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STREETLIFE SUBALTERNS

AN ALL-CONSUMING CHINA

Picture yourself in Beijing, in a city market, in a place called Qianmen. Picture yourself in one of the tiny little alleyways called *hutong*s, with their even tinier shops, stalls and benches, all of which nestle together at the back of Tiananmen Square and collectively make up the mercantile heart of this area. This is where the grandiose, expansive architecture of the Square, the Great Hall of the People, the Revolutionary Museum and the wide tree-lined boulevards of the Avenue of Eternal Peace (*chang'an jie*) seems to fall into a sea of cacophonous, chaotic people, alleyways and stalls which, before liberation, would have constituted the lifeblood of traditional city street life virtually anywhere in China.

Qianmen is, however, street life with a difference. Gone are the traditional traders of old—the shoe repairers, the ironmongers, the tin men—all of whom would have floated down these tiny backstreets in search of household consumers in need of their trade. These days, the flow of traffic in Qianmen is heading the other way. Consumers in their tens of thousands gravitate to Qianmen and its surrounds, and it is they who constitute the traffic in the busy and over-crowded streets. The traders no longer float by, but are now installed in an ever-changing but semi-permanent array of stalls which are tucked into virtually every nook and cranny. At the back of Tiananmen Square and, quite literally, behind the back of the late Chairman Mao, primitive capitalism is practised in all its exciting, chaotic, desperate, and exasperating glory.

As huge crowds push their way through what are apparently the backstreets of Beijing, the contrast with 'the front streets'—the regime's showpiece, Tiananmen Square—could not be put into sharper relief. Tiananmen, the 'people's square', the symbolic heart of Chinese Communist power, with its Haussmann-like expanses and clear open lines of vision, seems somewhat jaded and dead next to the bustle of Qianmen. This Square, which was once occupied by millions of Red Guards and, more recently, by tens of thousands of protesting students, appears more like an extension and 'socialist update' of the Palace Museum (which borders it immediately to the north) than it does a site of Communist power. With Mao at its centre, it has become, almost literally, the burial ground of socialism.

Despite this, it is Qianmen and not the Square that is currently under threat. While the bustle of these backstreets is not at all threatened by any extension of Tiananmen Square socialism, the bulldozer's blade, nevertheless, carves its way through these little streets, 'reorganising' them so that they become part of a more orderly way of life. Far more ornate and enduring structures are quickly

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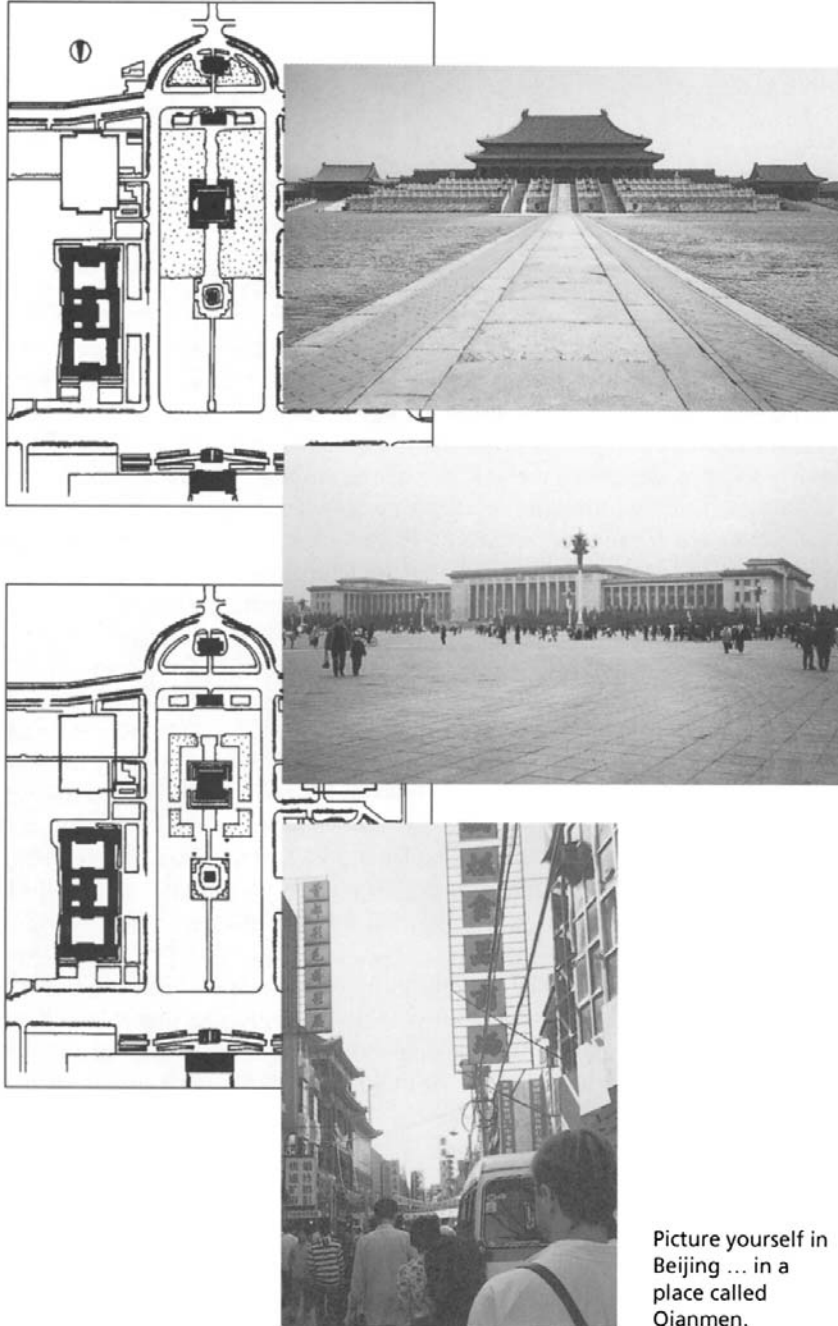

Picture yourself in Beijing ... in a place called Qianmen.

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replacing the chaos of the little stalls and backstreet shops. The 'socialist shops' of old, the so-called 'one-hundred things department stores' (*baihuo dalou*) are under threat. Their factory-style layout—neon-strip lighting, assembly-line forms of shelf display—and abrasive staff attitudes are being replaced by a new consumer-friendly architecture and attitude.

The new structures and forms that are replacing the old are not, however, 'socialist' in nature but are more permanent and elaborate monuments to the consumerism practised 'daily, hourly and by the minute' (Lenin) on the backstreets of Qianmen. The stalls and old-style mercantile shops, like the socialist arcades of old, are being demolished to make way for the department stores and shopping centres of a new and 'more advanced form' of consumerism.

The haste with which this change is effected is at once a recognition of the speed and power of commercial development in China, and a tell-tale sign of the unease felt both by the Communist Party and the *nouveau riche* about this particular form of small-scale and pre-reform 'socialist' trading. It is as though 'the successful' entrepreneurs wish to obliterate their more squalid or state-sponsored counterparts and, in so doing, cover up their own backstreet 'origins' such as might be found in places like Qianmen. For the wealthy merchants, it is as though these forms of trading, which constitute so much of their own 'history', are best forgotten. In China, where such 'histories' literally 'set up shop' on the walls of the 'present', the tainted and vulgar 'pasts' of the great entrepreneurs are on show for all to see. The story that this past tells is one of compromise, ambivalence and of 'making do'. It is one the current crop of rich merchants would rather forget or, at least, have the power to retell in their own way.

Why this urge to be remembered differently? Part of the reason may well be that theirs is not the story of legendary and gloriously independent capitalist traders seeking economic freedom and individuality in the face of a totalitarian and unbending government. The story is not one of a 'class' that will one day end up translating its economic freedom into political democracy. Instead, it is the story of capital accumulation based upon, sponsored by, and growing out of the 'womb of socialism': the work unit system (see Part I, 2; Part IV, 3). It is the story of the emergence of class in China: not just the new mercantile class that has grown rich with reform, but also of the subaltern classes that have not.[1] It is a story made possible only by the positivist dreams that consumption promises—and all too often betrays—and a governmental policing strategy that enforces the limits of all such dreaming. Such dreams are given concrete form in the display windows of the

1 The term 'subaltern' is drawn from the work of a group of mainly Indian scholars known as the Subaltern Studies Group, who attempted to re-insert and broaden the voice of 'the people' into colonial narrative history. They employed the term 'subaltern' to capture the heterogeneity of the 'people's voice', and the vast and changing array of positions that came into being as effects of power relations (see Prakash 1990). While the attempt to enable the subaltern to speak is not without its problems it has, nevertheless, produced 'knowledge effects' that have complicated the unity of the historical narrative by producing and inserting 'murmurs' of other ways of writing and other historical objects. In the context of Chinese history writing official Party class discourse colonises the space available for a subaltern history. The 'effect' of the re-insertion of the term subaltern, which includes its propensity to heterology, leads to a non-linear historical account which, in turn, offers a dynamic rendition of classes that draw breath from the mercurial nature of China as it undergoes economic reform.

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new shopping arcades: look, but don't touch, unless you pay. This is the new slogan of the shopping wonderworlds of China. Yet the display windows of this wonderworld are more than a physical manifestation of consumer dreams; they also constitute the 'technology' through which a veritable pedagogy of 'training in desiring' comes into effect. The old dreams of socialism, of a modern revolutionary China, pale before the windows of promise that the modern reifying form of consumption promotes. It is here, in these shop-window displays, that one begins to recognise the power of consumption. One realises how this power, beyond commitment to any single cause, beyond any simple-minded notion of 'ideology', is so voracious, so all-encompassing and so powerful. By evoking in the consumer the desire to consume, the consumers are themselves consumed.

The 'all-consuming' nature of this mode underlines the point I want to make here, that is, China's economic reform programme cannot be understood simply in conventional terms. The depth of change cannot be appreciated by the simple statement of economic facts. One cannot see the power of economic reform if one simply highlights the State's decision to shift from the production of capital to consumer goods. One cannot see the way it harnesses and remodels desire by noting the adoption of the economic contract system or in the responsibility system in agriculture. These 'techniques' to raise production become thinkable only when desire is silently factored into the calculations. Yet desire is not 'given', it is produced, or at least reproduced, in a particular way, such that time *does become* money and the more you work, the more you *will* get. What you get is an ability to move toward the dream by consuming, in part, what the display window has to offer. Herein lies the power of consumption and the reasons why Chinese economic reform is chaotically heading down this never-ending trail, buoyed by the dream that to consume is to be headed for a bright new future where, it is thought, dreams will be fulfilled in the purchases made at the new shopping malls. Yet such 'trainings' also have a secondary and, dare I say, subversive effect.

The power of the consumptive mode, while supplementing and promoting government initiatives and dreams of development in some ways, also undermines them in others. Consumerism transgresses the boundaries of government initiative, forcing the State itself to partake in 'market initiatives'. In other words, this mode consumes government too, as recent State initiatives in the market all too clearly demonstrate. Nowhere were these government initiatives at their clearest and yet most precarious than in relation to the Mao paraphernalia craze of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The Many Faces of Mao

Mao, this mammoth symbol of socialist China, is remembered on the centenary of his birth. Yet in the China of economic reform, this remembrance takes on a perverse form. Mao reappears, but as commodity and, along with the new consumer-friendly Canto-pop version of the 'East is Red', becomes a star reborn. Revolutionary memorabilia is commodified and becomes a 'big seller' in the new 'China market'. In the three-year period between 1990 and 1993, over 11 million posters of Chairman Mao were sold, while in the first two months of its release the disco cassette version of the 'East is Red' sold some 3.5 million copies (see Da

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Yang's article, Part V). Along with other 'revolutionary' paraphernalia such as watches, double-sided Mao portraits designed to dangle like dice from car mirrors and lighters that play the 'East is Red', Mao's image is reproduced on an endless array of items for sale. All classes and tastes are catered for: from solid-gold embossed Mao watches for the *nouveau riche*, through to the simple and traditional wall poster. A new form of ubiquitous 'Mao imagery' re-emerges as government and trader alike recognise that 'Mao sells'. The question is, if Mao is being 'reborn' in this renewed process of edification, what is he being reborn as?

This contemporary reification of Mao actually eats away at the Mao of old to the point whereby the meaning of Mao is no longer anchored in the Party. The Party must now fight for ownership of his body and image so that it can have a chance of 'ownership' over the collective soul. But this new consumer Mao defies a single Party-designated form or expression. Instead, 'one hundred schools of thought' come into contention over his image. This plurality of meaning around his image leads to a panoply of symbolic forms: Mao as sage in a resurgent peasant messianic phase; Mao as 1950s leader, bringing stability and offering an exemplary alternative to the chaos of economic reform; Mao as young rebel leader standing against authority in a similar fashion to the images of the young Chinese punk rock heroes of today. This myriad of Maos comes to symbolise a new consumer-based pluralism that actually transgresses the limits of any attempt to 'inlay' a dominant ideology. Yet in this dispersal of readings one constant remains: the ever present appetites and desires produced by consumerism. The pluralism brought on by the competition over Mao's body comes out of the single shared desire to own the Mao image. Thus, this form of plurality of views itself comes to reinforce the power of the reifying gaze within this increasingly consumer-based society.

It is for this reason that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were so insistent that the consumptive mode is always responsible for the 'constant reproduction of the same thing'.[2] While Adorno and Horkheimer examined the emergence of consumption in the West, the point they make about it is no less valuable in relation to China today. In tracing the emergence of Western consumer-based society they insisted that individuality and creativity were the first casualties. This was because the individuality produced under consumption was 'mass produced like Yale locks, whose only difference can be measured in fractions of millimetres'.[3] Adorno maintains that the result is a kind of 'pseudo individuality' that reifies the new but which ends up reproducing it as 'always-the-same'.[4] In this respect, Chinese forms of commodification differ little, enabling the adroit observer of Chinese street life, Geremie Barmé, to comment that even dissent in China today has become a commodity with a niche-market value.[5]

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2 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [Trans. John Cumming] (London: Verso, 1979), 134.

3 Adorno and Horkheimer, 154.

4 Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* [Edited and introduced by J. M. Bernstein] (London: Routledge, 1991), 35.

5 Geremie Barmé, 'Soft Porn, Packaged Dissent, and Nationalism: Notes on Chinese Culture in the 1990s', *Current History*, 93 (1994), 272.

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Barmé points out that 'underground' art, novels, rock and roll and the 'alternative' film industry in China are all too aware of the appeal both at home and abroad of the Chinese rebel voice. This new and growing 'dissident genre' thrives on its ability to promote rebellion, but always operates within acceptable limits. The new cultural products mark out a tactic that actually works to annoy, but not infuriate, the State censor. Such works must attract a critical rebuke from the censor in order to qualify as 'dissident', but they must also get through the censor's office intact, otherwise there would be no dissident cultural product to sell. Having succeeded in getting their 'dissident' product onto the domestic and international market, they can then 'cash in' on the 'dissident label'.[6] Rebellion itself becomes a commodity with its own market niche, and its own very lucrative form of marketing. Dissent in China, to use Barmé's expression, is quickly becoming 'packaged dissent'—commodified, and sold like any other product. For him, this packaged dissent, if not quite equalling betrayal, nevertheless proves very 'disturbing'.[7] In Barmé's reading, packaged dissent seems to extinguish the very rebellious and individual voices that the process of commodification tries to celebrate and sell.

There is much of interest in Barmé's position. He is probably one of the best informed Western China scholars on dissident voices in China today and clearly has his finger on the pulse when analysing the predominant form that these sorts of cultural products take when confronted by the market. The problem with his analysis, however, is its under-theorised approach to commodification. For Barmé, commodification is to rebellion what the full stop is to the sentence: it marks an end. Yet commodification operates more like a syntactical structure, detailing the contoured forms available to rebellion and life rather than as a sign of its demise. The fact that we may not like the particular form dissent takes, or approve of it being offered for sale, does not alter the dissident nature of the act, nor the delegitimising effect it has upon government. In producing expressions of dissent that are marketable, popular and—let's face it—fun, the commodity process demonstrates an almost uncanny productivity. The process is productive in so far as it does not simply cater for a market, but actually produces it, by manufacturing desire. It is uncanny, in that this very act of market production also produces space for critique, enabling certain tactical responses. The existence of these various responses illustrates the folly of unifying consumption such that it appears as 'a thing' rather than 'a relation'.

To go beyond commodification as a 'thing', however, requires a prior mental move. This is the mental separation of consumption as a macro-level and generalised mode of life from the specific (micro-level) act of producing and consuming (that is, specific acts of 'doing'). While the former, in the language of Michel de Certeau, is akin to a 'strategic field', the latter is a tactical choice that offers within itself the possibility of a range of playful and mischievous acts of disruption. The tactical play on market forces to produce a market for dissident voices, no matter what the subjective and personal motives of these 'dissidents' are, cannot be

6 Barmé, 272–73.
7 Barmé, 270.

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anything other than a tactical act of dissent. In adopting this approach, one can avoid contemporary variants on the traditional 'great man' approach to the question of dissent by decentring the dissident speaking subject while, nevertheless, valuing the message propounded. To value the tactical space commodification opens up, while simultaneously recognising the limits it imposes on acts, leads us away from the lionisation of the 'heroic subject' of dissent and toward an examination of the conditions under which the tactical act takes place. Moreover, in moving away from the 'heroic subjects' toward the micro-level act also shifts the focus onto the otherwise anonymous characters who are caught in the structural and systemic web of life in China. It is their lives that are currently being reconstituted by the process of commodification. Here again, it is the work of de Certeau that puts this in sharpest focus.

Other Rebellions

> To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets ... This anonymous hero is very ancient. He is the murmuring voice of societies. He squats now at the center of our scientific stages. The floodlights have moved away from the actors who possess proper names and social blazons, turning first toward the chorus of secondary characters, then settling on the mass of the audience. The increasingly sociological and anthropological perspective of inquiry privileges the anonymous and the everyday in which zoom lenses cut out metonymic details—parts taken for the whole. Slowly the representatives that formerly symbolized families, groups, and orders disappear from the stage they dominated during the epoch of the name. We witness the advent of the number.[8]

In 1984, what was described as the first 'major reform' of household registration laws in post-liberation Chinese history effectively witnessed the advent of the number in China, in the form of the 'resident identity card' system. Here is the strategic field within which the anonymous, ubiquitous characters of China must operate. Under the unity established by the 'proper name'—both signed and printed on every card—there was a 'second kind' of (biographical) unity displayed, in the form of a number detailing the uniqueness of every card and its bearer. In the number, the unity of the proper name is tied to a (secondary) set of biographical details. The proper name and the coded number are the unities around which the card and the government functions (see Part II). Through the number, details of the name—its specific place of abode, gender and date of birth—are given. More than simply scant biographical details, these numbers operate like library catalogue codes, tying the 'proper name' back to a personnel file, to a record, and to a household register. With this catalogued code as the reference point, details of the life of the card-bearer can be further checked and elaborated upon. The number leads back to the file which, in turn, leads back to the lives, loves and indiscretions of the name. To go beyond the name and number, however, requires knowledge and access beyond that available to the ordinary person. These coded numbers operate within a very specific scriptural regime that offers access only to

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8 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* [Trans. Steven Randall] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), n.p.

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those the authorities deem worthy. The codes on the card are not transparent and need to be decoded into a language that can be read by all. It is only through the codes and manuals of the security forces which are never made public, and therefore never seen, that the card offers access to the biographical life of the bearer.

Within this regime of codes and symbols, the bearer of the card cannot speak but is instead spoken of and spoken to. Such nameless numbers will tell of many things about the unspeaking subject. What they will also tell us, however, is about the way in which the government constitutes citizen subjectivity and within that, the way it separates the wanted and worthy from those who require more draconian forms of surveillance. What the card offers us is not only an example of the 'outer limits' of policing in China, but also a mechanism through which one can move the spotlight away from the stars of the human rights campaigns and onto the anonymous, ubiquitous characters de Certeau speaks of. Western critics of Chinese human rights have been slow to pick up on certain types of human rights abuses in China because they have all but ignored the overall anonymity of the process of abuse. It is anonymous because it is, in part, a structural feature of the very 'reform process' the West as a whole has embraced as the means by which China can economically and politically liberate itself.

Chinese human rights abuses today are, in the main, quite different to those which predominated in the Maoist era. At that time, there were no transient criminals, no vagrants, few prostitutes and virtually no drug addicts or triad gangs. These are the products of economic reform and it is these 'rebels' who are subject to the most numerous and most tragic human rights abuses among the Han Chinese community. To unearth their tales requires an enquiry beyond the fetishised goods of consumer China. It requires excavating the quarry that is economic reform. Laid out before you in *Streetlife China* are the fossil-documents that may be of help in piecing together at least part of this story. It is a part of the story characterised by the emergence of a definite murmur of 'subaltern voices' in China.

Human rights abuses in China are, in the main, less about heroic dissident voices being suppressed than about the desultory practices of the hooligans, pimps, prostitutes and unemployed being extinguished. Human rights abuse in China may be multifaceted, but the frequent and most serious cases invariably involve the stranger, the outsider, the vagrant or the wanderer. This is because the principal human rights story in China is a tale of movement: the movement of the society from one mode to another as it attempts to modernise, and the movement of the subalterns to the city as they attempt to gain a share of the wealth that modernisation brings.

In the new China of economic reform, this new subaltern group has a name and that name is all too often *mangliu*, meaning, quite literally, 'to blindly travel'. Yet there is nothing blind in the travels of these people. Migration in contemporary China is always undertaken 'tactically', that is, to make the best of a bad situation, to try and find work, get money, or if they are really lucky, make it rich. Migrants enter the cities and are distinguishable only by what they are not; their 'foreignness' is their only defining feature, and something they carry with them wherever they go. It is a foreignness to city life made evident by the way they speak, the way they dress, the dialect they speak, the way they walk and the way

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they address others. So visible and different are the *mangliu* of Chinese cities that their position is somewhat akin to migrant workers anywhere. It is their foreignness that marks them out not only as different but, all too often, as inferior. As Homi Bhabha points out, in relation to migrant labour in Europe, their presence signals a new 'imagined community' of nationhood.[9] They are the markers of a shifting boundary of nationhood. But is it possible to talk of shifting national boundaries when referring to ethnic Han in their own land? Perhaps ...

Paul Virilio, commenting on the postmodern American city, offers a useful insight. Virilio begins his book, *Lost Dimensions*, with a poignant quotation: 'At the beginning of the 60s, with black ghettoes rioting, the Mayor of Philadelphia announced: "From here on in, the frontiers of the State pass to the interior of the cities".'[10]

What Bhabha and the Mayor of Philadelphia miss in restricting the issue of the shifting national boundaries to race is the question of class. What both are discussing here is not just the break-up of an imagined national homogeneity because of racism and bigotry, what they are (re)telling is the story of subaltern labour exploited to breaking point. We could, in fact, retell these two stories in the language of Marx, in the story of the English peasants' movement to the city and the social panic this movement occasioned there. Alternatively, we could tell this story in terms of the Chinese peasants as they move in endless columns into the Chinese city in search of work and favours. In China, one may object that the story is different for, in this case, the subaltern is the same colour and of the same ethnic group. But again, to say this is to ignore the way in which difference operates as a floating signifier of the group named for its aimless 'floating' migration.

The subaltern of the Chinese city is always the stranger. She is the itinerant migrant worker who is as visible and identifiable to the local resident of a city like Beijing as an Afro-American is to the Caucasian in the cities of America, or the Turk is to the German. In China, however, the subalterns are diasporic in their own nation because, for them, the city is a foreign place, it is not their *laojia* (hometown). It is this connection to their *laojia*, to their *tongbao*, provincial county or village that unites them. From such marginalised unity in the foreign land of the city have grown some very powerful means of self-protection, promotion and, ultimately, exploitation: the dreaded triads or secret societies.

The Chinese peasant who is said to 'drift blindly' into the city does so with a single aim: to find work. The peasant takes up a diasporic position in the hope of occupying another position: that of city worker. Peasants migrate for work, but the work is limited, badly paid and often brief. Many fail to find work or refuse to accept the conditions. For them, it is either a return to the rural area from which they have fled or an attempt to eke out an existence on the margins, which sometimes means employment as beggars, prostitutes or thieves. All of these occupations, however, bring forth an erratic, arbitrary, but invariably harsh response

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9 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 164.
10 Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension* [Trans. Daniel Moshenburg] (New York: Semiotext[e], Autonomedia, 1991), 9.

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from the police. As the peasants move, the technologies of surveillance over them increase and they are caught in a double bind. Move, but only within limits. Move, but only if you have money.

Two moves of government, two responses, two sets of regulation form the 'double pincer movement' through which this drama is played out. Peasants are offered to the market as 'free' labour (what Marx describes as the wage slave) and simultaneously disciplined into the language of the market by the harshness of the alternative (strict laws against vagrancy, prostitution, itinerant suspects etc.). This double move is a compact signed under two names: one signs 'freedom' (the freedom of movement to places of work, the freedom to buy and sell one's labour power, not to mention the freedom to trade), the other signs 'restriction' (restrictions upon those who can and cannot remain in the cities, restrictions upon acceptable and unacceptable forms of work: women can work as char-ladies—the so-called *baomu*—but not as sex workers). Clear divisions operate, but the market has its limits: one can sell labour power but not human flesh.

What is interesting about these 'two moves', what is described above as a 'pincer action', is how much this story has been told countless times before. In the past, and elsewhere, it is known as the process of capital accumulation leading not only to an extension of commodity relations but also to the creation of 'free proletarian labour' by 'the separation of agricultural workers from the land in such a way that they become "available" for industrial employment'.

By pointing out these twin legal moves—one to loosen the highly restrictive household registration laws so as to allow labour to be 'freed', the other to tighten the regulation of those who will, if properly policed, come to constitute the reserve army of unemployed—we are able to draw a close analogy with the legal processes discussed by Marx in *Capital*.[11] Moreover, the shift from a capital to consumer goods driven development, which is the hallmark of China's economic reform process, has created new needs and raised the price of indigenous products in much the same way as Marx suggested early capitalism did in *Grundrisse*.[12] In both cases, they led to a speeding up of the transformation of money into capital and, as a consequence, farm workers into proletarians.

What is being suggested, then, is that the 'deep structure' of this story of Chinese economic reform does not begin with the third plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party in December 1978, but in England, some time between the fifteenth and nineteenth century. In addition, what is also being suggested is that this process is not explicable by reference to Deng Xiaoping's selected works, but rather by reference to Marx's *Capital*. It is in *Capital* that Marx explains the general effects of the tendencies unleashed as a result of the English laws around enclosure and vagrancy. It is with an understanding of these two legal changes that one can begin to see the significance of the collapse of the Chinese household registration laws and the tightening of laws against vagrancy in China. In other words, to understand the key dynamics producing human rights abuses in China today, it is necessary to take Queen Victoria's advice and 'close

11 Karl Marx, *Capital* [Trans. Ben Fowkes], 3 vols (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), vol. 1.
12 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* [Trans. Martin Nicholaus] (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), p. 508.

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