CHAPTER TWO

Stepping Out

Contesting the Moral Career from Peasant to Overseas Chinese

Before, we loved the two characters *geming* [revolution] the most. People all said, "No revolution, no way [forward]. . . ." Now it's all about the *kaifang* [opening up] model. No opening up, no way [forward].

—Party Secretary Liu, Longyan Non-Peasant Resident Committee

On the third day of the new lunar year in 2002, an unprecedented crowd of more than fifteen hundred people packed into the last plot of farmland along the south side of the river in Longyan. On this occasion, the only barren dirt plot remaining amid cemented roads and colorfully tiled five- and six-story mansions had been transformed into an enormous outdoor banquet in order to celebrate the grand opening of an adjacent high-rise senior center and a new kindergarten nearby. Along the wide paved road leading into the banquet area, a line of heavily rouged school girls in sailor outfits waved silk flowers above their heads in time to a blaring marching band, greeting pedestrians with a synchronized flutter of hands as they approached the celebration.

This was just the beginning of the visual dazzle the festivities had to offer. Inside the banquet area, guests seated at one of the 150 round dining tables were treated to a smorgasbord of musical and dance performances on a large stage constructed at the front and center of the plot. Beyond ballad singers, drumming troupes, and folk dancers, the entertainment showcased a daring acrobatic troupe who electrified the audience by alternately jumping through hoops of fire and bursting into back-spinning break-dancing moves including an occasional moonwalk. But perhaps the most dazzling sight of all hovered above the heads of the guests in the form

FIGURE 7 Grand opening celebration for Longyan's new senior center and kindergarten. Balloons overhead list contributing organizations, including several overseas Chinese groups.

of twenty-seven gigantic multicolored balloons swaying gently in the sky (figure 7).

Large, flowing banners attached to each balloon named the major sponsors for the banquet and the new buildings, which the festival was celebrating. Seven of these banners displayed the names of overseas Chinese organizations, including the U.S.-Longyan United Association (Meiguo Longyan Lianhehui). To foreground the presence of overseas Chinese even more, another large banner, stretching across the face of the senior center, gave specific thanks to "village relatives abroad" (*haiwai xiangqin*).

In a succession of speeches on stage, officials, local luminaries, and representatives from overseas Chinese organizations singled out the growing overseas population as a sign of Longyan's arrival at the doorstep of modernity. "Today, we at last can say right here that we've succeeded! Longyan's succeeded!" declared Party Secretary Chen, the village cadre leader responsible for peasant administration. Boasting of the more than three thousand village relatives abroad and their large financial contribu-

tion to these construction projects, Secretary Chen spoke optimistically of continual overseas support for state-sponsored projects, noting that with more collaboration between officials and overseas Chinese, "Our ancient exuberant Longyan can go from today's springboard to tomorrow's glorious prosperity with real and rapid speed!"

Following Secretary Chen's lead, the next three speakers—all representatives of the overseas population—touted the commitment and contributions of the overseas Chinese toward the progress and modernization of their community. On stage with the same ceremonial red sash and bow, the overseas representatives and officials from provincial, city, district, and village administrations all linked arms in front of the banquet guests at one point, prompting Secretary Chen to announce through the loudspeaker, "Reporters, please come take your photos now."

This orchestrated show of united leadership and cooperation had nearly run its course when one of the last speakers, a representative of the Fujian-U.S. government office, punctured the celebratory mood by casting doubt on the priorities and collaborative spirit of overseas villagers. Following some initial upbeat remarks, the official paused tentatively before declaring that he was there "to remind our overseas Chinese residing abroad [*luwai huaqiao*] to give a portion of supportive funding to their native homes." Striking a less confident tone than other speakers, the official soberly urged the audience to "carry on the village-loving, nation-loving spirit from this event to more building of schools, less building of temples." He continued: "Let's use funds from abroad on education, on useful things. We encourage you to follow this direction. Look at how things are here today; it's probably very difficult to successfully get us provincial, city, district leaders—major leaders at different levels—to participate in this banquet. This just goes to show how concerned all of us at different levels of government are for overseas Chinese, how we hope that they care more about their native homes, about construction, education, the building up of these aspects."

The official's comments sent a ripple through the audience, some of whom laughed and shook their heads while others whispered into each other's ears. He had clearly touched a nerve by highlighting the social distinctions between officials and village residents, a point that previous speakers had carefully papered over with more congratulatory and unifying remarks. Not only did he suggest that Longyan residents were lucky to be eating at the same banquet as "major leaders," but he also suggested that all these leaders were at the celebration only because they were not

quite convinced that villagers and their overseas kin had successfully transformed themselves into the kind of dynamic, productive subjects that the label *huaqiao* suggested.[1]

Without so many words, the official had managed to raise the specter of the "peasant" (*nongmin*)—the official state identification most people in the audience still held, despite their links to a large overseas population. Although most people I knew identified themselves as members of *huaqiao* families, as long as they themselves were still stuck in Longyan, they remained self-conscious of their political classification as peasants under village administration.

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This chapter examines some of the tensions and contradictions in villagers' transition from peasant identification to overseas Chinese status. Specifically, I offer a cross-class analysis of the divergent and often clashing narratives of peasant mobility among village cadres, urbanites, and Longyan's state-classified peasants themselves. In order to understand villagers' current aspirations and strategies for going abroad, I argue that we need to look first at the political classifications established under the household registration system (*hukou*) in the late 1950s, which effectively reordered and immobilized the majority of Longyan residents under the category of "peasant." The bureaucratic paper trail that circumscribed people's lives under the household registration system made villagers highly conscious not only of their "file selves" (Chatterji 1998; Goffman 1962) but also of the divergent futures enabled by different political classifications.

As I will show, state identifications not only legalized claims to personhood, but they also entitled their possessors to enact particular "moral careers"—that is, what Erving Goffman described as the possible sequence of changes and transitions over a life course that constituted both one's "image of self and felt identity" and one's "framework for judging [the self] and others" (1962, 127–28). At once public and personal, moral careers produced social "selves," as Goffman noted, by conflating "common character" and "common fate" (129). As such, moral careers worked to naturalize social differences by tracing certain pasts to certain futures for distinct categories of persons. They did this dialectically through the internalization of "felt identity," on the one hand, and through the externalization of official, juridical, and socially legible forms of identification

on the other. This chapter focuses on the latter aspect of moral careers and particularly on the ways state identification has mediated social horizons and destinies in China over the Mao and post-Mao years. The people of Longyan, as I will show, were precisely *not* the kind of state subjects expected to chart trajectories abroad as Chinese cosmopolitans. In turn, to fully understand their desires and struggles for becoming overseas Chinese, it is necessary to examine what moral careers Longyan residents could imagine in the first place and specifically what it meant for villagers to inhabit the state classification of "peasant" in China. As this chapter argues, the kinds of strategies Longyan residents developed for going overseas have roots in the socialist registration system, where people long sought unauthorized means for transcending state expectations of peasant subjects. Ultimately, villagers' views of state identification as a sign of potentiality rather than ontology or unchanging essence provide the key for understanding their current approach to questions of legality and morality as would-be migrants and aspiring overseas Chinese.

The Moral Career of the Peasant

Nongmin, commonly translated as "peasant" in English, was the kind of state identification that reeked of social and economic limitations, both in Longyan and in other places across China. To be identified as such was to be cast into the static backwaters of Chinese society as part of the "backward," "superstitious," and unproductive rural masses. The figure of the *nongmin*, as Myron Cohen has argued, was a modern cultural invention of early-twentieth-century Chinese elites—both Communist and non-Communist—constructed precisely as "an image of the old society that had to be rejected" in order to create a "new liberated society" (1993, 152–53; Guldin 2001; Kipnis 1995b; Ruf 1998). Cohen notes that in the elite urban imagination *nongmin* described a rural population that was "intellectually and culturally crippled by 'superstition' . . . a major obstacle to national development and salvation" (1993, 154).

Although the term *nongmin* was already in circulation before the Communist Revolution, it was not until the Maoist regime that the label was formally adopted and solidified as part of the Chinese state's official system of political classification and registration (Cohen 1993; Potter and Potter 1990a). While in rhetoric Mao himself often sang the praises of poor peasants as the backbone of the Communist Revolution, in practice

the Maoist regime instituted distinctions between the rural and the urban populations that were far from favorable to state-classified peasants.[2]

By the late 1950s under the policy of household registration, the central government established a residential system that essentially fixed people "permanently on the basis of their birth place or their husband's residence" (Solinger 1999, 35). The main distinction was between agricultural and nonagricultural status, which roughly corresponded to rural and urban residence respectively (T. Cheng and Selden 1997; MacKenzie 2002; Potter and Potter 1990a; Torpey 1997). Although the registration system was initially intended to establish people's residence mainly for monitoring population distributions and movement, following the economic catastrophe and famines of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), it quickly ossified into what anthropologists Sulamith Potter and Jack Potter (1990a) described as "a caste-like system of social stratification," isolating rural inhabitants from the more privileged urban dwellers.

From the late 1950s forward, a veritable paper barrier was established between rural and urban areas. Under the household registration system, a peasant could not gain physical entrance into cities or access to rationed food, employment, housing, or any other state resources without first presenting all sorts of registration-related paperwork—a certificate of urban employment, proof of school admission, "moving-in" and "moving-out" certificates issued by the police in one's destination and current residence respectively (T. Cheng and Selden 1997; Torpey 1997).[3] In effect, household registration became an internal passport system, fixing the entire population within a "spatial hierarchy" of unequal and bounded rural and urban entities (T. Cheng and Selden 1997). Between cities and rural areas, there were great disparities in the quality of life and opportunities for advancement.[4] As Dorothy Solinger noted, "The *hukou*—very much as a badge of citizenship in a Western society would do—determined a person's entire life chances, including social rank, wage, welfare, food rations (when these were in use), and housing" (1999, 4). "In every sphere," Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden argued, "city was privileged over the countryside, state-sector workers over collective farmers" (1997, 46).

In a place like Longyan, which had mainly relied on nonagricultural and translocal kinds of labor (such as from the military, fishing, construction, and transportation) before the Second World War, the reclassification of most people as peasants was experienced as an extremely artificial imposition from above and their confinement to compulsory agricultural

work in the countryside as a dramatic narrowing of their social world and life chances under Mao. Though some villagers classified as peasants were occasionally dispatched as temporary workers on particular nonagricultural projects in Fuzhou City, people tended to paper over such complications when describing the generally immobilizing effects of peasant status under state socialism. For instance, when recalling life under the rural commune system (1958–1979), villagers routinely launched into a long litany of laborious tasks—hoeing the fields, drawing water, planting sweet potatoes in the mountains, collecting timber and edible wild herbs and weeds—to illustrate just how all-consuming and "very bitter" (*hen ku*) it was to embody a peasant identity during the Mao years. Typically, this outline of dawn-to-dusk hard labor would be followed by memories of meager meals and hunger. I was always particularly struck by the consistency of people's narratives of eating wild herbs (*yecai*) scrounged from the mountains surrounding Longyan. As one elderly man noted, "For us there were many hungry stomachs, a lot of people with their feet swollen this big [as a result of hunger] and who had to go gather wild herbs to eat. All you get is this bit of vegetables to eat, never really feeling full."

Maoist policies promoting provincial self-sufficiency in grain production were particularly disastrous for a region like Fujian, which, with only 10 percent arable land, had traditionally depended on translocal trade, remittances, and food inflows to feed its population (Lyons 1999; Yeung and Chu 2000). Villages like Longyan along Fujian's coast, which had never relied on farming for survival, were especially hampered by Maoist development strategies tying the "peasants' " well-being to their success in producing grain for both the urban industrial workforce and themselves. Moreover, because only urban residents were entitled to state allocations of food and other basic resources, "peasants" like those in Longyan were expected to distribute the bulk of their agricultural output to first feed their urban neighbors before fending for themselves with whatever happened to be left over. Given the limited agricultural land and work experience of the many state-classified peasants who farmed under the rural commune system in coastal Fujian, it was not surprising that urban centers like Fuzhou were sustained largely through the impoverishment and, at times, starvation of those farming on its rural outskirts. As economist Thomas Lyons has shown through a comparison of county-level data in Fujian during the Mao era, huge disparities in income between Fuzhou City and its adjacent rural counties pointed to how "cities became islands

of wealth, with very little in the way of spillovers affecting welfare outside its borders" (1999, 964).

Beyond inadequate access to food and other basic staples, many, like Zhu Huarong, a married mother of two in her forties, also resented that such backbreaking work in the fields and mountains kept villagers from attaining the same educational levels as city residents. Zhu Huarong specifically told me that she was forced to drop out of the second grade when her mother fell ill and needed someone else in the family to assume her burden of agricultural labor and household chores during the Mao era. Her mother, she told me with pride, had had the leisure to learn how to write before the Communist Revolution, a skill Zhu Huarong had never had the chance to master as a "peasant." While older residents like Zhu Huarong's mother fondly recalled the early Mao years (1949–1956) as a period of much optimism and prosperity for peasants, almost everyone who had lived through rural collectivization and the disastrous Great Leap Forward pointed to "peasant" identification as a source of sufferings and persistent disadvantages under the CCP.

Inequalities experienced by the peasant population in Longyan were sharpened by the existence of a small minority of villagers with nonagricultural status, most significantly party cadres but also teachers, workers, and a few others, all of whom were assigned to work units. Since I happened to be living with a family of cadre members and worked among teachers as a volunteer at the middle school, I often witnessed the lived tensions and divisions among people of different household registration status. Most people in fact pointed explicitly to *hukou* identifications as the root of social inequalities among Longyan residents. Non-peasants, however, were much more likely to naturalize *hukou* status as ontology and explain peasant disadvantages as a result of the peasants' entire way of being, an expected outcome of their inherent "peasantness," so to speak. Middle-school teachers I knew—most of whom had grown up in Fuzhou City—often criticized the poor performance and undisciplined behavior of their students by noting that "peasants are just this way" (*nongmin jiushi zheiyang*). In contrast, Zhang Wen, a young mother in her early thirties, told me that it was because of the unfair stigma of peasant status itself that her older sister had failed to gain admission to high school, even though she had consistently gotten higher marks than a classmate from a cadre household who went on to become a college professor. Although her sister was at the top of her class, Zhang Wen believed that this other

student's superior status as a non-peasant had entitled her to preferential treatment for high school admissions. In this case, Zhang Wen saw nothing natural about peasant identification, only unjust structural disadvantages, which she blamed for her sister's dashed prospects.

While reform-era policies in the past two decades have eased the physical restriction of peasants to the countryside, they have done little to close the social and economic gaps between those with urban and rural *hukou* identifications. By the early 1980s, following the end of the rural commune system and the decollectivization of agricultural land, Longyan residents classified as peasants were no longer bound to agricultural labor in the village. However, although the economic reform policies gave new incentives for people to branch out into village enterprises and a variety of other productive labor, most villagers remained "administrative peasants" under the household registration system (Cohen 1993, 166).

Those from Longyan who ventured into Fuzhou City in the early-to-mid-1980s mainly discovered how closed off the urban world of state privileges and opportunities remained for people like them, who were still officially registered as rural peasants. The Lin clan of five brothers, for instance, all ended up as day laborers in Fuzhou City, mainly scrapping together unofficial temporary jobs in construction while remaining cut off from the city safety net of housing, health, and other welfare resources. Although the Lin brothers fared relatively well compared to the growing mass of unemployed in Longyan, they understood that "there wasn't any kind of future" in the city for them as long as they remained state-classified peasants. The legitimate trajectory to urban status and success—via the high school and college entrance exam system to official placement in an urban work unit—continued to be an impossibility for most villagers given the inferior educational infrastructure and resources in Longyan. But becoming part of the "floating population" of unregistered rural migrants in the city was hardly a step up, particularly when villagers began to face growing competition from other peasants coming from the interior and more distant regions of China who were often willing to settle for lower wages for the same kinds of itinerant labor.[5] Beyond economic competition, most Longyan residents simply refused to work alongside migrants from China's interior, whom they dismissed as even more "peasant," and hence socially inferior, than people like themselves, who identified as coastal subjects first and as "peasants" only by administrative default. Amid the influx of internal migrants in the mid-1980s,

people from Longyan quickly grew disillusioned with the opportunities available for "peasants" in China's cities and continued to view Fuzhou as an uninhabitable and exclusionary place.

Ultimately, whether they were running small food stands, doing day labor in Fuzhou City, or simply were unemployed (as most became under economic reform), the majority of Longyan residents I knew still retained their peasant status, tethered to a state identification that now represented less a shared form of labor (farming) than a "distinct and backward cultural category" of persons (Cohen 1993, 166). Even under reform, the expected moral career of the peasant continued to be one of social stasis and limitation in the countryside; the peasant was "one held by definition to be incapable of creative and autonomous participation in China's reconstruction" (Cohen 1993, 154). In fact, whatever signs of creativity and autonomy were displayed by Longyan residents tended to be viewed by elites as the antisocial and destabilizing effects of peasant ignorance and low culture (*di wenhua*). While the revival of temples and popular rituals in Longyan confirmed the "superstitious" nature of the peasant, the persistence of "unplanned" births highlighted the unruly and unproductive excess of peasant bodies despite state agendas for population control. These were traces of peasant autonomy that officials sought to stamp out through a series of political campaigns and often violent crackdowns on Longyan residents; for religious worshippers, such crackdowns persisted from the heyday of Mao through the mid-1990s, and for families with unauthorized pregnancies, from the early 1980s to the present. Along with the policing of unregistered rural migrants in the city, such crackdowns in the countryside not only reiterated the inferiority of the peasant but, moreover, imparted a new criminality to peasant aspirations and movements under economic reform.

Not surprisingly, Longyan's celebration of its transformation from peasant village to a modern home of overseas Chinese would appear suspect to someone like the official from the Fujian-U.S. government office. While local cadre like Party Secretary Chen often tried to downplay the peasantness of villagers in favor of their upwardly mobile overseas connections, higher-level officials and urban elites seemed less convinced of the population's legitimate transformation into the kind of modern(izing), cosmopolitan subjects that the identification of "overseas Chinese" implied. The government official's plea for "less temple-building" highlighted these

suspicions of villagers' persistent backwardness and their odd fit into the category of "overseas Chinese."

Those who sat next to me at the banquet, like Zou Jin, the wife of an undocumented Chinese take-out cook in New York, clearly did not resemble the kind of "nation-loving," entrepreneurial professionals imagined by the CCP in its promotion of overseas-Chinese-friendly policies since economic reform (see Barabantseva 2005; Nyíri 2002; Thunø 2001). For one thing, Zou Jin's husband had knowingly violated Chinese law by leaving the country without proper papers through a boat-smuggling venture. For another, he was currently applying for political asylum in the United States by specifically claiming persecution by the Chinese government under the "one-child" policy—a claim that surely contradicted both the patriotic and the collaborative spirit of the overseas Chinese that were being promoted by the succession of banquet speeches. If Zou Jin thanked anyone for her overseas status, it would certainly be the gods to whom she routinely prayed for supporting her husband's efforts abroad—and not the Chinese state. Such considerations did not fit neatly into the moral career of the model overseas Chinese, a figure imagined as an urban-dwelling elite venturing abroad—with formal approval of the Chinese state—to pursue higher education or some highly skilled or entrepreneurial professional venture. Aside from the questionable legality of travel, the typical Longyan emigrant like Zou Jin's husband was lucky to possess a middle-school education and find a minimum-wage job abroad washing dishes in a Chinese restaurant. Ultimately, despite a public show of unity among village cadre, outside elites, and Longyan's overseas representatives, these three groups had quite divergent and often conflicting understandings of villagers' claims to the overseas Chinese success story.

Village Cadre: The Disappearing Peasant

Although human smuggling, asylum claims, and divine worship were openly discussed in everyday conversations as part of villagers' strategies for becoming overseas Chinese, these were not aspects of the *huaqiao* success story that local officials wanted to highlight. The top two cadre leaders in Longyan—Party Secretary Chen of the peasant administration and Party Secretary Liu of the non-peasant (*jumin*) administration—both

told me in separate interviews that the village did not have a human smuggling problem.[6] Both insisted that since the 1980s economic reform policies have supported, rather than worked against, the outmigration of Longyan residents. In fact, as both saw it, no legal or political obstacles have stood in the way of people's quests for overseas success since the launching of China's economic reforms. Instead, they suggested that the greatest barrier for going abroad had been cultural—a problem of "ideological outlook" (*sixiang guannian*).

Specifically, Secretary Liu described the problem as a result of being "closed off from worldly ways" (*biguan shigu*). "Over hundreds of years of being closed off has led people to become narrow-minded," he explained to me. "This has been a part of our Chinese people's tradition, one of the most totalizing kinds of backwardness." Secretary Liu went on to explain that because people were penned in by Longyan's natural topography with "three sides of winding mountains, one side a surging river" and its scarcity of fertile land, over time villagers became complacent, content simply to survive under such unfavorable conditions. "There was a kind of very easy satisfaction that 'If I can survive, that's good enough' " Secretary Liu noted. "This was a kind of psychological solution," he added.

Not wanting to suggest that complacency was a natural characteristic of the villagers, Secretary Liu also pointed out that the same geographic environment had encouraged people to "go outside of the village to attract development" before the Communist Revolution. As a result of these prior translocal connections, Secretary Liu also argued that Longyan residents were never quite like other rural inhabitants in the area. "We Longyan folks were stepping out [of the village] long before [people in] other places, and because of business contacts with outsiders, we were not at all like a rural village," he insisted. In education, hygiene, and other aspects of life, Longyan residents were in fact much closer to urbanites, Secretary Liu argued. In fact, despite the classification of Longyan as a "rural village" under Mao, Secretary Liu noted that work teams from Fuzhou City who came to evaluate Longyan's productivity all instantly recognized the villagers' social superiority to other peasants. As he recalled, "One brief look and 'Huh!' they would exclaim. Longyan's hundred-surname workforce may have few resources compared to other village folks, but they thought the quality of our [people] was better."[7]

Party Secretary Liu acknowledged that during the Mao years, "The registration system and other circumstances greatly clamped down on mo-

bility"; he even noted that in terms of "mobility and hardship, it was a bit more favorable before than after liberation." While cadre leaders refrained from harshly criticizing the Mao years in discussions with me, both Secretary Liu and Secretary Chen described the period before economic reform as one of social stasis in Longyan. Secretary Liu remembered the state mantra, "No revolution, no way [forward]" (*bugeming buxing*) as a kind of empty slogan, leading to little positive transformation during the Mao years: "People all said, 'No revolution, no way [forward].' Yet as we stood here over time, other people in the world developed while we didn't even develop." While cadre leaders insisted that Longyan residents were never like other rural folks, the Mao years seemed to have nurtured their "closed off" complacent tendencies rather than their dynamic translocal ones.

According to village cadre, it was only after the initiation of reform in the late 1970s that Longyan residents were finally able to expunge the remaining signs of peasantness. In particular, village leaders offered a utopian narrative of their population as model subjects under economic reform, responding to "Deng Xiaoping's great vision" for China to open up. "After reform," Secretary Liu continued, "the biggest change that we Chinese people brought forward, that came to be the change that we Longyan folks brought forward, was precisely what is called 'stepping out' (*zou chuqu*)." As Secretary Liu and Secretary Chen understood it, Longyan folks were part of the vanguard of those "stepping out"—literally in this case—from the social stasis of "closed off" and "backward" villagers to modern cosmopolitan subjects with the singular drive "to walk forward from the front and break through from the back." Secretary Liu continued: "The best aspect of change since reform has been the transformation of ideological outlook, people boldly stepping out (*renmen dadande zou chuqu*). The country's policy permits this. And the people? They also meet the qualifications and also want to go abroad. Moreover, once abroad, they truly and honestly (*shishizaizaide*) succeed in launching overseas careers. When we also bring contributions back to our home village, the transformation domestically is great."

By emphasizing supportive state policies, people's "qualifications," and their honesty in pursuits abroad, village leaders deliberately tried to counter assumptions of human smuggling and to steer clear of other criminalizing or "uncivilized" (*bu wenming*) aspects associated with peasant migrants, such as the lack of education, meager resources, and general disregard for law and order. When prodded, village cadres did concede that

earlier emigrants from Longyan—those termed “old overseas Chinese” (*lao huaqiao*), who had emigrated before reform—did not have the highest qualifications and were often illiterate travelers seeking menial labor abroad. But they also insisted that the current generation abroad was qualitatively different; they were beneficiaries of the sacrifices the old overseas Chinese had made to ensure the superior education of their children and their access to legal status abroad. In effect, the past became a receptacle for all the problematic aspects of Longyan emigration, including the necessity for human smuggling. As Secretary Liu told me, “It’s not like people think, ‘If you don’t let me leave, I’ll just get smuggled out somewhere.’ The ones who wanted to leave [this way] have all left. There’s no need to stow away now.”

Though the cadres admitted that some aspects of “backwardness” had hampered Longyan residents in the past, they tried to limit such associations of “peasantness” to “ideological outlook.” This problem of outlook, moreover, was never all-encompassing but, at best, a partial effect of the same geographic constraints that had historically fostered villagers’ translocal inclinations for “stepping out.” In this narrative, the figure of the peasant was lodged so far in the past that by the time Communist work units were dispatched to Longyan in the 1950s, it was already clear that “peasantness” was on its way out. So, as the cadres argued, it only took the slight nudge of reform policies for villagers to expunge the final traces and transition with ease into the kind of modern, cosmopolitan subjects toward which they were developing all along. The model overseas Chinese, in other words, was a natural fit for Longyan residents.

For village cadres, the transition from peasant to overseas Chinese meant more than economic or juridical changes in status; rather it highlighted the wholesale transformation of embodied subjectivity among Longyan residents. Villagers not only assumed the legal status of overseas Chinese but also an entire way of being—outlook, appearance, health, propriety—that visibly marked their social superiority to their peasant neighbors. Secretary Liu told me that much like the Communist work teams in the 1950s, leaders coming from outside to observe Longyan’s development under reform could tell “just from appearances that the changes were dramatic.” When I asked for clarification, he continued:

> Since people’s spirits have become more optimistic [*leguan*] after reform, they pay more attention to their bodies, outside appearances, and inner pro-

> priety [*zishen, waibiao, neidaide xiuyang*]. By outside appearances, I'm not talking about just making oneself up but also about the exterior's polish—when a person goes out, to dress very neatly is to give others a kind of respect. Before people all left the house looking disheveled [*qiqibaba*]; now this is unacceptable. On the street, you have to suggest your quality as a person, your education as a person, so you have to pay attention to the impression of your outside appearance.

Beyond a newfound respect for the sociality of appearance, villagers' embodiment of overseas Chinese status extended to significant improvements in eating habits, hygiene, and other aspects of life, including a more cosmopolitan drive to "keep up with the developments of the times," which was a direct result of "closer contact with foreigners." Village cadres admitted that despite overseas connections, most Longyan residents retained peasant registration status. But they also insisted that "the household registration system hasn't had an influence on us here that counts as significant," noting not only the disappearing signs of "peasantness" among villagers but also the growing similarity and even superiority of Longyan to the "quality" of urban life. Although Secretary Liu noted that to legitimately move to Fuzhou City one still needed to change registration status, he added, "But even if you told me to move, I still wouldn't want to move. . . . Why? Because it's even better here." Secretary Liu then boasted of how his house in Longyan was just as big if not larger than those of urban residents and how his son, a graduate of Xiamen University, was just as educated and professionally skilled as urbanites. In fact, not only did Longyan provide the same kinds of opportunities for doing business as "going to the city," but according to village cadres, it also offered a more breezy (*qingsong*) lifestyle. Though people's official registration may have been the same, the qualisigns of Longyan's superior mobility were legible everywhere, local officials suggested—materialized in well-dressed villagers, the food they ate, their spacious mansions, and other visible markers of cosmopolitan embodiment. In fact, whatever remaining gaps still existed between Longyan and Fuzhou City, they were shrinking so quickly that Secretary Liu told me, "When you come back to Longyan, it's possible that Longyan will be part of the city's interior, so there won't be any kind of a peasant village left." Secretary Liu's prediction was more than just a reflection of scholarly observations of the "townization" of rural areas in post-Mao China (Guldin 2001). More important, it was meant to naturalize

Longyan's urbanization as an expected outcome for villagers who, as local cadres argued, had always been less like their rural neighbors than like the cosmopolitan urbanites in nearby Fuzhou City.

Urban Outsiders: Quantity, Not Quality

Outsiders like the official from the Fujian-U.S. government office and other urbanites also offered an ontologizing narrative of Longyan villagers' transformation from peasant to overseas Chinese. However, unlike the village cadres' utopian tale of smooth transitions and model subjects, urbanites pointed to a dystopic vision of lingering and intractable "peasantness," encroaching on city spaces and destabilizing China's development in general. While village cadres suggested that Longyan inhabitants were becoming more like city folks every day, most urban residents I knew tended to distance themselves and their own aspirations for going overseas by lumping together and delegitimizing peasant migrations in general, whether originating from China's interior to coastal cities or from places like Longyan to destinations abroad. Just as the flow of internal migrants into cities was often blamed for rising urban crime, the flow of rural migrants abroad was viewed with suspicion by Fuzhou's urban residents. In direct contrast to village cadres, many urbanites conflated rural emigration with human smuggling. They particularly often pointed to shady and violent associations with smugglers as the definitive aspect of peasant strategies for going abroad.

Longyan teachers, all of whom held non-peasant registration and lived in or close to the city, were especially vociferous in their critiques of the emigration aspirations and strategies of peasants in the village. Although they taught and interacted with Longyan peasants on a daily basis, the majority were not local residents but urban outsiders placed in Longyan schools after finishing their vocational training in the city. As such, most did not see themselves as part of the local population and often took pains to distinguish their urban identity from the village residents around them. In fact, I found that their views of emigration resonated much more with other city residents than with local villagers.[8] As I discovered, many of these teachers also had designs for becoming overseas Chinese, though they always stressed that unlike the local peasants, they would never resort to such desperate and illegal means as human smuggling. Since Deng Xiaoping had first promoted the Chinese overseas as a key com-

ponent of China's reconstruction in the late '70s, aspirations for overseas Chinese status had become fairly common, not only in rural places like Longyan but also in cities like Fuzhou.[9] Ads scattered across city buses and streets attested to the widespread interest of Fuzhou urbanites in becoming foreign students abroad, improving their English, obtaining travel visas, and finding work opportunities overseas. Popular media also promoted the overseas Chinese as successful and dynamic subjects, particularly in soap operas on national television, where they had become fairly common as central protagonists (see Sun 2002; M. Yang 1997).

While village cadre tried to avoid the term *toudu* (human smuggling or to stow away) when discussing the outmigration of villagers, urbanites often referred to peasant migrants explicitly as *touduke* (stowaways) to distinguish them from the more legitimizing and celebrated figure of the *huaqiao*.[10] Like others around her, Wang Lizhi, a thirty-one-year-old Longyan teacher who commuted from the city, also harbored overseas Chinese aspirations. On and off for the past few years, Wang Lizhi had considered and tried to find different legal routes to study or work abroad. But she also believed that her chances for obtaining a foreign visa had been compromised by the international notoriety of Fuzhou as China's human smuggling capital. That was why her husband had recently been rejected when he had applied for a travel visa overseas, she told me. Like other urbanites, Wang Lizhi resented the success of peasant migrants from Fuzhou's countryside and blamed their continual and mostly illegal flow overseas for undermining what she believed was her legal and more legitimate claim to overseas Chinese status. In particular, Wang Lizhi suggested that Longyan villagers simply did not have the moral disposition and cultural capital to thrive overseas and transform themselves into successful cosmopolitan subjects. "Their culture [*wenhua*] is not high enough, their quality [*suzhi*] too low," she complained about Longyan peasants. While educated urbanites like Wang Lizhi aspired to attain additional schooling and entrepreneurial success abroad, aspiring migrants from Longyan "only think of going overseas to wash dishes in restaurants." Moreover, their "low quality" explained why they were willing to violate laws in the first place and risk life and limb in dangerous smuggling ventures overseas.

Beyond issues of legality and legitimacy, the terms *huaqiao* and *toudu* suggested very different experiences of travel and mobility. *Huaqiao* invoked imaginations of a privileged class of cosmopolitan professionals

jet-setting across borders with the greatest ease.[11] In sharp contrast, *toudu* (the characters for which represent "to steal" and "to cross a river or sea"), conjured up harrowing images of illicit and lowly travel on crammed and suffocating boats. Unlike the celebrated *huaqiao*, the *touduke* offered cautionary tales of peasant ignorance and desperation, tracing the dangerous and tragic pitfalls of illegal migration in concrete and embodied ways. Typically *toudu* evoked descriptions of inefficient and slow journeys, full of squalor, risk, and suffering through rough seas and rugged terrain. Such experiences warranted significant media attention only when gruesome deaths were involved.

In October 2002, Wang Lizhi brought my attention to the media frenzy around a particularly tragic case of boat smuggling in which twenty-five people died and the remaining stowaways were captured off the shores of South Korea. This case provoked horror and indignation not only because a group of stowaways had slowly suffocated to death in a sealed ship container but also because the smuggler and his crew had dumped their corpses into the ocean to hide evidence of the tragedy from the approaching coast guard. For urbanites like Wang Lizhi, this case confirmed all the degrading and unruly aspects of peasant mobility—the peasants' lack of resources and alternatives, their blind willingness to break laws and risk death, their general disregard for the quality and value of their own lives. The dumping of the bodies provided a particularly sad illustration of the cheapness and expendability of peasant lives as part of the unemployed surplus of China's population. "It's like they used their own lives for gambling," Wang Lizhi noted with disapproval. She added, "It's really too terrifying. Who would dare do it?" Definitely not city folks like her, she implied.

With a mixture of admiration and disdain, Wang Lizhi pointed to the *danzi*, or courage, of peasants as the key distinction between rural and urban aspirations for overseas prosperity. While many urbanites also had overseas aspirations, most admitted they lacked the boldness of rural migrants to "gamble their lives" on risky human smuggling ventures. "People like me read the paper, hear about smuggling, and become too scared," Wang Lizhi admitted. In this case, Wang Lizhi believed that "peasants had more nerve" (*bijiao you danzi*) simply because they did not know better. As many urban observers of human smuggling told me, the lower the *wenhua* (education/culture), the greater the *danzi* (courage/nerve). This correlation between cultural capital and courage was affirmed by the com-

mon Chinese saying, "One who lacks knowledge lacks fear" (*wuzhizhe wuwei*). The boldness of aspiring rural migrants was mentioned not only by urban critics, but also by village cadres, who uniformly cited this characteristic among Longyan residents. But while local officials celebrated this trait as part of the modernizing disposition of villagers to venture into the broader world and step out of the comfortable complacency of rural life, urban observers dismissed it as a symptom of various peasant deficiencies—a lack of wisdom and moral propriety, "low culture," and low social expectations.

The peasants in Longyan, Yang Xiumei told me, were willing to gamble their lives on smuggling ventures overseas only because they did not have much else to lose. "Human smuggling to America is their one road out (*chulu weiyi*)," she told me. Yang Xiumei, the thirty-three-year-old daughter of the cadre household with whom I lived, had been a city resident for at least a decade and considered herself, much like Wang Lizhi, as an urban outsider with special ties and insights into Longyan peasant life. Though Yang Xiumei had little love for her childhood village, which she described as terribly boring and backward, my presence in her mother's house had something to do with her frequent extended trips back to Longyan from Fuzhou City. As I found out, like Wang Lizhi, she had also had emigrant aspirations since being laid off from her bookkeeping job in a city work unit. Currently awaiting approval for a visa to Canada, Yang Xiumei was eager to spend some time with me in hopes of learning more about life overseas and perhaps even practicing her English. As one of the few former villagers who claimed urban status, she served as a unique and especially compelling interlocutor on peasant mobility. Even more than teachers like Wang Lizhi, Yang Xiumei made great efforts to distance herself from local peasants and their aspirations for going abroad.

In particular, Yang Xiumei liked to stress that unlike Longyan peasants with overseas aspirations, she had other opportunities for prosperity in China. Though she was currently unemployed, she told me she had had the chance to take the placement exam for another city job. She also pointed to a friend in Kunming who had offered her an open invitation to join his private company as a saleswoman. In turning both of these options down for the chance to emigrate, Yang Xiumei emphasized that she had a choice in the matter, in contrast to the desperate situation of other would-be migrants from Longyan. "There are no jobs, no industries in Longyan," she pointed out. The one paper factory she remembered as

a teenager had long since gone bankrupt, while the remaining menial jobs, from plowing the few plots of village farmland to construction and domestic work, had mostly been taken over by even poorer rural migrants from Sichuan and other interior provinces over the years. Moreover, since most peasants did not thrive in school, few could successfully pursue the entrance exam route via high school and college into placement in state jobs. Because, as Yang Xiumei argued, "the people here do not have any kind of future if they do not leave," they were therefore more willing to embark on risky and illicit journeys to go overseas. Peasant courage, in this case, was seen as the product not only of ignorance but also of the desperation of unskilled and uneducated rural masses who were out of work and out of options for survival in China.

Like the unruly flows of rural migrants from the interior provinces to the developing coast, the massive outmigration from the Fuzhou countryside to overseas destinations was largely viewed by urbanites as part of the same "population problem" (*renkou wenti*) facing post-Mao China as it moved toward market liberalization and opening up to globalization. As various China scholars have observed, questions over the quantity and quality of China's population had become central to the project of economic development and modernization in the reform era (Anagnost 1995, 2004; Fong 2004, 2007; Greenhalgh 1994, 2003; Kipnis 2006; Pun 2003; H. Yan 2003, 2008). From the initiation of the one-child policy in 1978 to recurring party rhetoric for "raising the quality of the people," the population—its excessive size and lack of education and other resources—has emerged as a pervasive source of blame for China's persistent failures of achieving modernity in the past. Ann Anagnost (1995) has noted that the notion of a population problem played especially well among intellectuals and urbanites when the rural masses served as the referents for the "low quality" and unproductive surplus of the Chinese nation-state.

As I found out, the "low quality" of migrants from Fuzhou's countryside was also one of the most common critiques made by urbanites eager to distinguish their own overseas aspirations from those of their rural neighbors. Much like the "floating population" of internal migrants, the stowaways smuggled out of rural Fuzhou were imagined as a kind of undisciplined swarming mass on China's economic and political periphery who were more of a destabilizing drain than a productive resource. Unskilled and underemployed, wandering rural bodies—whether bound for the cities or overseas—constituted the part of China's population that

was considered quantity rather than quality. As urbanites imagined, these were not the kind of overseas migrants who would be sorely missed as part of the elite "brain drain" from China's population. Rather, as Yang Xiumei argued, would-be migrants from Fuzhou's countryside were akin to other rural migrants from the interior—low-quality surplus bodies pushed into motion out of necessity, not choice, as a result of the competitive Malthussian pressures of overpopulation in the midst of market liberalization. Widespread media depictions of smuggled Fuzhounese as faceless masses desperately crammed into illegal and suffocating shipping containers, produce trucks, and other tight quarters only bolstered urban imaginations of the triumph of quantity over quality in these rural flows overseas.

Whether internally or transnationally, peasants on the move were largely viewed by city residents as problematic and undisciplined subjects tending toward criminality. By virtue of leaving their rural homes without authorization, both the "floating population" and the stowaways were already marked as illegal migrants in violation of state policies for travel and residency. Additionally, while urbanites blamed internal migrants for rising crime rates in Fuzhou City, they lambasted their U.S.-bound rural neighbors for abetting transnational criminal networks and, in turn, tainting Fuzhou's regional reputation—and that of its upstanding city residents—with the notoriety of human smuggling. This sense of the transgressive movement of peasants extended to images of overpopulation in the countryside, where pregnant women in violation of the one-child policy were known to flee and hide from authorities in large numbers. It is interesting that the terms for both unauthorized births and unauthorized travel abroad shared the character *tou*, which means "to steal." While the common term for surplus births outside the one-child policy was *toushen*, meaning "to steal a birth," human smuggling, or *toudu*, referred to "the stealing of passages." Both pregnant women in hiding and roaming rural migrants conveyed the illicit nature of mobile peasant bodies in contradiction to state plans and disciplinary aims for managing the quantity and quality of the population.

In fact, it was common to hear urbanites describe human smuggling as the logical culmination of rural overpopulation itself. One reason peasants wanted so many children, some people told me, was so that they could increase the odds of future success overseas. According to this theory, the more children peasants had, the more expendable were the lives

to be gambled on smuggling ventures. In this case, surplus children born outside of the state's birth planning agenda became exemplary signs of the triumph of quantity over quality in the countryside. In contrast to state discourses for having the "quality" single child—a notion largely embraced by urbanites (Fong 2004, 2007; Kipnis 2006)—Longyan teachers often described how hordes of peasant children roamed village streets without adequate care or discipline from parents. "As soon as they can walk, their parents don't mind them," one teacher complained about peasant reproductive strategies. Deficient in care and excessive in numbers, this surplus of unruly peasant children would inevitably become the kind of "low-quality" subjects bound for desperate and illicit smuggling ventures overseas. By linking unregistered births to undocumented travel, urbanites generally denounced peasant mobility as deviant and subaltern in nature. Far from the natural progression described by village cadres, the trajectory of peasants overseas was largely critiqued by urbanites as part of a series of aberrations, the digressive moves of unproductive subjects off the grid of state networks for controlling population flows and quality.

The "low quality" of rural flows overseas had to do not only with the illegal means of travel but also with what many urban observers critiqued as the general problem of peasant culture. Whether describing the blind courage, criminal disposition, or problematic reproductive and productive capacities of rural populations, urbanites almost always punctuated their comments with broad statements that "their *wenhua* is just too low." While the term *wenhua* can be translated narrowly as "education," these complaints typically conveyed peasant deficiencies not only in schooling but also in an entire way of being that better reflected the broader definition of *wenhua* as "culture." Urban observers often pointed to the blossoming of "superstition" (*mixin*) or popular religious practices in the village as clear evidence of the intractable backwardness of peasant culture. Villagers' reliance on prayer and divination as part of the calculus for emigration particularly drew scorn from urbanites as "unscientific" (*bu kexue*) and superstitious folly. In addition, the massive sums overseas villagers donated to build temples and other ritual activities were often ruefully described as a "very wasteful" (*hen langfei*) and "meaningless" (*meiyisi*) use of remittances. The plea for "more building of schools, less building of temples" by the Fujian-U.S. government official also indicated the widespread frustration of higher-level officials—above village cadres—over the channeling of overseas capital toward popular religion rather than toward

state-sanctioned economic development and modernization. While Longyan officials always avoided talking about villagers' interest in popular religion and drew a blank when I would bring the topic up, urbanites of all stripes commonly pointed to the resurgence of peasant religiosity as proof of their hopelessly retrograde ontological makeup. As many urban observers decried, the successes of Longyan villagers overseas contributed very little to state desires for China's modernity but rather only managed to resuscitate "feudal superstitions" and other social ills long stamped out under Mao.

Beyond popular religion, the rise of a peasant *nouveau riche* with remittances to squander generated widespread distaste and resentment among urbanites. Specifically, as the previous caste-like system of registration distinctions shifted to a more flexible hierarchy of class and capital in the era of reform, many urbanites found themselves increasingly sharing the same banquet tables and social milieus as their upwardly mobile peasant neighbors. Longyan teachers and others, like Yang Xiumei, who prided themselves on their non-peasant privileges, felt especially threatened by the new class mobility of peasants with overseas wealth. Just as Fuzhou's urbanites criticized their rural neighbors for tainting their more legitimate overseas aspirations, so they also resented newly wealthy and overseas-connected villagers for crowding in on and spoiling what they perceived as their exclusive and entitled social spaces.

Among all the non-peasants I knew, Yang Xiumei and her two sisters drew my attention the most to distinctions between their urban lifestyles and the class pretensions of Longyan's rich peasants. Perhaps because the three Yang sisters were among the elite few from Longyan who had managed to become city residents, they guarded their privileged status from the perceived encroachment of their peasant neighbors with particularly visceral tenacity. The daughters of a former village head who was deceased, over the past decade and a half the sisters had all managed to finesse their cadre family connections into finding entrances into Fuzhou City. The oldest and most successful sister had navigated the difficult state exam system to become a city professor and was married to a provincial official to boot. The youngest sister, who did not fare as well in school, happened to marry a wealthy entrepreneur in the city. While Yang Xiumei neither excelled in school nor found an urban spouse, she had managed with the help of her sisters and their well-connected husbands to land a low-level job in a city work unit until her recent layoff. Few other families

in Longyan were as elite as this cadre household, and even fewer could boast of so many members who legitimately resided in the city. Though the sisters also had a brother who had gone overseas via human smuggling in the early '90s, they were catty about his success and disassociated themselves by blaming his "low culture" and general peasantness on the bad influence of his wife.

While Yang Xiumei made the most visits back to see her widowed mother in Longyan, the other two sisters also occasionally gathered in their village house, especially for holidays like Lunar New Year and the Dragon Boat Festival. Although it is hard to say what kind of influence my presence in the house had on their interactions, it seemed that when the three sisters gathered around the kitchen table in their village home, the conversation almost always turned into an extended rant against the vulgarity of their newly wealthy peasant neighbors. Of the new mansions around Longyan, Yang Xiumei and her younger sister disdainfully noted that they were merely poor copies of urban residences. "If you look very carefully," the youngest Yang sister instructed me, "you'll see that the materials they use are all the cheapest, the insides are hollow, and the outside—not even a few flowers or plants." In contrast, she noted that city folks cared about interior decorating and outside landscaping because such small details added to the quality of life for urbanites. For peasants, the grandiosity of housing was just all for show, yet another example of the peasant interest in quantity over quality.

This sense of overseas-connected peasants as subjects flush with cash but not class was further reinforced by the eldest Yang sister one afternoon shortly after Lunar New Year when she returned to her village home after attending her Longyan middle school reunion up the street. Sitting down with her sisters and me over some tea around the dining table, the she described the unexpected peasant wives who showed up at the reunion. Usually, she told me, only those who had achieved some level of respect and success would dare show their faces at these banquets, partly because they were expected to contribute some funds to the school by the end of the event. She then proceeded to list some of her classmates—a savvy entrepreneur, a doctor, another college graduate, and so forth—who she felt qualified to be at the same banquet table with her. With equal parts humor and aversion, she then went on to describe other surprising guests—female classmates who had never amounted to much—whose

main claim to success was the boast, "My old man is in America." As she parroted this line to her sisters in a wry tone, Yang Xiumei rolled her eyes and exclaimed with disgust, "What nerve (*zhen shi*)!" Though she herself had plans to emigrate, Yang Xiumei was the most vocal of the three sisters in denouncing these women for thinking that their overseas connections and new wealth could compensate for deficiencies in status and culture. Unlike her older sister, who took the fundraising part of the banquet seriously, Yang Xiumei suggested that these women were there only to be seen in the company of their more elite classmates and—even worse—for the vulgar fanfare of banquet food and entertainment. This uncouth aspect of village banquets, with peasants crowding elites for food and visibility, was one reason that no one from the Yang household wanted to attend the grand opening celebration of the senior center I described at the beginning of this chapter. Even the Yang widow wrinkled her nose disdainfully when I asked her about her invitation to this highly anticipated banquet. "She doesn't see the point," Yang Xiumei explained for her mother. Yang Xiumei went on to describe her mother's and her own distaste for the sight of their peasant neighbors hoarding party favors and leftovers at the end of these kinds of banquets.

By highlighting intractable distinctions between peasants and non-peasants in such minute and embodied ways as etiquette and dining habits, Yang Xiumei refuted the local cadres' insistence on the natural forward momentum of the villagers, who, as Party Secretary Liu argued, were not only closing in on urbanites as modernizing subjects but even exceeding their urban neighbors in achieving prosperity and comfort at home. In contrast, urban critics of peasant mobility argued that new wealth gained through such lowly illicit means as human smuggling was incommensurable with the more elusive class privileges of taste and breeding—what Bourdieu famously referred to as cultural capital (1977, 1986). Overseas connections and new money may have enabled peasants to buy their way into the same banquets as non-peasant elites. But as Yang Xiumei suggested, their social bearing and consumer habits at these kinds of events continued to betray the incontrovertible peasantness of their embodied subjectivity. In this case, hoarding food and party favors offered yet another example of the persistent peasant disposition to quantity over quality and, in turn, villagers' ill fit into the overseas success story as more elevated and cosmopolitan subjects.

Longyan Residents: The Networked Body

Despite their clashing interpretations of rural migration overseas, both village cadres and urbanites seemed to agree that "peasant" encompassed an entire way of being characterized unfavorably by social stasis and backwardness. Just as cadres naturalized villagers' transition to overseas identity by describing the wholesale transformation of people's habits and dispositions, urbanites fixated on these same embodied details to essentialize Longyan residents as unchanging peasants. From housing to food, they simply inverted many of the qualisigns embraced by village cadres as the markers of Longyan's legitimate upward mobility and newfound cosmopolitanism into indexes of its perennial "low quality" and "low culture."

In contrast to this interest in the ontological signs and material traces of peasantness (or lack thereof), villagers classified as peasants tended to emphasize the more narrow legal and political aspects of their identification. Far from essence and ontology, those who described themselves as peasants typically evoked the state inequalities and structural disadvantages associated with this juridical status. One of the most striking things about peasant self-descriptions was that they seemed to resonate—at least on the surface—with outside critiques of their deficiencies. In particular, not unlike their urban critics, villagers commonly told me about how they lacked *wenhua* because they were "only peasants." But in contrast to urban references to "low *wenhua*" as a wholesale deficiency in peasant culture, Longyan residents typically used the notion of *wenhua* more narrowly to describe the dearth of educational resources and opportunities available to those who occupied the state category of peasant. Villagers who were self-conscious about their poor literacy or Mandarin speaking skills frequently apologized for their lack of schooling by describing the political and economic disadvantages of being labeled peasants. Like Zhu Huarong, mentioned above, many peasant residents of Longyan suggested that state demands for agricultural labor in the past had detracted from their ability to excel in school or even to attend school in the first place. Many who had little more than an elementary education told me that they were forced to drop out of school to help their parents labor in the fields or take responsibility for domestic duties. Most also believed that non-peasants in the village, particularly among the cadres, had unfair privileges and connections for putting themselves and their children through the tough exam system into high school, college, and ultimately

state placement in a secure job. While the few elites, like the Yang family, could mobilize superior resources and social networks to ensure the smooth passage of their children into urban employment and residence, most villagers argued that by virtue of their peasant classification this same trajectory from Longyan to Fuzhou City was closed off to them. As Zhang Wen's story about the dashed prospects of her gifted sister suggested, many Longyan peasants suggested that the divergent destinies of non-peasants and themselves had less to do with the innate talents and "quality" of different populations than with the pragmatic institutional and social inequalities linked to state-imposed identifications.

This sense of the peasants' institutional disadvantage was typically manifested in villagers' descriptions of themselves as people "without a work unit" (*meiyou danwei*). Along with complaints about the lack of educational resources, people commonly pointed to their exclusion from the state system of work unit placement as a key component of peasant identification. In tandem with the household registration system, the socialist work unit system emerged in the 1950s as part of the state's agenda for harnessing labor power and resources for rapid industrialization and modernization through a centralized planned economy. Just as the household registration system divided the population along rural and urban lines, the work unit system became an organizational tool for privileging an urban industrial workforce at the expense of a rural majority (Perry 1997; Solinger 1999). *Danwei* mainly referred to the basic organizing unit of welfare benefits and bureaucratic administration through which urban and nonagricultural populations were placed. Peasants tethered to rural communes under Mao were not considered part of this system and in turn were excluded from the supportive and secure network of permanent state employment and comprehensive benefits provided by the work unit to its members. While the socialist state initially idealized rural communes as "iron rice bowls" (*tie fan wan*), with comparable guarantees of job and welfare security as work units, the famine during the Great Leap Forward and its aftermath highlighted pronounced inequalities between those who starved in communes and those who survived on state-allocated grain in work units. As He Xinghuan noted, far from the ideal "iron rice bowl" of lifetime state provisions, rural communes instead offered "an 'iron walled enclosure' (*tie weiqiang*)," excluding peasants from the privileges of city work units (cited in Dutton 1998, 48).

Beyond the allocation of state resources from food and clothing to

housing and health care, the work unit, as Michael Dutton has argued, emerged "as the ethically privileged space of contemporary Chinese Marxism" (1992, 190). Many scholars have also noted how fundamental the work unit system was as an organizing principle and basic unit of social life, particularly in urban China, where people commonly introduced themselves by naming their particular work unit (Dutton 1998; Lü and Perry 1997; M. Yang 1989). More than just a workplace, the work unit functioned as an encompassing social community and total institution with far-reaching jurisdiction over not only labor and welfare but also, more centrally, the moral discipline of its subjects. From surveillance and indoctrination to the regulation of marriage, childbirth, and divorce, the work unit served as the hub of state discipline and subjectification, tracking and sorting people through the careful administration of the personal dossier file (*dangan*) and producing collective identities for its members. This totalizing nature of the work unit was nicely captured by He Xinghuan. As He argued, "The work unit doesn't just constitute a kind of identity certificate. It also relates to subsistence and to other issues from birth through to death and also to the value attributed to the individual. If one is in a good work unit, one is set for life and one's status can even be inherited by one's children." He added that even if one belonged to a less than perfect work unit, "it [was] preferable to being lonely and roaming around in society without one" (cited in Dutton 1998, 45, 47).

In contemporary Fuzhou City and its surrounding countryside, I found that the work unit continued to dominate people's vision of social organization and emplacement through the early 2000s. In fact, it was still such a basic category for understanding social difference while I was conducting fieldwork in 2001–2 that people often tried to place me in the United States by inquiring about my own "work unit" overseas. Urbanites and rural residents alike frequently commented on what a good unit I must belong to as an advanced graduate student in the United States at the time. They also typically assumed that my current unit (that is, my university) would automatically secure a good job for me in a comparable or superior unit after I completed my PhD. People in both Fuzhou City and Longyan were often quite surprised when I explained that I did not belong to a work unit, like graduate students did in China, and that there was no state-guaranteed track to employment for me after I finished school.

While the general benefits and prestige of the work unit system have waned over the past decade, what the *danwei* long provided its members—

and what Longyan peasants resented not having—was a sense of security and social insulation from the vicissitudes of state agendas for development since the high tide of the Maoist regime in the 1950s. The famine during the Great Leap was perhaps the most striking example of how peasants felt cut off from the state's protection of its urban industrializing forces in the face of the disastrous effects of its own modernizing drive. But there were also more subtle and long-term instabilities that Longyan residents attributed to the disadvantages of peasant identification. Land reform, for instance, raised the uniform ire of older villagers, especially those who could remember as far back as the transition to communism in 1949—the historical turning point commonly referred to as *jiefang*, or "liberation." Specifically, while most Longyan seniors with peasant status spoke positively of the initial years after liberation, when many received their first piece of farmland under initial state policies for redistribution, they also resented that their property was confiscated only a few years later in the transition to rural collectivization in the mid-1950s. Most also viewed the last wave of land redistribution following the dismantling of the commune system in the late 1970s with a great deal of cynicism, as part of a continual seesaw of land reform policies toward peasant subjects. Many villagers complained particularly about how the majority of the plots allocated to peasants in 1980 were again confiscated by local officials by the end of the decade. While cadres justified these land seizures by pointing to their lack of productive use by residents increasingly bound for emigration, most Longyan peasants denounced these seizures as evidence of the continual instability and capriciousness of the state in regard to the rural masses.

Villagers' sense of the mercurial nature of state policies toward peasants was also manifested in discussions about the local policing of popular religious practices since the 1950s and the one-child policy since the early '80s. In both cases, the state's reliance on intense but short-lived political campaigns for periodically cracking down on rural populations contributed to villagers' sense of a perpetually unstable and unpredictable social field for pursuing their religious and reproductive interests. A hallmark of Maoist politics, the strategy of launching the occasional campaign to target a particular social problem or crime was exemplified by villagers' memories of the seemingly arbitrary rhythm of anti-"superstition" raids on homes that extended from the 1950s through the mid-'90s.[12] As Longyan residents remembered, in every decade since the Communist Revolution such campaigns against popular religion would periodically

emerge as short bursts of official political fervor, followed by long, indefinite stretches of informal apathy and non-enforcement. By all accounts, enforcement of the one-child policy since the early 1980s had also been subject to similar sporadic but zealous and draconian campaigns—with the last one in 1991 resulting in at least one late-term abortion, the partial destruction of two houses, and the incarceration of several elderly parents and in-laws, who were held mainly as ransom to lure their pregnant daughters or daughters-in-law out of hiding for mandatory abortion and sterilization. Not only did the inconsistency of these campaigns render them ineffectual over the long run, but also the intense and brutal nature of their execution only made those caught up in them feel unjustly and arbitrarily singled out for punishment.

Peasant complaints of injustice typically took highly personalized forms as indictments against Longyan officials, who were largely suspected of doling out scarce resources and draconian punishments on the basis of nepotism and social connections. For instance, many saw the Yang family, with its cadre members and urban ties, as a prime example of entrenched privilege built upon an insular personal network of state connections and favoritism. Desired resources like prime agricultural land and the sole factory in Longyan—not to mention a legitimate ticket to urban residency—all seemed to wind up in the hands of the Yangs and their social web of cadres, kin, and friends. Those inside this charmed circle also seemed less susceptible to the punitive whims of local law enforcement. Rumor had it that the most prominent elderly villager in Longyan was even able to get his son cleared of murder charges because of his superior personal connections, or *guanxi*, with state authorities. Despite the fact that the son had been caught and convicted for killing a man who had tried to seduce his wife, people told me that he did not spend more than a few years in prison before his well-connected father found a way to secure his release and passage out of China to the United States.

In contrast, those less attached to the centers of state authority—mainly villagers classified as peasants—often complained that they were subject to disproportionate fines and punishments for relatively minor infractions. For example, people told me that only those without state connections were ever fined for such widespread practices as the ritual burning of spirit money (offered on behalf of the dead)—an official fire-hazard public health violation. Such discriminatory fines were often cynically described as a kind of extortion by local officials hoping to fill their personal cof-

fers with the resources of the marginalized peasant masses. One woman even told me that it was not unusual for peasants to pay multiple fines for the same one-time infraction. She complained that several years after she was first fined for evading the one-child policy, local officials came by her house to demand yet another payment for the same violation. Even after paying two fines, she told me that she would not be surprised if officials used this past infraction yet again to extract more money from her down the road. Like others in Longyan, she attributed this unpredictable climate for local persecution and extortion to her lowly status as a peasant cut off from state favoritism and protection.

Being outside of the elite circle of village cadres as well as the privileged safety net of urban work units meant greater vulnerability to the whims of state agendas and the traumatic reversals of fortune that accompanied them over the years. While most villagers acknowledged that the political fervor of the Cultural Revolution upended Longyan elites more than the common peasant, this kind of elite dislocation was seen as an isolated and exceptional case within a longer and more steady history of peasant marginalization and displacement under state socialism, beginning with the seizure of land for rural collectivization. As Friedman et al. noted for peasants in northern China, collectivization along with the standardization of the household registration system entrenched divisions between "the favored few and the excluded many" and highlighted the informal networks that "channeled scarce resources—jobs, travel, medicine, investment, technicians, and so on—to favored communities, regions and families" (1991, xvii). Longyan critiques of policing and punishment suggested that the law itself was one of the resources that could be harnessed by the centrally networked and well-connected against the more socially peripheral and isolated others.

Rather than an emanation of a correct moral order, the law could be better described by villagers as a flexible and dynamic field for the production of personal connections (*guanxi*)—a social testament at any one time to the relative depth and breadth of one's network of loyalty and reciprocity.[13] For Longyan peasants, the household registration system was probably the most enduring and salient example of how legality could become a privileged currency for some over others. Particularly for a population accustomed to translocal mobility and ties before the Communist Revolution, registration classifications—with their segregation of urbanites from rural residents, non-peasants from peasants—ultimately pointed less to

ontological difference than to the state's "monopolization of the legitimate means of movement" (Torpey 2000, 5). At the most basic level, peasant identification itself became a badge of lawful if unjust immobilization, its imposition a legal curtailment of people's social and physical mobility outside the sedentary, agrarian assumptions of peasant ontology. This did not mean that most Longyan residents were resigned to their fates as state-classified peasants tethered to the land. If anything, the solidification of the household registration system as an internal passport system only highlighted how those who could finesse superior state connections also legalized better destinies and futures.

As people noted, it was usually the few well-positioned cadres like the Yangs who accessed the state channels from rural registration to city work unit. But while this legal trajectory was not available to most, Longyan residents sought out other pathways for legitimizing destinies beyond state limitations on peasant subjects. In particular, people's sense of legality as more of a flexible resource than a moral valuation was exemplified by their pride in successful maneuvers around the state's one-child policy. Initially, I was quite surprised when villagers would casually point to a child and openly declare, "This one is *toushen*" (that is, born outside of the one-child policy). But as I later found out, violations of the one-child policy were not only widespread but also quite normalized as part of a routine process for transforming illegal births into legalized children. Although children born outside of the state's birth-planning agenda were officially excluded from registration and state eligibility for benefits, villagers seemed to negotiate with local cadres on a regular basis for obtaining legal status for unregistered offspring. Except when there were spikes in law enforcement during campaign drives against unplanned births, it seemed commonplace for villagers to simply pay a fee for registering illegal births after the fact of violation. On several different occasions, people described how the cost and expediency of this process—from state evasion to legalization—depended largely on one's interpersonal skills and connections with local bureaucrats and leaders. For instance, Deng Feiyan, a mother of three in her mid-thirties, not only recounted how she had outsmarted and escaped from local police when they tried to arrest her while pregnant with her second child, but she also capped her triumphant narrative by boasting of how skillful bargaining with officials later enabled her to get a huge reduction off the payment for registering her unauthorized child. When it came to such payments, another woman

noted how informal things were and how contingent on local officials: "It's all according to whatever they say." Specifically, when I asked her about the standard costs of penalties for one-child policy violations, she shrugged and said, "However much they want to fine, they'll just fine." So much depended on "seeing who you are," she added.

For villagers, ascertaining "who someone was" required a relational appreciation for persons as networked bodies—a collective, rather than individualized, sense of subjects as particular nodal points and extensions of various affective and material ties.[14] While certain identities like "non-peasant" provided evidence of an expansive web of relations and superior alignment with state forces, villagers also believed that state identification was ultimately less totalizing as ontology and more partial as a contingent aspect of one's positioning within a larger, dynamic social network in which state ties comprised only one relational strand. This weblike and pliable sense of identification was highlighted by Lin Mengya's dramatic tale of reproductive defiance and triumph during the especially volatile 1991 campaign against unauthorized births in Longyan. Lin Mengya, a thirty-three-year-old mother of three, and I had reached a hilltop temple for Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, near her mother's home just outside of Longyan, when she first recounted her troubles with the one-child policy. The sight of this temple under renovation had jogged Lin Mengya's memories of how she had hidden with her husband and oldest daughter at this place when she was pregnant for the third time about a decade ago. In particular, she described how when she was more than eight months pregnant, she slept on the bare, hard floor of the courtyard in front of the temple for days while more than twenty local officers and cadres raided her mother's home not more than forty steps away at the bottom of the hill from this site. Had the authorities climbed these forty steps, she told me she would probably have faced abortion, fines, and incarceration. This was, after all, the fate that had befallen her cousin, who was also almost due to give birth when she was captured at a friend's house not far from the hilltop temple where Lin Mengya was hiding around the same time.

Lin Mengya attributed the divergent outcomes of her cousin's pregnancy and her own to the relative strength of their social networks. In particular, at the time of this intensified campaign, Lin Mengya recounted that local officials everywhere had been offering monetary rewards to people who revealed the hideouts of pregnant women in violation of the

one-child policy. This incentive became a true test of interpersonal savvy and social bonds, pitting group loyalties against personal financial benefit and revealing the instabilities of certain people's webs of relations. Lin Mengya suggested that her cousin was a victim of a shaky and untrustworthy social network at that time. For one thing, hiding at a friend's house pointed to the lack of closer relations (that is, kin) for the cousin to count on. Ultimately, her capture also highlighted the disloyalty and greed of the friend, who Lin Mengya suspected had turned her cousin in for the reward money. In contrast, Lin Mengya noted that she benefited from the widespread respect and loyalty commanded by her parents while she was hiding in her natal home. As a result of her parents' tight-knit web of relations, Lin Mengya described how knowing and watchful neighbors not only shielded her whereabouts from Longyan authorities but also warned her as the police were finally approaching to raid her mother's home. Even the local party secretary of her natal village had protected her informally out of respect and loyalty to her parents. Though this cadre knew Lin Mengya was hiding in his jurisdiction, he never turned her in to Longyan officials but instead warned her to be careful and on the lookout for signs of approaching authorities.

Susan Greenhalgh has observed that in the countryside, "local cadres often colluded with peasant resisters because of unwillingness or simply [their] inability to enforce the state's strict limits on fertility" (2003, 206). In part, such lack of enforcement could be attributed to the more dispersed and disorganized nature of rural cadre power, particularly after the dismantling of communes, a step that decentralized control over rural subsistence (Greenhalgh 1995, 2003). In contrast, city work units, with their highly centralized administration of welfare and punishment, tended to assert more uniform and strict discipline over their subjects' fertility, which became tightly bound with the allocation of urban resources, from jobs and housing to health and retirement benefits. Ironically, being outside the work unit's encompassing network of benefits enabled Longyan peasants to evade the state's firm grasp over the reproductive capacity of its urban subjects. More important, exclusion from the tight-knit, paternalistic web of state support and discipline allowed villagers to envision and plot moral careers beyond what was considered legally correct for peasant subjects.

Though Lin Mengya did not initially have the law on her side, she could point to an alternative anchor of moral support—her informal network

of kin, neighbors, and even officials—who not only collectively protected her against state intervention in her multiple pregnancies but also helped legitimize her actions later on by enabling her to obtain legal status for her children from the same disapproving state. Although she was finally arrested and incarcerated by Longyan officials after she returned to the village with her third newborn, her husband was able to finesse cadre connections, along with a 1,500 RMB payment, to secure her prompt release. These connections came in handy once more when her husband was unexpectedly arrested much later for this same one-child policy violation and held for more than ten days in jail. In the end, with the help of a relative who worked in the local administration, Lin Mengya not only got her husband free but in the process also secured household registration for her three children—all of whom had been unregistered until that point—with another 6,000 RMB payment. Although it was common to pay a fine for legalizing unregistered children, she told me that less connected villagers had paid over 10,000 RMB for the same registration. Moreover, during the last intensive campaign in 1991, those who lacked the protection of loyal and expansive networks encountered harsher threats and punitive measures, including wide-sweeping arrests of their family members and the tearing down of their houses in Longyan.

In contrast to urban critics, who dismissed surplus births as ontological signs of peasant criminality and low culture, villagers like Lin Mengya emphasized the processual and tactical nuances in rural reproductive practices for moving from state evasion to incorporation. In this case, legality and illegality could not be seen as exclusive positions of being, marking intractable differences between civilized urbanites and unruly peasants, but rather as distinct phases in a trajectory of becoming. Just as one could move from unregistered birth to registration, one could also legitimize illegal emigration with later acquisition of legal status and prosperity overseas. While the strategies for becoming overseas Chinese will be discussed in greater detail in part II, here I mainly want to point out that there were precedents for villagers who wanted to circumvent state channels and constraints in the pursuit of destinies and moral careers beyond normative expectations of "peasantness." It is important to note that villagers' approaches to the one-child policy revealed that the legality of being could not be conflated with the morality of becoming.

While much has been written about one-child policy violations as strategies of "peasant resistance," it is interesting to me here that village

maneuverings for extra children, as well as for going overseas, ultimately have less to do with outright opposition to state impositions of difference and ontology than with desires for reincorporation into privileged subject positions. Specifically, it seems important to note that those with illegal trajectories mostly had legal destinations in mind—whether from unregistered birth to registered child or from undocumented stowaway to passport-toting cosmopolitan Chinese. In this sense, maneuverings for moral careers beyond the teleological assumptions of peasant backwardness and stasis might be better described as counter-hegemonic moves always retrievable and circumscribed by a larger hegemonic order or, in Michel de Certeau's terms, as more of a tactic than a strategy that "insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (1984, xix). By "insinuating themselves into the other's place"—in this case, the privileged position of overseas Chinese—the villagers took a classificatory system that they could not fully escape and made it serve alternative practices and meanings foreign to it. It was neither simple resistance nor submission. As de Certeau argues, "They metaphorized the dominant order: they made it function in another register" (1984, 32).

For Lin Mengya, this alternative register was crystallized on the fateful day when she hid at the hilltop temple not more than forty steps above the swarm of local officials raiding her mother's house. Until this point, she told me she had been skeptical about the divine powers and compassion of gods, putting her faith in more certain human resources like the informal web of helpers who had protected her thus far in her unauthorized pregnancy. But when she found herself alone beyond the security of her social network and only forty steps away from capture, she realized she had exhausted her protective circle and for the first time pleaded with the gods to keep her safe. Her vigilant prayers, she told me, were answered that day when the local police somehow managed to overlook the steps leading up to the temple and pursued another path leading away from her. Rather than simple chance, she saw the police's stray trajectory as clear evidence of the superiority of divine efficacy and, in turn, as moral affirmation of her reproductive efforts against state regulation. From that point forward, she told me she had been a loyal follower of local gods and a generous contributor to the revitalization of temples and ritual life in Longyan.

I have much more to say in subsequent chapters about the repositioning of state power within a more encompassing order of divine authority

(see especially chapter 5). For now, I just want to point out that this alignment of villagers with gods was not necessarily anti-state or anti-modern simply because it supported local practices that villagers (as well as their urban critics) commonly described as a continuity of "customs" (*xisu*). As mentioned in chapter 1, gods themselves were not imagined as unchanging and stolid forces in contemporary Longyan but rather as forward-looking, cosmopolitan subjects. In turn, alignment with the gods over the state was a means for villagers to better access, not oppose, the dream of modernity. They did so by trying to shed the categorical constraints of household registration status, particularly the backward associations of peasant identification, which they denaturalized as a sign of institutional disadvantage and state expropriation rather than as an index of their inherent quality as persons. From the famine during the Great Leap Forward to recurring campaigns against religious and reproductive practices, villagers linked an uncertain and turbulent terrain for livelihood and prosperity to their institutional marginalization as state-classified peasants. Having children outside the state plan was itself not simply a matter of incorrigible peasant "tradition" but a response to the socioeconomic insecurities of life outside the state's embrace. In particular, villagers often argued that urbanites could afford to have one child only because they had the work unit to support them in poor health and retirement. However, multiple children were viewed not only as necessary insurance for old age among rural residents, but they were also fundamental extensions of one's social possibilities and moral legacy as a networked body.

While critics focused on surplus children as expendable by-products of peasant criminality, villagers themselves pointed to these same children as part of their success in solidifying and expanding their reach as moral persons positioned in a reciprocal and loyal web of relations. In an important way this desire for what Nancy Munn (1986) termed the "spatial-temporal extension" of subjects went beyond the material vicissitudes of life to the sustainability of one's social influence and reputation well after death as a beloved ancestor with far-reaching and thriving intergenerational ties. In contrast to dystopic images of rural children as the unruly excesses of China, villagers openly pointed to unauthorized children as networked achievements in circumventing state constraints to legalization. Moreover, they singled out another kind of child beyond the Chinese state's grasp as evidence of their superior spatial-temporal extension—the "American child," or in Fuzhounese, the *Miwo giang*. This term

mainly referred to children born overseas who were sent back as infants and toddlers to be raised by village kin, especially grandparents. More than any other figure, the returned "American child" offered proof of the overseas success story villagers were crafting against state expectations. Not only were these children the culmination of transnational journeys from state evasion to privileged legalization, but also, armed with U.S. citizenship, the "American child" promised to be a superior networked body, full of generative potential as a resourceful link and legal channel to future overseas status for those still immobilized as village peasants. Even without emigrating, Longyan residents, particularly those too old to imagine ventures overseas, could point to the transfer of these children to their care as evidence of their own elevated positioning within an expanded transnational circuit of exchange. Nurturing the "American child" not only opened flows of remittances from abroad to villagers but for elderly grandparents, it also extended and strengthened the intergenerational ties essential for their imagined futures as formidable ancestors, still transnationally networked and connected in the afterlife.

The Ins and Outs of Moral Careers

Erving Goffman described moral careers as "any social strand of any person's course through life" in which "unique outcomes are neglected in favor of such changes over time as are basic and common to members of a social category, although occurring independently to each of them" (1962, 127). This concept of career, he suggested, was dialectical in nature: "one side is linked to internal matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt identity; the other side concerns official position, jural relations, and style of life, and is part of a publicly accessible institutional complex" (127). Central to every moral career was the reconstruction of a fateful past leading to one's present arrival and future destination. Retracing and contesting such trajectories are part of what I call a "politics of destination" among my subjects in rural Fuzhou.

Specifically this chapter has examined three divergent narratives of "fateful pasts" leading up to the village-wide banquet celebration of Longyan's new senior center and kindergarten in early 2002, when officials and villagers linked arms in front of a crowd of thousands and declared that Longyan had finally "arrived" as a modern, cosmopolitan home to

overseas Chinese. As I have suggested, this triumphant tale of villagers' smooth transition to overseas Chinese status was best represented by Longyan's cadres, who tried hard to efface all teleological signs of peasant backwardness from their accounts of village transformation. They argued that it was natural and inevitable for villagers to move from a position of ideologically clouded but translocally mobile subjects before the Communist Revolution to enlightened, cosmopolitan vanguards for China's modernization and opening up in the post-Mao era of economic reform. Even during their confinement to the stasis of the rural commune system, cadres emphasized the positive impressions of visiting party elites who observed that Longyan residents were clearly not like "other peasants." By downplaying peasant status and illicit links to human smuggling, cadres argued that it was villagers' moral destiny to step out and become successful overseas Chinese. They even suggested that state policies directly served as supports and catalysts—not legal obstacles—for villagers' overseas aspirations, enabling them not only to catch up to their urban neighbors but even to surpass them in terms of the pace of modernization. They pointed to all sorts of embodied forms of newfound prosperity as the indexical signs of villagers' superior quality and growing cosmopolitanism as an overseas-connected population.

Urbanites refuted this account of a fateful past to a cosmopolitan future by interpreting many of the same qualisigns celebrated by village cadres—from housing to food to social etiquette—as the inverse markers of intractable peasantness among Longyan's newly mobile residents. Far from a natural evolution of the peasants with state support and legitimacy, non-peasant critics emphasized all the transgressive and unruly aspects of rural emigration from Fuzhou's countryside to distinguish these transnational flows from the more elevated assumptions of the overseas Chinese as jet-setting cosmopolitan professionals. Not only did they reference overseas villagers as stowaways rather than overseas Chinese to highlight their criminal dispositions for "stealing a passage," but they also linked illegal migration to the larger population problem of unproductive rural surplus—itself a result of illicit peasant tendencies for having excessive and expendable children in violation of the one-child policy. Along with the peasants' continual backward and superstitious practices, these evasions of state regulations suggested how far Longyan villagers were from the model subjects of economic reform promoted by local cadres. Despite

their urban and worldly pretensions, villagers with overseas connections continued to embody the quantity rather than quality part of the population, as exemplified by their disregard for civic order and their squandering of remittances on vulgar consumerism. As their critics argued, villagers remained incorrigible peasants, displaying all the ontological signs of backwardness that disqualified them from moral careers as China's cosmopolitan vanguards.

Despite their obvious clashes, these two retracings of village trajectories from peasant to overseas Chinese shared some fundamental assumptions of ontology and entitlement anchored to the state classificatory grid of distinct and unequal state identifications. Cadres did not dispute urbanites' claims that peasant culture was fundamentally incompatible with overseas Chinese identity, disagreeing only over the degree that villagers ever embodied the qualisigns of peasantness in the first place. In both cases, the state's taxonomy of difference and identity was taken as the natural order of things, its bureaucratically regulated channels understood as the encompassing road map to divergent moral careers. While nonpeasant status put one on the track from school to work unit, peasant status usually meant either a future of categorical stasis and immobilization or aimless wandering and dislocation off of state trajectories. Villagers did not disagree with this assessment of the available pathways for state subjects. But they also emphasized the institutional inequalities leading to such divergent destinies and in the process denaturalized state distinctions like household registration as the ontological grounds for charting moral careers.

Since Deng Xiaoping called on people to "step out" in the late 1970s, new trajectories overseas also opened to Chinese subjects for serving as productive "bridges" (the "*qiao*" in the term *huaqiao*) to global ties and resources. While the legal channels abroad largely remained the province of university graduates and elite professionals, state desires for an inflow of overseas capital inspired officials—high and low—to court a wider circle of mobile Chinese currently overseas—from third-generation foreign nationals to recent emigrants like Longyan villagers—under the same celebratory rubric as "overseas Chinese."[15] The slippage of this designation between urban elites authorized for travel and mobile others questionably bound to state regulations has made it possible for people to imagine moral careers from state evasion to privileged reincorporation. More important, I have argued here that precedents for such moral careers could

be found in people's approaches to the household registration system, particularly around the status for unauthorized children, where legality was understood more as a resource than a moral valuation, more a phase than a state of being. In the delinking of legality and morality under the registration system, villagers could look to state identification more for potentiality than ontology, more as networked achievements than as natural entitlements in a given order of things.