

REVIEW OF YAN HAIRONG'S "NEW MASTERS, NEW SERVANTS"

Yan Hairong. *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2008. 328 pp.

In *New Masters, New Servants* (2008), Yan Hairong explores the discursive and material conditions under which Chinese domestic workers labour, both physically and mentally. In the years following Mao's death in 1978, she argues, the discourse of Development¹ has become hegemonic, structuring practices, relationships, and subjectivities around the teleology of capitalist accumulation. Yet Yan's analysis of the keywords² involved in this discourse shows that, while in many ways China has embraced the ideology of capitalism and of Development, it remains clothed in the language of Marxist-Leninist socialism. This produces what Yan, following Derrida, terms "catachresis" – "literally, the improper or strained use of a word" (2008:5). As does Derrida, Yan uses the term in a specialized political sense to refer to "a violent production of meaning, an abuse which refers to no anterior or proper norm" (p. 251).

Through the analysis of a wide range of textual materials – ethnographic field notes, interview transcripts, letters, magazine articles, and short stories – collected between 1998 and 2000, Yan builds her argument that the keywords of socialism, and the associations they still possess with the social order that produced their

meanings, have been transformed into discursive support for the expansion of neoliberalism in China. Furthermore, she argues that through these ideological contortions, peasant women migrating to the cities find themselves in deeply exploitative subject positions in which their worth as persons is linked to their value as both a part of the apparatus of capitalism and as a symbol of it – yet their ability to fully embrace this subjectivity is constrained by these same discursive and material conditions.

Yan begins with a description of the violence, both symbolic and material, that has been perpetrated against the countryside. While the countryside was the ideological centre of Maoist China, serving as a training ground for party elites and as a symbol of the collectivity and equality promised by Chinese communism, in the post-Mao era both the economic and ideological futures of the nation-state are predicated on the centrality of cities. Although cities are constructed as reliant on surplus labour from the countryside, Yan argues, this posited transfer of surplus does not really occur. Instead of taking excess labour power and valuing it, the city attracts the youngest and strongest – those most needed in the countryside. In

addition, this labour power is not, in fact, greatly needed in the cities. While rural workers are indeed cheaper to employ than urban workers, rising urban unemployment and the difficulty of finding work attest to the fact that the supply of workers may in fact be greater than the demand.

The material depletion of the countryside of its populace (and their wages) is mirrored by its ideological construction as a place of backwardness and poverty – a place where a future cannot be found. Young rural women cannot reconcile the modernized subject positions they develop with remaining at home. The construction of the rural as backward contributes to the unwillingness of the young to base their futures there; this in turn causes material scarcity and justifies and reinforces the discourse of rural poverty.

In chapter 2, Yan shifts her focus from the countryside to the city. Here, she discusses the historical and political context that surrounds the position of *baomu* (domestic worker), and follows this with a close examination of what it means to be a “good” or “proper” *baomu* (p. 70). Again she bases her analysis in a contrast between the practices of the late Mao-era and the post-Mao economic reforms, focusing on the construction of domestic work and attending particularly to its gendered and class-based facets.

Initially, Yan argues the introduction of domestic wage labour was justified through the discourse of “the

intellectuals’ burdens” (p. 57). This was the idea that, because China’s progress depended so heavily on the work of particular highly educated members of society, expecting them to fulfil household duties in addition to their work outside the home placed them under unreasonable strain and endangered China’s economic future. Drawing on a 1980 novella by Shen Rong, in which a female doctor collapses under the dual burden of her work outside the home and her gendered responsibilities within it, Yan argues that using the bodies of uneducated domestic workers to relieve this burden was validated as a necessary practice in order to allow the “intellectuals” to do their work of moving the nation forward. In order for a *baomu* to fulfil this role, she should ideally be a “blank slate,” able to uncritically adopt the desires and practices of her employers until she is “of one heart and mind” with them (p. 93). Today, Yan writes, “domestic work as a burden has ... changed from being a central part of the discourse of intellectuals’ burdens, which issued a moral appeal for state concern and social sympathy, to being part of an individualized cost-benefit calculation of time management” (p. 80). While the idea that the interests of the nation are being served by relieving intellectuals of domestic work has faded, parts of this discourse have lived on. *Baomu* are still expected to be “blank slates” on which employers’ tastes, desires and interests can be inscribed, but the ideological justification has changed. The individual exchange between *baomu* and employer is emphasized, with the needs of the state downpla-

yed. The employer receives the labour power, while the baomu earns not only her (meagre) wage, but increases her *suzhi*, a term that “refers to the somewhat ephemeral qualities of civility, self-discipline, and modernity” (p. 113).

The discourse of *suzhi* is the focus of the third chapter. The claim is often made by Chinese journalists and academics that the level of *suzhi* among the Chinese population, particularly in the countryside, is low. But what is *suzhi*, exactly? How can it be measured? Yan claims that, “as a catch-all discursive basket, *suzhi*, empty in itself, is a mode of expression that aspires to shape all expressions” (p. 119). It is in *suzhi*’s capacity to contribute to the teleology of development that it can be defined, and its presence or absence identified. In practice, however, it seems that *suzhi* is predicated more on the consumption aspects of development than on those of production, and demonstrated through one’s habits of dress, self-presentation and acquisition of commercial goods.

Chapter 4 deals with the relationship between consumption and production, arguing that, while Mao-era political practices emphasized production as the path to modernity, reform-era policies place consumption at the centre of the equation. The entrepreneurial development of the self as a consuming subject is viewed as necessary for the progress of the nation, rendering commodity purchases vital to one’s identity as a modern Chinese citizen. Chapter 5 follows this by further outlining the

notion of self-development, and linking it to “the spectre of class” (p. 187). Yan notes substantial changes to understandings of material inequality from the Maoist era to the present. Under Mao’s rule, class was understood as an inevitable, and inevitably negative, attribute of the capitalist state – the primary attribute that necessitated the (also inevitable) process of revolution. As a communist state, China was not to have “classes.” As increasing inequality has emerged in the post-Mao reform era, politicians and intellectuals have had to account for this divide in a country that still claims to be communist. Thus class, in both its past and present incarnations, is reframed. Rather than being viewed as an inherent feature of economic systems that privilege private ownership, its existence in the pre-communist period is blamed on “backward” productive forces: the material conditions of possibility did not allow for an equal or just society (p. 194). In the present era, social differentiation is framed as “strata,” a term with less baggage and no revolutionary connotations. This transition is supported by the discourse of self-development through placing responsibility for transformation on the individual rather than on the collective social structure. “When one recognizes the self as one’s biggest enemy, the need for radical change in the self replaces the potential demand for social change: self-antagonism takes the place of social antagonism” (p. 198).

The sixth and final chapter ties together the strands of discourse and

social structure, materiality and ideology, into Yan's overarching argument: that Chinese domestic workers are caught up in the teleology of development as its "liminal subjects" (p. 221). They are both producers of wage labour and producers of selves for consumption, subordinated and exploited in a society that refuses to acknowledge the existence of class and so locates the responsibility for their inferior position in their own efforts and quality. These women are thus trapped between an "emaciated countryside" that once was home but holds no future and an idealized city that will allow them entry only as players of the least valued roles – and sometimes not even that.

Yan does a thorough and compelling job of joining the threads of her argument together, drawing on what appears to be a vast body of ethnographic data to support an incisive critique of China's neoliberal reform policies. Although her area of focus is the realm of the discursive, she effectively balances attention to ideology and representation with the material realities of China's cities and countryside. Initially, I was doubtful of the relevance of a Foucauldian governmentality framework in a non-Western context. Foucault's own disinterest in "grand theory" and his heavy reliance on European history in formulating his own arguments make it risky to apply them to regions where the development of political rationalities has been so different from the West. However, Yan's careful use of this theoretical orientation comes off, in the context of her topic, as entirely appropriate,

as well as implying points of comparison that resonate with Western readers. By pairing insights from post-structural theory with a non-teleological reading of Marx, Yan provides a nuanced analysis of the structures of power, both internal and external, that operate on her subjects, though it is not a standpoint that allows much hope for change. While stiff and jargon-laden at first, her writing also warmed up appreciably throughout the text, conveying with a certain eloquence her dismay at the misappropriation of socialist discourse to validate what she convincingly argues are exploitative policies.

My sole criticism of *New Masters, New Servants* is one that applies to a great deal of recent work in anthropology: I refer here to the broad lack of engagement with linguistic theory. Traditionally, one of the strengths anthropology has claimed has been its "four field" nature, which allowed scholars to examine issues from multiple angles. In recent decades, however, the discipline has fragmented. Archaeology and physical anthropology now occupy a theoretical ground much removed from cultural anthropology, and the two poles often fail to converse with one another. Linguistics has retreated in another direction, forging its own space where language, an inherently social practice, is treated as a self-contained system separate from social life. Anthropologists, in turn, may feel uncomfortable with the admittedly reductionist cognitive models linguists employed to understand the production and interpretation of

language.

A field of research that has attempted to breach this divide is critical discourse analysis (CDA). Scholars working within this program employ both linguistic and social theory to understand how language is both reflective and constitutive of social life (see, for example, Wodak & Meyer 2009 for an introduction). There exists a fairly well recognized division, however, between discourse analysis that takes Foucauldian theory and the post-structuralist work of Derrida and Lacan as its theoretical core, and CDA, which relies more heavily upon grammatical theory and, in some cases, cognitive linguistics (Graham 2008:3). Clearly, Yan's work falls into the first category, and I do not mean to imply that this approach is less valuable. There are unresolved questions within CDA about its ability to make the types of truth claims it sometimes aims to, and for this reason (as well as, perhaps, a lack of training in linguistic methodologies), anthropologists have often avoided it. However, the grounding of social analysis in the micro-level features of discourse could potentially add a further dimension to a great deal of discourse-based social science. While CDA may not provide a model all scholars wish to embrace, it does, at the very least, demonstrate the depth of insights that can be gained through attention to linguistic detail.

A lack of engagement with CDA is hardly a gaping hole in Yan's book. Yet her work does appear to me to be illustrative of the type of research

for which a micro-level analysis of the features of texts as well as their contexts could be illuminating. A more concerted effort to reintegrate linguistic scholarship with anthropology would, in my view, benefit both disciplines, providing innovative methodologies to anthropologists with which to triangulate broad claims about social structure, while reminding linguists that their study of the technicalities of language as a system must remain relevant to the world in which that system is used.

NOTES

¹ Yan notes: "I use 'Development' with a capital D to refer to a certain discourse of developmentalism promoted by organizations of North-dominated international capital, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank" (Yan 2008:115).

² Raymond Williams defines these lexical items as "keywords in two connected senses: they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought" (Williams 1976, in Yan 2008:1-2).

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