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SIT Spring 2010
Chinese Culture and Ethnic Minorities

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So many people were helpful to me throughout this process, but I am particularly grateful to my Shaxi host family who welcomed me into their home and adopted me as one of their own. Their extreme kindness and generous hospitality made me feel at home in Shaxi and truly facilitated my integration into the Bai community. Without their support and eagerness to help, I would not have such a thorough understanding of rural society in Sideng. I am also grateful to all those migrant workers who spoke with me honestly about their plight, particularly Yang who even took me to his construction site to learn traditional Bai construction methods. Also, thank you Zhang Laoshi for taking me to a migrant worker settlement in Kunming to witness where those who migrate from rural areas end up in the cities.

The majority of my interviews were conducted in Chinese and so I have translated them here.

I have left out the names of all my interviewees in an effort to protect their identities.

“Before it was better...the government looked after you, gave you money. Now, maybe you have more freedom but you have to do everything yourself. You have to look after yourself. There is no more social safety net...”

-- Middle-aged male villager from
Sideng Village, Shaxi Township

In his analysis of post-Mao China, historian Maurice Meisner writes, “it was the countryside where the majority of the Chinese people live and work, that was first to feel fully both the economic dynamism and the social destructiveness of a market economy” (Meisner 460). Meisner’s statement underscores how the commercialization of the rural economy changed rural society. Deng Xiaoping’s ascension to power in 1978 marked a re-articulation of state orthodoxy that prioritized economic development. The era of ‘reform’ was launched in the countryside with the break up of the communes and the introduction of the household responsibility system. What are the consequences of utopian marketization on rural society? Why do rural laborers harbor such deep hostility toward the restructuring of rural society? Below, I engage these questions by placing my discussion in the time-space of an ethnically Bai village in Yunnan province. With data collected through interviewing local residents and government officials, living with a local family, and surveying the local population, I have a relatively thorough understanding of the costs of Sideng’s restructuring process. The problems of Sideng’s restructuring are in certain ways representative of nationwide patterns so I hope that this paper will reveal problems that are universal to the marketization of China’s rural communities. The marketization of village of Sideng has led to the attenuation of social relationships, the transformation of values, and the emergence of a new kind of existential uncertainty.

I. Economic and Social Reform

The gathering strength of neoliberal policies in the 1980s opened up the world to transformative market and financial forces. In so doing, the neoliberal doctrine created a space for China's entry and incorporation into the global market. Chinese advocates of market-type reform argued that the nation's economic growth and material well being would best be served if production and distribution of goods were determined by 'unfettered' market forces. Deng Xiaoping's economic reform program began in 1979, officially sanctioned by the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee's injunction of 'adjustment by the market' (Meisner 453). That a market economy inevitably breeds capitalist social relationships, and all the inequitable consequences of capitalism, was well known to China's Communist leaders in the late 1970s (Riskin 318). Deng Xiaoping and his reformist associates, however, tended to disseminate a naïve view of the wonders of the market (Riskin 318).¹ The state apparatus saw economic decentralization and the introduction of market mechanisms as a means to develop 'modern' productive forces. The state's function was then transformed from guaranteeing social services to guaranteeing, by force if necessary, the proper functioning of markets.

The social reforms of 1978-89 can be divided into two major phases: the 1978-84 rural reform phase and the urban reform phase from 1984 onward. The rural reforms implemented in the 1980s sought to structurally transform rural areas first by 'liberating'

¹ According to Karl Polanyi, the market has always existed throughout the history of mankind, but it is rare to see a market economy. Until the nineteenth century, the economy had always been embedded in society – economic activities were subordinated to political, religious, and social relations. Classical economists of the nineteenth century, however, attempted to create a disembedded market that subordinated society to the market.

people's communes through the state-sponsored redistribution of land and the implementation of the household responsibility system; and, second, working through state/policy coordination to raise the prices of rural products, encourage consumption in rural areas, and develop rural industry (H. Wang 12). The policy of forced self-sufficiency in grain was replaced by one encouraging diversification and specialization. China's reforms that began in agriculture with the movement from the commune system of production to the individual responsibility system – in effect partial privatization – created the institutional infrastructure for a market economy.

The household responsibility system resurrected the incentive principle and the entrepreneurial spirit as it portioned what were public resources in partial privatization schemes. The system returned the cultivation and management of farmland to individual peasant households in what can be called 'privatization without ownership' (H. Lee 521). Under the 'responsibility' system, individual peasant households concluded contractual agreements for farmlands with the local state authority, or the production team, to cultivate a portion of communal land as if it were their own for a period of fifteen years (Lee 41). Farm tools and animals, previously collectively held by the production team, were divided among the households. In agreeing to take on 'individual responsibility', the households paid the team contractually stipulated portions of their output to meet state tax and grain quota obligations (Meisner 461). Prices paid to peasants for agricultural products were increased – any surplus above the quota became the property of the household, not the commune (Meisner 454). Surplus could thus be consumed or sold in private markets for profit.

Initially, these reform measures brought dramatic improvements in production. Agricultural gross output value rose by no less than nine percent per year between 1978 and 1984, with the growth rates of sideline production and animal husbandry reaching 18.6 percent and 9.4 percent respectively (Lee 41). The economic upsurge in the countryside was partly attributable to the incentives provided by the household responsibility system, but also the result of the adjustment of agricultural products prices²(H. Wang 12). The rural reform policy that raised prices protected local communal markets. Unfortunately, however, the state, emboldened by the increase in surplus capital from the countryside, pursued urban reforms to promote the capitalist restructuring of urban industry. With the implementation of urban reforms, grain shortages increased along with wild fluctuations in agricultural prices. From 1985 to 1989, peasant incomes began to fall (H. Wang 18). The post-1984 urban reforms widened the urban-rural divide.

If collectivization dissolved the economic foundations of the rich peasant class, de-collectivization reintroduced class divisions. The decollectivization of agriculture created new class divisions between rich peasants with specialized household designations and impoverished peasants who, unable to maintain their plots, were, and still are, forced to sell the mortgages of their leaseholds, thereby becoming wage laborers. The household responsibility also revealed that nearly half the rural labor force was redundant. By the mid 1980s some 30 to 40 percent of China's rural labor force –between 114 and 152 million peasants – was surplus to the requirements of agricultural production (Lee 42). The commune system whereby labor was compensated for even marginal contributions to output obscured the massive redundancy of rural laborers. Prior to 1979,

² In 1979, the state increased prices for agricultural products.

the Chinese government absorbed rural labor by increasing the labor intensity of crop production, favoring a labor-intensive crop mix. Post 1979, the Chinese state reduced its intervention in labor markets. Some of the surplus labor found alternative opportunities in rural nonagricultural employment, but the majority resorted to rural urban migration to escape rural unemployment and poverty (Lee 42). De-collectivization of agriculture then induced peasants to work as temporary migrant workers in urban centers.

The state's decentralization of the rural economy loosened social controls on mobility whereby laborers could migrate to urban centers to work. The rural-urban influx of labor into China's towns and cities provided the cheap labor necessary for the new manufacturing establishments and infrastructure projects that were the expressions of the state's post-1984 reorganization of urban industry. The new class of temporary migrant laborers is transient residents in China's urban centers. Without the urban household registration card (*hukou*), migrant laborers only enjoy social rights in the impoverished villages from which they fled. Peasants then leave their farms, but not their villages. In other words, peasants are bound to the rural areas from which they migrated where they enjoy the social security that a plot of land provides. The state has thus created a segmented labor market: urbanites work as permanent workers in the state sector or in other high paying primary labor markets, while rural temporary migrants can only get jobs in the secondary labor market in the private sectors that are low paying (So 109). Because of the lack of labor security peasant laborers must periodically migrate back and forth between urban and rural areas in accordance with urban economic declines (H. Wang 29).

The dismantlement of the commune system transformed rural China. The uneven expansion of the market has rendered peasants and land semi-free commodities, undermining both the organization of rural village society as well as the ability of rural society to rehabilitate itself. Under the planned economy, communes and brigades in rural areas were both economic, and social and political institutions. They provided not only job opportunities and salaries (or work points) to their members, but also social welfare services³ to them and their family members. After the government launched its economic reform, however, policy makers abandoned the search for basic welfare and equality, and focused on development, exclusively pursuing economic growth. The primary test for success is no longer the well being of workers in an allegedly workers' state, but productivity. Because rural communities have been deprived of social functions and turned into purely economic institutions, farmers are forced to get by with reduced entitlement to assistance and security. Consequently, the welfare of individuals now depends almost entirely on the cash nexus.

II. Sideng Village, Shaxi Township

Sideng is a peaceful village with a long history. Due to its location – in an interior region at a high altitude -- the village has remained relatively underdeveloped. Slow economic growth, however, has meant that much of the village's cultural heritage has been preserved. Upon entering the village, one is greeted by cobblestone streets, traditional Bai architecture, and historic sites such as the Sideng market. Once a station

³ Social welfare services are defined as daycare, kindergarten, school, medical care, assistance, old-age insurance, burial and funeral services.

on the Tea-Horse Caravan trail, the World Monument Fund has classified Sideng as a world heritage site. Villagers have then been able to use both their history and their Bai ethnicity as leverage in the market economy. Undeniably, Sideng's present prosperity and success has been built on the foundations of tourism.

As Sideng has become increasingly integrated into the market economy, the village has become more vulnerable to crisis. Against the background of Sideng's tranquility and prosperity, the phenomena of unemployment and socioeconomic polarization have become increasingly apparent on a daily basis, and restructuring itself has led directly to farmers' profound sense of discontent. While tourism certainly helps to cushion the uncertainty of a market economy, the village remains economically impoverished. The average yearly income is approximately US \$120 (Feiner , etal. 3). Agriculture remains the primary source of income for the majority of economically active residents. But, as Shaxi Township is located at about 2,3000 meters above sea level – the highest altitude where wet rice can still be cultivated – only one harvest is possible annually. Construction work accounts for two-thirds of the secondary industrial sector; stone and woodcarving, and architectural building craftsmanship are strong traditional businesses. Skilled carpenters, and wood and stone carvers are often contracted for construction projects across the province as well as in many parts of the country. Male rural laborers constantly move between urban centers and the village to help supplement their families' income.

Still, Sideng is economically better off than other Bai villages in the valley. The village across the river, where my host father's family is originally from, is visibly poorer. The village has dirt roads, run-down houses, and mounds of trash. My host's

childhood house is sparsely furnished with dirt floors. The house is overcrowded with over three generations living in one small space. While my sisters rarely helped in the fields, the children from my host's hometown all labor in the fields. Whenever I would visit my host's family, I would pass several school-aged children on their way to labor in the fields. My host said he thought the majority of youth, particularly males, left his village to find work in the cities and thereby improve their lives.

The neighboring Han village, on the other hand, is more economically prosperous than both Sideng and my host's hometown. A Han villager explained that Han farmers monopolize the farming market in the valley, producing all food products that are consumed in the valley. He suggested that villagers could make more money farming cash crops than if they migrated to urban centers. He claimed that his village's land was more fertile and thus more conducive to certain high yield cash crops. Han villagers also have a greater square foot of land per person meaning that families can produce more than in other villages where the distribution of land is not as favorable. When asked if this disparity in access to land reflected an inequality between Bai and Han, he said that the Han villagers' quality and quantity of land was simply a historical fact; thus, disguising a political problem as a historical one rendering the problem insoluble. Six Han workers who were fixing the road in Sideng agreed with their fellow villager's comments. They insisted that they would not leave their village to labor as migrant laborers. But what work opportunities are there in the valley? They all laughed. "Only farming, but we have many agricultural products," one worker said.

III. Attenuation of Social Relationships

The economic reforms transformed cooperative and community social relations. Community social relations once transcended the interests of individual household productive units and their mediation by the market. In Sideng, although economic relations are still subject to kinship relations, the interests of the individual are privileged over all else. Friendships, and even familial relationships, have been commodified; for example, families now have to pay family members and friends to help transplant rice seedlings into rice paddies. The quality of people's lives is dependent upon the market that serves only those who can afford to pay. It is not that they do not want to help my hostess told me, but that persons can no longer afford to labor for free. The value of friendship is overwhelmed by the individual libertarianism that the market economy requires. The market unraveled the moral linkage between individuals and various social groups.

The spread of the market economy gave rise to a new rural social structure that juxtaposes a bourgeois elite of de fact owners of various commercial enterprises to a peasantry engaged in family farming and a growing underclass of wage and migrant laborers. The fast transition to a market society broke the traditional social safety net to create social differentiation. There is a distinct social hierarchy in Sideng organized around material wealth. The guesthouse owners – all outside entrepreneurs – act as an elite while those who have very little land occupy the social space of the marginalized. Even among the peasant 'class', income differentials created class divisions. Some peasants own small businesses while others only had their plots of land to depend on. My

father often said that those who only have 1 *mu* of land⁴ have to migrate from Sideng in order to survive. Another local who would regularly migrate to find work said, “we are peasants, there is no money here...we have to migrate.” As a set of political arrangements, the formation of a market society deepened and legitimized social polarization.

Migration reconfigured the nuclear family. My host spoke of how migration strained family relationships. He himself was once a migrant construction worker, working to save money to marry and build a house. He only worked as a construction worker for three years before returning home.

“It was too hard being so far from my family. Then when I got married and had kids I could not imagine leaving home. When you leave home you have no idea what is happening at home...if there is a problem you do not know. Today it is somewhat easier to leave. Everyone has cell phones so you can just call home, but before you would write letters that would take such a long time to reach home. You suffer away from your family. You miss them.”

Migration loosens family ties thereby changing the family structure. The gendered division of rural labor means that women rarely migrate; men say it is the woman’s responsibility to raise the children and farm the fields.⁵ Instead, like my host, most working-age men will migrate from Sideng to work as construction workers. These migrant workers are temporary; they migrate home between jobs and to help during the harvesting season. My host’s neighbor, who returned home to help with the harvest, said he always missed his family. When I asked him why he left so often he looked at his two daughters – six and twelve – and said, “I have to provide for my kids, send them to school, pay for life’s basic necessities.” His sojourn at home was bittersweet; he was

⁴ One *mu* is approximately the equivalent of a hectare.

⁵ One informant suggested that men’s lives were more difficult than women’s as they were forced to migrate to supplement the family’s income.

anxious about returning to Kunming to find work. I had to wonder whether his absence contributed to the improvement of his daughters' lives or harmed their healthy development. He looked after his daughters' material needs, but neglected their emotional ones.

The family is shaped by capitalist practices that require rural bodies to enter a particular set of production relations where they experience the process of alienation. The family suffers from the absence of the father. One father who had been migrating back and forth for over twenty years said he rarely returns home.

“I go to the city to make money. I cannot go home yet, I still want to make money. My wife is a good wife. She does everything by herself, but she is used to it. She does not like the city. She has her friends at home. She is always busy laboring in the fields. She does not really need me at home. I call every night. If I do not call my daughter will call me and ask me why I didn't call. If there is a problem at home I will go home. Now, my wife is sick...nothing serious, but I will go home and take her to see a doctor.”

His wife often complained about not having enough money for life's basic necessities. I wondered how often he actually sent money home. When I visited him in Kunming, he seemed to have established a separate life for himself. His prolonged absence was inscribed in the family structure – the wife took on both the role of father and mother. The family today is subsumed by the expropriation of global capitalism and the state socialist system, which is continuously in favor of urban and industrial development.

IV. Transformation of Values

The emphasis on accumulating wealth means that villagers pursue their maximum interests in the market at the expense of preserving traditional values. Whereas before

kinship relations were most valued, today families are increasingly divided over issues related to money; for example, families will feud over the deeds to family homes. Increasingly the meaning of prosperity has changed to focus solely on economic profit. Visiting a woodcarving workshop, I was struck by how obsessed the young apprentices were by money. Their conversations centered on discussions of material wealth. They did not know – and most likely were not even interested in – the historical and cultural significance of woodcarving; rather, they were more concerned with the commercial value of their craft. Education was deemed unimportant; all the apprentices had barely finished middle school. Instead, they wanted instant gratification. They wanted to acquire a skill from which they knew they could quickly benefit financially. These youth are caught in the contradiction of modernity– engrossed by fantasies of wealth but trapped by the limitations of their environment.

The network of relationships between migrants, cities, and their place of origin enables a continuous crisscrossing between the traditional local sphere and the new forms of life in the big cities. With relatives working in the cities, the apprentices were very aware of urban fashions. They would flaunt their cell phones; blast loud mainstream Chinese techno; and, wear the latest urban clothes. Their behavior carried the deceptive sheen of modernity. People who move to an environment, which is different from their traditional environment, may lose aspects of their culture in favor of the prevailing culture of the destination area through the process of acculturation or intermarriage (Bilik, et al. 14). With the out-migration of family members to urban areas, the socio-cultural environment of Sideng was altered. My hostess's younger sister embodies this process of acculturation. Migrating to the city after she finished middle school, she

married a fellow migrant worker from Sichuan. As a result, she no longer practices Bai customs and her three-year-old daughter cannot even speak the Bai language.

On the other hand, temporary migrants' ethnic identity was strengthened from their being removed from their community. Construction workers spoke of the beauty of their village. These workers migrate in together and are largely isolated from the urban society of their destination area. Having spent time in cities, they appreciated the pristine environment of their village. When I asked these workers if they ever felt discriminated against in the city, they all responded that they themselves looked down upon city citizens. One migrant elaborated,

“Our lives are better than city peoples. In the city if you are poor you have nothing, but in the country you have land. In the city, the air and water are polluted. There are too many people. There are factories. In the countryside, our water is drinkable, our air clean. We have land, nice houses. Our food is better too. The city is really horrible.”

His response reflected an appreciation of his local environment, one that is not as of yet completely degraded by economic development. Still, many hope that Sideng will develop local industry so they no longer to migrate to find work opportunities. Villagers believe that the development of modern productive forces will bring them progress and thus happiness.. Progress is now associated with Deng Xiaoping's slogan, “to get rich is glorious.”

Personal desire is upheld by opportune theories of individualism, spurning traditional society. One migrant told me that as a migrant he could make 300 RMB per day. When I asked my host if this was true, he became outraged.

“You can barely make 100 RMB selling pork let alone building a house in the city. The most you might make in one day is 80 RMB, but then again you have to buy your own food, cigarettes, and alcohol. If you could make 300 RMB a day there would be no one left in the village. I

would have left long ago if I could make 300 RMB a day building houses.”

My hostess added, “Just look at their house. If he made that much money, their house would be a palace.” Her comment speaks to the callousness of this materialistic time. That my host thought everyone would leave if they could make 300 RMB a day as a construction worker shows how capital accumulation dictates people’s lives. No matter how abysmal life is as a migrant worker, persons continue to migrate to increase their purchasing power. Sitting in the living room of a migrant worker who eventually was able to start his own construction company, I realized how strong the desire to accumulate wealth is. The room was furnished with a large flat screen television and several velvet couches. He had succeeded in realizing every villager’s dream. He had secured enough wealth to ensure his family lived a ‘lavish’ lifestyle.

Rural society, and its values, is reorganized to facilitate capital accumulation. The owner of the construction company repeated that he needed to make money.

“There is no money at home. I will not stop migrating until I stop wanting to make money. Today, you have money you can do anything, you can go anywhere. With money life is comfortable, there are no problems. Now you just need money, right? Money is power.”

I asked him if he thought the economic reforms of the 1980s helped to improve villagers’ lives. He responded,

“After reforms life got better, farmers had more freedom to grow what they wanted. They had the freedom to leave and work in the cities to make more money.”

He thus defined ‘freedom’ as the ability to accumulate economic wealth, the ability to consume. Though he admitted that rural society lacked a social safety net, for him the possibility of accumulating enormous amounts of wealth is more important.

But, such is the discursive hegemony of neoliberalism in China. As an ideology that underpins the logic of class formation it requires the construction of a market-based populist culture that promotes differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism; it requires the construction of popular consent. The ideology's penetration into 'common sense' understandings makes it increasingly difficult to undermine its discursive hegemony.

V. The Emergence of a New Kind of Existential Uncertainty

When market forces turned society into a market society, people who had previously depended on the collective and family were forced to start living on their own income. Though great social wealth was created⁶, the market is full of risks; everyone is vulnerable to misfortune. It is then difficult for individuals – especially those who live in a substrate of society – to take care of themselves. My host would always say,

“Life is uncertain...nothing is certain anymore. Farming is uncertain, just like migrating to work, just like doing business is uncertain. Nothing is certain anymore.”

As we labored in the fields my father stressed that as a farmer you cannot afford to be sick. “Who will take care of your fields? Who will help you?” he asked. After the new household farming system increased agricultural production, the state largely divested itself of rural public works and social welfare: collectively owned irrigation, public

⁶ With the implementation of economic reforms, Chinese people who had suffered from a shortage of material goods quickly experienced a period of surplus.

medical care, and schooling fell into disrepair, and often the local government took on a predatory relationship to the rural population.⁷

As a family of subsistence farmers, my hosts' livelihoods were dependent upon a successful crop yield. One day we went to check the rice seedlings that were soon to be transplanted in the rice paddies. The rice seedlings were completely dried out. Both of my hosts were devastated, aware of how much the family's finances would suffer with a failed crop. To salvage what they could of the crop, they stayed throughout the night, soaking the rice seedlings in water. My host also lamented over the poor quality of this year's barley yield. "These stalks are too short," he said as we were harvesting the barley. "But it does not matter...we will feed this stuff to the pigs," he added, shaking his head. My hostess explained how this year the excess supply of barley meant that the demand for barley had decreased. The market, it seems, has grown too strong for individual households to operate within it. Many farming families no longer make a profit from farming. Some families do not even earn enough selling agricultural products to support themselves. China's small family farms have no chance of operating efficiently within the national and international market system, but rural households rely on those markets for agricultural inputs and sales. Exploitation is then understood as the result of unfair competition between weak peasant producers and big capital. As such, the farmer's life is fraught with uncertainty so he migrates to try to remedy that uncertainty.

⁷ Even after the period of heavy 'primitive accumulation', the rural government often used high taxation and fees as a form of rent seeking. This predatory relationship, most extreme during the 1990s, is clearly described in Li Changping's 'The Crisis in the Countryside', in *One China, Many Paths*, ed. Chaohua Wang (London: Verso, 2003). 198-218.

With few opportunities to supplement their farming income in the village, many male rural laborers migrate to cities. Out of twenty-three persons I surveyed, sixteen had, at some point in their lives, migrated from Sideng to make money in the urban centers. Migrant workers, however, make very little considering the work they do; for example, construction workers only make 80 RMB a day and are expected to buy their own food, cigarettes, and alcohol. Their employers, however, provide housing. Such housing is often substandard with no running water and electricity – ten to fifteen people will share a room. As these temporary settlements are located next to the construction site, management is able to enforce a just-in-time labor system where the dormitory is an extension of the work site. The spatial proximity of workers' dormitories to the construction site means that management can call on workers to work longer hours, and continue to discipline workers even when they are not at the construction site. Worker accommodation does not function to create a long-term protracted relationship between the production machine and the individual worker. The utilization of dormitory labor in Chinese urban areas allows enterprises to maximize working time and extract labor power without worrying about the reproduction of labor in the long run. Worker accommodation then creates a hybrid, transient workforce that circulates between worksites and the countryside.

The emergence of a legal system has, according to migrant workers I interviewed, lessened the uncertainties that plague migrant life. "Today," my host said,

"the boss has to give you money. If he delays you can report him to the government and he will be fined. Before, bosses would not pay you, making up excuses about why they were delaying. You did not know if you could even get your money. Now, no problem. The government document ensures you your wages."

When I asked another migrant worker, if management sometimes undercut workers' wages he responded that such a situation is not possible. If management were to try and undermine workers, workers would mobilize around the law and demand state intervention. A boss elaborated, "We would never try to steal our workers' wages...If we did we would face exorbitant fines." There is, however, a tension between accumulation and legitimization; the imperative to rely on local accumulation to fuel 'marketization' clashes with the imperative to maintain legitimacy by providing justice to the most disadvantaged. Furthermore, the state's legalistic language that upholds the legality of the transformation of China's national economy proletarianizes workers who no longer own the means of production. Legal language dissolves forms of collective ownership that previously ensured villagers a degree of social security. The legalistic language of the state forces migrant workers to act as individual citizens as opposed to the collective class of peasants they once were.

VI. De-Commercialization

To reduce social disparity, the Chinese government is making a concerted effort to re-embed the economy within social relations through 'de-commercialization.' Under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, the state refocused its attention on rural issues after decades of neglect. The state began by looking for ways to increase rural incomes; for example, in 2006, agricultural taxes were abolished and comprehensive rural subsidies introduced. By late 2005, the state called for a major new program to 'build a socialist new countryside' (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun*). Under the

formulation ‘building a socialist new countryside’, the party proposed that ‘industry help agriculture’ (*gongye fanbu nongye*).⁸ The state is now investing heavily in rural education and infrastructure development; for example, compulsory primary and middle school education in rural areas is free.

This major policy initiative should be seen as a response to a complex series of factors. On the one hand, the state is responding to rural unrest that can potentially damage the legitimacy of the Communist Party’s power. On the other hand, the new party leadership is moving away from the economic policies of the previous regime that relied so heavily on the export economy and infrastructure investment. Rural development is vital for building internal consumer demand, which cannot be sustained by the urban middle class alone.

The local government in Sideng, however, is withdrawing itself from the public sector instead of re-investing in it. Talking with a government official in Sideng I did not get the impression that the local government was trying to de-commodify rural society. The emphasis throughout the conversation was on individual responsibility. As the official said, “People have to do things themselves.” The local state authority will sometimes help the very poor, but who qualify as ‘very poor’ remains unclear. Instead of giving villagers’ “handouts”, the local government is helping individuals navigate the market. To improve agricultural industry, the government is pushing individual farmers to grow cash crops like tobacco. The local official said, “If they grow cash crops, their lives will improve considerably...they will make more money.” The government dictates who can and cannot grow cash crops, and how much of the person’s land can be devoted

⁸ Fanbu implies that agriculture has nourished industry so that now industry must nourish agriculture.

to the growth of cash crops. But, who is selected for the lucrative cash crop business is unclear; is it those persons who have a good relationship with the local government? If so, is this policy exacerbating inequalities instead of ameliorating them?

The local government does very little in Sideng to promote diverse local employment opportunities. The local government is trying to develop tourism, the official said, but then added that even tourism will not be a huge employment opportunity. The local official said,

“Improving the peasants’ lives is a slow process. We don’t give individual families money per say, but we have been spending money on infrastructure like roads, bridges and schools that indirectly benefits them. But all of this investment of course does not mean a decrease in migration. We are focusing on developing agricultural industry with the introduction of cash crops that will bring individual families more money and thus improve their lives and the village infrastructure.”

For the local official, the out-migration of a large percentage of the local population is not a negative development. Migrants’ remittances fuel local economic development. The local government will sometimes even help persons migrate to coastal areas. Such endeavors further commercialize the rural economy and render peasants commodities. The village then is becoming even more dependent upon the market for its survival. Policies place the global commodity market in the position of allocating goods and services, expanding the influence of the market ethos that contributes to social inequality. Auspices of the ‘free market’ sentence people to poverty by virtue of instituting policies that are oriented toward helping the free flow of capital.

VII. Conclusion

“The peasants’ lot is really bitter, the countryside is really poor, and agriculture is in crisis,” said Li Changping, a rural cadre from central China’s Hubei Province, in an open letter to Premier Zhu Rongji in early 2000. Li’s burning indignation at the plight of the peasantry was inspired by his dislike of market distortions. Li’s statement highlights that the rural crisis is not simply a problem of rural economics and agricultural production, but also a social crisis that calls for the reconstruction of social life. The marketization of the rural economy saw spectacular economic growth and intense social disruption. During the late Mao period, the communes provided minimal security for most of the rural population. In its commodification of rural labor, the de-collectivization of agriculture undermined the commune system’s measures for labor security.

Several Chinese anthropologists have argued that we are presently witnessing the end of the peasantry in China. While village society is becoming more town-like, the income gap between rural and urban China has grown dramatically since the mid-1990s. Alternatively, even if we view the peasantry as a disappearing social class, we need to ask what they are becoming. Perhaps in many cases they are shifting from one form of excluded population – the peasantry – to another – an urban underemployed underclass or a surplus population of slum dwellers. Can global capitalism, in its neoliberal mode, benefit rural society or will slums – urban and rural – simply continue to grow as warehouses of the excluded? As female novelist Wang Anyi writes, “We are rushing towards bourgeois society with all the enthusiasm of a proletarian revolution.”

VIII. Personal Reflections on the ISP Project

As the ruling party proceeded to rebuild its power, there was a basic change in the way it addressed society. In the late seventies and eighties, the regime's legitimacy continued to be fueled by ideology, but this ideology was no longer the Maoist ideology of previous years, but, rather, an ideology that promised a reformed socialism with Chinese characteristics. After 1989, discourse experienced continuous metamorphoses with an ever-growing emphasis on Chinese characteristics, while its socialist contents became more and more nominal. The party's legitimacy was henceforward fueled by the government's ability satisfy the material demands of enough key groups to give it a basis of passive content in the population. To achieve this goal, the party turned to the market.

During my Independent Study, I attempted to think through the pitfalls of the state's adoption of the neoliberal doctrine, particularly the doctrine's adverse effects on an ethnically Bai rural community. Disillusioned by the uneven expansion of the market, my ISP was a period of frustration, reorientation and active intervention. I grew very attached to my host family who adopted me as one of their own. I soon began to internalize their financial concerns as though they were my own. I remember one day at the market, my hosts were unable to sell any meat. As I stood in the middle of the road with them, begging people to buy the pork, I felt their growing fears over not being able to sell the meat and nostalgia at the loss of social safety net.

My experiences in Sideng confirmed for me the political constitution of poverty. The organization of society to facilitate the flow of capital, as manifested through neoliberal policies, dismantles the government's financial and institutional capacities to

engage in full scale public provisioning and as such deprives persons of services crucial to their survival. Human subsistence related services should be treated as basic human rights rather than commercial commodities. I realized the importance of questioning modernity, and to search for different methods of economic development that are not dependent upon social polarization and inequality. I want my ISP to provoke intellectual engagement in eliminating utopian marketization.

My experience also illuminated for me the violence inherent in political structures involved in withholding and depriving persons of their survival. In a situation of severe inequality, the failure to rectify that inequality by the state is violent, especially when society has the ability and technology to do so.

IX. Future ISP Topics

- Migration and ethnicity
- The processes that lead to the emergence of urban slums in Kunming
- Contemporary efforts to eradicate the *Sannongwenti*

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