

China's Subaltern and the Possibilities for Social Change

Jack Linchuan Qiu, **Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009, 320 pp., \$28.00 (hardcover).

Wanning Sun, **Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries**, New York: Routledge, 2009, 224 pp., \$137.00 (hardcover).

Hairong Yan, **New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, 328 pp., \$42.47 (hardcover), \$13.66 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Cara Wallis

Texas A & M University

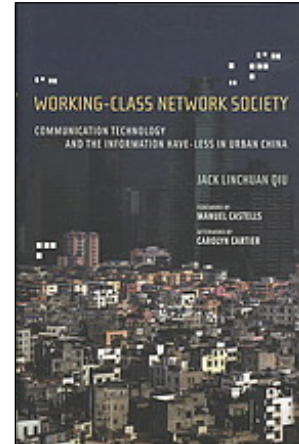
It has been just over one year since China dazzled the world with its coming-out party known as the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics. Obviously much more than a sports competition, the event showcased not only China's athletic prowess (the Chinese garnered 51 gold medals, the most of all competing nations) but also its accomplishments in arts, architecture, high-tech and efficient transport, and disciplinary power (e.g., the politeness and cheerfulness of even the city's customs agents and bus ticket takers). If indeed the Olympics were staged more for a domestic than a global audience, as Susan Brownell (2008) has argued, this aim was lost on the international media, which overwhelmingly hailed Beijing 2008 as a triumphant success, despite the government reneging on certain human rights promises, and one that has raised the bar indefinitely for future Olympic hosts. But beneath the glitz and glamour of the Games, and yet crucial to its ultimate success, is another side of the "China miracle." This is the story of the nation's rural-to-urban migrants, numbering roughly 150 million by official estimates and closer to 200 million by unofficial ones, who work tirelessly under often exploitative and/or dangerous conditions and have literally shed sweat and blood to make China the "modern" nation it is today. It is also the story of laid-off state workers, who have seen both their social status and economic livelihood plunge as China has embraced market reforms — "socialism with Chinese characteristics" — that have rendered these workers a redundant relic of the Mao-era planned economy, the dismantling of which provides the basis for the current government's legitimacy.

The three books under review here offer varying perspectives through which one may understand this less flattering side of China's 30 years of reform in which this globalizing nation has been dramatically transformed by rapid urbanization, industrialization, privatization, and marketization. Each takes China's underclass as its focal point — although the word "class" has been expunged from official party discourse — with the most attention devoted to rural-to-urban migrants, who, due to China's rigid *hukou*, or household registration system, face exploitation, discrimination, and limited life opportunities in urban areas. The three authors employ in-depth fieldwork, and though certain themes run across their work,

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each has a different theoretical grounding, purpose, and critique. All three aim for critical scholarship as a basis for a progressive politics that will ultimately empower China's subaltern.

In *Working-Class Network Society*, Jack Qiu seeks to expand Manuel Castells' (2000) formulation of the "network society" in which changing notions of time, work, and social organization are constitutive of a world that is becoming increasingly characterized by the thorough integration of new communication technologies into people's everyday lives. Whereas much scholarship has focused on the relative elite of this network society, Qiu has, for a number of years, studied new communication technology usage by China's "information have-less," a term he uses to get beyond the limiting binary of the digital divide. Indeed, China offers fertile ground for such analysis: It has the largest number of Internet users and mobile phone subscriptions on the planet, yet as Castells notes in the forward to Qiu's rigorously researched and informative book, "The irony of history has located the largest exploited working class of the global information age in the last communist state inherited from the industrial era" (p. x). Starting with this reality, Qiu maps the cultural, political, economic, and institutional factors that have given rise simultaneously to social differentiation and informational stratification in contemporary China. In his introduction, Qiu points out that studies of the Internet and mobile phones have paid attention to race, gender, age, and ethnicity, but he makes clear that his intervention is to focus on class. Key to the emergence of urban China's working-class network society, Qiu argues, is the information have-less — rural-to-urban migrants, laid-off state workers, retirees, and certain youth populations — who use, manufacture, and/or provide "working-class ICTs," such as second-hand mobile phones and computers, bootleg DVDs, Internet cafés, SMS, prepaid phone cards, and Little Smart, a less expensive mobile phone that can be used only within a limited geographical area. The basis for this working-class network society is what Qiu calls "network labor," which originates from China's simultaneous industrialization and policy of "informatization." Network labor includes "programmable labor" (simplified skilled tasks in the new information industry), a layer Qiu proposes to add between Castells' notion of self-programmable (better paid, skilled) and generic (unskilled, "disposable") labor.



After laying out this analytical framework, the rest of *Working-Class Network Society* is divided into three sections that individually examine "have-less" technologies, people, and the making of this new working class. In Chapter 2, Qiu shows how, despite repressive government policies and negative media coverage, Internet cafés (*wangba*) have continued to proliferate (though not necessarily prosper) as crucial sites of access for have-less individuals. Once places of "enlightenment" for coffee-drinking college students, they have transformed into entertainment zones that require regular technical upgrades which just happen to benefit local and multi-national IT companies. Chapter 3 covers mobile phones and offers a detailed account of the diffusion of mobile phones in China, the proliferation of SMS and other value-added content, and the growth and worldwide influence of China's domestic mobile handset industry. Both chapters examine shifting discourses, policies, and business models that illustrate the contingencies of ICT diffusion and how a range of solutions has emerged to meet the informational needs of China's have-less. In Chapter 3, Qiu offers a rich account of migrant workers, who not only use the working-class ICTs just

examined, but also form the core of the low-end ICT workforce as so-called “gray-collar” workers who engage in manual and informational tasks. His examination of the cultural expression of a small number of migrants, such as blogger Han Ying and musician Sun Heng, is also engaging, revealing the diversity of migrant workers and their deployment of working-class ICTs. Though interesting and well intentioned, Chapter 4, focusing on the “young and old,” felt slightly out of place since the class-based analysis of the rest of the book was obscured. In the final section, Qiu shows how local and translocal institutions and structures, place-based narratives, and mediated discourses emerge and intersect in the formation of China’s working-class network society. He offers a fascinating glimpse of the heterogeneous migrant village of Shipai in Guangdong, where “cement monsters” are built so close to one another that locals call them “handshake buildings,” and where informal and formal ICT businesses exist in the shadows of huge skyscrapers that abut the village and house IT companies that employ its have-less residents. This account of a marginalized yet thriving community is tempered in the next chapter that examines how inequality and discrimination led to three “fatal cases” — the Lanjisu Internet café fire, the beating death of migrant college graduate Sun Zhigang, and the murder spree of Ma Jiejue — that, while tragic, also ultimately resulted in the use of working-class ICTs to bridge social divisions in China. In generating a cultural momentum as “new media events,” these tragedies mobilized grassroots cultural expression that existed apart from mainstream mediated discourse.

Qiu’s sweeping scope encompasses telecom industry and policy, media accounts, a diverse array of ICT users (including female travel booking agents and the predominantly male “gold farmers”), and user-generated content. He shows how working-class ICTs emerge as key to facilitating migration, employment, and social support in China and calls attention to the multiple factors that must be examined for any true understanding of the relationship between communication technology and social change. Though the intended audience for Qiu’s passionate policy discussions that conclude certain chapters wasn’t always clear and his juxtaposition of “elite” and “working-class” discourses and practices largely left out any acknowledgement of China’s emerging middle class, the book as a whole is an insightful and significant contribution. For those interested in new communication technology use in China and in the developing world more generally, *Working-Class Network Society* is a must-read.

While Qiu is concerned with a broad array of the “have-less” in China’s urban areas, both Sun and Yan focus primarily on women from Anhui who have migrated to Beijing to become *baomu*, or domestic workers, in the homes of middle-class urban residents. (Both also give some attention to *baomu* who are laid-off state workers.) Given that their research topic is the same, and indeed they include some of the same media examples, one might question whether it is necessary to read both books. However, the two authors’ focus and approach are so different that both works end up complementing, rather than competing with, one another.

In *Maid in China*, Sun offers a cultural study of media production and consumption in urban China that reveals the mutually constitutive nature of mediated discourses and social identities, in particular those of the *baomu* and her urban employer. Sun’s premise is that, just as the household registration system, though severely eroded, nonetheless produces different modes of citizenship in the city, “discursive resources,” including news reports, television dramas, and comics similarly work to preserve the rigid divisions between people and places (i.e., urban and rural) that were formerly maintained

through the *hukou* policy. As such, Sun's study of domestic workers is also an examination of China's emerging urban middle class, though it is the *baomu* that garner the bulk of Sun's attention and empathy in this perceptive and engaging book. As Sun argues in the introduction, *baomu* (a term coded with negative gender, class, and place connotations, hence Sun's translation of the term as "maid") are characterized by their "ubiquitous invisibility," their transience, and their position in middle-class family residences as "intimate strangers." Welcomed into urban homes for their labor, and privy to their employers' dirty laundry, literally and figuratively, maids nonetheless are denied the emotional and familial intimacy that such a location normally entails. Moreover, despite the state's promotion of "social harmony and civility" in such relationships, in reality they are imbued with discourses pertaining to privacy, security, morality, and quality (*suzhi*) that ultimately reinforce, rather than break down, material and symbolic boundaries. Through employing fieldwork among domestic workers and urban residents in private homes, public areas, and job placement centers, as well as textual analysis of various media, Sun explores such boundaries and their ultimate role in myth making (*à la* Roland Barthes) and constituting subjectivity.

In the first part of *Maid in China*, Sun examines cultural production, focusing on television shows and news reports, where *baomu* are featured, yet the intended audience is, for the most part, urban. In what she labels "theater of *suzhi*," Sun reveals how the *suzhi*, or "quality," discourse so prevalent in news accounts, policy documents, and entertainment media as well. Though decades is absent, in its place are discourses featuring the "good perseveres, knows her place, and, develop herself. Similarly, meant to "manufacture love" toward simultaneously invokes and solidifies rescue. As Sun astutely argues, when treatment of migrant workers as emphasis on personal morality rather revealing the media's propensity for invisible an inequitable system, change, and subverting true

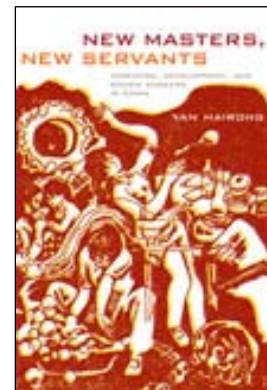


research studies, has seeped into the heavy-handed ideology of past moral guidelines and civilizing woman" *baomu* role model who under a regulative gaze, strives to "compassionate journalism," which is China's marginalized groups, the rural Other as victim in need of such reports present the terrible shameful anomalies, they put the than structural inequalities, thereby myth making; that is, for rendering muting calls for real legislative empowerment of migrants and rural workers. In the second part, Sun focuses on consumption and perhaps, not surprisingly, finds that rather than being a democratizing force (as some had predicted), China's consumer culture has ushered in a new discourse of consumer rights and needs that benefits the relative elite. Insofar as maids are constructed as a commodity that an urban resident purchases, when problems arise, especially involving sexual harassment by male employers, unequal gendered power relations are subsumed. Instead, the maid's lack of "quality" (or a more general discussion of abuse) becomes the focus in media reports. On the other hand, the unruly, promiscuous maid is a common sensational media trope. Either way, the media refuse to offer a discursive basis for migrant rights. In contrast to such limited media discourse, Sun's exploration of maids as consumers reveals a diversity of motives and experiences. Even though most are well aware of their construction as "undesirable" consumers, given their low income, they nonetheless devise tactics "to circumvent the logic of consumption" that privileges the wealthy. Though Sun's

insistence that consumption should be seen as not just buying but what people do with the things they buy may seem rather obvious, her attention to “dominant” and “latent” geographies of consumption is insightful. In the final section of *Maid in China*, Sun examines the “everyday politics” of *baomu* in the city and lays out a “continuum of transgression” that denotes the *baomu* as speaking subject, on the one side, and as “object of representation” on the other. In the last chapter, taking a cue from Michel De Certeau, Sun examines the “art of making do,” with brief discussions of migrants’ use of newspapers, television shows, mobile phones, and the Internet to educate themselves, relieve drudgery, and create new, if ultimately unsatisfying, identities. Engaging with such media, argues Sun, is, in the end, an attempt by migrants to “speak/act themselves into existence” (p. 171).

In *Maid in China*, Sun weaves personal narratives, media analysis, and cultural theory into a highly readable book. Her refusal to cast *baomu* as either victims or liberated subjects of “modernity” is refreshing, and her attention to urban residents complements her insights into the daily struggles of the maids in her study. Though some might find her examples of the political agency of migrants (such as the “guerilla shopper”) a bit of a stretch, her book offers an overall well-argued account of the powerful role of the media as a “technology of subjectivity” and of the contested terrain within which urban subjectivity of *baomu* and their employers is constituted.

In *New Masters, New Servants*, Yan also examines migrant women from Anhui who have become domestic workers (a term she prefers to *baomu*), and the discursive power that produces their subjectivity in the city. Like Sun, she uses fieldwork in various sites — a municipal family service company in Tianjin, the Migrant Women’s Club in Beijing, a returned migrant’s home — as a basis for her arguments. However, whereas Sun’s emphasis is on media production and consumption, Yan takes a cue from Raymond Williams and frames her study as an examination of specific “regulative keywords” (including modernity, human capital, development, and, most importantly, *suzhi*), as these are present in government policy documents, academic studies, news and entertainment media, literature, and popular discourse. Using these keywords to critique the employer-domestic worker relationship as that of master-servant, Yan aims to present a powerful allegory for the dramatic changes that China has undergone in the last three decades. She applies heavy doses of critical theory (Marxist, postcolonial, subaltern, psychoanalytic), not surprising given her previous journal articles, which appear here in revised form. Although her fluency with such theories is formidable, the text is, at times, extremely dense, potentially obscuring the political aims of her project.



After laying out her framework in the introduction, Yan sets the context of her study by examining how development policies and corresponding ideological shifts in postsocialist China have resulted in a denigration of the rural and an elevation of the city as the source of modernity, civilization, and personhood itself, especially for rural young adults. She then traces the shifting discourse surrounding domestic work and shows how, as rural women have become a prime source for such labor, their supposed “low *suzhi*” and lack of a “modern subjectivity” mean they are expected to submit to the “civilizing” hand of their employers. In Chapter 3, Yan presents an in-depth discussion of *suzhi*, or quality,

a word that, while eluding firm definition, has nonetheless become a means of mobilizing subjectivity to meet the needs of Development, which Yan defines as the “discourse of developmentalism promoted by organizations of North-dominated international capital” (p. 115). As Yan persuasively argues throughout her book, the discourse of *suzhi* compels individuals to improve themselves (to raise their human value) ultimately for the sake of China’s capitalist productivity. For migrants, then, labor mobility becomes *suzhi* mobility, as the city is framed as a “classroom” and migration brings not only monetary benefits but also access to a modern subjectivity and a “social education.” In such a milieu, even the theories of Marx and Mao have been retooled, “making them ‘speak’ the language of *suzhi*” (p. 119), and culture and consciousness are being reterritorialized to serve the market. Chapter 4 examines how domestic workers are at once commodified labor in urban households as well as consumer subjects who are “incited” to find a modern self through consumption rather than labor. Despite their constrained circumstances, when they return home, they are, in both body and spirit, a walking advertisement for migration. Unlike Sun, who finds agency in migrant women’s consumption practices, Yan seems to see their engagement in consumption as one more ruse of capitalism, with the city “a mirage of modernity” that, in fact, masks the deplorable and degrading labor conditions of most migrant workers. Moreover, through their outward appearance and their personal narratives that focus on the positive aspects of their migration experience, migrants perpetuate these contradictions. Chapter 5 repeats some of the terrain covered in earlier keyword discussions, yet adds insights into how these keywords are intricately connected to new discursive constructions of social mobility, work, and social strata (*jieceng*) as a replacement for the Maoist notion of class (*jiejì*). This analysis leads Yan to critique certain scholars’ celebration of the “everyday resistance” of the subaltern. And whereas Qiu sees in the making of a new working class the potential for transformation, Yan argues that “the discourse of self-development through an acquisition of *suzhi* has a profoundly negative implication for class consciousness and collective social agency” (p. 188). In the final chapter, migrants are shown as liminal subjects, belonging neither to their rural homes nor to the city. Nonetheless, through a subaltern politics of “presence” rather than voice, as they remain in the city, expending time, energy, and labor, their persistence may eventually result in a collective identity that can demand social change. With the bulk of *New Masters, New Servants* offering such a dark vision of the workings of the state and capital, one only wishes Yan had arrived at this possibility somewhat earlier in the book.

Yan’s work is rich in ethnographic description, lucid discussions of theoretical concepts, and detailed analyses of a range of texts, and her portrayal of the hardship and heartbreak that migrant women experience is compassionate and moving. She persuasively argues that any discussion of neoliberalism as economic structural adjustment in China must be accompanied by an examination of how people’s sense of themselves has similarly been reorganized. However, while “intermezzo” vignettes in between chapters offer interesting and sometimes comic relief, Yan’s theoretical discussions periodically border on the impenetrable. Furthermore, whereas Yan is correct in asserting that, in the city, “dagongmei [female migrant workers] as a collective subject position” are over-determined (p. 231) in terms of jobs, status, and mobility, she sometimes appears to overdetermine her subjects as well. This leaves the reader with the impression that migrant women who would rather talk about consumption than production, and indeed whose consumption is enabled by their participation in exploitative labor, have false consciousness, a conclusion only reached through the vulgar Marxism from which Yan obviously wants to distance herself.

Though the Chinese government has taken pains to shift the discourse from “class” to “social strata,” to erase its Maoist past and to mask the exploitation of workers that marketization has brought about, these three books show that class must be a component of any analysis that seeks to deepen our understanding of the changes taking place in contemporary Chinese society. In different ways, all three books offer timely and important contributions that ultimately are concerned with social transformation in China and the role that China’s marginalized groups, in particular rural-to-urban migrants, will play in such transformation, whether through the use of mobile phones, the poaching of traditional media, or exerting an extended and unwavering presence in the city.

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