

INTRODUCTION

The Countryside as Home



Uneven Earthiness

Laolei and I were thrown together in a van bumping along a winding road westward through the Shanxi mountain range in the summer of 2009.¹ Passengers hopped on and off the van shouldering unwieldy sacks of red sorghum and balancing juicy green watermelons, as our vehicle crisscrossed the rural gorges of north China's Loess Plateau baking under the sweltering sun. Laolei, now in his seventies, came of age under Maoism and proudly identified as a "peasant" (*nongmin*) commanding authority over all aspects of rural life. Hearing I was headed for a historical trading village on the Yellow River (famed for its merchant cave dwellings), Laolei reacted with disbelief. The merchants and financiers who had dominated the Shanxi economy in the late Imperial Era were regarded as morally dubious for extorting profit from the rightful hands of citizens and the state, maligned by both Confucian and Maoist thought. The lines on Laolei's tanned face deepened as he squinted at me with quizzical eyes, before exclaiming with exasperation, "Why do you want to go there? It's so earthy [*tu*]!"

As he and I gazed out of the dusty windowpane at the agricultural terraces carved into the golden ravines, Laolei turned his narrative of the land into one of pride, as he explained that the passing fields were all manmade. He then launched into a reverie of Maoist nostalgia about how the chairman organized the farmers to build high-quality terraces throughout the area to increase agricultural output. Most famously, the town of Dazhai became a



Figure 0.1. Aerial view of Sweeping Cliff. Image data: Google Earth, DigitalGlobe 2019.

model for all the good communists of the land, inspiring campaign slogans that Laolei enthusiastically recited: “For agriculture, learn from Dazhai! Move the mountains to make the fields! Change the sky to alter the land!” I asked him if he thought the craggy Shanxi mountainside was beautiful, to which he replied, “Beautiful or not, it’s home.”

Laolei then reminisced about the peasantry working together to make the land efficient through pooling their collective labor in brigades, before lamenting that many families nowadays did not even farm the small plots of land that the village committees allocated to their households. As he saw it, today “the land is going to waste, because young people don’t want to go to the fields; they want to go to the office and do business.” Laolei’s accusation was that contemporary rural youth resisted working the land, instead following aspirations to enter nonagricultural sectors of the economy. He prided himself on living a frugal life as a peasant (*nongmin*), unlike those merchants of old and the businesspeople of today, who turned away from labor in the fields in search of more lucrative trades and professions.

Fangdi, a Shanxi tour guide in the village of Sweeping Cliff (Figure 0.1), where I ended up doing fieldwork, was just this type of young peasant. He was employed with other young rural workers in a newly established tourism development company attempting to break into

the emerging service economy in the area. On one occasion we were sitting in their office, where the tour guides waited for their turn in the roster to take affluent Chinese visitors through the village's main attractions, particularly an underground tunnel complex. Squatting on low stools in the back courtyard tourism office located in an old temple complex, we sipped green tea from glass bottles and chatted about everything under the sun that hung low in the gray pollution of a stifling late summer afternoon.

A conversation unfolded about why Shanxi's earth, composed of ochre loess soil, was called "yellow earth" (*huangtu*). Struck by a train of thought, Fangdi boisterously exclaimed: "The yellow earth creates the Yellow River, the Yellow River creates the yellow emperor." To prove his point, Fangdi gestured toward his face: "Look, even my skin is that color!" Everybody in the tour guide office erupted with laughter. Fangdi went on to explain that China's history was tied to "the peasantry's dependence on the earth" (*nongmin kaodi*). He argued that this ancient situation is changing as peasants "progress forward" (*tuijin*) with "development" (*fazhan*).

Fangdi commuted from the city center to the countryside on a daily basis. Nonetheless, his affluent family background jarred with his local dialect and down-to-earth demeanor, leading the other tour guides to frequently tease Fangdi for being overtly "earthy" (*tu*). Many of the tour guides came from more humble backgrounds than Fangdi but equaled him in educational attainment and even surpassed him in certain aspects of cosmopolitan sophistication. The tour guides often jostled as they compared and competed over who had higher levels of "human quality" (*suzhi*). These young people felt like anything but the sellouts of the post-Maoist Era Laolei made them out to be, instead presenting themselves as the ultimate harbingers of a new vanguard of workers "leaving the land but not the countryside" (*litu bu lixiang*).

Despite being officially designated a peasant (*nongmin*) by the state's household registration system, Fangdi had never worked the land. Instead, he completed a university education before entering the workforce as a rural tour guide, all while living in a luxurious family apartment in the city. His family came from a rural background but had "struck wealth" (*facai*) through the expansion of coal mining operations into the area, a process in which his father was involved as a local cadre for a regulatory bureau. This position within the increasingly key sector of the local economy allowed his family to move to the city when Fangdi was in middle school and gain access to prime real estate in the urban valley. Thereby, Fangdi and his

family established themselves as part of an emerging cadre capitalist elite of technocratic experts.

These “red capitalists” emerged at the helm of the state’s agenda of fostering development in the post-Maoist Era of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (see Dickson 2003; So 2003; Kong 2010). They often boasted close ties to the communist party and oversaw strategic resources within particular localities, thereby optimally placing themselves to push the nation forward along a teleologically imagined sequence of progress, while simultaneously safeguarding political stability and economic growth. The official restoration of “market mechanisms” after 1978 had transformed what once was a command-and-control economy, reorienting sectors ranging from agriculture, industry, and commerce to real estate, education, and healthcare. State institutions and corporate developers rallied around new priorities of competition and profit.

While China’s urban and coastal regions developed rapidly alongside these market transformations, interior provinces like Shanxi struggled to match their economic growth. Simultaneously, across China inequalities between urban cosmopolitan centers and the peripheral countryside became entrenched. Reflecting these disparities, rural residents of China’s interior appear as a monolithic surplus population, tucked away in the hinterlands to serve as a reservoir pool of labor fueling the growth of China’s export-oriented manufacturing zones. I argue that this is not the case: there are deep schisms between what it means to be a peasant within the partial, uneven, and unequal trajectories of development in Shanxi.

Peasants Out of Place

At first glance, the nostalgic Maoist farmer and the red capitalist tour guide appear to have little in common beyond identifying as “peasants” at home in Shanxi.² However, they share an ambivalent relationship to the earth, both referring to locations and people as “earthy” with derogatory connotations. This deserves a short explanation. The Chinese character for earth, or *tu*, at its most literal refers to the land and soil. In a more metaphorical way, *tu* can also refer to something being indigenous, local, and native, to being “of the earth” so to speak. An extension of this tie between rootedness and the earth can plunge into a deprecating domain of *tu* as being too territorialized, too local, and too rural, to the point of being crude or rough. Within Fangdi and Laolei’s description of the countryside a

tension runs between the earth as a substance from which life flows and the earth's association with agricultural work that holds people to a localized, grounded, and at times harsh existence. But what of the people associated with the land?

China has, of course, come a long way from Fei Xiaotong's (1992 [1948]: 27) famous dictum: "Chinese society is fundamentally rural. I say it is fundamentally rural because its foundation is rural. . . . Country people cannot do without the soil because their very livelihood is based upon it." Instead, the peasant as disappearing in the face of modernity or as the persistent obstacle to development has taken over from the peasant as the bedrock of Confucian order and the vanguard of Maoist progress. Are we simply moving from Laolei's memories of the peasant as a revolutionary figure and hero of transformation toward Fangdi's assessment of the peasant as a historical relic and source of embarrassment that can be, at best, a source of self-satirizing jokes?

In the cities, urbanites and rural migrants alike portray the countryside as "inert, meaningless, and boring" (*meijin, meiyisi*; Yan H. 2003), populated with people "left behind" (*luohou*) by development (Xiang 2007) and "lacking the human quality" (*suzhi cha*) found in cosmopolitan centers (Anagnost 1997; Greenhalgh 2010). Parallel to these devaluations of the countryside, rural citizens increasingly sustain livelihoods by integrating into urban labor markets as they migrate, remit wages, or commute to find waged employment (Zavoretti 2017; Murphy 2002; Carrillo 2011). These developments raise critical questions about the commodification of rural labor in the interest of capital accumulation, especially through relations of dependence on and exploitation within cities. Yet, research into contemporary rural conditions shows that the countryside and its residents are far from a homogenous and passive population awaiting deliverance from cosmopolitan capitalist development.

Not all peasants pack up and move to urban centers. Rural citizens remaining in the countryside establish new rural cooperatives (Hale 2013; Yan and Chen 2013; Lammer 2012), turn to organic farming (Klein 2009), improve local health services (Lai 2016), and challenge pollution levels (Lora-Wainwright 2013). They revive religious and ritual practices that strengthen the rural peasantry as an "imagined community" (Kipnis 1997) and an "agrarian public sphere" (Chau 2006b). They also move within rural areas, often for marriage and employment, sustaining lifelong relationships across different regions and localities outside urban centers (Gaetano 2015; Judd 2009). They overturn paradigms of "the rural" as representing

a more authentic, traditional, or moral “Chineseness” by partaking in, and complaining of, rising individualism, competition, and even outright immorality in their midst (Liu 2002; Yan Y. 2003; Tan 2016). Some actively subvert stereotypical contrasts between modernity and ruralism by satirizing these representations (Steinmüller 2013), while others profit from the romantic appeal of the countryside by selling rural experiences to urban tourists hosted in family guesthouses (Park 2008) and ethnic minority villages (Chio 2011). In short, citizens, cadres, and corporations develop rural industries and offer services in the countryside to supplement agricultural livelihoods, thereby realizing state policies “to construct a new socialist countryside” (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun*) in complex, and sometimes contradictory, ways. In what sense, then, are these peasants out of place in the contemporary moment?

The persistence of peasant status no longer tethered to the land reveals the uneasy integration of agricultural labor into contemporary capitalism, where generating surplus from farming often necessitates significant state subsidies and governmental support. In situations where supplementary financial inputs bolstering capital accumulation for large-scale cultivators are not forthcoming, agriculture predominantly underscores rural livelihood strategies of subsistence supplemented with other sources of income. The growing importance of services and finance, but also subsistence activities, shifts the bases of reproduction beyond the framework of industrial capitalism and calls for consideration of where and how to locate theories of class in the contemporary moment (Friedman 2015). These transformations also raise questions about what we are witnessing: is this the end of the peasantry thrown under the wheels of developmentalist paradigms during the onward march of capitalism or is there rather a propitious reorientation of peasant identities afoot in China?

The Location of Class and the Politics of Place

In order to make sense of the peasantry’s positioning in terms of locality, two contending perspectives in anthropology, one of location and the other of dislocation, are worth articulating. Taking conceptions of locality as not simply given but created through the interaction between human activity and historical processes, James Weiner (2002: 21–22) posits a gulf between anthropological accounts of human relations to place. At one end is a focus on how people mediate attachment to particular places through “dimensions of intimacy,

knowledge, familiarity, history, and interpersonality” associated with long-standing co-constitution of persons and localities. At the other end of the spectrum, there is a second perspective that highlights “the transience, the nomadism, the rootlessness, the migratory, the diasporic, the out-of-placedness” assumed to be characteristic of contemporary individuals and societies. Yet, the personal, spatial, economic, and political contradictions between location and dislocation cannot be easily resolved, as location frequently disappears from view under processes of dislocation, only to resurface through repressive and even violent exclusions.

Approaches to location and dislocation must not merely be mapped spatially, but temporally, as the constitution of location is assumed to be long term, while experiences of dislocation imply temporal discontinuity, even rupture. By focusing exclusively on the first dimension of “location,” ethnographic accounts may refuse the contemporary coexistence of the peasantry in the present, in line with a pseudoevolutionary narrative that problematically implies a “denial of coevalness” (Fabian 1983). By contrast, ethnographers who eclipse “location” in favor of “dislocation” may miss the long-term connections and forms of belonging that bind humans together as they pursue intertwined lives across massive spatial, personal, political, and temporal upheaval. Of course, these forms of belonging, especially when projected into the past, are always present articulations that entail evocations of memory, imagination, and even invention (Hobsbawm 1983). To bring location and dislocation together, I trace the labor of homemaking in forging belonging through kinship, community, and citizenship alongside the inequalities and exclusions associated with its broader political identifications.

Within economic relations, claims of belonging also loom large, especially as ever more activities become subsumed by capitalist relations. Monetary quantifications and wage relations often serve to shortchange those disempowered and dispossessed by the intensification of capitalism. Capitalist development necessitates some dispossession to progress, whether through a kick-start of primitive accumulation through enclosure of the commons (Marx 1867), the extractive cycles of expansion in colonialism (Luxemburg 1913), or the escalating spheres of accumulation by dispossession in mature capitalism (Harvey 1982).

In the Chinese Market Era since 1978; processes of dispossession converged with dislocation, privatization, and devaluation. The sale of public assets, layoffs of state workers, and increasing mobility of rural and migrant workers created a more fluid, informal, and

precarious labor force. Simultaneously, many workers were devalued, as their labor became recoded as “unskilled” through indexes of “human quality” (*suzhi*). This has led to a situation in which rural and manual workers effectively subsidize sites of accumulation elsewhere. However, how people locate themselves within these cycles of dispossession makes an immense difference to their subsequent political, economic, and social positions.

Under Chinese capitalism, state cadres, as well as managers and entrepreneurs with close ties to the Communist Party, rose to power as the new technocratic elite (Goodman 2008; Nonini 2008; So 2003). In the countryside, formerly collective resources, especially lucrative sites of production like groves, ponds, mines and kilns, were privatized, with cadres often gaining the management contracts for township village enterprises or outright ownership of these assets (Hinton 1990; Potter and Potter 1990). In the cities, work units from factories to hospitals often turned to a shareholding model to make ends meet as state-owned enterprises faltered, with some eventually becoming private corporations; thus, the local state, cadres, and managers rather than employees usually became the dominant shareholders (Hertz 1998). This managerial elite sometimes even ran these corporations like family enterprises (Kipnis 2016) or forged intimate connections through activities ranging from exchanging formal banquets to illicit favors and tie political power to economic prowess (Osburg 2013). While some ventures went bust, others thrived, and over the ensuing decades many corporations have remained state owned or under state protection, while an array of entrepreneurial ventures solidified alongside them.

These partial policies, contradictory reforms, mixed ownership, and hybrid economic constellations have often led to unclear legal relationships in China (So 2003), so that “rules” (Shao 2013), “reason” (Pia 2016), or “legalism” (Lee 2007) sometimes take precedence over formal “laws.” To many people in the countryside, to “clarify property rights” often simply means privatization and dispossession (Day 2013), and appeals to “reason” can be preferable to legal frameworks in local decision making (Pia 2016). In the moral ambiguity of this changing “gray society” (Tan 2006), citizens and cadres alike have acted strategically to safeguard their own position, even when this has meant dispossessing others of vital resources (Potter and Potter 1990; Hinton 1990). In urban areas, differential positions in quests for justice based on generation, class, location, and other determinants of background have meant that more privileged segments of the workforce are more likely to seek out courts (Lee 2007).

However, this is not always the case, as barefoot lawyers (Brandtstädter 2016), self-taught petitioners (Shao 2013), and civilian protesters (Chu 2014) take matters into their own hands and venture legal battles against the odds, especially when their homes and livelihoods come under threat. The party state legitimacy nonetheless rests on delivering economic growth, meeting imperatives of development, and instituting the “rule of law” (*fazhi*) in China, although what the latter means in practice remains open to debate.

I have chosen to call the current constellation “red capitalism” rather than “cadre capitalism,” as this formation resonated strongly with nonelite residents of Sweeping Cliff, as well as its political cadres, local entrepreneurs, and corporate leaders. The desire to uphold socialist sovereignty formed deep temporal, spatial, and personal roots from shared experiences of Maoism, markets, and the state. Village tourism partially commodified this mutual legacy through cultural traditionalism as a resource for development. Moreover, many villagers felt compelled by the legacy of socialist values to sacrifice their own interests for the public good of progress in ways that, at times, justified devaluation and dispossession. Not just the shift in the village economy toward the tourist service sector but other parts of their lives, including the reproduction of the family and the ownership of houses, increasingly revolved around these claims in red capitalism that simultaneously located and dislocated the work of creating a home.

In China, the centrality of place-based identities in structuring worker action puts class into a particularly uneasy tension with locality in understanding labor conflicts and solidarities (Perry 1996). Workers routinely draw on vernacular understandings of insider/outsider, peasant/worker, uncivilized/civilized, and low quality/high quality to articulate demands for labor justice and livelihood fulfillment. However, native place identity and distrust of outsiders also results in resentments, antagonisms, and suspicions between workers (Perry 1996). Place-based articulations of collective grievances thereby undermine solidarities between localities that could potentially rally around notions of class elsewhere (see Lee 2007). This displacement of class onto other forms of labor stratification reflects the problematic associations with the punitive and preferential “class labels” (*jieji*) of the Mao Era. However, rather than dismiss these relational intersections between labor and locality, this ethnography attempts to simultaneously localize class and politicize place.

At the risk of being overly explicit, I argue *against* “rural citizens” or “the peasantry” as a homogenously grouped category of people

framed as a “class.” The homology between the theory of class and China’s rural-urban dichotomy, especially in terms of the countryside subsidizing urban centers, has limited analytic traction, as it collapses the multiplicity of contradictions faced in defending rural livelihoods with a simple locational duality. My approach also differs from a more sociological grouped notion of class that is predominantly stratified by socioeconomic differentiation captured in quantitative terms, as this does not do justice to the historical and political legacy of class discourse in China (see Goodman 2015). The *jieji* ascribed to Chinese citizens in the days of high socialism filtered political affiliation and economic position into a system enforcing social differentiation similar to Weberian notions of status and hierarchy (Unger 2002).

Current discourse within China implicitly articulates social differentiation through “social strata” (*jieceng*) against an analysis of “class” in the popular imagination (Anagnost 2008), in ways that parallel Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of “distinction.” However, defining Chinese classes primarily through social differentiation would be misleading for two reasons: first, this would sideline processes of location and dislocation in understanding labor-capital confrontations; and second, this ignores appeals to collective imagination of the contemporary peasant identifications across locations in the countryside. Instead, embedded cultural understandings of those at home in the countryside must be brought into dialogue with actual relationships of solidarity, friendship, antagonism, inequality, and so on, as they unfold over time. My approach therefore follows social historians who analyze the experiences of real people in formulating understandings of class as a relational, incomplete, and ongoing process (particularly E. P. Thompson 1963 and Williams 1973). Going forward, I address both location and class as entangled relational processes that unfold through struggles of reproduction within a set of vertical relationships of exploitation and dispossession.

Making Claims through Labor

Who is responsible for the safety and interests of the common people? I am an honest and simple peasant from Sweeping Cliff. The countryside is the peasants’ lifeblood [*minggen*, literally: “the root of life”], but the fields are being covered with buildings and roads. Now those who traded in their homes for compensation are without any property rights. What will they rely on to survive later? How will they support themselves in old age? I hope the relevant authorities will take responsibility for the common people.

— Anonymous message on WeChat, 2016

This message circulated on social media in Shanxi in the mid-2010s. It described how a particular confluence of development and dislocation could strip rural citizens of their “roots of life”: the countryside they called home. Villagers experienced this loss after they exchanged their homes and fields to make way for commercial development plans as deeply personal. Yet the conditions under which these processes unfolded were widely shared across the Shanxi countryside. The rural safety net of housing and agriculture eroded under economic transition, as state bureaus and corporate developers carved up the region in the interest of developmental progress, promising a brighter future to all. Appealing to the “relevant authorities” to safeguard the farmers who traded away homes and property rights, the message divulges both a deep distrust of legalistic local settlements and faith in higher orders of bureaucracy to safeguard against injustices.

Citizens all over China have lost their homes to development. Most anthropological accounts focus on how urban homes were dismantled, sometimes even violently demolished, and residents forcefully evicted in the wake of commercial rezoning in the interest of real estate development (Shao 2013; Chu 2014; Ho 2015; Zhang 2010; Fleischer 2010). Resistance often falls back onto legal claims of individual property rights in these urban centers. By contrast, in some villages-in-the-cities formerly rural real estate has rapidly and swiftly appreciated in value, turning residents with claims to the locality into new elites, for instance by building apartment blocks, leasing land, or becoming landlords (Trémon 2015; Kipnis 2016).

Sweeping Cliff’s processes of dislocation and relocation unfolded along a very different trajectory, focused less on individual property rights than on state mandates of development and on local necessities of subsistence. A corporation with a strong track record in regional development entered the village with the promise of attracting tourism, thereby generating income and creating employment in the countryside. As they delivered on these promises and built new apartment complexes adjacent to the old village, they persuaded villagers to move out of the beautiful old courtyard complexes they had previously inhabited. Most villagers took the trade for housing compensation in the newly built settlement. Some villagers received a financial payout and profited from the transactions. Others took on employment with the tourism development company. A few villagers even stayed behind in the sparsely inhabited village that became a daytime tourist attraction. Meanwhile, the local government received substantial and sustained revenue streams contracting out the use rights of the village to the tourism development company.

In Sweeping Cliff villagers resisted recourse to the formal law, preferring to resolve disputes through local mediators, particularly their elected representative in the village committee in charge of “negotiating settlements” (*shuohe*, literally: “speaking peace”). I argue that rather than relying on legal frameworks in safeguarding individual rights or property rights, villagers staked out claims to notions of home through the value of their labor. Two collective assertions of rights came into conflict, and were eventually resolved for some villagers, in this recasting of Sweeping Cliff and its residents: the right to development (*fazhan*) and the right to subsistence (*shengcun*; see Perry 2008). The tourism development company and local government championed the necessity of developing a service industry in the village as the only solution for diminishing sustainability of livelihoods from agriculture in the village. Rallying villagers around their shared responsibility to foster development and preserve the architectural heritage created a situation of coercion, collusion, and consent among residents. Villagers experienced the pressure to bow to the allegedly collective interest of transforming Sweeping Cliff into a tourist site as a responsibility to kin, locality, and even the nation.

In response to this developmentalist paradigm, Sweeping Cliff residents insisted on their capacity to work, maintain their homes, and reproduce their families, rather than relying on conceptions of individual property rights over houses, courtyards, and fields. These rights to development *and* subsistence were framed through claims of work done in the past, often in service of the family, socialism, and the nation. Most families managed to transition to the reoriented livelihoods, despite dispossession and devaluation, by confronting and thwarting domicile, the destruction of home (see Porteous and Smith 2001; Nowicki 2014).

This reproduction of homes despite dislocation cannot be celebrated as an unequivocal victory. The social media message above bears witness to a process in which citizens could not support their claims of value and belonging against state-supported and corporate-coordinated forms of housing dispossession and livelihood devaluation. Against these odds, villagers nonetheless reproduced their families and their homes, thereby quite literally domesticating capitalism to overcome domicile by development. But this did not happen without the complicity of some villagers who drew on kinship networks and home safeguards to weather, and even profit from, the process of dispossession that occurred.

These logics of claims making were not limited to houses, fields, or the village, but encompassed belonging over objects, places, and



Figure 0.2. Sweeping Cliff rooftops. Photograph by the author.

people. Theoretically, this account builds on insights from anthropological insights into kinship, care, and relatedness but pushes these into a broader framework of dispossession, devaluation, and class through notions of reproduction. Reproduction brings together activities, spaces, and temporalities in fruitful ways to substantiate my two core arguments for Sweeping Cliff: first, that understandings of labor and visions of care formed a resource for claims making in the village; second, that this relational mechanism of claims making operated within a larger dispossessive process that residents defied, accommodated, and even exploited in various ways over time (Figure 0.2).

Recognizing Labor, Reproducing Homes

The home as a constantly emerging relational claim needs to be continuously reproduced. In anthropology the notion of “reproduction” operates through a number of interrelated oppositions, binaries, and contrasts that include, first, production versus reproduction; second, biological versus social reproduction; and third, material life versus ideological forms. Attempts to separate these entangled spheres through bracketing off the latter realm as reproduction comes up short in understanding the conception of home. Although my use of the term “reproduction” builds most closely on theoretical explorations of “social reproduction,” I drop the “social” caveat, as I do not wish to exclude spheres of production, biological reproduction, or material life from my examination. I want to avoid reducing the concept of

reproduction to a particular set of activities, delineated spatial realm, or sphere beyond, or outside of, capitalism (Harvey and Krohn-Hansen et al. 2018; Bhattacharya 2017; Bear et al. 2015). Instead, I follow Gavin Smith (2018) in positing a potential though unattainable “holism” that nonetheless keeps the social from detaching economic, political, or biological dimensions. Theoretically, I build on Marxist, feminist, and ritual studies and rethink reproduction through the unifying spheres of work, labor, and toil, broadly conceived.

Labor historians and Marxist anthropologists often focus on sites of production, especially through the prism of industrial labor focused on the capitalist core (see Parry 2018; Kasmir and Carbonella 2008). Notably, many of the studies that most successfully evoked the challenges of industrial life, and deindustrializing challenges, included broader spheres of housing estates, residential complexes, and dormitory arrangements both within capitalist “centers” and at its increasingly central “margins” (e.g., Pun 2005; Rofel 1999). Both classic and contemporary works attempted to overcome the exclusionary remaindering of life beyond the factory floor or industrial compound (e.g., Mollona 2009; Kalb 1998; Thompson 1967), with more recent work explicitly shifting from waged, formal employment to broader livelihood perspectives (see Narotzky 1997).

As many of the world’s workers become dependent on monetized reproduction through the enclosure of resources and dispossession of other livelihood strategies, they nonetheless find themselves excluded from the wage relation (Dennig 2010). Even the reproduction of agricultural livelihoods is not just bound to, but dependent on, capitalist processes, markets, and exploitation (Wolf 1982). This leads to new claims of redistribution from the state to legitimize development (Ferguson 2015) and recognize the contributions of precarious, informal, and unwaged labor within and against the capitalist market (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008).

These blurred lines between how value becomes imparted to labor bears parallels to classic Marxist discussion of separation of use values for consumption oriented toward the reproduction of life from the sphere of exchange value revolving around the realization and circulation aimed at the accumulation of capital (Marx 1992 [1867]). The parallel question of women and the recognition of their labor has long been central to debates on reproduction within capitalism (Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Rubin 1975; Ortner 1974). This forms an inverse discussion to the opposition between waged and unwaged work above, instead crystalized in such movements as “wages for housework” that seek to undermine how unpaid domestic

labor becomes exploited through lack of recognition in the capitalist market (Federici 2012).

Studies of kinship, care, and affection in the domestic domain have become increasingly framed within the larger political economy to reveal how market exchange and capitalist extraction entangles the intimate and political domains (Bear et al. 2015). When new reproductive technologies market bodily processes in constituting new persons (Franklin 2013; Carsten 2000), states sanction and deny kinship through bureaucratic accounting and legislating reproduction (Lambek 2013a; Greenhalgh 2003), and commercialized care displaces affective labor across the globe (Gutierrez 2018; Hochschild 1983; 2000), questions of political economy loom large. Yet monetary value constitutes an insufficient lens through which to understand the work, labor, and toil expended in these realms. Therefore, the broader realm of reproduction, particularly in kinship and ritual studies where labor often resists the demarcation of the secular, practical, or mundane, complement these approaches to labor and kinship.

The third line of inquiry therefore draws together studies focused on personhood, emotion, and ritual, where the entangled nature of production and reproduction becomes recognized, validated, and undermined in ways beyond, and frequently against, the monetary relation (Turner 2003, 1979; Sangren 2000; Strathern 1988). The stakes in these practices are often high, about who belongs to the realm of a “full person” (Strathern 2005) or what counts as appropriate, responsible, even moral conduct under particular obligations and responsibilities (Stasch 2009), and even how order, hierarchy, and distinction become established through staking out contributions to reproduction (Bloch 1989; Turner 1979). At times the double-edged sword of participation in these sublimated activities, spaces, and spheres actually allows extraction and dispossession to take place.

Particularly theories on how kinship work and ritual events create, recognize, and circulate value offer important points of departure for this study (Graeber 2013; Turner 2003; Bloch and Parry 1972), allowing the joint consideration of both material life and ideological forms. Some classic ethnographic examples render the division between male production and female biological reproduction visible through ritual forms (Ortner 1974, Bloch and Parry 1972). In some instances, ritual forms invert gender hierarchies through championing women’s fertility, only to subsequently reconstitute an ideological field of abstract reproduction dominated by men (Bloch 1989).

In the contemporary Chinese context, dualities between production and reproduction in academic discourse often become refracted

through contrasts of political and domestic, urban and rural, and outside and inside work, respectively (see Rosenfeld 2000). To break down these boundaries, instead viewing these realms as mutually constituted in their unfolding, studies of the residential dynamics of labor, the making of persons through kinship, and rituals of differentiation, inequality, and hierarchy provide fruitful points for comparison. In what follows, I attempt to rethink claims of belonging as they crystallize around labor, kinship, and reproduction through the concept of the home.

Home as a Relational Claim

I was born in Shanxi, grew up in Shanxi, lived and worked in Shanxi for forty-four years. Shanxi is my home, and the Shanxi people raised me as a son of peasants. As the saying goes, 'Home influences are hard to change, home feelings hard to forget.' I have never been able to forget the affection of the people at home. My own fate and that of my home are firmly bound together.

—Hu Fuguo, governor of Shanxi, 1993³

The concept of home forms a claim unto itself. The former governor of Shanxi, Hu Fuguo, evoked this claim in a speech to the Provincial People's Congress in 1993 by mobilizing a rhetoric related to the home that continues to be heard in the far reaches of the province over two decades later. The governor's identification with Shanxi revolves around the Chinese term *jia*, which translates as "home, house, and family" depending on the situation, condensing belonging to an institution, a place, and a form of kinship into one. In Shanxi, questions about where one's *jia* is usually refers to an ancestral place of origin but can also be about current residence or the location of one's family. When preceded by the character for country (*guo*), the *guo-jia* forms claim about political belonging, the nation-state, of a given citizen.

I develop these relational conceptions of home alongside one another, moving from architectural buildings to kinship formations, as well as rural belonging and regional solidarities. The Shanxi home presented the following tendencies: first, the home acted as both a point of origin and a place of return, where people converged and dispersed across place and time; second, the home eluded completion as an entity, because its continuous formation relied on both memory and desire, as ongoing practices cosubstantiated persons with the environment they created; and third, activities of making the home sustained life in which people were both a part of and apart from one another.

I argue that making and remaking claims to the home in Sweeping Cliff were staked through work and care. The premise that studies of labor should be located in the workplace is common to analyses of both socialist and capitalist regimes (Burawoy 1979), yet this methodological logic rarely extends to the home as a workplace. The realm of work, labor, and reproduction at home unfolds continuously with other spheres of activity, eroding boundaries with others in the process of world making (Thompson 1967). Within the Chinese context I focus on “work done on one another’s behalf” or “care” as I gloss this particular form of labor here. I argue that the ethical implications of orienting work toward others cannot be reduced to instrumental concerns but emerges as part of life projects in which we are both a part of and apart from each other.

This is key to debates about moral motivation, because when you care for somebody or something, you can direct it, and influence its unfolding. The resulting forms of “belonging” do not necessarily imply ownership (see Strathern 2005), nor can they be mapped on a continuum from altruism via reciprocity to self-interest (see Sahlins 2013). Instead, this co-constitution and cosubstantiation reflect a notion of entangled selfhood underlying a number of anthropological accounts of personhood and kinship (Carsten 1997; Strathern 1988). Yet, this account is not limited to the realm of the reproduction of relatives. Crucially, I argue that doing work on behalf of others allows you to subsequently stake claims of belonging over projects, houses, even children, on the basis of that care. Encompassment through these relational claims of belonging in Sweeping Cliff could be nurturing, supportive, and sustaining, just as they could turn coercive, competitive, and exclusionary (see Lambek 2011).

The force of these mechanisms of claims making reveal themselves most compellingly when they come up against one another, pressing their contours and boundaries into sharp relief. Negotiating belonging to and over homes, fields, foods, and persons through work done on behalf of others, or care, follows different patterns, takes diverse shapes and beats to varied rhythms over time. Without exhausting these forms of claims making, I traced this notion of care through both ongoing processes of productive and reproductive labor and intentional intervention into the stream of practice through consequential acts, particularly in ritual. In order to understand how these entangled notions of the home become asserted in claims making, these dynamics in Sweeping Cliff must be historicized.

Work, Care, and Kinship in Context

Men and women in Sweeping Cliff forged homes through everyday work, reproductive labor, and ritual acts that sedimented claims of belonging to and over homes through time. The roots of these home-based claims can be traced through the classic distribution of work in kinship, the allocation of resources during the Maoist Era through workplaces and in the subsequent Market Era of corporate and state development. Over time, not just families and children but also, for instance, houses and fields, could be claimed through work, labor, and care in Sweeping Cliff. The following sketches an overly simplified overview of the transformations to be developed in greater detail in later chapters.

My approach to claims of home draws on critiques of kinship as a formal, ideal, rule-based structure and offers more fluid, processual, and practice-oriented approaches to relatedness (Carsten 2000), particularly from a “house” perspective that grasps who lives together with whom, why, how, and when (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; see also Yanagisako 1979). Parallel critiques in Chinese kinship challenged the “lineage paradigm” based on the official ideology of patriliney in Confucian orthodoxy with its focus on the male-dominated, agnatic “lineage” (*zu*; Brandtstädter and Santos 2009). This strong focus on the lineage overlooked the bureaucratic, residential, and domestic arrangements in actual “households” (*hu*; Judd 1994) and subordinated the “family, house, home” (*jia*) to the lineage (Freedman 1966). In short, the nuclear, ephemeral, living family became overshadowed by the hierarchies of ancestors and descendants in the everlasting chain of patriliney (Ahern 1974). However, this understanding of Chinese kinship is and was inherently partial.

Mutable forms of kinship work, especially by mothers, wives, and daughters, but also sons, brothers, and fathers, in the interstices of patrilocal and patrilineal kinship norms shaped claims of home in Sweeping Cliff. Kin connected to diverse kinship formations across their lifecycle as well as over spatial ruptures (see Trémon 2017 for a discussion of transnational Chinese “flexible kinship”). Historically, kin were born into one family, their “natal family” (*niangjia*; Wolf 1972). When women married, their productive and reproductive labor was transferred to their husband’s family, where they arrived by “moving the home” (*banjia*) and “completing the home” (*chengjia*). Hence their sense of belonging and claims to land, houses, and children was built up over time as they, in turn, created their own family, particularly by bearing, nourishing, and raising children (Judd 2009).

The birth of sons, especially, helped secure the status for wives, although families also made claims over daughters based on their past care in Sweeping Cliff (see Wolf 1972).⁴ Conversely, children both practically created, and ritually recognized, their mothers and fathers (Sangren 2000; Zito 1987). Not only did children's births turn adults into parents, but adult children, in turn, cared for senior kin and made offerings to them as ancestors (Stafford 2000). While the Maoist state dismantled the backbone of patriliney by confiscating lineage property, providing wives with inheritance rights, and enforcing bureaucratic accounting on kin, it simultaneously strengthened patrilocalty through household registration and resource allocation (Zhang 2009; Friedman 2006).

Maoist policies extended labor and kinship claims of home through the redistribution of key resources in Sweeping Cliff. Across China, cadres assigned class labels on the basis of family history and revolutionary work, branding families with these inherited badges of privilege and stigma for decades (Walder 2015). In Shanxi, houses were transferred from the descendants of wealthy merchant landlords to veterans of the revolution, landless peasants, and household servants based on kinship associations and revolutionary contributions (Hinton 1966). During the Maoist years, work teams and brigades organized agricultural labor, compensating villagers for their labor with work points needed to gain access to basic necessities (Liu 2000). Women's domestic work on the "inner sphere" (*nei*) became devalued as their work on the "outside" (*wai*) in fields and other workplaces gained recognition, and even status, through the work points, although women often received fewer points than their male counterparts (Herschatter 2011; Jacka 1997; Judd 1994). In short, kinship-based logics actually became absorbed into the work-based logics of place, belonging, and claims making in subsequent socialist policies.

The dismantling of rural brigades in the Reform Era released village labor from compulsory participation in agriculture. As the Shanxi economy expanded its coal production and heavy industries in the 1980s, many Sweeping Cliff men entered work in mining and associated industries, such as logistics, refineries, smelting, chemicals, and construction, often organized by township village enterprises, entrepreneurial companies, or state-owned corporations. In the 1990s, younger Sweeping Cliff women also ventured beyond the village for employment, joining the workforce in the urban valley, especially in the growing service sectors of education, hotels, transport, and office jobs. By the 2000s this initially gendered, and then

generational, transformation led to an increasing feminization and subsequent aging of agricultural and household work in the village, especially as retired men returned to the village to join their wives in the courtyards and fields. These older couples often took on the care not just for each other but also for grandchildren left in the village while parents commuted or lived in urban centers.

As the necessities for making a livelihood shifted, so did lifecycle dynamics, with younger men and women pursuing very different life projects from their parents and parents-in-law. They often contributed primarily to village households in monetized forms, through either passing on wages to parents and grandparents or purchasing household and consumer goods. While young people sought to fulfill new hopes and aspirations through their education and employment, parents and grandparents reflected on old hardships or shouldered new sacrifices in enabling the next generation to follow their ambitions for work and family life. However, the post-Mao state's restrictive family planning policy dispossessed families of their reproductive autonomy (see Greenhalgh 1993) and led kin to find new ways to claim offspring as descendants beyond patrilineal norms and bureaucratic accounting, including through commoditized contributions and caring labor (Bruckermann 2019).

The increasing integration of rural livelihoods into the urban valley expanded spheres of engagement from face-to-face interactions with familiar people and toward the necessity for constant interactions with strangers, sometimes even through online spheres that lost all trace of identification to anonymity (see Yan 2011). As elsewhere in China, the resulting transformations of morality, responsibility, and trust affected understandings of personhood, belonging, and locality (Guo et al. 2011). Moreover, this shifting moral landscape became infused with anxieties arising from the increasingly stark and perceptible inequalities emerging across and within the local rural-urban terrain. The tourism operations that entered Sweeping Cliff provide a poignant example of this process, as they quite literally invited “outsiders” (*waidiren*) into the heart of the village. As urban school classes, workplace outings, and family excursions poured through Sweeping Cliff alleys, temples, and tunnels, residents attempted to host, or rebuff, visitors. From tracing tourism routes to staging ritual events, villagers were caught between performing affective attachment through bodily, verbal, and commodified forms of expression, as they worked to make themselves, their kin, and their guests feel at home.

This transformation of belonging to a home transmuted through scales of identification from the house up to the nation. Naturalized

claims of home thereby eclipsed hierarchies, exploitation, and inequality through encompassing notions of belonging at various scales across time. Nonetheless, these claims were based on work and care rather than property rights. They carried connotations of a homegrown logic of labor underwriting claims over persons, things, and projects. Sedimented with kinship ethics, but also suffused with Marxist labor theories of value, these claims were reinforced by the Maoist state distribution of resources and refracted in contradictory ways on to the post-Maoist terrain. These labor-based and home-oriented claims met, and sometimes contradicted, the legal, rights-based discourse espoused by the post-Mao state and its agents of development.

The home as a relational mechanism for claims making operated within larger dispossessive processes that allowed Sweeping Cliff residents to defy, accommodate, and even exploit these processes. While reproducing the home in the face of dislocation appears as resilience and refusal, these activities became recuperated by capitalism as it allowed exploitation in cities, factories, and even the newly formed tourism services in the old village. Therefore, even these labor-based claims around belonging carried ambivalent implications. As notions of home became enacted at the family, village, or regional and national levels, appeals to home became both stratified and unified. This fostered collectivities that ameliorated dispossession for some and allowed some to benefit, yet simultaneously extracted and exacerbated dispossession for others. This shows that dispossession, development, and domicile do not necessarily form unilineal or causal chains. While claims of home proved resilient and even resurgent against waves of dispossession, red capitalism and socialist sovereignty suffused and legitimized even some of these most intimate inequalities.

The Ins and Outs of Fieldwork

Fieldwork as a foreigner in Shanxi did not lend itself to a smooth narrative of arrival. Several failed attempts at receiving access, obtaining permits, and getting registrations with bureaucratic gatekeepers meant that I spent four months traveling and networking in the spring of 2009. These activities eventually culminated in a situation where effort gave rise to “serendipity” (see Pieke 2000) and I was able to settle in a village, an “arbitrary location” in these sense that it had to be bordered and bounded through “cutting the network” of

potentially infinite connections emanating from this core locale (see Candea 2007). Only a handful of foreign social scientists have conducted long-term fieldwork in the province of over 36 million people and published the resulting research on the Reform Era in English (including Goodman 2002, 2006; Jones 2007; Carrillo 2011; Husman 2011). In a region plagued by labor scandals, mining collapses, residential relocations, and pervasive pollution, the provincial government seemed unenthusiastic about “opening up” to foreigners, even three decades after Deng Xiaoping’s initial reforms.

Eventually a powerful local workplace took on responsibility for my stay vis-à-vis the public security bureau, a mining corporation that had diversified into energy, construction, and tourism operations. The president of the Triumph Corporation agreed to host me institutionally and made my fieldwork possible, in the name of academic research and in the interest of development. Sweeping Cliff’s village historian helped me find a family willing to put up with an incompetent and nosy foreigner for over a year in 2009–2010. I have since returned several times, usually for a few weeks at a time, visiting friends and neighbors, although most residents have relocated to the “new village” (*xin cun*) built across the road.

My host family provided the foundation for my involvement in everyday life, as working, eating, sleeping, and speaking with villagers gradually eroded the privilege and distance associated with the powerful patronage of the tourism development company. Each day in the village was different, spent in workplaces that included homes, fields, construction sites, shops, restaurants, and offices, as well as more idiosyncratic labor locations, including with street hawkers, with a divination specialist, at a pig farm, at a stone quarry, at a medical clinic, and at a direct sales meeting for feminine hygiene products. The tourism development company not only hosted my stay bureaucratically but also offered insights into corporate work life and the emerging service industry in the village despite also eliciting some suspicion and distrust in the village regarding my intentions.

Village celebrations, especially birthdays, weddings, and funerals, but also annual events like market days and festive rituals offered opportunities to meet and discuss with diverse people. At lifecycle events I became a particularly welcome guest once news of my peculiar snapshots and excellent camera spread, and I basically acted as the village photographer for a year. My main research methods incorporated participant observation, life histories, ritual practices, object elicitations, formal interviews, architectural history, academic articles, newspaper articles, and historical resources such as the

local gazetteer. An attempted survey of houses and households fell flat due to suspicions around their future use. Family histories, in particular, became central to my research, providing insights into complex, entangled lives that more formal techniques would never have revealed.

At times, those initial suspicions proved justified, partly due to my ignorance about the risks of certain types of information, including the illicit, embarrassing, or traumatic dynamics of everyday life. Luckily, the generous vigilance of others saved me from harming participants, as I guarded details more carefully, and even followed recommendations to retreat from pursuing particular lines of inquiry. Many of these difficulties were initially compounded with language difficulties, as the local Shanxi *Jin* dialect is mutually unintelligible from standard Mandarin (*Putonghua*) and considered by many linguists to be a separate language entirely. As my *Jin* improved I realized how quickly the language was changing, with young people sometimes struggling to understand their own grandparents. As time wore on, I was finally able to chat with senior villagers, such as the “old ladies” (*laotaitai*) who had rarely ventured beyond the village since marriage. Some villagers became excited, insistent, and sometimes even adamant that I capture their life experiences in writing, beckoning me into their courtyards or summoning me to their banquet tables and demanding I put pen to paper and record their explications, experiences, and perspectives. I can only hope I do justice to the parts of their lives they shared with me.

Organization of the Book

The first part of the book unearths the historical legacy of the village, particularly focusing on struggles over resources under contradictions of state accumulation and socialist sovereignty. The opening chapter situates Sweeping Cliff within broader historical transformations, throwing light on the mountain village’s uncertain position within Shanxi province’s shifting political and economic terrain. Maoist policies suffused divine and domestic spaces, leaving formerly collective spaces particularly vulnerable to the incursion of commercial nationalism under subsequent market reforms. As red capitalism reoriented these spaces in the name of development, villagers’ claims for residence through logics of kinship and labor were undermined. The second chapter turns to how these claims over homes were created, mobilized, and sustained in homes. Unpacking a seeming

clash of ideological commitments between the God of Wealth and Chairman Mao reveals how families championed national contributions to building socialism, while concealing inherited wealth and privilege in the home.

Expanding on staking claims to the home as a place, the second part of the book turns to how villagers reproduced and claimed kin as children and spouses. The third chapter traces generational inversions of inequality, as children were left behind in the care of senior kin, particularly grandparents. Cooperation and conflict marked negotiations of childbirth, childcare, and celebrations of survival that coalesced around birthdays. Kin vied to claim offspring by contributing labor, care, and commodities and asserted descent through Confucian lineages and registration by the state bureaucracy, despite devaluations revolving around population policies targeting “human quality” (*suzhi*). Marriage affords another prism on kinship claims in this uneven rural-urban terrain, where income, inheritance, and romance come to the fore in negotiating wedding transfers of money, goods, houses, and emotions. Caught between obligations and aspirations of making a good match, men and women struggled to safeguard their futures despite the gendered inequalities in residential, educational, occupational, and affective expectations. At the intersection of memory and desire, a discourse of “homesickness” (*xiangjia*) emerged across the emotional ruptures of spatial and social mobility.

The third part of the book traces the changing role of agriculture, industry, and service economy labor within the market economy and the ongoing solidification of red capitalism in the region. As government bureaus and corporate enterprises carved up the countryside for development, rural citizens attempted to implicate state legitimacy in defending their vulnerable position through socialist sovereignty as a “moral economy.” Chapter five turns to agriculture and its shifting role in rural life under the expansion of rural services. Through food production, distribution, and consumption, villagers forged affection and belonging while creating boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Changing ideals of health, beauty, and work revealed the legacy of socialist sovereignty in the spread of red capitalism. Tour guides and network marketers, in particular, romanticized and commodified their ruralness as part of the service industry in the village.

Nonetheless, the following chapter reveals how rural citizens who increasingly dispersed across the urbanizing valley experienced the uneven developments that could put life itself at risk, as well as

threaten attachments to the locality as home. The promise of urban opportunities came at the expense of mistrust, anonymity, and insecurity, as the perils of urban integration and interactions with strangers created a wariness toward the city, particularly due to airborne pollution, rampant corruption, and social competition in the valley. This politics of suspicion, as well as trust in person-to-person action (*minjian*), crystallized during an earthquake scare that spread through telecommunications and social media across the region in the dead of night.

The final sections of the book reflect on the counterpastoral approach to the countryside that reveals how notions of home continue, although not always in familiar forms. Through a focus on the work, toil, and labor in the countryside, the home emerged as both a workplace and a place created by work. Contradictions between capital accumulation and state legitimization became sutured through the emergence of red capitalism in Shanxi, which allowed commodified markets and socialist sovereignty to coexist. Rather than offering resolutions to the frictions and conflicts between local residents under increasing social differentiation, these forms pave the way for processes of devaluation, dispossession, and dislocation that nonetheless unfold in highly uneven ways, benefiting some while disadvantaging others.

Notes

1. Names have been changed throughout the book to provide anonymity, except for people who requested to be named in the study. In rare instances, identifying personal information has been altered to protect research participants.
2. While the term “peasant” and “peasantry” often involves antiquated and stigmatizing connotations in English, identification with the term *nongmin* forms part of everyday, contemporary discourse in China. *Nongmin* literally translates as “rural citizen,” and I use this translation alongside the “peasant” designation. I retain the term “peasant” over the translation of “farmer” as more neutral in English, as the latter implies an agricultural livelihood that many Chinese *nongmin*, living in cities as well as the countryside, are turning away from. In referring to *nongmin* in the countryside, I sometimes translate interchangeably with “rural resident,” as the category is defined officially through rural household registration (*hukou*). However, it is worth noting that rural migrants in the cities continue to be referred to by their official designation as *nongmin* or, sometimes, *nongmingong*, “peasant workers” unless they manage to change their household registration to the “urban citizen” (*shimin*) designation.
3. David Goodman (2002: 837) originally translated and cited this excerpt of Hu Fuguo’s speech.

4. Historically, children could be incorporated into the family through the care of senior women: by adopting a son; by raising a future daughter-in-law; through claiming the reproductive power of junior wives, concubines, or servants by raising their child as one's own (Judd 2009; Bruckermann 2017a).