation behind my disparate encounters with these two different groups of rural girls – girls who seem to be incessantly concerned about their future and girls who dodged my question about plans for future?

Questions about reading the "other" still linger. While it is relatively easy for me to resonate with the vocational school girls' ambition and fear of becoming the upwardly mobile modern girl, the other three girls' stories left me feeling uncertain and disturbed about how to construct an analysis. Their stories might sound like the typical "victim" plot of rural girls prevalent these days, with teen motherhood, multiple abortions and prostitution. Yet their care-free attitudes exhibit anything but "victimhood." Most feminist researchers have alternatively sought to write less-privileged women through locating a storyline of "resistance." A series of recent feminist research on sex workers in China weaves their analysis through depicting prostitutes coming from rural backgrounds as experimenting with sex (Ding & Ho, 2008; Zheng, 2004). Ding & Ho (2008) wrote of one rural woman's prostitution experience as "a way to

facilitate her opening up to new possibilities in gender relations,” because “she keeps trying different forms of ‘love consumption’, like paying younger men for sex, and enjoys horse racing and beer, while she keeps her marital bond with her rural husband back at her village” (p.127). Yet, I wondered whether these feminist researchers have ever been to any of the rapidly changing rural villages and seen as I did that for some rural women, they do not need to travel that far into a city and become a prostitute to liberate themselves from what we envision as sexual repression. As what Ling gossiped about her neighbor, some rural women are “opening up new possibilities in gender relations” with men living next door while keeping their husbands. The problem with the “resistance” storyline is that often “we” (researchers dwelling mostly in urban and privileged academic context) have already imagined in our own framework of a “rural” that is necessarily conservative in comparison to the modern and Westernized urban context and assumed any transgressive sexual behavior of rural women as “resistance.”

Later in the same article, the same “liberated” rural woman states the following when asked by researchers to define her work, “Me? I live from day to day. I’m 41, what if I suddenly have no money at all? What if I encounter any difficulty? What if one day I suddenly die? I don’t want to live in this world. Why do we need to talk about status and *gongzuo* (work)? I don’t want to think too much about it, and I can’t.” The feminist authors concluded, “They do not want to envisage their identity by deliberately calling themselves ‘sex workers’. We would like to borrow the concept of ‘tactic’ from de Certeau (1984) and argue that these *xiaojies*’ (prostitute) lived experiences and desires have a tactical nature – they live their lives in a ‘spontaneous’ way following their own logic, intuition and relationships; their thoughts, behaviors and narratives are gradually formed, shaped and modified with the resources available at hand” (Ding & Ho, 2008, 131). Is the narrative of this 41-year-old woman as the researchers indicated a triumphal story of resistance with a tactical nature? If so, why do I feel saddened and disturbed when hearing her saying, “I don’t want to live in this world? Why do we need to talk about status?” Can I say that

the rural girls on the street with their care-free manner and their rejection of “respectability” are projecting a resistant narrative against the normative discourse of femininity and sexuality?

Reading into less-privileged women/girls becomes a rather slippery matter of ethics. Where does the storyline of “resistance” stop and a gesture of patronizing start?

Let me put another comparative piece of information here to further complicate my writing of rural girls and the sexual order of a rural locality. The rural county Xiuning is the rebirth place of Confucius during the neo-conservatism revival era more than one thousand years ago. A group of famous scholars from this area re-interpreted and re-integrated this ancient philosophy into ever stricter regulations towards women, with foot-binding and chaste widowhood as the most notorious examples. Under such regulations, women were supposed to remain “clean” widows for their long deceased husbands and chastity was valued higher than all else. In the four hundred years of Qing Dynasty, China’s last feudal dynasty, there were more than 2,200 women being praised as chaste widows in the rural county Xiuning alone. There still remain more than 20 archways engraved with names of these chaste widows as historic memories today. These artifacts alone are enough to give me the impression of a rural community with strong sexual moral regulations against women in particular.

Yet Xia’s recount of her mother’s premarital pregnancy and her father’s bomb threat puts this “tradition” of so-called conservative rural sexual morality in question. Pregnancy before marriage as I heard from several other girls seems to be what happened also to their parents’ generation in early 1980s, a time when market-economy and modernization were still a long way from disrupting the order of these mountainside villages. Could that mean those “traditional” chaste women are indeed women from better-off and more privileged families of landlords in the rural community? So “rural” is not a homogenous community as what urban and Western researchers have imagined, but also a place with distinctive class disparities that might serve to

regulate young women differently? How about the masses living at the bottom of rural communities as Gellhorn has observed in her utter sense of hopelessness? For this group of “rural” subjects, with nothing else to lose and no storylines of a future to hold their existence as “legitimate” subjects, morality and the “order of sexuality” lose its tight grip as categorical regulations upon them as individuals.

Is this why I sensed my own fear and ambivalence when talking to the girls on the street? Their stories broke down the order I have long acquainted and subjected myself into as a legitimate subject. Their lives seem to be out of my frame-of-reference and moral order and I was pushed to the edge of reading and writing the other. It even does not matter whether I construct their stories with sympathy or as “resistance,” these girls simply do not seem to care about a researcher’s voyeuristic eye into their lives as they rejected flatly to be my participants.

Is this why I feel relieved and encouraged when talking to the girls in the vocational school, aspiring to be tour guides? Because I can figure these girls out? Because they see in me their own future version of a middle-class, urban, upwardly mobile, “modern” subject? I feel safe acting out in my usual sympathetic and caring “big sister” and researcher role with them.

Boundaries revealed and unraveled, leaving the “feminist ethnographer” clinging to her own identity. For those other girls in the street, I could never truly make sense of their contradictions as a voyeur. My own ambivalence finally led me to Trinh’s depiction of the great master, Malinowski and his notorious diary about his research on the sexuality of African natives. As Trinh (1989) recounts Malinowski’s words, “the diary confirms one’s sense of the contempt for the ‘niggers’ (his italics) that pierces through the professional writings despite his use there of the word ‘native,’ of fierce hatred for the ‘bloody negroes’ whose life is ‘utterly devoid of interest or importance, something as remote to me as the life of a dog’ (p.75).

“No anthropological understanding can ever open up the other. Never the marrow. All he can do is wear himself out circling the object and define his other on the grounds of his being a

man studying another man. How can he, indeed, read into the other knowing not how the other read into him?" (Trinh, 1989, 76)

Maybe Trinh is right that as a feminist ethnographer pretending to be objective and analytical, all I have written is just gossip about gossip of the lives of others. I am glad that I was of some help to the girls I did resonate and bond with and who aspire to become a "modern" upwardly mobile subject. I remain indefinitely deferred from offering a reading of those other girls who I have already positioned prejudicially as the "other" through my very constructed field note recounts. As it turns out, it is one thing to write objectively about the "ordering of sexuality" in a certain community following the rational Foucauldian approach, but quite another to write a feminist ethnography about different girls living under such an "ordering" as ordered or disordered subjects, where emotions are still raw.

Chapter 5

The Disrupted “Arrival” of the Rural Girl – The Double Movement of Feminist Ethnographic Writing

In the months after returning to the United States to finish writing about the girls, I received several emails from Wei. Each time, she would end her email with the same question, “Are you still writing about our stories? Could you translate your writing into Chinese some time? I am very curious about what you wrote about us. How are we going to like in your dissertation?”

These innocent and curious inquires of hers always stirred up an acute moment of struggle with loss of words on my side, because -- I simply didn’t know what to answer back. It is at those moments I realized that no matter how “compassionate” I am about this writing project, my readership is always somewhere else, in a world that speaks a different and more valued language than my mother tongue. I realized that even if I could translate my ethnographic writing into Chinese, the girls might not recognize themselves as my poststructuralist “girl subjects” amidst a deconstructive reading of a changing rural Chinese locale and neoliberal globalization.

My reading of them, as it turns out, is not intended for them to read as the first audience. Or borrowing Trinh’s (1989) words, ethnography as revealed in those “innocent” moments of inquiry from Wei, is “mainly a conversation of ‘us’ with ‘us’ about ‘them’in which ‘them’ is silenced. ‘Them’ always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless ... ‘them’ is

only admitted among ‘us,’ the discussing subjects, when accompanied or introduced by an ‘us’” (p.65, 67). This writing is plagued with ambivalence of such commitment and guilt.

The girls kept contact with me nevertheless, updating me once in a while about their whereabouts. I got to know through their emails that they left school after a year, started their new tour-guide jobs, now are thinking about quitting this job for something else, etc. I wondered how many ethnographers remained in contact with their participants long after their research is done? Have they ever had my feelings of standing at the threshold of a revolving door? On one hand, it is the attempt of the ethnographer, sitting in front of her desk at “home” (or in my case, a dislocated “home” away from home?), far away from the “field,” to make order of some tightly-held, “truthful” observations she gained from what was already the “past.” On the other hand, sound bites come in, constantly reminding her that “their” (her participants’) life is always going on in the present -- a life that is larger and uncontainable in her “fixed” text. There seems to be a perpetual tension in this writing. As feminist ethnographers, we have to take responsibility to continuously seek meaning and read order out of others’ lives in an attempt to open up new storylines for generations of young women to come. Yet at the same time, we are constantly being pushed towards the dilemma of ethics, knowing that representing the other is always an “illusion” starting with this “I” who wants to “name” and “order.” Reality finally arrives as meaningful only through the eyes of this “I,” yet life itself is more ambivalent than “my” attempt to fix it once and for all within the margins of this writing.

Feminist poststructuralist ethnography is bound to face its own limits and impossibility (Chow, 1992; Trinh, 1989; Visweswaran, 1994). Unwriting the very act of writing interweaves in a double movement.

Moments of Theory – Tracing the production of a feminist ethnography

This dilemma of ethnography and representing the other starts with the very question of language itself. When Saussure theorized language as an abstract system of signs, each with a *signifier* (sound or written image) and a *signified* (meaning), the meaning of signs are dislodged and become relational. Derrida (1974/1967) further challenged this dislodged notion of the signified and posited that the meaning of the signified is never fixed, but is constantly deferred and thus can always be disputed. This renewed notion of language coupled with Foucauldian approach to power, discourse and subjectivity, offered feminists new ways to question and rewrite stories of “women.” Language becomes the battle ground of definition, defying definition and rewriting. As St. Pierre (2000) points out in one simple case, there is “not anything intrinsic to the signifier ‘whore,’ for example, that gives it its meaning, but rather its difference from other signifiers of womanhood such as ‘virgin’ and ‘mother’” (p.23). With the dislodgement of the very meaning used to be fixed under a “naming,” the name (whore) itself loses its grip on the material and discursive bodies of “woman.” And subjectivity is now open to possibilities of rewriting beyond not only the whore/virgin double bind, but the very male/female gender binary itself. Or as feminist educator Davies (2001) did with her collective memory project of tracing back the storyline of the “proper” schoolgirl, once the texture of becoming a girl is revealed as constructed within the contradictory discourses of being “feminine and thus constrained from desires” and simultaneously being “modern and recognizable through asserting the self and uttering desires,” the fixed identity of the schoolgirl is troubled, revealed as an impossible fiction, and dissolved into strategic moments of rejecting and taking-up of available subject positions and writing new ones.

Language, instead of depicting reality as it is, turns out to be an “event” with speakers and hearers constantly projecting meanings from their very own subject positions. And we word the world while being worded. Language becomes the double movement between writing,

unwriting and (re)writing for poststructuralist feminist writers. Yet, parallel to the seemingly boundless possibilities of breaking regulative norms of femininity through the play of language, the very act of ethnography, embedded in its belief of a “reality” through an objective language, was also thrown into a dilemma. Ethnography is now exposed through the poststructuralist lens as yet another set of discourses of its own. Feminist writing of the other women is revealed here as no “innocent” project as well.

This dilemma of representation has resulted in a wave of feminist reflections on the very epistemological foundation of doing feminist ethnography. Issues of writing were raised. First and foremost is the recognition that meanings are always produced from certain positionality and that ethnographic knowing is always partial (Flax, 1992; Haraway, 1988; Spivak 1988). Furthermore, the very foundation of ethnographic knowledge --“experience,” is also called into question. If language is always a reconstruction within the double movement between the subject and mediated reality, then narratives of the participants also can no longer be held as “real” to ground one’s truth claims (Scott, 1992). At the same time, it is also not possible to retreat from interpretation and claim to only speak for oneself, since as Alcoff (1991) poignantly argues, this very claim “assumes the autonomous conception of the self in classical liberal theory – that I am unconnected to others in my authentic self or that I can achieve an autonomy from others” (p.108). If we think of our choice as only between seeking “truth” and “reality” and loss of it, then this dilemma does create the almost impossible for a feminist ethnographic writer.

Yet as Alcoff (1991) consequently points out, “a partial loss of control does not entail a complete loss of accountability” (p.105). Feminist ethnography continues where the “real” dissolves into contested discourses. Or in other words, it is about shifting responsibility from “representing things in themselves to representing the web of ‘structure, sign and play’ of social relations” (Derrida, 1978 as cited in Lather, 1993). For feminist poststructuralist ethnographers, a shift of paradigm occurred with the subject of “woman” in writing. Instead of trying to reveal

“something about the sense maker (the subject) herself, about her motives or intentions” (Davies, 2004, p.4), the inquiry moves to how “woman” becomes a certain kind of subject through available discourses within a particular sense making community and further identifies moments of contradictions within that very power relation to push for new possibilities of becoming.

Reading from this lens, this study of rural girls is such a project that traces the very construction of “girlhood” as an invention within various contested discourses in a changing locality. I have attempted to situate the narratives of girls in the shifting order of rural modernity. In tracing the clashing lines where normative discourses of femininity bumping up against a historically constructed local “rural” discourse and globalized neoliberal discourse, I position these girls as embodied subjects moving through social, political, economic and cultural relations of a locality that carries with it elements of the pre-modern, modern and postmodern. This very contradictory project of becoming a young woman as narrated through the girls and other members of the community, revealed that “rural” and “gender” are not static identities, but rather social relations (Harding, 1992) that function as the truth effect of certain regulative discourses (Butler, 1990). In writing the girls’ stories, I hope to put into question both the local nostalgic yearning for a “pure” rural as projected through layers and layers of images of innocent rural girls, and also the project of a nation-state’s modernity that employs girls as unproblematic symbolic carriers of change.

Modernity, as the prominent Chinese feminist scholar and cultural critic, Cui Weiping (2008) astutely observes, “can be viewed as the fall from the Garden of Eden to the Lost Paradise. Walking from a comparatively confined and stable small world to a rapidly changing big world, individuals are bound to experience a sense of loss, but also gains and openness to a wide variety of possibilities.” Defying the dichotomous definitions of “tradition” and “modernity,” the girls seem to be trudging on with both courage and hesitation into the yet unknown dis/order of shifting Chinese rural modernity. From a poststructuralist perspective, their stories of “becoming”

embody the double-movement of the subject. A person is always subjected by discourses and identity and agency are revealed as process rather than fixed. Yet through exposing the “illusion” of identity and words as coming not from an essential core but from the discursive practices, “the person can move within and between discourses, can see precisely how they subject her, can use the terms of one discourse to counteract, modify, refuse, or go beyond the other, both in terms of her own experienced subjectivity and in the way in which she speaks in relation to the subjectivities of others (Davies, 2000, p.60). In other words, as “girls” and “women,” we are constituting ourselves and being constituted (Butler, 1990; Britzman, 2003; Davies, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1987). While being labeled as “*guai* (naïve and simple),” “bad,” “rebellious,” “out-of-order” “girl” and subjected to the often contested discourses of the local/global, rural/urban, state/market, and tradition/modernity, the girls constantly took up these discourses, negotiated collectively, and sought to re-invent an in-between space in a time unprecedented for becoming a girl and young woman. Contradictions might have been experienced by the girls as hesitation, bewilderment, and occasionally frustration over their very “rural” bearing, but this very moment of contradiction in China’s globalized present, also brings these same girls spaces of negotiation, possibilities and imagination vastly different from their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generation. My very presence as a feminist ethnographer in their lives has, I hope, and as Yiyi once wrote to me at least offered some of them renewed awareness of the possibilities lying ahead of them once they are able to negotiate the discourses that have constructed their very subjectivity as “rural” “girls.”

Moments of Rupture – Tracing the limits of a feminist ethnography

If feminist ethnography can serve as a project of hope, commitment and “sisterhood” to a certain extent, the awareness of it being partial and produced through the situatedness of a

particular ethnographic “I”, rips open that very rosy façade and revealed any writing project as embedded in power relations between self and other, field and home. And this writing project is in no way exempt from the political nature of representing the other. While I diligently recorded every detail and conversation with the girls with a digital tape-recorder and daily field notes, and sought to analytically retrace the social contexts and discourses constructing their subjectivity through ethnographic documentation, there are always moments of rupture that throw me squarely into the limits of speech and expose the very contours of my own desire of reading the other. Those are moments when feelings of uncertainty, ambivalence, frustration, doubt and silence crept in and put that rational “I-can-analyze-anything” intellectual mind in paralysis and jeopardy. If this writing reads like an ethnographer’s attempt to constantly pin-down the girls’ vulnerability of “becoming” amidst a time of rapidly changing social relations, the following ruptured moments are when my own vulnerable and shaky position as a knowing self is revealed. My scientific and objective gaze as it turns out, is just a gaze. Ethnography goes beyond the analytical and rational mind. Within the margins of research, she thinks she has captured it all. But as she opens her heart, flashes of memories rush in.

1. The very beginning – writing with/out permission

“The task that faces Third World feminists is not simply that of ‘animating’ the oppressed women of their cultures, but of making the automatized and animated condition of their own voices the conscious point of departure in their intervention. This does not simply mean they are, as they must be, speaking across cultures and boundaries; it also means that they speak with the awareness of ‘cross-cultural’ speech as a limit, that their very own use of the victimhood of women and Third World cultures is both symptomatic of and inevitably complicitous with the First World”(Chow, 1992, p.122).

Negotiating entry into a cross-cultural ethnography proves to be more than theoretical preparation and research design. On a very material level, it starts with IRB’s (Institutional Review Board) human subject approval. To conduct a cross-cultural project is as cumbersome to

the researcher as it is to the ethics review officer in the U.S. university context. Strict guidelines are offered and detailed listings of questionnaires are required to be submitted ahead of time. Before even entering my yet unknown “field”, I was already asked to lay out my plan for recruiting my potential human research subjects. Ethnography, with all its elements of unexpectedness and uncertainty, is a troublesome enterprise for a scientifically and objectively minded research review board. A cross-cultural ethnography is an even more complicated case. In a supplemental application material designed specifically for cross-cultural human studies, I was asked “who will grant permission for this research” and the choices given started surprisingly (or maybe not that surprising after all) with “tribe elders.” After several rounds of revisions, I passed the ethics test while being constantly reminded that a U.S. trained “native” researcher was about to go to her “Third World” rural field.

So I went, equipped with approved human subject forms from my U.S. institution. I did not need a tribe elder to grant me entry into rural schools, but I did need the permission from the school principals to conduct my research as guided by U.S. research ethics. Through local connections, I was able to get into two vocational schools and started my interviews with the girls until—I pulled out my form and asked permission from the principals. Whatever was promised orally ahead of time fell apart. The day after I left my permission form on the school principal’s desk, a teacher who I had talked to frequently pulled me aside and told me secretly, “The principal called yesterday and told us not to allow you to come into our school anymore. I bet he now grew suspicious about your visit. You know, you left that permission form from a U.S. university. And it is something political. He’s concerned about you spreading things about our school. You are from the U.S.” The expression “political” was emphasized and repeated several times in her nervous warning to me. And just like that, my position as a graduate student from a U.S. university slipped into an uneasy and threatening “political” identity. “It’s better that you hide yourself as an anonymous person and go into individual girls’ families to talk to them. I

don't think school principals want to see someone like you in their schools. But don't ask for permission in this kind of written form anymore. You scare local people with that. ”

With no possibility of gaining permission from the school principals, I engaged in another round of negotiation with my U.S. institution until finally I was able to continue with permission from girls' parents. As a “native” ethnographer conducting fieldwork individually, I was caught in-between the impossibility of talking “cross-culturally.” My very presence in those cross-cultural settings stirred up different symbolic meanings that almost always guaranteed a moment of break-down. Yet, while I was painstakingly seeking access on my own, another Chinese graduate student I knew of called from her fieldwork with questions of what to make of her survey data. She was collaborating with a prestigious U.S. foundation on girls' education in China. Treated as an authority and accompanied by officers from the governmental women's federation, she received a big reception since her project was to inspect the prospect of more monetary funding to local schools.

But as we exchanged our different encounters, she suddenly asked, “How much real stuff do you think people are telling me in those schools?”

2. Feminist intention -- Commitment and guilt

“Commitment as an ideal is particularly dear to Third World writers. It helps to alleviate the Guilt: that of being privileged (Inequality), of ‘going over the hill’ to join the clan of literate (Assimilation), and of indulging in a ‘useless’ activity while most community members ‘stoop over the tomato fields, bending under the hot sun’ (a perpetuation of the same privilege). In a sense, committed writers are the ones who write both to awaken to the consciousness of their guilt and to give their readers a guilty conscience. Bound to one another by an awareness of their guilt, writer and reader may thus assess their positions, engaging themselves wholly in their situations and carrying their weight into the weight of their communities, the weight of the world” (Trinh, 1989, p.10-11).

Excerpt 1: Fieldnote (July.17th, 2006)

I am still feeling helpless, for the many things I have witnessed yet am unable to change. Outside my window, the light in the garment factory is still on. I can't imagine being sixteen and having no night time and weekends, work and all work. How did the girls survive their garment factory years? Now Ms. Tang, the boss has banned me from approaching them anymore, what should I do? Maybe tomorrow I will wait for Feifei secretly outside the factory school and let her know that I might not be able to help them with their immediate situation, but I really want to hear her stories and write something about them.

Excerpt 2: Feifei's response

"Your father is a middle-man in the garment industry? Will you be able to ask him and see whether he can get me into a factory in your city, so I can get out of here?" Feifei asked me after my sister-in-law revealed the secret of mine that I almost forgot. She apparently was not interested in becoming my interviewee and subject. And I don't know what to reply.

Then I remembered upon leaving for the U.S., that my father told me to be grateful for being born in a well-off family that could support my continuing education abroad. Now, I am coming back with my commitment as a Western-trained feminist researcher to tell their stories as rural girls? I stumbled with no words. My sense of commitment, for a moment, froze in the air.

3. Talking/Speaking – Rejecting to be "real"

"Speech has, of course, been seen as the privileged catalyst of agency; lacking of speech as the absence of agency. How then might we destabilize the equation of speech with agency by staging one woman's subject refusal as a refusal to speak?" (Visweswaran, 1994, p.68-69).

It always puzzles me which girls sought me out and continued their contact with me and which girls flatly rejected my request to write about them. Xia and Ling, the two girls I met on the street rejected time and again to be my subjects. Xia would often laugh when I made initiatives for a formal interview, yet she would chat with me on and on about her personal troubles with boyfriends and gossip about other girls. And Ling was more concerned about how much I could make in the U.S. as a graduate teaching assistant and constantly asked me about my husband's salary in Shanghai. She commented on my clothing and appearance often too. My old T-shirt was deemed a "no, no" and my wool coat was a "woo and how much was it." Similar to Luttrell's (2003) uneasiness with her pregnant working-class girls in the U.S. context, I also felt uncomfortable and unnerved with such money talk. It is as if the moment I revealed the "truth" of my background, a newly-founded solidarity between them and me would immediately fall apart. Is it as Luttrell(2003) has pointed out, that "the girls' 'money talk' and my discomfort about it reveals two distinct class-based 'structures of feeling', a distinct middle-class constellation of guilt, insecurity, and fears about falling set next to a poor/working-class constellation of envy, resentment, exclusion, and fears about survival" (p.96). In any case, Ling seems less sensitive than me. After learning that I was approaching thirty and still had no plan of having a baby, this sixteen-year-old new mom would always proceed to give me a lecture, "You should have a baby soon, otherwise it would be difficult for you." And then she would continue with a giggle, "If you have a baby girl soon, then probably my son can date your daughter in the future." It is as innocent as that for her. But she too, did not want to be interviewed.

On the other hand, it was Yiyi and Wei, who still keep contact with me via the email account I set up for them. When I first met them, the two girls were fresh from their villages. But they volunteered to be participants and frequented my place after Friday's classes. At that time, they knew nothing about computers and the Internet, so in an attempt to maintain my contact with them, I taught them how to go online and set up email accounts for them. Since I left China, Yiyi

has started her own blog which she regards as a diary into her journey of becoming a more mature young woman. And we rarely talk about boyfriends and relationships. Yiyi always reassures me that relationships are the last thing in her mind at the moment -- after seeing so many rural girls trapped in hopeless relationships with rural boys with no job prospects.

Their different reactions often remind me of an online post I read some time ago. It was written by a 20-something rural girl who documented her own life as a sex worker in a southern city and then a mistress to a rich Taiwanese boss. The raw and emotion-laden first-person account of a rural girl's dramatic experience into an "urban" subject shocked many readers. And this story occupied the headline of the major Chinese online forum for several weeks. But when people commented with notes such as, "thank you for sharing this heart-felt personal story with us. It is through your story we can get glimpses into the 'subaltern's life,'" the rural girl author snapped and replied harshly, "Who are you talking about? I'm just so fed up with people talking to us as the 'subaltern.' Who are the subalterns?"

So who are the "subalterns" in all these scholarly debates I read in my academic texts? Why are we so concerned about whether they can speak or not? Spivak (1988) has repeatedly reminded us that "to confront them is not to represent them but to learn to represent ourselves" (p.85) and "the possibility of collectivity itself is persistently foreclosed through the manipulation of female agency" (p.78). In the end, as it turns out, as intellectuals we are often too concerned about how "we" can speak for "them." It is about our talk in our circles about "them." It might be aimed for them, but really the point is not whether they can speak or not. For the girls who refused to be my subjects, they might as Visweswaran (1994) suggests, deliberately reject to be "real" and "retrievable" for some scholarly, noble purposes far out of their context. They just live their own reality as it is with no need for further interpretation. For the girls who sought me out for interviews, what we shared is moments of becoming as I presented myself not only as an encouraging big sister, but maybe also an aspiring modern subject to model after. Yet their letters

constantly remind me that they can never become the “modern” girl I have displayed for them – despite my effort to displace my privilege, I am the “modern” girl who travel back and forth, leaving them behind in the “field.”

“A feminist anthropology cannot assume the willingness of women to talk, and that one avenue open to it is an investigation of when and why women do talk – assessing what strictures are placed on their speech, what avenues of creativity they have appropriated, what degrees of freedom they possess” (Visweswaran, 1994, p.30).

4. Writing – between skipped lines of theory and emotion

“Like mixing vodka with Lowenbrau, a combined dose of Marxism and Freudianism can produce a false consciousness and a blustery ego. Both narratives situate contemporary travails in generic historical forces (Marxism in preexisting structures, Freudianism in preexisting child-rearing practices) beyond the control (but not the knowledge) of the intellectual, but both, nevertheless, posit a future that will be ‘theirs.’ Neither privilege human agency. Contemporary Marxism obliterates the lived experiences of individuals, while contemporary Freudianism blithely metaphors out human agency, speaking of a mother’s love for her child as ‘object relations’ (Richardson, 1997, p.76).

Yiyi’s email, Dec.31st, 2009

Yihuai sister,

I often feel confused these days after started working at this tourist agency. I don’t know when you will come back to visit us. When you see us again, I guess you’ll feel something has changed in all of us. It’s so different from our school environment, so we have to change, even though it is often a compromise. I really miss my days in school, so naïve and simple – just very idealist pure thoughts. Now it’s not possible anymore. The society has taught us to be cautious against others. Even if sometimes someone is genuinely nice to you, you will still think whether that person wants something from you. I don’t like to think that way, but it just happens. For

example, the tourism business is really not like what I thought. It's all about money and profits. As a tour guide, I was asked to trap my guests into stores for shopping to get my salary. I don't like to cheat people, but this is the tour guide business, I now know.

Shortly following Yiyi's email, I talked to her and Wei on the phone and learned another piece of news. The vocational school they attended for less than a year, before being sent to their current job positions, asked them to pay three years' tuition, if they want to get a diploma. That means beside the 1,600 yuan (\$230) they have already paid, the school now asked for additional 3,200 yuan (\$460) if the girls wanted to get a vocational high school diploma. The girls fretted over this shocking matter and agonized about whether or not to "buy" their diploma. "Can you tell your parents and have all your parents go to school for a protest?" I asked. "No way," Yiyi said, "the school knows that we need a diploma, and they'll hold that until we pay the money." "But you only stayed there for a little bit over one semester and the school never offered you continued courses." I grew a little bit frustrated.

Few days later, I received another email from Yiyi, assuring me the problem has been taken care of. Her father agreed to pay the money and she got her diploma.

Helpless moments like those plagued my encounters with the girls. I wish I could offer some "righteous" suggestions for their situations, but instead I wrote back and told Yiyi not to agonize over issues of "ethics" and just do her job as she was told to do, because this was survival and a way of moving up to another job.

Theory is of such limited currency when life is experienced with vexed emotions and immediacy. My Foucauldian analysis on the discourses that construct those girls into some discursive subjects might be of interest to my potential readers and myself as a trained

poststructuralist feminist ethnographer. But when minute life accounts of the girls arrived from the other end of the world through such a thin computer screen, subject/object and poststructuralist analysis all fell silent. My analysis of “them,” no matter how brilliant it might be, does not travel the other way around. First World abstractions can not delete the specificities of Third World happenings. When Spivak (1988) critiques the “self-abnegating intellectual” poses of Foucault and Deleuze in their rejection to be more accountable to the “real” subjects, she is speaking of the ambivalent double movement of doing feminist ethnography. While seeking to address social issues at large and disrupting the very formation of an intellectual ego, the feminist ethnographer also struggles to hold herself accountable for the emotions and real happenings in the lives of those she has grown closer to, even when she is fully aware that relationship itself is laden with inequality.

Moments of Ambivalence – The Double movement towards a renewed point of departure

It seems that those moments of rupture of “language defying language,” seeking meaning while tracing and disrupting the very order of that meaning-making, almost leads to a choking point in ethnographic writing. So “why write? For whom? What necessity? What writing” (Trinh, 1989, p.9)? To write, after all, as Trinh (1989) poignantly exposes, “is to communicate, express, witness, impose, instruct, redeem, or save – at any rate to *mean* and to send out *an unambiguous message*. Writing, thus reduced to a mere vehicle of thought may be *used* to orient toward a goal or to sustain an act, but it does not constitute an act in itself. This is how the division between the writer/the intellectual and the activists/the masses becomes possible” (p.16, emphasis hers). In seeking order, the feminist ethnographer writes about other girls through her endless circles of meaning-making in hopes of making change through *her* thoughts and words. In walking back towards her own limits of knowing and exposing herself to the ruins of an “innocent” feminist

project, she sees shadows of her own privileged middle-class, urban-raised, U.S. trained self lurking behind every question and every move to her othered subjects. She asks questions as if she knows the suffering of living as a rural girl, or assumes it is the pain of others that she is going to hear, pin down and save them from.

Writing -- is a political act in itself. I still consider writing ethnography about making order out of an otherwise disorderly world. It is about understanding social relations and seeking change for the less privileged. But when moments of rupture remind us time and again that what we consider to be pure text *was* and *is* someone else's life happening in the waves of a worldly existence, emotions and ambivalence creep over from the other end of the screen and gradually seized these writing hands. "Did I get it right about the girls?" the feminist ethnographer asks herself after traveling all the way with her rigorously trained measuring procedures. "How do I make a proper and profound conclusion about my meaning-making research?" she continues.

I have tried, as a dutiful and committed ethnographer, to grab onto some moments and posit those narrative moments into larger discourses and social contexts. I have delineated and deconstructed the various discourses that produce a certain kind of "girlhood" in a rapidly changing Third World local context. I have disrupted the connotations of "badness" that regulate proper girlhood. I have talked about girls as "rural," "school" and "sexed" subjects -- regulative norms function as truth effects of contesting discourses. I have talked a lot about them, but what is this anxiety behind "whether I have gotten it right" by a feminist writer?

This anxiety as sociologist Bauman (1991) and feminist ethnographers Davies (2004) and Richardson (1997) point out for us is "the acute discomfort we feel when we are unable to read the situation properly" (Bauman, 1991, p.281) and the bare fact that "human experience is constituted through multiple discourses which give rise to ambivalent understandings and emotions" (Davies, 2004, p.6). We can blame language for lack of precision in this experience of ambivalence in reading and writing the other. Yet just as how we name and classify "experience"

and “narratives” into the fictional identity of “I,” “she,” and “you” through manipulating multiple probabilities and discourses, those uncontainable moments of ambivalence in the order-making process simply arise as a normal aspect of our linguistic practice (Bauman, 1991, p.282).

“Through the recognition of ambivalence and contradiction, rather than through the search for interpretation cleansed of doubleness, opposition and multiplicity” (Davies, 2004, p.6), the feminist writer weaves and dispossesses herself into a continuous dialogue with women coming before her, along with her and after her. “Our work will never ‘arrive’ but must always struggle ‘between’” (Fine, 1994, p.140).

If in the previous chapters I have embarked on an one person journey in dialogue with different girls in a particular rural community, now towards the end of this journey, I want to invite more dialogues into this writing, dialogues with women coming from different walks of life, fictional dialogues between Chinese feminist novelists, English-writing feminists in the U.S. academy, me as a cross-cultural story-teller, and the girls who write and rewrite themselves in emails and blogs (or not writing and refusing to speak at all). Through “these jagged transitions between the analytical and poetical to the disruptive” (Trinh, 1989, p.43), the non-unitary female subject is revealed as One in all of us. Words become jumbles of pearls and raindrops, carrying on the tireless (dis)harmonious symphony of dialogues inscribing and de-scribing that young woman of becoming, as i/she/you/they fade into shadows.

1. Will you still stand at “their” side? – The issue of committed writing

Cui, Weiping (2008): a Chinese feminist and cultural critic, commenting on documentaries depicting rural lives

Rural towns face the most upheavals and shifts in social relations amidst the contradictions within a historically divided rural/urban and a modernity project that is purely market-driven. Everywhere you look, you see an odd image of a “dirty and disordered” subaltern living environment juxtaposed with some hair saloon named “Paris” with its twinkling pinky lights screaming out in a suggestive manner about desires. Empty desires. You then see dark dancing rooms in basements where men and women cling to each other tightly, desperately seeking company in each other, hands touching and grabbing onto sensitive parts of each other. The subaltern life as revealed in many documentary movies in China, feels helpless and just empty of meaning. These heroes live in the whirlpool of a dislocated rural town where old traditions have vanished and monetary desires become the only standard. Yet they are often at a disadvantage to chase that desire because of their rural identity. Life becomes an empty existence deprived of further meanings. The more the heroes see through this very meaninglessness in the nature of life, the less s/he cares about morality. And why should they care anyway?

The question becomes: for those professors and scholars who live in the ivory tower, writing passionately about the cause for the subaltern, have they ever had such close contact with people living in such destitute and numbness, like a headless fly with no direction and light to follow at all? Will they still stand steadfastly on the side of the “subaltern” after experiencing such a deep sense of helplessness and meaninglessness that could devour their own commitment? Have they ever doubted what to save? “We” seem to be so invested in re-creating the innocent and morally superior “subaltern” as if their minds, morality and humanity would always shine in steadfastness even if their very living environment is unraveling, broken down and slipping away from them (p.6).

My field note: July, 23rd, 2006, on mixed feelings about a rural town

Following the narrow mud road outside my grandparents-in-law's house, you will reach the newly built main street leading to the town center. There is still no light yet and I heard of someone being killed by a passing car in darkness a few days ago. There is lot of dust and dirt on the new street, it is very dark too. Some buildings are under construction and deserted farmlands are scattered behind the dumps of construction sites. Then as you walk on, gradually small vendors start to occupy the two-story buildings along the way. Many of them are internet bars, small restaurants, massage parlors, and a photo studio with pictures of girls in heavy-makeup hanging in its windows. Cheap entertainment places. There are not so many cars on the street, but tons of motorcycles. Outside the numerous Internet bars and restaurants are hordes and hordes of young men -- rural young men staring eagerly and directly at every passing young girl and woman.

Everything exhibits an odd combination of ruralness with an eager flare of modernity. A bread-shop at the corner of the street is lit up with a warm urban feel and a seven-story hotel stands tall against the darkness. But just against the bread-shop is the shabby old building where the garment school girls live. And against the hotel is the dingy alley with suggestive pinky lights.

A lot of motorbikes, and no traffic rules here. Young rural men seem to find their way of playing it cool. They cruise the only two streets in town untiringly and repetitively in the darkness. The girls who have just arrived in town have nothing else to do, so they line up outside the square in front of the hotel, looking into the noisy and dark street as we sit in silence.

On the road side of this small rural town, there seems nothing else other than the many, many shabby versions of long deceased urban entertainment places -- electronic game rooms, internet bars, billiard rooms filled with smoking and bare-chest young boys and men In those nights when they don't need to work, young boys and men roam the town.

These young rural boys and girls remind me of something I read earlier. It is a picture of a young rural man dressed in an ill-fitted, creased suit. The footnote reads, "What he is imitating

is not some urban subject, but the first person in a rural village who dressed in a suit.” He is a creation of neither this nor that. The rural girls and boys in a very real sense are being thrown into this very particular scenario where rural bearings and urban desires clash. They are staging their own endless show of imitation in between these conflicting storylines. As a matter of fact, such stories are happening now on this very street and in the fictional cyber space of the chat rooms. Feifei and the other girls laughed, a few dirty words slipped out of their mouths and then they typed nimbly with their just off-the-garment-factory-work fingers. On the computer screen I see flashing iconic faces and suggestive words going back and forth, the girls are flirting with several men from different places online with their newly found freedom.

2. Are they full of suffering? – The issue of reading the other

Tie, Ning, The first woman chairman of China’s Writers’ Association, in an interview

Some Chinese writers, men as well as women use their own “liberated soul” to write about those other rural women. They think from their own perspective that these women want to “liberate” themselves, and thus are suffering from helpless pain. But it is not this simple. Rural women might have experienced a lot of change in the past decades, but many of them are still in an “unconscious” state, with no desire to search for a meaning or direction of life. You might think they are very “dumb,” “blind” or “ignorant”, but really, it could all be your own self-appointed “shrewdness.” The rural women’s appearing “numbness” towards life could be their bigger wisdom. The goal of their life is very small and often lack meaning to “your” eye, but can you say that she is ignorant? When I write my main character, I feel she is a holy mother – that strong and earthy mother who strives for survival and living despite a difficult destiny and circumstances.

My field note: Oct. 17th, 2007, on girls who refused to be interviewed

What's really interesting about these girls is that even though they seem to speak a shocking and unrestricted language of their own (with all the sex and dirty words), they are also so naïve, open and just trust people like me, with no class definitions. Their world seems simple and complicated. Or is it just me feeling this from my own point of view? They are people living at the lowest end of society. They might not have those splendid moments of achievement in life, but it's interesting also how they seem to have that naturally satisfied look. Is that why they don't seem to worry about what's coming tomorrow? Or, why they don't seem to be searching for the meaning of their own lives and life in general like what I do maybe a little bit too much. Life is what it is to them at this moment. They joke and laugh, not really that big sort of feelings of loss and confusion (or maybe this is just my reading again?) Feifei's blog doesn't seem so happy recently. She talks about being bored and turning bad, maybe she realized the boring nature of those online games? Their life is complicated to me, because all of my frame of references seems to be dysfunctional here, I mean those rules I learned as a girl growing up. So we talk about makeup and boyfriends. Men come and go in their lives. They don't censor their language at all, "sleep with someone", "someone wants to sleep with me", "f**k", these words just come out their mouths naturally. When I was all nervous about men staring at me, they seem to have a natural boldness, coquette-ness and a quick street smart-ness.

3. Let me surrender into life itself – The issue of writing the other

Lin, Bai (2005) Afterword of her controversial novel "A rural woman's gossip," which directly uses first-person oral narratives of a mid-aged rural woman to talk about a seemingly disorderly

life where survival of inequality is interwoven into accounts of adultery, petty crime and even murder.

I don't know that one day I will hear the voice of others. Life presents itself through this voice, with all its noise, flashes, rawness and ruggedness, and swept me outside this "I" into a vast and open world. I start to see mountains and rivers, sun and moon, thousands of lakes with waves high and low.

All the whispers and callings arrived this way.

What I heard and wrote down is the voice of a real woman. It is oral and colloquial. The words are ragged, repetitive, sluggish, and monotonous. Yet they are also earthy and vivid, full of life. This is how the voice of a human being weaves into the voice of God, without any further mutilation from the intellectual. I like this voice. I will delve into this voice and surrender to life itself.

The land is so vast, and so is the human soul. What I need to do first is to liberate myself from the text and surrender myself back into a vivid life.

My field note: March.2nd, 2008, on the difficulty of writing

I have delayed my writing for so long, searching for a way to start. Unconsciously, I know what I want, but this writing process is full of contradiction, anxiety, and ambivalence. I want something expansive, bigger than the intellectual mind. My thoughts linger as if there are three parallel plots, but I have to put them together in one thread. What kind of language and what kind of writing is that? Foucault and poststructuralist theory offered me philosophical language to deconstruct a society and the subjectivity of girlhood. Studies on girls' education, sexuality, and rural modernity laid out a rational academic language on how to describe, analyze

and put into order and meaning a certain social phenomenon. But my thoughts are often led into feelings of ambivalence by the uncontainable details and headless and bottomless life as it is. An unsettling language is burning inside of me.

Suddenly I remembered a movie by a Taiwanese director, Edward Yang, “A Brighter Summer Day.” A story of the crisis of masculinity amidst the large background of 1960s’ Taiwan. Men left their homeland with no hope of returning, Western influences swept over the sojourning tiny island.¹⁶ Where is the last stand of “home” and “identity”? There is no return to either and man is no longer man in this displaced island. Something disappeared and we don’t know how to keep onto hope.

Maybe my own writing of the girls, in what seems to be about the other, really, is my own ambivalence about a changing society and the unsettling feeling of traveling-in-between different cultures. What research does is to always point out there is hope ahead not only for our subjects, but maybe more for our own search. Movies are one way to make visible those emotions. And research on the other hand, seems to be a rational way of seeking meaning endlessly. Maybe what ethnography does is to combine both –we tried very hard to give rational answers to life and keep on hoping with enthusiasm and optimism, we also spell out the emotions and let life just be the disordered jumble itself. That’s fine too. Let the stories continue endlessly without suffocating them with our own limited conclusions.

4. Let the stories continue – the double movement as points of departure

¹⁶ When the communist party defeated the national party in 1949, many nationalists left mainland China and retreated to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-Shik. For more than 50 years, these men would never be able to return to their homeland anymore. Their children who were born in Taiwan, yet educated to maintain their mainland identity are often referred to as the “lost” generation with no “identity” to cling to.

What I have tried to do in these juxtaposition of Chinese feminist writers' thoughts on writing the other and my own ambivalence throughout the fieldwork and writing process is to construct a moment of departure where "we" can start to "see the world of overlapping circles, like movement on the millpond after a fish has jumped" (Pratt, 1990,p.17). Your truth does not negate my truth and mine to her. The writing women and the very act of writing women enmesh into endless reflexivity of questioning and celebration as Cui, Tie and Lin did with their respective feminist writings. What we as feminist writers can do is to continue to be the untiring storyteller, even when our words "suffocate the codes of lie and truth" (Trinh, 1989, p.134). Let it be the opening of more dialogues. The power of ethnographic telling does not simply lie in the pinning-down of a subject or deriving certain intellectual interpretations, but in the very transmitted process of telling the stories again and again and to hear them echo through the circles of other lives. As I told the stories of Chinese rural girls to people young and old in the U.S. context, those coming from small towns who have seen first hand the rapid decline of local communities at this end of the globe, lamented as they told me stories of sisters getting pregnant at seventeen, fathers losing jobs and drinking every day, mothers weeping and carrying on. Stories I would not otherwise hear as a young Chinese woman coming from her cosmopolitan upbringing. I don't know whether it is me who is telling the stories or that stories expressed through me so I can finally see life as more than what "I" am about.

"I-the-writer do not express (a) a reality more than (a) reality impresses itself on me. Express me. The function of the craftwo/man-writer is, therefore, 'not so much to create a work as to supply a literature which can be seen from afar' (Barthes) ... She writes, finally not to express, nor so much to materialize an idea or feeling, as to posses and dispossess herself of the power of writing" (Trinh, 1989,p.18). And unless " 'point of departure' is constantly re-emphasized so that, again, reversal strategies do not become end points in themselves Women

as subject can only redefine while being defined by language” (p.44). And this is the double movement as points of departure for this very writing project.

5. The Last sound bite

Yiyi added another entry in her blog space thoughtfully titled “TIME.”

“Recently I feel that everyone and everything started to change gradually. It’s not that noticeable.... I don’t know how to describe it ... or how to write about it ...there is something changing! We came in contact with this something and then we turned and found ourselves not recognizable even to ourselves ... Terrifying indeed, but I am also one of them as well.

“Everyday I go to work and get off from work Time is flying. What will I be able to grab through those fleeting moments?” (Yiyi, blog entry Dec.22nd, 2009, “Recently”)

As Nikki Giovanni (1971) once said, “Poetry is the culture of a people. We are poets even when we don’t write poems We are all preachers because we are One ...” (Giovanni, *Gemini*, 1971, p.95). Yiyi, this dialogue is for you and all the girls who have allowed me to walk together in grabbing something (meaningful?) through those fleeting moments of life.

Epilogue: Life Continues

Before I was about to leave for the U.S. to continue my writing, I received an excited phone call from Yuehua, Huizi, Yiyi and Wei. They, together with another girl have recently started to work as interns in a local folk tourist site as tour guides.

“What kind of tourist site is that?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s this place where our boss has ‘invited’ many really dark-skinned mountain aboriginal people from Yunnan Province in the far south of China to perform in our park.” Yiyi answered and then added, “They are said to be the ancestors of people in my region many thousands of years ago.”

“Oh, they are just really strange. They look so different, men with big muscles and women with big breasts. And dress in a skimpy way.” Yuehua explained to me further their new co-workers or to be more exact -- their objects of explanation for incoming tourists.

“At first, we were really scared of them, you know, because they looked so different and the way they laugh and talk, just so loudly. No manners at all.” Huizi complained, but then her tone shifted, “now we sort of get close to them and have lunch together. They are actually really nice people and with a good sense of humor. It’s just they look different, that’s all.”

I found myself amused at this recent development – the girls of my study are now talking about a staged spectacle of some aboriginals as their “others.” And their job is to add more mystery to that spectacle and otherness through more words and explanations to voyeuristic tourists. If at the beginning of this writing, I have intentionally constructed a spectacle of the Third World young woman, I hope like the girls, you have arrived at this end of writing with

something different. The aboriginal people are both objects of explanation and friends for the girls and they seem to be able to shift smoothly between. Can a piece of writing do the same?

And I was finally able to write back to the girls to explain what I have written about them all along. In a recent email to Yiyi, I stopped telling her that I was writing interesting stories about them, but instead I wrote,

“I have just finished reading a scholar’s essay on rural modernity. It feels like she is talking about your generation, leaving the familiar rural context behind, going into the bigger and shifting urban space and social relations. It’s like traveling from a simple and grounded, yet also confined environment to an open and disordered urban environment. You are bound to face frustration, sense of loss and ambivalence. And this is what I heard from the stories you told me and what I have written down. But more importantly, there are also opportunities for personal exploration and resilience. When you look back some time in the future, I think you’ll cherish what you have experienced as a sixteen-year-old and seventeen-year-old. No matter what you are experiencing right now, I hope to share with you that these are all parts of the journey.”

Yiyi got back to me immediately the same day in an email titled “Resilience.”

“Yihuai sister, you are right about what’s happening now around us. The rural is no longer so innocent and grounded anymore. Like the touristy village we are working at right now. It’s close to the rural town center and has been developed into a tourist site, so everything has changed and become more complicated, including the villagers. Today when I went to work, I found that all the trees on the other side of the hill were cut down, maybe to pave for a new road. At that time, it was raining, the road was covered in the dusty red hue of dirt from the hill, strikingly red against a barren hilltop. I was feeling a little bit upset there and then! I was thinking maybe this is the price to pay for having a better life. If I can choose, I hope my village can

remain the same as always, but – is that possible? I have told you before, I discovered that as you grow up and go places, it is inevitable that people and things change. And things we can't change for now, we have to adjust to that.

“Oh, did I tell you that today there were many new girls coming to our place? And I look at them as if seeing myself from yesterday. We have walked a long way since you left. Now we have changed from yesterday's novice tour guides to experts. And I even have an apprentice under me now. Being someone's trainer, this is something I couldn't imagine before, but today it has become a reality! I still remember those days when I repeated the same task again and again, reciting my words of explanation and asking for advice from experienced tour guides. And every time I went on internship to take groups out, I would get critiqued. But today when the newly hired girls help us out with our guest groups, we can also give them instruction and suggestions as an expert.

“Maybe this is the journey we have traveled so far. Now looking back, we are really different from a year ago when you left. I started to feel that if I can have more resilience, I will get recognition from others. I am not a very confident person, even though people might not see that in me immediately. But now I believe in resilience. Sister, coming back soon to visit us, I have many things to tell you and want to share all the sweet, sour, bitter and happy moments of life with you. Too much to put into words here.”

“See you soon!”

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EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University Aug. 2003 – present
Dual degree Ph.D candidate, Curriculum & Instruction and Women's Studies

The Pennsylvania State University Aug. 2001 – Aug. 2003
Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language, Dept. of Applied Linguistics

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TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Women's Studies Program, Instructor 2005 – present
Introduction to Women's Studies 001

Chinese program, Comparative Literature, Instructor 2004 – 2005
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Intensive English and Communication Program Summer 2003
Intermediate Reading and Advanced Conversation for international students

English as a Second Language Program 2002 – 2003
ESL 118 – Advanced communication and pronunciation class for international graduate assistants

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Vice president, Women's Studies Graduate Students Organization 2005 – 2006

Community Projects Organizer 2005 – 2007
Projects include: Peer Help Reaffirm, Educate and Empower Group and Men Against Violence,
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Instructor
Mid-State Literacy Council, State College, PA 2005
Taught one lower-intermediate reading and conversation ESL class for immigrants from China,
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AWARDS

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