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The Representation of Rural Migrant Women and the Discourses of Modernity in Contemporary China—A Study of Zhang Kangkang’s Novel *Zhima*

Abstract Contemporary Chinese female writer Zhang Kangkang’s novel *Zhima* uses the lives of rural migrant women to symbolize the experience of the individual in Chinese urban modernity. The novel exposes the gender and class discrimination suffered by the rural migrant woman *Zhima*, but it does not fully unmask or probe the deeply institutionalized imbrications between gender, class and power in both rural and urban society. The challenge posed to the hierarchical distinction between rural/urban in this text’s narrative ultimately gives way to the discourses on *suzhi* (quality) and “population control” that actually reinforce the rural/urban differences. The author’s self-proclaimed feminist standpoint is also overshadowed by the text’s complicity with developmentalist modern urban values. This literary text thus affirms, rather than calling into question, the post-socialist discourses of modernity, which are distinguished by their promotion and celebration of urbanization and free market.

Keywords rural migrant women, *suzhi* (quality), birth control policy, urban modernity

Introduction

This paper explores the literary representation of the experiences of Chinese rural migrant women in *Zhima*, a work of contemporary fiction written in 2003 by the acclaimed female author Zhang Kangkang. The paper analyzes the ways in which this literary text codes and unfolds female migrants’ changing subjectivities both in reaction to and within the post-socialist discursive framework of gender, class and modernity. This story portrays the migration and work experiences of rural, subaltern migrant women but is written by an urban,

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middle-class female intellectual; it is thus significant to explore how and if the author lets her subaltern protagonists speak about themselves, or, more precisely, the ways in which the female intellectual speaks for underprivileged women. In discussing the relationship between gender and representation, Rey Chow proposed that:

Instead of asking how women are represented or made to represent certain ideas, then, it becomes necessary to query *who* is engaged in such representations and what motivations lie behind them. For instance: in “representing” women in a certain way, are the representers being descriptive or prescriptive? Are they portraying things as they are or are they imposing on readers preconceived ideas? Are they speaking for women at the expense of women’s views of themselves?¹

This proposition prompts critics to question and reflect upon the underlying assumptions found in cultural texts, including assumptions surrounding the representation of gender issues. In *Zhima*, prescribed gendered representation is only one aspect of the overall textual politics informing the story’s worldview. The multiple interlocking discourses found in this work should be read together within their historically specific socio-cultural context. The politics of representation should be investigated not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of social class/re-stratification and the rural/urban divide in contemporary China.

Throughout the twentieth century, questions surrounding the future of the peasantry and the prospects of rural society have been intimately tied up with the dominant discourses of modernity and nationhood in China. In modern and contemporary Chinese literature, there exist abundant and multifarious literary constructions of Chinese rural areas and peasants. These works are distinguished by two typical representational paradigms that are mutually contradictory (but are not necessarily exclusive within one author’s works). First, most May Fourth era writers portrayed the countryside as a desolate wasteland that threatened the project of national modernity. In contrast, the countryside has mainly been glorified in socialist literature as the revolutionary base that provides the momentum for socialist causes and national (re)construction. Likewise, the peasantry has sometimes been depicted as the backward, unenlightened, helpless “other” that embodies the problematic aspects of China’s “national character” and is waiting to be rescued and modernized, while at other times has been characterized as guileless, honest, and virtuous, as people who epitomize the traditional Chinese spirit.

¹ Rey Chow, “Gender and Representation,” 41.

For contemporary Chinese writers, the ever-changing rural subject continues to be a significant source of inspiration in this era of rapid economic and social transformation. The turn of the twenty-first century has witnessed a massive increase in rural to urban migration, which has occurred in tandem with the Chinese state's efforts to develop a market economy and participate in the globalization process. Stories of peasants' experiences of migration and lives in the city have also been an important topic of interest in fictional works since the 1980s. Many of these works depict the frustration and tragedy experienced by rural-to-urban migrant women and portray their difficult experiences as pronounced and enduring symptoms of the "social crisis" accompanying the national transitional process. Within the contemporary ideological context of neo-liberalism, urbanization and globalization, rural migrant women more easily fall victim to the reconfigured systems of class and gender oppression than do their urban, middle-class counterparts. In addition to realistic depictions of the hardship, loss and trauma experienced by lower-class women in modern Chinese society, the corpus of contemporary literature on migrant women also includes works that explore the possibility for growing consciousness, autonomy, and resistance to prevailing class and gender hierarchies. These literary works explore the possibility for rural migrant women's "liberation" from both social and gender inequality, as well as how their agency could be asserted in the process of social and gender transformation. The questions raised by these texts include: How do these texts position themselves within modernity discourses, which are closely associated with gender difference and the rural/urban divide in China? Is it possible for these texts to break away from the tendency to stereotype subaltern women and see them as the "other" within the coding systems demarcating female/male and peasantry/urbanites? Are literary constructions of the rural migrants possibly yet another "signifier of 'otherness' against and around which dominant national ideas about identity are constructed and reproduced"?² This paper will use *Zhima* as an example to investigate these questions.

The novella *Zhima*, written by Zhang Kangkang in 2003, presents the migration and working experiences of Zhima, a rural woman who works as a household domestic in Beijing. Migration has generally been perceived as socio-economic movement from the poorer "margins" to the wealthier "modern centers" that has taken place in the past three decades. *Zhima* likewise follows the female protagonist Zhima's "progressive rural-to-urban trajectory": from her pursuit of improved living conditions through domestic labor in the city to her pursuit of a modern identity through the abandonment of the peasant mentality and reconfiguration of her worldview and value systems. *Zhima's* geographical

² Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change*, 43.

movement from the countryside to the city is eventually overshadowed by her mental transformation, as she embraces the post-socialist urban modernity. The main plot of the story is as follows. Zhima, a woman living in rural Henan province, gives birth to an extra child, a girl, and is heavily fined by the governmental institution in charge of carrying out the one-child policy. This situation adversely affects the family finances. As a result, Zhima goes to Beijing to work as a household domestic in order to earn more money, hoping to alleviate her family's suffering. Because of the rigid state policy against giving birth to more than one child, Zhima has to go to hospital to have the pregnancy-check once every three months. While working in Beijing, she witnesses the sharp rural/urban disparity in terms of wealth, lifestyle, female status within family and women's rights in procreative decision-making. In confronting this social and cultural stratification, she is pushed to think about what kind of life is "worthwhile and livable" and what constitutes a proper lifestyle for a woman. She gradually starts to identify with the urbanites and view rural residents as uncivilized and backward. For her, rural life is meaningless and hopeless. The story thus suggests that the possibility for rural transformation lies primarily in the recognition and development of a sort of "modern subjectivity." When Zhima's friend, who is also from the countryside, asks her to collaborate in helping another woman, pregnant with an extra child, to cheat on her pregnancy examination, Zhima refuses this request in order to prove that she has discarded the peasant mentality and gained a new, modern, gendered subjectivity. Therefore, the story of the rural migrant woman Zhima symbolizes the individual's pursuit of both urban modernity and modern gender subjectivity.

In a public speech, the author once discussed her motivation for writing a story about the life of rural migrants. She stated that she is glad to see that most migrant workers gain a great deal of "modern knowledge and viewpoints" during the course of their journey from rural areas to cities. She claimed that the internal changes experienced by these migrants are crucial to social progress and that her female protagonist Zhima represents an example of the way in which the process of migration can transform the migrant's worldview.

I wrote *Zhima* to express my concern and sympathy for the stories of female migrate workers. From Zhima (literally "sesame"), sesame oil can be extracted. What I want to represent is the sesame oil I extracted from the story of Zhima (sesame). In the past 20 years of "reform and opening," we have noticed the phenomenon of peasants migrating to work in the city, but we have seldom paid attention to what they bring back with them. They return with the money they earned as migrant workers and build new houses, buy TVs and agricultural tools, and transform themselves little by little, step by step. What matters most is the modern cultural consciousness

imbibed by huge numbers of migrant workers. For instance, today some rural parents choose not to find a wife for their 18-year-old son, as they would have in the past, but instead encourage him to learn more science and techniques or seek jobs outside. Their worldview is undergoing a subtle transformation; this process speaks to the core of societal progress in China. The main theme of the novel *Zhima* concerns a kind of “gradual personal progress” or “socio-cultural maturation” among migrant workers.³

Moreover, the author also intentionally adopts a “female standpoint” so as to explore the living conditions of subaltern women. She calls for contemporary authors to attach more importance to the “gendered perspective” in their writings.⁴ As a result of these authorial intentions, the protagonist Zhima is depicted as actively pursuing a new, modern gendered identity in her rural-urban migration trajectory. Because *Zhima* also emphasizes the gender and class discrimination faced by Zhima within both the rural and urban contexts, it is important to explore the meaning of “personal progress” and “maturity” for the female migrant worker. Does the process of “growing to maturity” point to her self-liberation from gender/class inequalities? The ensuing two sections will analyze the way in which *Zhima* negotiates discourses surrounding the rural/urban divide, gender, and urban modernity and market economy in contemporary China.

A Progressive Path? Between Rural Backwardness and Urban Modernity

Zhima uses its portrayal of migrant women's experiences to introduce the issue of social re-stratification and class structure. Zhima and her fellow rural women suffer a great deal of discrimination and exploitation when working as domestic maids for urban families. Every day they have to complete a never-ending stream of domestic chores: housecleaning, shopping, food preparation, cooking, looking after children and the elderly. As family maids, their social status is seen as much lower than that of their employers; they are mistrusted, perceived as careless, and are even victims of abuse. Zhima's fellow domestic maid Feng complains to her that she could tolerate the troublesome domestic chores and psychological torment and has even grown accustomed to looking at her employers' faces all the time, but what she cannot bear is the hunger she suffers because she is never

³ Zhang Kangkang, “Xiezu yu shenghuo de guanxi: Zai Zhongguo xiandai wenxueguan de yanjiang.”

⁴ Ibid., “Tan chuangzuo: Zhuzhong xingbie zouchu youxian.”

given enough food.⁵ Another migrant girl is forbidden to eat the same food consumed by members of the employers' household. Besides wholehearted devotion to their work, the qualities most valued by the employers of these maidservants are their simplicity, docility and submissiveness. Sometimes the employers make demands simply to display their power over the domestic workers. Zhima's grievance comes from her imposed subordinate position within the employee/employer power relations and the loss of dignity that comes along with being a household domestic in the city. She complains to her husband:

Do you really think that I enjoy the urban life? Ah, I dare not to tell you of all the many difficulties I've suffered over the years. You would not allow me to go there again if you knew the truth. Yes, there are high rises and paved roads in the city. The floor of an urban household is even smoother than our rural chopping board. Their toilet bowl is even brighter than our rice bowl. To be frank, rural migrate workers like us are no more than beggars in the cities.⁶

She even questions the legitimacy of social stratification and the hierarchical rural/urban divide. "Rural residents and urban ones, aren't they all human? Why are there such severe social divisions between them?"⁷

Zhima is depicted as a simple, honest, virtuous, and frugal rural woman. She cannot fully participate in city life, which she finds alienating. She observes the estrangement, indifference and coldness that often exist not only between rural migrants and urban citizens, but also among the urban residents. She feels that urbanites rely too much on machine technology to improve their standards of living, even to the point that they themselves become "machine-like." She is deeply troubled by the impersonal nature of urban life.

Zhima's physical mobility from her hometown to urban areas does not seem bring her complete freedom. The non-agricultural domestic work in which she engages in the city is stripped of the dignity that she had previously experienced when engaged in agricultural production in her hometown. When working in the city, she often remembers the free time she used to have when she lived in the country and worked on the farm. After migrating to the city, she has to work all day long, like a machine, and does not have any time for herself. *Zhima* implicitly conveys the loss of freedom and dignity experienced by Zhima in her transition from rural to urban labor. Yan Hairong has discussed the "overdetermined contradiction existing at the core of migrant women's pursuit of

⁵ Ibid., "Zhima," 99.

⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁷ Ibid., 116.

a modern personhood.” Yan argues that, “In the context of contemporary development, the very condition enabling such women’s entrance to the city, the center of commodity economy, is that they themselves be disposable commodities of migrant labor power. Consequently, the very condition enabling their entry and existence in the city fundamentally disables the possibility of attaining the modern personhood for which they have struggled.”⁸ On one level, the depiction of Zhima’s uneasy relationship with her new urban life provides a critical inquiry into the devaluation of the migrant worker. On another level, the portrayal of Zhima doesn’t go a step further to deconstruct the myth of the “attainment of modern personhood.”

Zhima is very annoyed by the way in which her employer wastes food. Her nostalgia for her rural life demonstrates her deep connection with agricultural labor and production. An underlying discourse in the text seeks to restore the dignity of peasants and the value of agricultural labor, which is juxtaposed with the devaluation of peasants in the era of market economy. Zhima’s indelible memories of her childhood mainly center on food and production: natural disasters, food shortages, hard work, and the joy of the harvest. It is worth noting that, in the novella, “Uncle Liu,” a retired state cadre in the family of Zhima’s employer, always calls her “Xiao Guo Tongzhi” (Comrade Xiao Guo) or “jiating fuwu yuan” (domestic service helper). These names, as residual markers of Maoist social discourse, remind the readers of a past era that celebrated the equality of all forms of labor and all professions. As an intellectual from the Maoist era, Uncle Liu uses the outdated term *jiceng* (basic level, or grass-roots) instead of the modern word “countryside.” He falls back on Maoist-era socialist discourses on the great significance of agricultural labor and on rural areas as the “base” for both the revolution and national construction. This old-fashioned rhetoric sharply contrasts with the post-socialist discourses of modernity, which prioritize urbanism and the market economy. Now, even Zhima views her physical/agricultural labor as unimportant and inferior. She hopes that, in the future, her children will finish their educations and pursue modern “careers” like the urbanites she sees around her. According to the new worldview she has gradually acquired while working as a migrant, a creditable and meaningful “career” is one based on mental labor and participation in urban life. Agricultural production is not an acceptable “career” for rural children anymore. Despite the fact that Zhima’s commodification of her physical labor in the market economy causes her a great deal of suffering, she still gradually comes to accept the re-inscribed hierarchy of mental labor/physical labor that characterizes the contemporary era. Thus, although the story reveals and negotiates the

⁸ Yan Hairong, “Specialization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labor Mobility of Rural Young Women in Post-Mao China,” 590.

hierarchical distinctions between urban and rural, it ultimately reaffirms and reinforces the discourses of modernity in contemporary China. These discourses privilege the urban and are the product of the reconfigured rural-urban relationship characterizing China's restructured political economy.

At the beginning of the story, Zhima is upset with the discursive power of urbanites and the violence with which they treat rural migrants. "When a peasant migrants to the city, he or she becomes subject to the rebukes of all the urban residents."⁹ However, after working in the city for a long time, Zhima gradually comes to realize that the huge rural/urban disparity lies not just in material well-being, but also in lifestyle and personal choices. At this point, she begins to acquire an understanding of what "modern life" should be like and comes to regard her rural community as uncivilized and backward. She is armed with discourses of modernity that touch upon all aspects of contemporary life: the social, cultural, and judicial realms, as well as issues pertaining to gender. She gains new knowledge and learns the corresponding new rhetoric, including terms such as "science and technology," "IT," "law," "(social) discrimination," "domestic violence" and "justifiable defense." She begins to internalize the modern identity and wishes to carve out a future for herself and her children that is totally different from the old rural lifestyle and ways of thinking. This newly acquired mentality embodies the concept of "personal progress/maturity" that the author wishes to convey. The idea that contemporary labor migration is a process through which "the individual comes into his or her own" is predominant in the liberal media and mainstream scholarship of modernity in contemporary China.¹⁰ Zhima's equation of the countryside with "backwardness" and "lack of civility" is in line with the "telos of the city" in contemporary modernity discourses. Yan Hairong interprets the migrant women's despondent remark that "There is no way out in the countryside" as meaning that "There is no path to modernity in the countryside":

The discourse of modernity in the contemporary era thus produces the countryside both materially and ideologically as a wasteland stripped of state investment and inhabited by moribund tradition, with the two dimensions mutually reinforcing each other. If Modernity and Progress reside in the city and the city monopolizes the culture of modernity, then the countryside is the city's spectral Other. It is in this discursive context that the countryside cannot function as the locus of a modern identity for rural young women.¹¹

⁹ Zhang Kangkang, "Zhima," 95.

¹⁰ Yan Hairong, "Specialization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labor Mobility of Rural Young Women in Post-Mao China," 583.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 587.

Zhima feels quite ashamed that her home province, Henan, was known for its moral decline and the prevalence of stealing within the rural community. She distinguishes herself from her fellow villagers and places the blame for the underdevelopment of rural areas on the shoulders of the peasantry or “peasant mentality.” To Zhima, this mentality is exemplified by moral decline, especially engagement in theft, the reluctance to gain new knowledge and skills, and the lack of a modern education. These problems are all seen as existing in binary opposition to “urbanity” and modernity. She is eager to break away from the old value systems and thought paradigms, in particular, “old” ideas about reproduction (“more children will bring more happiness”). Her exposure to new ways of thinking in the urban context eventually leads her to support the Chinese population control policy and to believe that having many children can only result in poverty and suffering. Theft and extra births among rural residents are clearly symptoms of the rough conditions in the countryside, including the lack of agricultural development. However, Zhima tends to blame the difficulty and decline of rural life on the “low quality” of peasants, in particular, their moral weakness and backward views on reproduction. Zhima’s opinions on why rural society is “backward” are configured within the powerful *suzhi* (quality) discourses of the contemporary era. As Tamara Jacka has argued, “*Suzhi* has become a central element in a variety of discourses on development and the achievement of modernity and national power. It can, and has been, used to refer to a host of attributes, including education, culture, morality, manners, psychology, physiology, and genetics.”¹² Peasants’ lack of education, manners and morality can accordingly be interpreted as the natural expression or outgrowth of their “low/lack of quality.” The *suzhi* discourses are in fact informed by the contemporary developmentalist policies:

Suzhi perhaps first arose in the early 1980s in the context of the contemporary eugenics discourse of *yousheng youyu* (superior birth and nurture). Stringent population planning has zoomed in on the rural population as an object of intense anxiety for political and intellectual elite. In this light, the rural population appears as a timorous mass—large in quantity and low in quality—encumbering the national body that strives to join the world of global capital through its policies of “reform and opening.” The image of abject poverty among rural households, further burdened by “too many” children, marks rural people not only as low-quality and intractable, lacking modern civility and discipline, but perhaps, more importantly, they are seen as lacking a consciousness of development that the contemporary Chinese state has been striving to

¹² Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change*, 53.

foster.¹³

Zhima recognizes the unequal development of rural and urban areas, but the only solution to alleviate rural poverty that she can conceptualize is to raise the “low quality” of rural people. *Suzhi* discourse is featured by its focus on overcoming individual weaknesses at the expense of dealing with the underlying structural inequalities. As Yan Hairong has noted, “Another significant feature of the deployment of *suzhi* is that it focuses concern on the attributes of human beings and how to improve them, and diverts attention away from deficiencies and inequities resulting from structures, institutions, and practices either created, or endorsed by, the state.”¹⁴ For Zhima, the low quality of rural people is mainly due to the overpopulation of rural society, which is a result of rural residents’ ignorant views on procreation. In turn, the prevalence with which rural people choose to have extra children leads to the widespread lack of education. Zhima contends that:

Those people only play cards, gather and gossip after their agricultural labor is done. They are so lazy that they even don’t listen to the radio at all. They really deserve their poverty! They only aspire to bear more children and raise them to have no knowledge, no future, and no happiness. Why should these people be brought into the world? Zhima did not think about such things when she was in her hometown, but she was pushed to do so here in the city. If Zhima had the chance to start over with a totally new life, she would not live this way, at least not the way the villagers live.¹⁵

The discourse of family planning is a significant exponent of the modernity discourses in contemporary China on the achievement of “development” and “progress.” As noted by Susan Greenhalgh, “Development is also a form of government rationality, a logic of state whose object is the population and whose aim is normalization of society in the name of optimizing the health, welfare, and usefulness of the population.”¹⁶ Although Zhima’s own experiences expose the violent, inhumane deeds committed by the supervisors responsible for enacting the family planning policy, in the end, she actually regards the state population regulation and birth control policy as the key to improving the “low quality” of rural communities. Zhima believes that bridging the gap between the “low

¹³ Yan Hairong, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing *Suzhi*/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment,” 495.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵ Zhang Kangkang, “Zhima,” 127.

¹⁶ Susan Greenhalgh, “Planned Births, Unplanned Persons: ‘Population’ in the Making of Chinese Modernity,” 197.

quality” of the peasantry and the “high quality” of urbanites will help to break down the existing social stratification and eliminate class oppression. The idea of state regulation and *suzhi* discourses on “modernizing the population” and “enhancing the quality of the people through planned birth” gradually come to dominate Zhima’s thinking and displace her initial misgivings regarding the injustice of rural/urban differences.

By attributing the underdevelopment of rural society solely to overpopulation, the novel reaffirms prevailing hierarchical rural/urban distinctions through reference to discourses of urban modernity, which are distinguished by their celebration of development and *suzhi*. The novella’s conformity to state-sanctioned notions of modernity might explain why it was awarded the “Di shi’er jie quanguo renkou wenhua jiang xiaoshuo jinjiang” (The 12th Golden Prize for a Novel on Chinese Population Issue) in 2004. Therefore, although this text vividly exposes the inequality between rural and urban China through the representation of a rural migrant woman’s gendered experiences it ultimately colludes with the official discourses on population control, which provide an imaginary solution to bridge the huge rural/urban gap, that is, controlling the rural population and enhancing the “quality” of rural residents. This ending precludes any deeper exploration of the political-economic reasons behind the underdevelopment of rural areas.

Female Autonomy? Between Rural Patriarchy and the State Birth Control Policy

The migration of rural women to urban areas is generally seen as motivated by their desire to broaden their horizons and achieve freedom from rural patriarchy. The author presents Zhima’s migration from a gendered perspective and focuses on the transformation of her gendered identity. Zhima’s work in the city affords her not only the opportunity for economic independence, but also access to modern discourses on women’s rights and gender equality. The spatial distance from the rural community and, more importantly, the knowledge and discursive power that she gains empower Zhima to resist the oppressive conditions of her rural life. Her evolving sense of female self leads her to oppose domestic violence, struggle for an equal say in domestic affairs, and reflect critically on the patriarchal reproduction culture predominant in the countryside.

The key to the transformation of Zhima’s gendered subjectivity lies in her realization of the importance of women’s reproductive choice. She is encouraged by her patrilocal family to bear a second child regardless of her own preference. When she complains to her employer Aunt Li about the punishment her family suffered because she gave birth to an extra child, Aunt Li tells her that the

punishment is Zhima's own fault and pushes her to reexamine the situation. At the end of the story, Zhima refuses to collaborate in helping another rural woman, Xing'er, cheat in her pregnancy examination, and she rebukes Xing'er for her unthinking submission to her husband. Nonetheless, Zhima's gender consciousness is closely bound up with her belief that ignorance and overpopulation are the roots of poverty and backwardness in rural areas:

Xing'er, why don't you have your own free will? Why do you just do whatever your husband says? If you do have another child, what will you do if it's another girl? You will be fined tens of thousands for having an extra child—how will you pay for it? Children have to eat, dress, and go to school. You're the one who will suffer in bringing up your children. To bear, bear, bear—peasants only know how to bear more children. Why do you want to bear so many children?... All of the villagers are ignorant—why do you still want to bear more and more children?¹⁷

When she hears some rural men laugh at the rural women who earn money in the city as domestic maids, Zhima feels quite sad and angry. But again, it is the *suzhi* discourse that informs her opposition to gender discrimination: "They (the rural men) only aspire to bear more children and raise them to have no knowledge, no future, and no happiness.... Zhima hopes that her son and daughter would not live the same type of life as she had. She now looked down upon rural villagers. If she helped Xing'er cheat, she would be no different from those villagers."¹⁸

The male villagers who mock the women who go to work in the city do not acknowledge these women's important economic contribution to their families. They look upon rural women's domestic service in the city as shameful and intolerable. Their disparaging attitude may stem from their opposition to rural women's provision of service to men outside the patrilocal community and is thus rooted in the patriarchal rural culture. Furthermore, their negative attitude may also reflect their opposition to rural women's domestic work as an expression of class-based inferiority. Zhima's response to the men's disparagement is worthy of note. Instead of responding from a gendered and/or class-based standpoint, Zhima once again attributes their disrespectful behavior to their lack of *suzhi*. The completion of her "evolutionary trajectory" as a female migrant is expressed by her final endorsement of urban modernity as embodied in the state policy of population management. In the end, Zhima's understanding of rural men's discriminatory attitude towards women's migrant labor as the

¹⁷ Zhang Kangkang, "Zhima," 126.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

embodiment of their ignorance is both gender-blind and class-blind. Her interpretation lacks gender-specific analysis of rural men's socio-cultural humiliation. Zhima's rejection of the rural phenomenon of "extra births" therefore stems not so much from her belief in women's reproductive freedom as from her anxiety regarding the "low quality" of rural children. Her attitude thus reflects her resolution to uphold the values of urban modernity. The story therefore fails to sufficiently deal with the unequal power relations between women/men and rural/urban.

Likewise, the story lacks an objective, comprehensive examination of the economic and ideological causes for the persistence of rural poverty in the transition from the Mao era to the post-1980 period. According to Greenhalgh, rural ideas about reproduction, such as "more children bring more happiness," may not merely be the product of traditional patriarchal culture. "By labeling the preferences for several children and for sons over daughters 'old-fashioned' and 'feudal' in origin, the discourse rendered unthinkable the possibility that contemporary forces might have inadvertently reproduced them. Important socio-cultural and political-economic structures shaping childbearing decisions remained unacknowledged in the official discourse."¹⁹ The attribution of rural underdevelopment to "overpopulation" is simplistic and suggests the text's collusion with state population discourses.

Even the text's construction of Zhima's "independence" and "autonomy" is rendered questionable by the end of the story. In order to resist the pressure of the local patriarchy, Zhima requires the support of her husband. His spousal authority must be affirmed to diffuse the growing tension within the narrative.

All in all, between rural patriarchy's demands that they give birth to extra children and the family planning policy enforced by state, rural women actually lack any real reproductive autonomy. Within the text, gender discourses are intertwined with discourses surrounding contemporary modernity and developmentalism, which are undergirded by population control policies. The author's self-proclaimed feminist standpoint is overshadowed by her cultural politics, which unquestioningly support this same urban modernity.

Conclusion

Many scholars have noted that it is not just class or an urban/rural divide, but also gender that "serves as one of the central modalities through which modernity is imagined and desired."²⁰ The literary representations of rural women's

¹⁹ Susan Greenhalgh, "Planned Births, Unplanned Persons: 'Population' in the Making of Chinese Modernity," 203.

²⁰ Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*, 19.

migrant experiences are deployed within the existing discourses of gender and rural/urban difference, as well as the intertwining nexus between these discourses and notions of modernity. According to Wang Yu, narratives on the experiences of “rural women” have been important to modernity discourses and counter-discourses since the 1980s.²¹ As the signifier of “otherness,” rural females serve as “a subject that must be both put to work and worked upon, if the project of modernity is to succeed.”²² This paper has accordingly explored how the novella *Zhima* responds to and interacts with modernity discourses in post-1980 China.

By tracing *Zhima*’s experiences as a migrant worker, the novel exposes the gender and class discrimination to which she and other rural women are subjected within both the rural and urban contexts. *Zhima*’s nostalgia for and alienation from her rural life suggest the “in-between” mentality of migrant workers as a symptom of social transformation and crisis. However, the author’s main thematic concern is the process through which *Zhima* actively forges her modern subjectivity. *Zhima*’s transformation or “individual progress” is reflected at the end of the novel in her celebration of modern urban values, which are seen to contradict rural “passivity,” “hopelessness,” and “backwardness.” The prevalent devaluation of the peasantry as uncivilized in comparison with urbanites remains unchallenged, as the author is unable to imagine a future for rural society outside of the post-socialist developmentalist project. The initial questioning of the essentialist hierarchical distinction between rural/urban eventually gives way to the discourses on *suzhi* and “population control” that re-inscribe and reinforce the rural/urban distinctions.

The novel also explores *Zhima*’s formation of an autonomous female self through her confrontation with gender inequality and rural patriarchy. However, the text’s complicity with state population discourses hinders its feminist assertions about female liberation and autonomy. All of the class and gender issues experienced by rural migrants in the course of social transformation are eventually given imaginary solutions relating to population control and improvement of the peasantry’s “quality.” The problematic of how to achieve rural affluence based on equality, rather than deep social stratification, remains untouched. The deep, institutionalized intersections between gender, class and power in both rural and urban society are never fully explored.

The pursuit of modern female selfhood is a difficult process for the rural migrant woman, who is trapped within the huge rural/urban divide, between sacrificing her own interests to the demands of rural patriarchy and commodifying herself in the urban market economy. Shao Ming once examined

²¹ Wang Yu, “Xiandaixing yu bei xushu de ‘xiangcun nüxing,’” 85.

²² Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change*, 43.

several contemporary literary texts on the lives of migrant workers and concluded that, "The post-socialist modernity, driven by the market economy, is generalized and legitimized; any other imaginary social structures outside this modernity are hard-pressed to gain acceptance."²³ *Zhima's* representation of Chinese rural migrant women is mediated by the author's preconceived liberal socio-cultural views. This paper has demonstrated that this text affirms, rather than calls into question, discourses surrounding post-socialist modernity, which emphasize urbanization and the free market.

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²³ Shao Ming, "Shangtong zhong de xiandai kewang—jinqi xiaoshuo 'nongmingong' shuxie de yishi jiangou gongneng," 37.