"Quality" Control in China's Reform Era: Investigating the Suzhi Discourse in Women's Work

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“QUALITY” CONTROL IN CHINA’S REFORM ERA: 
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ABSTRACT 

China’s reform era has coincided with an emergence of a Chinese Communist Party-State 
ideological discourse concerning “population quality.” Claims and accusations of ‘low quality’ 
are particularly targeted at rural migrant women who have been migrating to Chinese cities at an 
increasing rate. This investigation attempts to delineate to what extent this is a story of complete 
domination of the hearts and minds. To what extent do the women themselves internalize these 
claims of low ‘quality?’

The thesis has been built around fieldwork conducted in the Beijing household services sector. 
Known as an industry for perpetrating unjust labor conditions for women, this site proves to be 
an appropriate site to explore a discourse that attempts to justify these conditions with claims of 
women’s low ‘quality.’ It will analyze various manifestations of the suzhi discourse on-the-
ground, as experienced the household service agency, women’s organizations, and the migrant 
women domestic workers themselves. Analysis of each of the players’ relationship to the 
discourse is complex: there are instances of submission and resistance; defiance and 
internalization; and nuances and generalizations.

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The origin and evolution of this inquiry involved many others. The entire piece has been built around the personal reflections and opinions of a certain group of women in Beijing in the summer of 2007.

Women of Ping An—Thank you for letting me into your world. I only hope that I have accurately rendered the meanings behind the narratives, stories and anecdotes you have entrusted with me.

Laoshi of Ping An—Thank you for Fully inviting me in every weekend, into every conversation, and into every discussion.

Migrant Women’s Club—Thank you for your openness, resourcefulness, and trust.

Nancy Mao Xian Rong—Your commitment inspired me every weekend. Thank you.

Thank you to Annette M. Kim who has served as an advisor to my fieldwork, analysis and writing process. She has allowed me the space and freedom to reflect and grapple with the many iterations this story has taken on over the last year, while also pushing me to clearly identify the phenomenon under study each time. That alone has been a learning process.

I wholeheartedly want to acknowledge J. Philip Thompson, who in an official capacity, served as the reader and reviewer of this thesis. It is in his unofficial capacity as a mentor, however where Phil gave me the courage to trust my instincts and encouraged me to ground my convictions in scholarship and research. In times of doubt and uncertainty, his unwavering trust was both inspiring and motivating.

My fieldwork was conducted in conjunction with an internship with the Program on Human Rights and Justice. Special thanks to Balakrishnan Rajagopal for this opportunity. Additional grant monies were provided by the MIT Public Service Center.

A special note of thanks to Tamara Jacka for sharing her own work as well as those of others. I only hope the new questions generated from this inquiry will help further her research on women workers in China.

As always, I want to acknowledge my family for their enduring support, patience, and faith in my efforts.
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CHAPTER I: “QUALITY” CONTROL: LINGUISTIC REFORM ON CHINA’S DEVELOPMENTAL PATH

It was my first conversation with a domestic worker at the household service agency. As an outsider, I was worried that her responses would be limited, her honesty restrained, and her true opinions censored. And then she said the following: “There is a lot happening in the country that isn’t shown to the outside world. They [Chinese leaders] are very clear about the conflict.”

Conflict defines China today. It is a conflict arising from the introduction of capitalism into a country that endured a decade-long Communist Revolution in order to realize an alternative to that exact societal arrangement. It is the conflict between exponential growth in coastal regions, yet deepening levels of poverty in the countryside. In China’s quest for prominence on the world stage, the resolution of these conflicts warrants serious consideration. This thesis argues that its resolution rests on how the conflict is felt, managed and contested on the ground. It will focus its attention on the millions of women—7 million is one estimate—who now form the backbone of the industry of domestic services in China. And ultimately it is an attempt to ‘show to the outside world’ what this woman claims is hidden.

This inquiry is focused on the analysis of an ideological discourse that has touched every major player in the market for household services. During the summer of 2007, my days were spent listening to migrant women domestic workers, household service companies, and popular women’s organizations reveal the contradictions, inconsistencies and variations in this discourse. All my interviewees were women; all played pivotal roles in maintaining and supporting Beijing’s household service industry. And over and over again, the term ‘quality’ appeared. It was never precisely defined, though my transcripts are full of references, anecdotes and explanations that represent attempts to situate its meaning in the respondents’ personal contexts. It was spoken to me almost as if its mere mention should generate a shared understanding.

Upon return from the field, I learned the true significance of this term of ‘quality.’ It is the foundation upon which a larger national discourse of “population quality” is being constituted. A pervasive concern with “population quality” permeates official Chinese Communist Party [CCP] rhetoric. It is best described as a blend of anxiety, urgency, obsession, and fear over its ability “to transform its massive population into a disciplined citizenry that can be harnessed for a unified national purpose.” It is an ideology premised on two Chinese terms: wenming [civilization, modernity] and suzhi [quality]. It is being deployed and disseminated with the express purpose of organizing, disciplining and regulating the ‘quality’ of the masses towards realizing civilization or modernity. The wenhua suzhi discourse is being used by the Party-State to manage development and the contradictions and conflicts that arise from this pursuit.

2 Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2001 statistics reveal that women make up 85% of the household service sector, China Daily, 31 April 2006.
3 Yan, Hairong (2003): 495.
4 Yan, Hairong (2003): 495.
5 Anagnost (1997): 7
6 Anagnost (1997): 120
7 Anagnost (1997): 120
The Phenomenon At-Play: Explanation of the Research Agenda

Research Question

James Scott once said about ideological discourses: "Once established, domination does not persist on its own momentum....[rather it is] by continuous efforts at reinforcement, maintenance, and adjustment." In order to permeate and exercise its control throughout all levels of society, these efforts must transcend its origins as a product of the Party-State.

Tamara Jacka's extensive research on women migrant workers in the Mainland Chinese household services industry, as well as their relationship with the wenhua suzhi discourse, has prompted her to offer a way conceptualize the discourse:

...rather than thinking solely in terms of an ideology constructed by a powerful state and inflicted upon a passive, powerless citizenry, we should conceive of wenming/suzhi as being part of a discursive field that engages a range of different subject positions and is constructed and reproduced through the agency of different social actors, including state officials, ordinary urbanites, peasants and migrants.

The phenomenon in question therefore is whether this State-produced ideology of wenhua suzhi is simply a story of Party-State domination. Using the domestic services industry as a focal point, to what extent are the key institutional players experiencing, constructing, and reproducing the Party-State discourse?

To that end, related questions include the following: Do their efforts represent submission to the State-produced ideologies? If not submission and internalization of the discourse, will we instead find resistance and defiance? How will any of these acts—be it submission, resistance, re-interpretation—reveal themselves?

Overview of Fieldwork Research

The answers to these questions lie in the transcripts, recordings, and notes collected during my three months of fieldwork in Beijing. Interning at the Beijing Migrant Women’s Club—the first women’s organization dedicated to addressing migrant workers’ needs in the city—situated me in a nexus of all the major players in the city’s domestic service industry. From that standpoint, I came to understand the structure of the industry as seen through the eyes of the domestic workers themselves. Through the snowballing method, I identified opportunities to speak with the institutions to which migrant women domestic workers maintained everyday relations.

Through the Club, I was introduced to a household service company where I conducted over 20 in-depth interviews with migrant women domestic workers and 2 staff members. Also through the Club, I engaged in participant-observation in workshops, forums and trainings at the

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8 Scott: 45.
9 Jacka (“Cultivating..): 20
organization itself and with other women's organizations. And finally, ongoing conversations with staff, workers, and participant-observation in workshops, forums, and trainings.

My entire field research experience was contextual and contingent on relationships. Two types of relationships shaped my approach to conducting this research: those premised on connections and those premised on the deepening of personal relations with the interviewee or institution. The Migrant Women’s Club opened several doors for me, vouching for my legitimacy and presence. Through them, I was able to participate in numerous meetings, trainings and workshops. Most importantly, they introduced me to the household agency, which turned out to be crucial because I was put in contact with a specific group of migrant women domestic workers themselves. Following this introduction, I agreed to participate in and on occasion lead English workshops for the women on the weekends. In this way, my relationship to this group of women deepened through both time and repeated interactions.

Therefore all my data and observations gain meaning only in the context in which they were embedded. To extract meaning, this thesis draws upon a tradition known as the ‘extended case study.’ Blending the standard research techniques of interviewing and participant-observation, this approach ‘valorizes context [and] challenges reification.’

The primary research methods were used: informal conversations, participant-observation, formal interviews, and secondary research on literature produced by several of the institutions under study. Conversations and interviews also took place in a variety of settings: the household agency, the agency’s off-site dormitory, and the offices of the women’s organizations.

**Approaches to Discourse Analysis**

After gathering this data, the real work—and arguably the heart of this inquiry—began. The collection of in-depth, personal narratives, stories and anecdotes as recounted to me in and of themselves do not generate any conclusive theory or framework with which to answer the research questions. After pouring over these transcripts over and over again, I can only say that the *wenhua suzhi* discourse is a battleground of competing definitions, characterizations, and interests. Therefore the major portions of this inquiry will focus on discourse analysis, keeping in mind that stories and anecdotes have latent explanatory power that must be teased out:

> The accounts or narratives that people tell do more than relate events. They also make moral claims and to be intelligible must be related within conventional idioms and vocabularies of motive.  

Analysis of these narratives will hinge on what has been explicitly articulated. But it will also rely heavily on an analysis of what is unsaid. By noting how the interviewees craft their stories to relate, reference, and/or challenge the discourse, this allows for a more nuanced investigation of their relationship to the discourse. This has proven especially important because most interviewees exhibited a rather complex connection to labels of 'quality,' depending on the context, the target audience, and the ultimate purpose of invoking such claims.

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10 Buroway: 30.
A related aspect to discourse analysis as well as the extended case study method is extending the phenomenon under study into historical research (cite). The primacy of the discourse would be difficult to understand outside of its historic context. The concept of wenhua suzhi has been molded and re-molded several times to accommodate the Party-State’s priorities at different points in history. Understanding its past—and what it achieved in the past—can offer hints towards its future role. As Lin Chun comments, “There is nothing to romanticize about the pasts—their importance is no more than the force of their residues in the present.”

**Contribution to Existing Research**

7 million nationwide are now employed in domestic service. The domestic services industry is 92% rural to urban migrants and 85% women. Though only a small fraction of this 7 million reside in Beijing—153,000—there is also a chronic shortage of domestic workers in the capital city. A recent 2008 estimate reports a shortage of 30,000 maids in Beijing.

Both State officials and the International Labour Organization claim that China is facing the largest human movement and migration in history. Presently, migrants compose 25% of the total population in Beijing. Nationally, they compose 11.5% of the total population in Chinese cities.

Beijing’s floating population reached 3.5 million in 2005, accounting for one-quarter of Beijing’s total population. Nationally, 140,000 million surplus workers have already come from the countryside. Furthermore, the National Population and Family Commission estimate a surplus labor force of 150 to 170 million rural dwellers; there is no reason to believe that migration to cities will slow down anytime in the near future.

As more and more rural workers enter into Chinese cities to participate in the industrialization and modernization of the country, the official Party-State ‘quality’ discourse that justifies their abusive labor conditions claims will become more and more important. Understanding the discourse’s impact on the ground can provide clues towards its effectiveness.

**Structure of Thesis**

This investigation unfolds in the following manner; Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the wenhua suzhi discourse, including its origins and iterations throughout modern Chinese history.
It will provide an explanation for its official purpose today in the era of reform. In this section there will also be a case study of the emergence of a similar discourse in Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. An ideological discourse around ‘Asian values’ attempted to legitimize the growth of the household service industries in those countries. The chapter concludes by comparing the similarities and differences between the ‘East Asian Tigers’ experience with this Mainland Chinese case.

Chapter 3 will return to the rise of the household services industry in China. A history of the Party-State’s principal role in structuring the industry will explain how the *suzhi* discourse was linked to rural migrant women from the very beginning. The Party-State also introduced a new institution, the household service company, which has since become the principal way in which rural migrant women seek employment.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 form the heart of this thesis. In each of these chapters, the key players in the industry begin to speak. Chapter 4 focuses on the household agency, their functions, and relationship to the women workers. The agency at-hand is considered an elite one, catering to ‘high-class’ families and whose workers usually command wages double to triple the industry average. In my interviews with the staff at this agency, there were multiple references to the *wenhua suzhi* of their women workers. By expanding the definition of ‘quality,’ their stories and opinions extended beyond the women to implicate the *wenhua suzhi* of employers as well.

Chapter 5 offers a detailed account of the *wenhua suzhi* discourse, as both experienced and recounted to me by over 20 migrant women domestic workers. It is in this section where the women demonstrate simultaneous acts of submission and resistance to the discourse. The contradictions of internalization are revealed as the women grapple with issues of ‘quality,’ respect, and control.

Chapter 6 charts the growth of the popular women’s organization, an institution that is beginning to gain ground in reform-China. The Beijing Migrant Women’s Club is a hybrid organization that straddles the line between the Party-State and public sector. This section will reveal the structural contradictions behind their mission towards serving migrant women domestic services and their complex relationship to the *wenhua suzhi* discourse.

This chapter also includes observations gained from participating in a workshop led by another women’s organization. At the Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Centre, the *wenhua suzhi* discourse is reified, to a degree unparalleled in any other context.

Chapter 7 revisits the original research question. This thesis is an attempt at documenting variations and nuances in discourse, hoping that the larger story will tell itself. The collection of these stories, narratives and interpretations has allowed me to analyze the *wenhua suzhi* discourse, as processed through the minds of various players in the industry for household services in China. Together they provide revealing clues into the questions of whether or not official Party-State rhetoric is in fact maintaining ‘quality’ control.
CHAPTER II. HISTORICAL FRAMEWORKS AND PRECEDENTS

This inquiry is an exploration of one particular strand of discourse rooted in Confucianism, a philosophy that has maintained an unwavering—though altered—presence throughout Chinese history. It is a strand that has been particularly persistent, though malleable, in times of great national importance. It is only with this historical perspective that the discourse’s reincarnation as well as contradictions today can be fully appreciated.

The other portion of the chapter will attempt to anchor an analysis of the Mainland Chinese case in a comparable context. To that end, an evaluation of the “Asian Values” discourse’s role in the developmental states of Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong will be discussed. Collectively known as the “East Asian Tigers,” all three societies have transformed themselves into economic development success stories. More importantly, these countries are “identifiably ‘Chinese’ or ‘Confucian’”¹, in the sense that Confucian values continue to guide development in these contemporary Chinese societies.² The chapter will conclude by situating the East Asian Tiger’s experience with value-laden discourse in that of Mainland China’s current phenomenon.

Confucian Philosophy: Origins and Iterations in Chinese Communist Party Rhetoric

Confucian philosophy has maintained an unwavering—though altered—presence throughout the many dynasties and periods of Chinese civilization. The concept wenming in Chinese signifies civilization, modernity and an advanced stage of development.³ On closer inspection, the character wen forms the backbone of Confucian philosophy. Wen encompasses several meanings, including script, written language, literary, culture and refined manners.⁴ Ming, on the other hand, conveys the meaning of brightness and understanding.⁵ Together, wenming is associated with connotations of enlightened modernity and fervent nationalism.

The root term—wen—when combined with another character, becomes wenhua. Wenhua, roughly translated as culture or education⁶, then becomes the vehicle through which the Chinese populace achieves the long-desired state of wenming.

...wenhua is the highly contested ground on which a national culture must be reconstituted in the project of moving toward wenming, a state of civility that is closely identified with the advanced industrial cultures of Asia and the West.⁷

Since the early 19th century, the national culture of wenhua has been constituted and reconstituted by the ways and means through which China’s people cultivate and embody Confucian ideals. In other words, this meant a high degree of literacy, familiarity with the

¹ Anagnost (1997): 84.
⁴ Jacka ("Cultivating..."): 2
⁶ Jacka ("Cultivating..."): 2
classics, and an expert understanding and adherence to traditional rituals and notions of propriety. The mark of the Confucian educated elite was exemplified through years of discipline and self-cultivation towards achieving these ideals. Collectively this process is loosely understood as acquiring *wenhua*.

In keeping with core Confucian values, one's individual, continual process of lifelong learning and self-cultivation was not for their own personal glory. Respect for authority and submission of the individual for the larger collective good have always been core values of Confucian thought.\(^8\) The Confucian world is one of hierarchies, where no institution or figure is higher than that of the nation, and later the Party-State. The attainment of *wenhua* and *wenming* has always been connected to overt nationalist objectives.

*Wenming*'s link to Confucianism—through the vehicle of *wenhua*—created two very important conditions. First, the Confucian roots, with its emphasis on the possibility and desirability of self-cultivation, training and improvement, promulgated individual responsibility for the strength of the empire.\(^9\) Framing the discourse in such a manner absolved State responsibility in directing development, the quest for modernity and responsibility for the fate of the empire.

Secondly and accordingly, this created a condition where falling short of this advanced development and enlightened modernity could be attributed to the inadequacies of the Chinese people. "Intrinsic to the idea of the nation as deeply historical is the concept of the people as embodying the primordial character of the nation."\(^10\) The burden of ushering in an age of modernity falls squarely and solely on the nation's citizens. For this reason, the *wenming* discourse has always been a discourse of lack.\(^11\) The sole reason that China has never reached this state of *wenming* is because of the shortcomings of modernity, civility and discipline\(^12\) of the Chinese population.

Tamara Jacka, summarizes the conceptual underpinnings of the discourse in the following comment:

> Like the discourses of that earlier, colonial period it is underpinned by an anxiety about modernity, a concern that China is weak and backward because its people are deficient in some way, and a conviction that in order for it to become powerful and fully modern, those deficiencies in the people must be rectified.\(^13\)

The discourse linguistically paired the idealized image of civilization in the national psyche with concerns of individual *wenhua*. The term *suzhi* [quality] often is used in tandem with *wenhua*. Even throughout the imperial period, the development of the individual lied in the simultaneous pursuit of physical, intellectual and moral qualities [*suzhi*].\(^14\) The term 'quality' can sometimes act as synonym for the term *wenhua*. Historically, "*suzhi* can be seen in Confucian teachings that

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\(^8\) Ho and Ho:77.
\(^12\) Anagnost (1997): 76.
\(^13\) Jacka: ("Introduction..."): 5.
each individual is malleable, trainable and obliged to self-cultivate and that all subjects share in
the responsibility for the fate of the empire.\textsuperscript{15}

The parallels notwithstanding, the two terms do convey different meanings, though the nuances
are hard to render without a specific context. \textit{Suzhi} is a concept that is not as readily translatable
as \textit{wenhua}. In fact, Andrew Kipnis starts his genealogy of the \textit{suzhi} discourse by stating upfront
that although it is often translated as ‘quality,’ there is simply no single English term that fully
catches the nuances of \textit{suzhi}.\textsuperscript{16} Rachael Murphy, in her research of the \textit{suzhi} discourse in the
education realm, frames the concept in the following way: “Literally ‘essentialized quality,’
\textit{suzhi} is an amorphous concept that refers to the innate and nurtured physical, intellectual and
ideological characteristics of a person.”\textsuperscript{17} Though it evades precise definition, \textit{suzhi} operates
according to the idea “that the strength of the nation and its position in history are reducible to
the quality of its citizens.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Departure and Continuity: The Discourse during the Cultural Revolution}

This \textit{wenhua suzhi} discourse was altogether cast in a new light during the Cultural Revolution.

The founding of the People’s Republic of China saw the most radical change in ideology.
Massive efforts were consciously and thoroughly directed toward translating
revolutionary ideology into educational objectives and practices. Notwithstanding this
fact, continuity with the past is evident at another level of analysis.\textsuperscript{19}

The discourse was re-aligned with the then priorities of national development-- to aid in the
pursuit of a Socialist civilization. Mao called for an end to the any remnants of an ‘old’
civilization that obstructed China’s path towards an enlightened Communist society. In order to
cast off all remnants of an “old” society, Confucius teachings were expressly targeted, for they
epitomized traditional Chinese culture and thought. As a result, Confucius teachings of
traditional classics and rituals were openly denigrated.

Ironically, the philosophy was never altogether abandoned. The notion of \textit{suzhi} survived.
“Quality” during the Revolution was intermeshed with the pursuit of Marxian thought and
“socialist consciousness.” A high regard remained for the development of moral, intellectual and
physical \textit{suzhi} towards the Revolution, which at the time was of utmost national importance.
Mao is often quoted as saying the following:

“make those who receive an education develop morally, intellectually and physically and
become cultured workers with a high degree of socialist consciousness”\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{footnotes}
\item Murphy: 2.
\item Kipnis (2006): 296.
\item Murphy: 2.
\item Murphy: 2.
\item Murphy: 16.
\item Ho and Ho: 10.
\end{footnotes}
Neither the concepts of *wenhua* or *suzhi* were discarded. *Suzhi* was still an individual responsibility, still directly aligned with the national purpose, though now re-framed to serve the purposes of a socialist transformation. The State effectively preserved the language of *wenhua* and *suzhi*, in the name of a new political apparatus. Again, the discourse was connected to a larger national project, while at the same time, effectively called on individuals to raise their own *suzhi* in the name of contributing to a revolutionary cause. Maoists stressed the concept of improvability of the masses, in terms of education, ideological indoctrination and labour.\(^{21}\) It was the presumed or perceived lack of socialist *suzhi* that invited the numerous and widespread attacks on counter-revolutionary individuals. Simply spouting Maoist slogans and sayings were a measure of protection against random violence. "Their use of the slogan was presumably intended not only to operate almost talismanically, protecting themselves and their comrades from harm, but also to redeploy the official language, to appropriate it for the ordinary citizen against a representative of state power."\(^{22}\) The lesson from the Cultural Revolution is that belief and internalization of the discourse is not necessary to maintaining the strength and legitimacy of the regime. The key was an ability to speak to the political apparatus.

**Reincarnation of the *Suzhi* Discourse: “Development is the Indisputable Truth”**

Almost immediately following the Revolution, the late successor *Deng Xiaoping*, ushered in a radical platform for change.\(^{23}\) Meanwhile, *suzhi*, or quality, began gaining widespread prominence amongst official Party rhetoric in the 1980s. Its appearance in Party Congress reports has grown substantially throughout the last two decades:

In the mid to late 1980s, there was an unprecedented explosion in the usage of the term *suzhi*. Thus, the number of times the word was used in the People’s Daily jumped from 7 in 1970 to 102 in 1980, and then 813 in 1985, 1,066 in 1990 and 2,486 in 2000.\(^{24}\)

This explosion has coincided with the national project of reform. Formerly at the helm of a Socialist command economy, the CCP is now endeavoring to transform itself into a developmental state capable of ushering in a ‘socialist market economy.’\(^{25}\) But the introduction of markets has unleashed and set in motion a myriad of institutional, social, political and economic changes. Reverberations are felt throughout the Chinese population at both an unprecedented scope and scale.

These reverberations are often felt as contradictions. The cultural, social and economic divides between urban and rural, rich and poor, coastal and inner western regions are deepening in the age of marketization.\(^{26}\) The relentless pursuit of economic growth has resulted in the subsequent growth and reliance on a low-wage, low-skilled, and largely rural labor force.

\(^{22}\) Weeden: 66.
\(^{23}\) Moore: 168.
\(^{24}\) Jacka: (“Cultivating…”): 7.
\(^{25}\) Fan: 286.
\(^{26}\) Moore: 152.
In the face of widespread rural poverty, the discourse of Development sponsored by the party state and the elite is unable to grasp how continuing poverty is integral to the process of marketization and how coastal cities and enterprises of all capital forms build their economic success on the backs of interior rural areas that supply cheap resources and labor.

At the heart of these contradictions is the Chinese Communist Party, which remains the sole political apparatus in the nation. Hence the term Party-State is often used to denote the single party governing system in China. The CCP was founded in 1921 on the principles of Marxism, Socialism and egalitarian values and ideologies. Today, it is not uncommon either in academic literature or popular media to find scholars arguing with disenchanted resoluteness that the CCP has abandoned its socialist mission. The byline in these stories is that in their unrelenting march towards modernization and development, they have dismantled and abandoned all responsibility for the collective welfare of the Chinese population. The Party-State’s legitimacy to rule rests on resolving, or least managing or balancing these contradictions. The wenhua suzhi discourse—directed at the newly mobile rural masses—is their attempt.

The suzhi discourse speaks almost exclusively to the Chinese peasantry. Yan Hairong further specifies that, in addition to its pervasiveness, it is also referred to as a matter of intense urgency and anxiety about the country’s massive rural population. The call to improve on the suzhi of the nation was particularly directed at the educating, civilizing, disciplining and modernizing of rural migrants.

rural agricultural regions, and rural peasants by extension, are paradoxically blamed as the causes of China’s underdevelopment and seen as objects to be developed; they are the necessary “other” against which progress and civilization (wenming) are defined and measured.

This attempt is embodied in the Party-State’s active and persistent efforts at disseminating a discourse on raising “population quality” (renkou suzhi). As Yan Hairong so succinctly articulates: “Suzhi, is therefore, nothing more (nor less) than Development’s phantom child.” It is the pathway towards enlightened modernity today. Implicit in their pervasive concern with “raising population quality” was the notion that the “quality” of the Chinese people is too low, therefore inhibiting the nation from reaching its full development potential.

In the Party-State’s concern over improving the human attributes of the populace, it then enables them to explain the adverse impact of national policies on the rural population. The CCP uses the discourse to reposition themselves as facilitators of suzhi improvement: to provide the tools and avenues necessary for the Chinese populace to raise their suzhi in order to contribute to the nationalist project of development. The suzhi discourse has become central to the continuing

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28 Yan (2003): 495
29 Sun: 27
30 Gaetano: 47.
31 Yan (2003): 496.
32 Jacka ("Cultivating...”): 7.
33 Murphy: 4.
legitimacy of the party-state in the era of reform.\textsuperscript{34} It is in this way that they can gain legitimacy as a developmental state.

The use of ideology as a developmental strategy is not altogether unique, even in recent Asian history. What follows is an evaluation of what has been referred to as the 'Asian Values' discourse in the national development of the Newly Industrialized Economies (NIEs) of Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

\textbf{Case Study: The Asian Values Discourse in the East Asian Tiger Experience}

The foreign maid trade in the Southeast region is built almost entirely on transnational, gendered migration. The labor shortage for low-status, low wage occupations in all three NIEs “forced it to depend on foreign labor to ensure continuing momentum in economic growth.”\textsuperscript{35} Hong Kong has 240,000 domestic workers\textsuperscript{36}, primarily from the Phillipines and Indonesia. Its city-state neighbor, Singapore, has 150,000,\textsuperscript{37} primarily from the Phillipines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand.\textsuperscript{38} The island of Taiwan has 120,000\textsuperscript{39} with sending countries being Phillipines, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.\textsuperscript{40} The overwhelming majority are women. The globalization of domestic service rests entirely on an apparatus made possible by the hundreds of thousands of migrant women, traversing multiple divides of race, geography, and class in order to render these services.

The divide between the sending economies of developing countries and the receiving, more advanced economies is codified into real terms of class, race, gender, and ethnic differences. These differences are often the ones that structure and maintain the modern day slave-like conditions under which many domestic migrant women workers labor.

The first theme is the invocation of the colonial discourse. Since they come from poor countries, their education, hygienic practices, and physical conditions tend to be inferior. According, their individual and collective characteristics are also less than satisfactory…their collective status as migrant labor, which is synonymous with being poor, uneducated, and uncivilized…One major mechanism in the othering of foreign domestics is the representation of them as savages in need of being civilized and modernized… \textsuperscript{41}

Due to the asymmetry between the sending and receiving countries of global household help, the ‘backwardness’ of foreign domestics is central to the discourse on domestic service.\textsuperscript{42} The

\textsuperscript{34} Murphy: 4.
\textsuperscript{35} Gonzalez, Huang, Yeoh (1999): 117.
\textsuperscript{36} Ong: 196.
\textsuperscript{37} Human Rights Watch (2005):1.
\textsuperscript{38} Oishi : 31
\textsuperscript{39} Lan: 210.
\textsuperscript{40} Lan: 216.
\textsuperscript{41} Cheng: 135.
\textsuperscript{42} Cheng: 135.
perceived inferiority brought about by class, race, gender and nationality enables the devaluation of domestic work, as well as those who perform it. 43

This colonial discourse is pervasive throughout the domestic services industries in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan alike. Implicit in this discourse is the justification of sub-par and exploitative labor conditions because these women are lacking in education, financial resources, and an air of civility. Their lack legitimizes their second-class status in both the individual household as well as their host societies at-large. According to the discourse, migrant women domestic workers are branded by their native places, seen only as products of their underdeveloped countries of origin.

The irony however is that the women's collective 'lack' enabled the miraculous growth engendered by these States. The formula for success that transformed Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore into competitive, global economies was rooted in state-led industrialization strategies focused, in early stages, on aggressive export promotion and manufacturing. 44 To attract women into the local labor force, the State employed a strategy of importing foreign migrant women to serve as their helpers, instead of investing in childcare or eldercare services. 45

The State's success in scaling back from the provision of childcare and eldercare services was made possible by appealing to "traditional Asian values." Central to the discourse on "Asian values" is the Confucian stress on the centrality and importance of the family as an institution. Caring for one's family was so important a task that it should be a family responsibility, never to rely on outside institutions. By framing childcare as a family responsibility, the State was able to imply that state welfare services would threaten the traditional value that family members should be cared for at home. 46

Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong also promoted these norms of collectivity, communal care, and family in order to advance a larger "ideological claim that capitalism in Southeast Asia was a kinder and gentler system in which collective interests were not displaced by unfettered individual interests." 47 This pursuit, and the model of development for the East Asian tigers, has been argued by some scholars to be an alternative development trajectory that differed fundamentally from Western developmental precedents. The priorities for these developmental states was to pursue economic growth and an alternative trajectory of development hinged on uniquely "Asian" values: "an emphasis on the community and societal harmony over the individual, a sense of loyalty and duty toward one's family," 48 and the high regard for collective good over personal gain. 49

However their discourse did not perform as effectively in managing the contradictions of capitalist development and its reliance on low-wage, exploited labor. The grand contradiction in their Confucian-inspired Asian values discourse—with its claims on community and societal

43 Huang, Yeoh, and Rahman: 3.
44 Glick: 1.
45 Oishi :32.
46 Oishi: 25.
48 Samuels: 713.
49 Ong: 216.
harmony, collectivity over individuality—is its complete silence on the contradictions that arose from the importation and exploitation of migrant women domestic workers.

Situating Precedents in the Chinese Case

Transnational, gendered migration in the scheme of global householding allowed for a privileging of urban, middle income households over the fates of women workers from less developed economies. In the Chinese case, however, the grand majority of women domestic workers are rural migrants who share the same nationality. A closer look into China’s internal rural-urban divide reveals striking similarities to the divides between advanced economies and developing countries.

The Chinese rural migrant conjures images of backwardness, peasantry, and illiteracy. This image stands in stark contrast with the Chinese urban dweller, who is modern, professional and standard. This distinction traces its roots to the country’s socialist past.

The privileging of urban residents over their rural counterparts has always been characteristic of the Chinese state’s national development strategy. When industrialization became a top priority for the CCP in the 1950s, “rural wages and consumption were suppressed and the countryside subordinated to urban demands.” 50 Lin Chun goes on to explain that the country’s own rural labor and resources were exploited to meet the historical demands of industrialization because the country did not have colonies nor a global trade network from which to extract these resources. 51To prevent the rural masses from migrating to cities, the State Council of the CCP established a household registration system [hukou] for the purposes of population control and resource allocation in 1955. This system effectively ensured that peasants remained on the land, working in agricultural communes “to produce the food that would enable the cities’ residents to industrialize and modernize China.” 52 Benefits such as healthcare, education and other social services were delivered through this registration system, effectively tying rural hukou holders to the land. Though the State achieved staggering growth, the subordination of rural needs to urban demands has left indelible marks on the country’s collective conscience.

The significance of one’s hukou was both real and psychological. In real terms, for one, the quality of tangible goods available to urbanites was far superior than their rural counterparts. Urban transportation and infrastructure in cities were expanded too, as were employment opportunities, education and healthcare. Across the board, urbanites were undeniably favored. This material superiority was internalized in the psyches of both rural and urban hukou holders. In Ma and Xiang’s work on Chinese native-place and identity, they have likened the urban-rural distinction to a marker for class. 53 Peasants, or rural hukou holders, were in a class altogether subordinate to urbanites, or city hukou holders. Within one country, the hukou system single-handedly erected and maintained geographic, class-based, and psychological rifts.

50 Chun: 66
51 Chun: 66.
52 Cheng and Selden.
53 Ma and Xiang: 548.
For these reasons, Chinese rural-urban migration is especially significant because some have argued that traversing the rural-urban divide is as socially, culturally, politically and economically significant as cross-border transnational migration. Describing the *hukou* as a “de facto internal passport system,” Kam Wing Chan argues that China has been able to benefit from migrant labor as well as discriminate against its own internal migrants because of this system. Daniel Bell refers to the *hukou* as a "politically sanctioned, hereditary distinction between natives of rural and urban areas," likening it to a caste system that brands rural dwellers as second-class citizens. Upon arrival in the city, the stigma associated with a rural *hukou* is similar to that experienced by transnational, foreign migrant laborers. While geographic mobility is now possible and to an extent, encouraged by the State, the *hukou* is still a tool to maintain a class difference. The *hukou* in the past was associated with rural backwardness and lower class status; now it is about the language of *suzhi*.

With state investment increasingly concentrated in the city and making it the center for developing a commodity of economy of scale, the city becomes the locale that represents modernity and progress. The countryside comes to be treated as a depository of backwardness, tradition and low *suzhi*.

To address the chronic shortage of local citizens willing to work as domestic workers, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore have turned to their less-developed Asian neighbors to fulfill the increasing demand for household services. China, on the other hand, looks no further than their own backyard for this pool of labor. Today, the modern version of rural extraction is playing out against a backdrop of renewed modernization, involving again the enhancement of urbanites’ quality of life. This is no more apparent in the domestic services industry than any other sector, where Chinese rural women are serving as domestic helpers in urban households seeking to solidify their status as middle-class families.

The transnational nature of gendered migration in the maid trade of Southeast Asia enabled a pervasive discourse of colonialism and lack; the Mainland Chinese case has been able to recode, from their unique historical conditions likening transnational migration, it into a discourse of ‘quality,’ or low ‘quality.’

**Will the Discourse Penetrate?**

The discourse on ‘quality’ today would never have been able to penetrate the national psyche and mobilize to the extent that it has if it had not been attached to the socialist institution of the *hukou*.

*Suzhi* derives part of its ideological potency through its reinforcement of related systems of valuation already embedded within Chinese development discourse, such as town

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54 Chan: 139.
55 Bell: 91-99.
56 Chan: 139.
57 Yan (2006): 21
58 Huang: 96.
versus country, developed versus backward, prosperous versus poor, civilized versus barbarian, and to have culture (you wenhua) versus to be without culture (mei wenhua). 60

Wanning Sun explains that while the hukou has in recent decades been relaxed to allow for rural migrant labor to pour into cities, “such change has in fact given rise to a greater need for exclusion and boundary keeping at a symbolic level.” 61 This exclusion and boundary keeping often takes the form of polar opposites: city versus rural folk, and high suzhi versus low suzhi.

Citizens’ own concerns about wenhua suzhi have a potentially penetrating influence. By drawing attention to their personal lack of wenhua suzhi, it creates a condition for individual self-cultivation and improvement. In the striving for modernity, there is this notion that neither an individual or a nation’s suzhi is fixed. The discourse is framed in a way that provokes action, either their personal suzhi can fall behind or be raised. 62

The essential question then becomes one related to the actual internalization of the discourse by the target audience. In surveying the role of the discourse during the Cultural Revolution, Andrew Kipnis, a leading scholar of the suzhi discourse has argued the following:

During the Cultural Revolution, Maoist sayings constituted a sacred language used by almost everyone to express almost anything. No matter how self-serving, disingenuous, or subversive one’s intent, expressing one’s thoughts through Maoist sayings implied that one was respecting the leadership of the party, and thus offered a modicum of political protection as well as an opportunity to be heard. 63

To this day, it remains unclear the extent to which the masses believed and internalized revolutionary fervor and thinking. In studying the present-day version of the discourse, Kipnis argues that the language of suzhi operates similarly today as it did during the Revolution. 64 Today, the question becomes whether the arguments about ‘population quality’ and ‘lack’ are internalized by the millions making the journey across the rural-urban divide, or if they are simply speaking to the official State discourse to serve their own interests.

60 Murphy: 3.
61 Sun: 9.
63 Kipnis (2007): 393.
64 Kipnis (2007): 393.
CHAPTER III. AN INDUSTRY BORN OUT OF SUZHI CONCERNS

The primary loci of interest in analyzing the wenhua suzhi discourse are the institutions and organizations born out of China’s reform towards a socialist market economy. As a former Socialist economy, service industries were virtually non-existent\(^1\) in China prior to the reform of the 1970s. Economic reform has relied heavily upon the State sector to carve out appropriate spheres and spaces for their growth and maturity.\(^2\) The birth of the market for household services in China is one such story. Understanding these historical conditions will explain how the industry was structured around the wenhua suzhi discourse.

This chapter will offer a brief history of domestic servants and nursemaids in China, prior to reform. It will then offer a reasoning for formal State intervention and mediation of this migration in the mid 1970s. It is upon this foundation on which concerns with suzhi are built—concerns of raising the “quality” of rural migrant women. It is here that the State laid the dual foundations for both the structural and cognitive contradictions we will explore later amongst women themselves and institutions.

Early Migration of Domestic Servants: The Role of Kinship and Place-Based Networks

In the 1970s and 1980s, urban households with domestic helpers were few and far between. Only high-ranking cadres and intellectual elites, who received a subsidy for such services, hired domestic help.\(^3\) It has been argued that the cadres’ heavy responsibilities during the Maoist era exempted them from the general rule against employing hired labor.\(^4\) For the servant however, even during this era of egalitarianism, “working as a baomu carried a sense of shame, shaped by the power of local patriarchy and reinforced by the state’s failure to socialize domestic service as public and socialist labor, with due legitimacy, rights and benefits.”\(^5\) Even in Communist China, domestic help as a profession and together with those who provide the services, have always been devalued.

In the 1980s, following economic liberalization, the practice of hiring live-in domestic help became popular amongst urban families under the tolerance of the government, who was eager to fulfill the dual objectives of improving urban living conditions and creating jobs for the rural unemployed.\(^6\)

Migration and placement into households proceeded at an unregulated, yet highly orderly manner. Potential urban employers would rely on “old trusted domestics in their neighborhoods or in their friends’ neighborhoods to supply new domestic helpers. Or short of such access, they

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1 Solinger: 280.
2 Christiansen: 72.
6 Chan: 125.
asked their rural relatives to find a trustworthy young woman, often related to the employers, to come to the city to work for them as a domestic helper.  

The 1980s saw the predominance of kinship and place-based networks in facilitating the movement of rural women to Beijing. Kinship and place-based networks appear throughout Chinese history and society. The term *laoshiang* refers to “people from the same native place.” With a country as vast and as diverse as China, crossing provincial lines, let alone urban and rural lines, can be as different culturally and economically as immigrating to another country. *Laoshiang* networks have been known to provide insular support to rural migrants upon arrival in Chinese cities. They have reduced risks involved in long-distance migration, provided mutual aid and skills, and offered social solidarity.

Domestic workers’ kinship-based and place-based networks offered a similar form of support and mutual aid. Undoubtedly, the strongest of these networks was from Wuwei County in Anhui province. As early as 1982-1988, one estimate suggests that 50,000 to 60,000 migrants were in domestic work. Approximately 10,000 were from Wuwei County alone. Also known as “nursemaid associations,” these groups “tried to improve their members’ living and working conditions, to raise their wages, and to guarantee their economic rights, and they spread information on wage levels and job opportunities.” These networks were so powerful and reliable that operating outside of them (either as employer or domestic worker) was often likened to operating in the black market.

This power, over time, translated into a monopoly, especially for rural women from Anhui province. By the mid-1980s, Beijing households began to avoid hiring migrant women from Wuwei County precisely because of their clout. If one domestic worker had a grievance with her employer, it was not uncommon for their *laoshiang* to “gang up on her employer.” It is because of these instances of collective action that urban households were growing more and more disgruntled at the general lack of a disciplined, domestic labor force. It is against this background that the State stepped in.

**The Beginnings of State Intervention: The Birth of the *Suzhi* Improvement Discourse**

Historically in China, urban centers have never been bastions of low-skilled, low-paying occupations. Chinese cities simply did not have the supply of low-skilled workers needed to meet the urban demand for domestic help. Hence, the local People’s Congress and People’s Political Consultative Conference convened to address what was termed as a “crisis” in the domestic labor market. These initial convenings led to the Beijing municipal government coordinating a series of labor exchanges with the local branches of the All-China Women’s

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8 Zhang: 54.
9 Zhang: 60.
10 Zhang: 55.
11 Solinger: 224.
12 Solinger: 224.
13 Solinger: 224.
Federations (ACWF), a mass organization under the State Council. The idea was to use the ACWF's network of 60,000 grassroots organizations, township and neighborhood committees to recruit rural women who had ambitions of becoming nursemaid in cities. As a result of these exchanges, it is recorded in history that the State agency was used as a substitute for an embryonic market. A directive from the Beijing municipal government requested that the Women's Federation form a "household help placement company, the famous March Eighth Domestic Service Co., to organize country women, mostly from Anhui...."

The March Eighth Domestic Service Co. (or Family Labor Service Co.), was founded in 1982 deliberately to begin introducing the contract-based system of employment. Domestic women workers’ kinship and place-based networks by this time had gained much clout and control over urban households, with several women often ganging up on unsatisfactory practices of any given employer or simply leaving households in a matter of days, if confronted with subpar working conditions. These networks had the resources, savviness, and know-how to negotiate salary and working conditions, putting the urban employer at a severe disadvantage. The service company was the State’s way of intervening in order to appease growing urban dissatisfaction and decline in bargaining power. “To urban citizens, the labor recruitment company promised to provide an organized, “clean,” sustainable, and reliable source of labor power.”

Labor power in the countryside was directly linked to these urban companies through the network of the Women’s Federation and other government organizations. It was the domestic service industry that trailblazed the model of organized migration and recruitment of rural women to service industries in cities. The official channels of employment, headed by the State-units of Women’s Federations, or even neighborhood committees of any given city, were coordinated by agencies responsible for registering the maids, arranging contracts, stabilizing wages, negotiating conflicts, training them, and “allegedly safeguarding the rights and interests of the women.” The State attempt to regulate the industry came through the introduction of contracts between these agencies and workers.

These labor recruitment and housekeeping agencies have become central to the industry, whether wholly State-owned or not, and have fulfilled the promises of the CCP project of disciplining domestic workers through suzhi improvement. The initial work of the Women’s Federation was not always so clear-cut. Confronted by rural women's initial unwillingness and reluctance to migrate, field recruiters led propaganda campaigns to invoke a desire amongst rural women to migrate. One example elucidates the suzhi discourse in action: State labor recruitment agencies first began drawing upon provinces with higher levels of poverty in more isolated areas for domestic workers, where migration networks were sparse. The benefits associated with

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17 Solinger:179.
18 Chan: 125.
20 Solinger: 223.
21 Solinger: 223; March Eighth Domestic Service Co. opened in 1983, according to Yan Hairong (2006): 5.
22 Yan (2003): 502
24 Solinger: 224.
migration were deployed through the use of local television and radio stations. In Yan Hairong’s history of migrant women domestic workers in China, she comments:

Here is where the linkage between Development and suzhi improvement...is deployed to persuade both cadres and peasants that labor migration is the only way that can effect a change for the better in their local area, not just through the money remittances that the migrants would send home but also through the change it could effect in local consciousness.

Suzhi improvement was effectively linked with national priorities of rural poverty alleviation, and called on women to play a key role. Yan Hairong argues that agencies’ deploy this discourse in order to demonstrate that poor wages and low-status associated with domestic work are outweighed by an opportunity for suzhi improvement. On an individual level, attaining suzhi is a transformative process. Young rural women are “simple, naïve, and a little clueless.” The “clueless” comment translates into lack of consciousness even about her own lack. “They have to learn of their lack of suzhi in order to desire it.” Commenting on the same woman, the manager of one household agency says, “Now when you look at her, although she still has that...that kind, that bit of...what do you call it...about rural people, yet in the way she speaks, she has a certain refinement now, and her air of awareness shows that she has learned a lot, at least in these respects, at the same time that she was doing the housework.”

His comment plays into a theory proposed by Ann Anagnost about the power of internalization of this discourse. Once citizens internalize the discourse, they become transformed into subjects who make rational choices about raising their suzhi in order to contribute to the transformation at hand. In the age of reform, suzhi improvement became the order of the day, effectively invoking “the desire for which propels the rural migrant to the city as waged labor.”

By 1999, at the time of Yan Hairong’s fieldwork on the link between household agencies, governmentality, and suzhi improvement, she made the following comment:

The establishment of over 100 outlets of labor supply from 11 provinces for the company in Beijing is also the result of the promotion of labor migration as the most efficient and cost-effective project for poverty relief and suzhi improvement. This idea is promoted by the Poverty-Relief Office of the Central Government and by lecture tours to poverty-stricken areas organized by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League.

The early involvement and reliance on the ACWF enabled domestic service to gain legitimacy and primacy amongst service industries in reform-China. Here the suzhi improvement discourse was born, linking the lack of quality in rural migrant women with national development priorities of poverty alleviation.

28 Anagnost (2004): 192
29 Yan (2003): 495.
CHAPTER IV. THE HOUSEHOLD SERVICE COMPANY

In the previous chapter, the discussion revolved around how State labor recruitment agencies and the All-China Women’s Federation used the language of suzhi improvement as a way to lure rural women into the domestic services industries. Though born from official State discourse, this chapter marks the beginning of a journey in tracking and analyzing the discourse’s appearances, uses, and interpretations throughout important institutional players in the industry.

The first of these players is the household service company, who play so pivotal a role today that Yan Hairong describes them in the following manner:

“They “have united, disciplined, and regulated domestic workers and claimed their loyalty. In place of these networks [family and kinship migration networks], these companies have appointed themselves as the modern institutional locus of identity for these young women to whom they promise to open the pathway to suzhi improvement.”

This remark frames State-run household companies as vehicles for disseminating the official Party-State discourse. To what extent is this remark true for privately-owned household companies? This chapter will evaluate this claim taking into account the growth of privately-run agencies. The first part will offer an overview of the regulatory environment that has allowed for household service entities to gain such prominence in the lives of migrant women domestic workers. Understanding their specific functions and responsibilities will situate these institutions in relation to workers. The final portion of this chapter will analyze the narratives from staff at a particular household service agency. Of particular interest to the research question is how household service companies perceive and reproduce claims of ‘quality’ in reference to both rural workers and urban households. How do these acts intersect with their interests in remaining profitable?

Drawn exclusively from in-depth conversations with staff members at the agency, their uses, insights, and perspectives will reveal the latent explanatory power behind the discourse. Not only are there numerous references to the wenhua suzhi levels of both employers and workers, but on display will be an obvious degree of defining, re-defining, and wrestling with their understanding of the meanings and implications.

The Rise of the Household Service Company

By the 1990s, contract-based domestic service companies had significantly supplanted chain migration based on kinship and place-oriented networks. Today, one source estimates approximately 5,000 household agencies in Beijing alone. Two administrative types dominate the landscape, with the wholly state-owned and operated (like March 8th) being operated by the Women’s Federation, community committees, and labor and social security branches of the

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3 Interview with Chen Laoshi. July 10, 2007. (names have been changed to protect the identity of the interviewee)
government. The other administrative type are private entities, which are then registered as share-holding companies, limited liability companies, individually-funded industrial and business enterprises with the local Industrial and Commercial Administrative Bureau. The dominant typology in the sector however are the latter—the limited liability companies and self-employed business enterprises.

Almost 10 years later, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security finally declared 'domestic service' an occupation. However, clear governance frameworks have not followed suit. That is to say that the government agencies responsible for regulating the industry are many and varied. The following are a sampling of those agencies involved: Labor and Social Security Authority, Center for Community Service of Civil Authority, Quality Testing Bureau, Beijing Association of Domestic Service (sponsored by the Ministry of Business Affairs) and the Public Security Bureau. Amidst this overlapping administrative structure and lacking governance, housekeeping agencies are able to gain prominence and centrality in the lives of domestic workers.

Meanwhile, the construction of the entire industry is riddled with references to suzhi, employers, workers and social service institutions all cite them as explanations for everything from the stalled growth of legal governance in the industry to individual suzhi concerns of rural migrant women who dominate the services. From an industry perspective, the Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University issued a study that cited workers' low suzhi for the stalled growth of the sector:

While the demand for household service is increasing, the number of workers available in this sector is decreasing. What is the cause to this contrast? It should be admitted that public discrimination on household service and the comparatively low quality of service workers are the elements impeding the development of the sector.

On an industry level, the suzhi discourse appears to be an explanation for distorted market growth. The supply of workers is suppressed by the low ‘quality’ of workers and subsequent societal discrimination, while the demand continues to surge. On a daily basis, it is common for urban employers to complain incessantly about the low suzhi of their domestic help, while migrants come to the city with the express purpose of raising their suzhi.

Functions and Responsibilities of a Household Service Company

Several regime types of private household service entities exist in China today. A more detailed description of the ‘staff regime’ typology will be reviewed simply because the household service agency under analysis—Beijing Ping An Housekeeping Company— in this inquiry belongs to this administrative type.

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4 Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University: 123.
5 Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University: 123.
6 Research Group of Beijing Migrant Women Workers' Club: 54.
7 Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University: 142.
8 Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University: 123-127. This section was drawn exclusively from this research study.
9 Center for Women's Law Studies and Legal Services of Peking University: 124.
These household service types gain their title based on their regard for their workers as their own staff. Recruited and trained as the agency’s own staff, workers belonging to a staff regime agency are guaranteed training, as well as food and lodging when unemployed. The household company matches and dispatches domestic workers to customers. Upon termination of the contract, the worker returns to the company and receives free lodging in the household company’s dormitory facilities until another match is made.

The household company maintains two sets of contracts for each client and staff match. An employment contract relationship exists between the entity and the worker. A service contract relationship is established between the entity and the customer (or employer). Customers submit payment to the household company on a monthly basis. After deducting an administrative fee, the companies issue payment to the worker. Many companies in Beijing deduct anywhere from 30-40% for this fee, while Ping An deducts an average of 10%. Under this scheme, the company is liable for damages and losses incurred to customers, their family and their property. Wages are deducted directly from workers to compensate for such losses. These types of companies are also expected to appeal on behalf of workers when their rights are violated by employers.

Of all regimes, these agencies bear the largest amount of responsibility for workers, and are arguably the most involved in the everyday lives of workers. This type of household company charges the highest fees amongst all three regimes, but also bears the most responsibilities towards employers and workers alike, as well the relationship between the two parties.

These companies typically purchase some form of insurance for their staff. In Beijing, it is normal practice to purchase accidental damage insurance for members.

**Introduction to Beijing Ping An Household Agency**

Founded in November 2005, Beijing Ping An Housekeeping Company is an elite agency that stands out from the 5,000 in Beijing. As a staff regime household agency, they estimate approximately 200 in their ‘staff regime.’ In their own words, the Company describes itself in the following manner on their website:

> Our company is purposed on offering highly-qualified housekeepers for senior family and foreign family to work in high-level apartments and villas, doing cleaning, washing, ironing, and tiding, cooking, shopping, baby-sitting, pets-feeding and floriculture etc. Our Housekeeper are senior housekeeping service assistants, generally above high-school education, some received junior college or undergraduate education.

In addition to providing the requisite training, the staff at Ping An are also responsible for matching women workers with employment in individual households. They are also then responsible for managing the contracts that are signed between the agency and the household employer, otherwise referred to as the client; and the contract signed between the agency and the domestic worker.

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13 Ping An Housekeeping Agency website.
Relationships between staff and rural migrant domestic workers in a household agency figure squarely into a social hierarchy. The most fitting analogy for this relationship is that between teacher and student. In fact, all those staffing the household agency are referred to as laoshi.

The term laoshi literally means “elder role model,”\textsuperscript{14} or “old master.” In everyday usage, the term laoshi means “teacher.” It is a term that commands respect and deference. It should also come as no surprise that this term is also rooted in Confucianism. The teacher-student relationship is premised on the reinforcement of authoritarian values of obedience, deference, respect, and humbleness.\textsuperscript{15}

In this specific context, laoshi are the main conduits for the transmission of wenhua suzhi improvement objectives. In addition to training and disciplining their workforce, the laoshi also serve the dual function of matching these women to appropriate employment openings with individual employers. To the women domestic workers in any agency, laoshi are gatekeepers in two senses of the word: they act as repositories of wenhua suzhi, as well as headhunters, granting access to gainful employment for the women.

At Beijing’s Ping An Housekeeping Company, Chen Laoshi\textsuperscript{16} is the Manager of Domestic Service Workers. Wang Laoshi\textsuperscript{17} is the Manager of Client Services. The former deals mostly with domestic workers, while the latter interfaces on a daily basis with prospective and current employers, often referred to as ‘clients.’ Both referred multiple times and in varying contexts to wenhua suzhi. There however was a marked difference between the assessment and characterization of employers’ and workers’ wenhua suzhi levels.

**Women Workers’ Wenhua Suzhi: Supporting State Hegemony?**

‘Quality’ as Highly Trained, Skilled and Paid

In reference to workers’ wenhua suzhi, the discussion invariably centered around training. All housekeeping agencies focus on training the women for domestic service duties. Higher suzhi, a more advanced, diverse skills set, translates into higher wages. When Wang Lao Shi speaks about the training offered at Ping An, she approaches it in a way that conveys the intrinsic value to each individual. It also reflects the discourse’s Confucian stress of submission of the individual for a larger good, which in this specific case, means the needs of urban households:

We do it to raise the skills and suzhi of our staff, to raise the entire suzhi of the whole contingent. It is not training for training’s sake only. But rather we are doing this in order to allow each and every person to be well-versed in the techniques, [for the purpose of] offering even better service and even more upright and proper clients.

This comment stuck me as one spoken only from an individual who has internalized a sense of purpose and mission. The agency, as well as its staff members, understand their role in the

\textsuperscript{14} Boye: 237.
\textsuperscript{15} Ho and Ho: 73.
\textsuperscript{16} Names have been changed to protect the identity of the interviewee.
\textsuperscript{17} Names have been changed to protect the identity of the interviewee.
industry to be a site for suzhi improvement. Moreover, suzhi improvement is not only in the name of improvement per se for the individual, but expressly tied to job performance for a third party.

The idea that improvement of one’s individual qualities was tied to a purpose greater than oneself was further elaborated on by Chen Laoshi. As the staff person responsible for intake of domestic workers, Chen Laoshi is often the first person to screen domestic workers looking to sign contracts with the agency. As such, her role likens that of a gatekeeper to access the purported high-end clientele in the market for domestic services. For a domestic worker, signing with Ping An means a higher wage guarantee, as most earn between 1700 and 3000 yuan (USD $243 and $428), in an industry where the average is 600 yuan (USD $86).

‘Quality’ as Willingness and Capacity to Improve

Chen Laoshi provided an explanation for how this company is able to guarantee such wages. Inevitably the explanation was premised on the individual suzhi of the workers:

The wages are determined by the person’s abilities, not by whether they have a city hukou, but rather by the individual person’s ability. Some exceptional ones have come, they arrive here, within 2, 3 months they find that they have raised their own suzhi very quickly, their ability to absorb or to change their abilities is exceptionally strong. Their willingness to change is also very strong, those who are slow-witted have not changed one bit through many years.

This just depends on the individual person.

That this, if you are able to adapt very quickly, the abilities will quickly increase as well.

One’s abilities and skills in domestic service are used interchangeably with one’s individual suzhi. Both seem to be responsible for higher wages from employers. Suzhi also seems tied to an individual’s disposition, attitude and willingness to benefit from the improvement or training offered. The ability to fully benefit from technical training is premised on a change of attitude. Tamara Jacka underscores the power of the discourse to spur internal desires for suzhi improvement:

This feeds and answers to new, very powerful desires and anxieties in the populace, for the possibilities of attaining higher levels of suzhi for oneself, of competing with others over who has the most suzhi, of feeling superior because of one’s suzhi and looking down with either sympathy or contempt on those who have less, has proved enormously enticing.

‘Quality’ as High Educational Attainment [wenhua]

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19 Chen Laoshi Interview: July, 10 2007.
20 Jacka ("Cultivating..."): 7-8.
In addition to a willingness to change and improve, Chen Laoshi also drew in an individual’s wenhua in determining their ability to raise their suzhi.

(Those) with too low wenhua suzhi we do not want. This is not a matter of sympathy; if their wenhua is too low, (it is revealed) when they look after children or do housework, in the medicine they should normally use… even if they learn about something they won’t recognize it. They misunderstand, it’s very dangerous, so that’s why we say we don’t want those with low wenhua.

In this context, suzhi refers almost exclusively to an acquired skills set. According to her, high skills set, or high suzhi, is the sole explanation for higher wages. As the discussion progressed however, she introduced the term wenhua, in order to signify that which cannot be learned at the agency. As mentioned earlier, wenhua is often used to denote educational qualifications.

When I further probed Wang Lao Shi for more details regarding their hesitation with taking in those with low wenhua, she provided the following explanation:

For example, if it is a service person who comes in from the outside, for us, its not as if we can accept all kinds of conditions, we do have the right to select, there are standards, there is a definite threshold, after that, our contingent, from the minute they walk into this door, they have to be at a certain level. This way, for the sake of our future work and training there will be more benefits, for example those who are primary school graduates, after they arrive, no matter how you train them, no matter how much you tell them, regardless of whether they are able to listen to it, but even if they are junior middle school graduates, there are some things that will be easier for us, easier to train, and for them, easier for them to master.

According to her experience, wenhua and suzhi are inextricably linked. When she speaks about wenhua, it is clear that she is referring specifically to education level. In this case, a higher education level predisposes one to better cultivate their suzhi. At least in terms of migrant women working as domestic workers, wenhua level plays a central role in acquiring suzhi.

The Importance of Workers’ Wenhua Suzhi to the Profession

She went on to explain that this threshold of minimum suzhi is not so much a direct request from the employer, but rather serves to raise the overall standard of the industry, benefiting employers as well as workers through higher wages.

This is not according to the employer’s requests, when our household service people arrive at someone’s home they must have a certain set of skills, because other people have spent a certain amount in wages to hire you, (they) can’t also have a piece of clothing taken out to be washed. Now, why do household service people in our company earn higher wages? It is because they are able to do more, a higher skills set. If a regular family hires one for 600, 800, they likely won’t be able to iron clothes…the client also has to invest a lot of [additional] resources in them. Therefore that is to say that there are employers who are willing to hire these kinds of ready-made service people, or that
employers are willing to hire the types of household service people you have to keep in custody, who have low wenhua/suzhi. Or there are those employers who hire those with high suzhi, that they can entrust their home to, so they don't have to manage anything, so much that if they normally use cash, allow them (the worker) to record it, just bill it, when the time comes if you need the money, I'll give it to you, if I have you managing my home, they can feel at ease working.

Individual workers' suzhi then, figures centrally in the development of healthy relations within the overall industry. This picture however is missing the layer of the employer, their presumed wenhua suzhi, and the interplay between the two.

**Extending Wenhua Suzhi Arguments onto Employers**

Chen and Wang Laoshi's certainty on how suzhi figures in the lives of domestic workers does not extend as easily into discussions about the employers' suzhi however. In discussing the wenhua suzhi of employers, the picture Chen Laoshi painted was different in two ways. First, the wenhua suzhi of employers explicitly drew in more factors such as personality, temperament, occupation, generosity, and the common sense to set reasonable expectations. Secondly, in discussing the wenhua suzhi of urban, middle-class employers, both of them expressed very strong opinions on the how some employers embody a contradiction between their wenhua and suzhi. They may have attained high levels of wenhua as marked by their occupations and advanced educational degrees. But their 'quality' is also determined by their ability to exhibit moral uprightness, set reasonable expectations, and practice generosity.

**'Quality' as Temperament, Personality, Moral Uprightness**

It's not mainly a matter of wenhua, our company's clients. I'm not just saying our company's clients, all clients, their wenhua suzhi, together with their xiuyang [accomplishments & manners] and temperament/disposition. In comparison, it is not always in line with each other, some have really high wenhua, have doctorate degrees, but....

They don't understand life or livelihood, they only know how to work, they only want their jobs to be very good, but life in their terms, they understand it very little. For example, they don't know how to wash clothes, for example when they cook, the soy sauce, what types of dishes can be used with what type of soy sauce, the employer doesn't even understand what kind of soy sauce can be used in what types of dishes...there is a mismatch between a person's temperament and their wenhua.

Some clients have particularly high wenhua suzhi, how to behave as an upright person of quality, but their suzhi on the contrary is extremely low. Some people have normal wenhua, but their suzhi is relatively high. That's all to say that it is never definite or certain.²¹

As mentioned before, discussions about the employers' *suzhi* drew in more factors to be considered. Temperament, together with accomplishments and manners, is taken into consideration in assessing the level of an employer's *suzhi*. The interplay of *wenhua suzhi* can be malleable enough to encompass personality, disposition, and upbringing. Yan Hairong describes the flexibility of the concept in the following manner: "A rhyming couplet popular among educators captures the 'catch-all' nature of *suzhi* by suggesting that 'suzhi education is a basket into which anything can be put.'" 22

‘Quality’ as Setting Reasonable Boundaries

The 'quality' of an employer also encompasses the exercising of common reason and courtesy. Part of *Wang Laoshi*’s responsibilities at the agency include settling disputes or complaints from employers. In the following segment, *Wang Laoshi* explains what the agency does when employers bring forth unreasonable complaints:

>[if she is not performing her job]...I will bring forth criticism and education to her, but there are some things, they [employers] turn it into a biased over-exaggeration, there are also a lot of these instances. Moreover some things are not reasonable or equitable. They insist you do something, for example when the weather is that hot, in the interest of saving electricity, they just will not turn on the air-conditioning or even an electric fan. Just allow you to be in the kitchen, to be locked up in the kitchen, where the temperatures are very high. So then when our employees fall ill, during this period of time, this rest period, they won’t give you medicine fees, nor wages. What do you think about these situations? No one manages [these situations], nor is there anyone who will take responsibility for these situations. Even if we tried to, these employers would say, we don’t want to use your employees anymore, then the service employees lose a job, we just feel like we have no alternative. We cannot manage too much, yet we can't manage too little. That's why we feel we are in a very awkward role.

In this anecdote, *Wang Laoshi* expressed her frustration at the unreasonable demands, attitudes and behaviors of employers. First however, she conveys this underlying sense that she and the agency by extension are the ones to judge the boundaries of what is appropriate or not with regards to the employer-employee relationship. Only after establishing these lines can she claim that some employers are over-exaggerating, or acting unreasonable or inequitable. If the domestic worker is not performing her job, it is the agency’s duty to further discipline her. However, when it comes to unreasonable demands, *Wang Laoshi* is at a loss for how to address what she has clearly expressed as an injustice and instance of maltreatment.

‘Quality’ as Generosity

Employers’ interpretation of current labor laws also reveals how 'good' they are. In discussing the issue of holiday wages, she explains that even established laws carry little weight in the face of employers who have the power to mis-interpret, or rather disregard them:

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...if nannies do not rest on festivals or holidays they should be given double the salary, but this double salary is understood by some people as *not* including that day of salary, then I will give you a double salary. That's how it is understood; and not as I gave you one day's wages, and additionally I give you double salary. In our country today whether they are offices, business enterprises, they are all triple the salary, some private businesses are also triple salary. But who will apply [this rule] to nannies, [that is] very difficult. Even though there are good employers, there are a lot of good employers, you say double salary, no problem I will give you double salary. But there are also some, relatively speaking, there are all kinds of people, even though s/he is a big boss, even though s/he have a lot of money, but they are simply unwilling to give it to you.  

worker. Oftentimes collectively referred to as a ‘contingent,’ both laoshi seemed to be enforcing the official Party-State rhetoric of the lack of necessary wenhua suzhi amongst some migrant women. Those who have achieved a higher level of suzhi are rewarded with higher wages, they stressed. Alternatively, it is quite clear that the terms of ‘lack’ in the discourse are freely used to justify lower wages and poorer service standards.

The agency’s own interests to remain profitable are also dependent on the women. Higher wenhua suzhi commands higher wages, of which Ping An receives a 10% cut. The women are simply a means to an end for the company to secure their financial interests in operating as a job agency. By raising the quality of women and of their services rendered, the company protects their own interest in maintaining a satisfied client base of employers. The agency’s other responsibility is to maintain a satisfactory client base. This limits how much they defend the ‘quality’ of their employees, for fear that they will lose the client. Limited by the possibility of losing the client, which in turn means another employee without a job. Agency has to make another match. In confronting this dilemma, the laoshi hold the employers’ lack in wenhua suzhi responsible.

These laoshi re-framed the wenhua suzhi discourse to implicate the employers. Employers’ were assessed along more expanded lines of educational attainment, personality and temperament. Their assessment of both workers’ and employers’ wenhua suzhi levels in this section highlights the malleability and flexibility of the discourse. Furthermore, in their attempt to explain the conflict between wenhua and suzhi levels of employers, both Chen and Wang Laoshi struggled with extrapolating from their experiences in order to pin down the exact definition of suzhi as it relates to employers. What was clear was that they were using the official Party-State rhetoric to express their underlying contempt for employers, and by extension, the emerging middle-class to which they belong. Comments referring to them being ‘big bosses,’ of good jobs, and having doctorate degrees were expressed to contrast it against their low quality in dealing with domestic matters.

This chapter has demonstrated that suzhi evades precise definition. The ideology fails to stand alone, without a specific context with which to understand it. For the women workers, there is this notion that suzhi attainment follows a strict hierarchy that influences wages. Their primary responsibility is to raise the suzhi of their employees, yet despite all their efforts, they are still confronted with employers who fail to embody expected levels of wenhua suzhi.

One of the interesting things about the suzhi concept is that on the one hand, it’s very totalizing in that it implies a single suzhi hierarchy. So if your suzhi is higher than my suzhi, you are higher than me and that’s that. On the other hand, when you ask how you can detect an individual’s suzhi it could refer to almost anything.24

In this way, the sanctity of the discourse is maintained, but its uses and attached meanings are morphing into strategies for the agency to lament about employers’ ‘lack’ in their treatment of hired help.

24 Australian National University: 1.
CHAPTER V. IN THEIR OWN WORDS: VOICES OF THE WOMEN

The *laoshi* at the household service company were able to use *wenhua suzhi* to explain phenomena on multiple scales; it was used to explain everything from individual worker’s wage levels to the development and growth of the industry. The material in preceding chapters was discussed in order to structure an environment that would enable the following—an in-depth look into the relationship rural migrant women themselves have with the discourse. As the targets/objects of the discourse in official Party-State rhetoric, their relationship with the rhetoric on ‘quality’ is essential. This chapter will present the single most important piece of analysis in this inquiry. The *wenhua suzhi* discourse will be tested upon a group of women are who markedly different from the prevailing prototype of rural migrant women. By virtue of belonging to an elite agency, these women more experienced, more educated, and command higher wages. Despite being surrounded by *laoshi* who talk quite freely, explicitly and constantly about both the workers’ and employers’ *wenhua suzhi*, the women’s comments, anecdotes and stories were almost completely absent of any direct reference to the discourse.

The discourse though maintains an undeniable presence. The analysis in this section will borrow heavily from the work of James Scott in his quest for “hidden transcripts,” or discourse that occurs on the sidelines, away from the public limelight.\(^1\) It will also draw on Patricia Ewick and Susan Selby’s work on how acts of storytelling can be interpreted as acts of resistance to the dominant social structure.\(^2\) This chapter will attempt to capture the instances of resistance to the *wenhua suzhi* discourse, while also teasing out the nuances and contradictions behind their words, stories and anecdotes. These women demonstrate that it is possible to internalize and resist at the same time. It is possible to simultaneously claim allegiance to and undercut the discourse. The key to the subsequent investigation is uncovering their markers of resistance.

**Introduction to the Women of Ping An Housekeeping Agency**

*Ping An*’s niche market is what they refer to as “high-class” families. In practical terms, this translates into higher wages for the domestic worker, but also requires a more comprehensive skill set. The backgrounds of their services staff are markedly different from domestic workers that have been largely researched and documented. The women who claim *Ping An* as their housekeeping agency are generally older women, in their late 40s and early 50s. To summarize the backgrounds of the 20 women with whom I had in-depth conversations is a difficult task. Their industry experience ranges from 1 year to 12 years; their time in Beijing ranges from 1 year to 14 years. 3 had college degrees; 2 received diplomas from specialized secondary schools; 6 have high school diplomas; while the rest completed only primary and middle school education. Their home provinces were also all over the map; these women come from as far South as *Sichuan* province, as far West as *Xizang*, as far North as *Heilongjiang* and *Jilin*.

The presence of older, rural women in this industry is important because it is widely believed that domestic work is a springboard industry for young rural women with little education and experience.\(^3\) Domestic work is widely perceived to be a stepping stone towards

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1 Scott: 4.
3 Interview with staff member of the Migrant Women’s Club: June 26, 2007.
more stable, dignified employment for young migrants.⁴ The discourse’s call to continually strive to improve one’s own ‘quality’ was originally directed at young, rural women at the time when the Women’s Federation began actively recruiting for domestic workers.

At Ping An however, there were both instances of women with over 10 years of experience in the industry and those who have retired from their work units in their home province and come to Beijing in search for work. Regardless of their time in the industry, few of these women saw domestic work as a springboard towards other employment prospects. As prevalent as suzhi improvement and training was in my conversations with their laoshi, very few of the women I spoke with expressed an explicit desire to raise their suzhi through domestic work. However distinct the above socioeconomic indicators may be from other migrant women domestic workers, they were still not insulated from the discourse on ‘quality.’ Could this subpopulation of women also be targets of the wenhua suzhi discourse? Will they be active participants in perpetuating the discourse, or staunch opponents?

**Personal History & Background: Resisting Place in the Suzhi Hierarchy**

While none of the women interviewed were native Beijingers, they also did not identify with the traditional notions of rurality, backwardness and ultimately, low wenhua suzhi. One woman, who had been in Beijing for one year mentioned the following:

> I worked at a bank as an accountant in my home province. I had a great job. I gave it up myself, including health insurance and social security. I have been in Beijing for 1 month; there are jobs but I’m not willing to take them. I want a job where I can learn English. Most people are not from rural areas; we were accountants, etc, all had very good danwei.⁵ ⁶

By situating her own history in the larger shared experience and narrative of rural to urban migration, she acknowledges that the discourse of ‘quality’ automatically attributes her with low quality and rurality. She is quick to distance herself from it, by delving into details about her prior occupation. She also conveyed her sense of agency and empowerment by explaining that she herself gave up stable employment and benefits in order to come to Beijing. In her statement of belonging to a good danwei, she marked a desire to differentiate herself from rurality and its associated notions of backwardness, low educational attainment and status. Finally, her primary concern with learning English however still marked a desire to improve her suzhi, though she never verbally expressed it in this manner. And she saw the city--Beijing in particular--as the site for English language improvement.

Her experience is an untold story in the dominant discourse on rural migrant women. Objectively, she was clearly from a rural hukou, which in China’s history has marked both native-place as well as one’s ‘quality.’ However, her lived experience prompts her to disassociate her rural hukou from her ‘quality.’ As a professional woman in her home province, she adds a layer of complexity into the discourse of ‘high’ and ‘low’ quality; of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’. Finally, she skillfully ties this complex history and consciousness to that of other people.

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⁴ Interview with staff member of the Migrant Women’s Club: June 26, 2007.
⁵ Danwei is the Chinese term for the employment unit.
when she claims that “most people are not from rural areas....” This act of tying one’s experience to the larger collective is not uncommon. Ewick and Silbey offer an explanation of this act:

By combining first-hand knowledge that is valued because it is direct, unmediated, and emotionally salient (the story) with what is more widely shared and culturally dispersed (familiar language, tropes and experiences), storytellers assert, in effect, that their story is part of the ongoing human story, that “what is true for me is also true generally”\(^7\)

Another domestic worker, aged 50, originally from Chongqing province arrived in Beijing just 6 months prior to our meeting. Officially retired, she still receives health insurance from her old danwei, where she worked in the medicine department of a drug company.

I am already retired. I’m directly receiving the country’s wealth! I said earlier that I am not like the rest of them; a lot of them don’t have a career. (They) also shoulder responsibilities at home, but me! I’m just not like them. I do not bear responsibilities, furthermore I am already retired. In addition I am very healthy, I don’t have any illnesses, so my health insurance is the entirely taken care of by the State. So in other words, if I were to fall ill, I would be able to claim 90%, we only have to contribute a little. Because my length of service was rather long.\(^8\)

Though she never specified who “them” was in her multiple statements of “not being like them,” this woman was keen to distance herself from other migrant domestic workers, or even her peers at Ping An. This was an instance whereby the suzhi discourse clearly manifested itself in the form of a hierarchy. Ann Anagnost characterized the discourse as “work[ing] ideologically as a regime of representation through which subjects recognize their positions within the larger social order and thereby sets up the conditions for socioeconomic striving.”\(^9\) This woman’s comment communicates her self-awareness and self-perception of having attained a higher suzhi standing in this hierarchy. By clarifying that she had a long-standing career in her home province, she implies that having a profession or career should gain her higher marks in the suzhi hierarchy.

Another woman also had internalized her place in the suzhi hierarchy by stating the following:

...mental/psychological pressure, yes there is. But I believe that I have personally overcome it. For example, before in China nursemaidas were called “laomazi”\(^10\) [translate] or something, how is that! That’s why we were unwilling to listen to that, I think that this is an industry, a job, it’s very normal. Moreover I feel that this profession is also very important, like that of teaching small children, it’s not as if people with high suzhi are teaching, this little child might be brought up in a bad way! That’s why I feel that in the domestic service industry, the suzhi should be developed and nurtured even more.\(^11\)

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\(^7\) Ewick and Silbey (2003): 1344.
\(^8\) July 28, 2007. Interviewee #2.
\(^10\) Laomazi is a Chinese term referring to “little maidservant.”
\(^11\) August 5, 2007 Interview.
This woman communicated her relative confidence about her place in the *suzhi* hierarchy, signaling a sense of pride in her work as a domestic helper. She exuded a sense of consciousness and ownership about belonging to this industry and occupation.

At the same time though, she advocated for more intensive strategies for *suzhi* improvement of domestic workers across the board. Her example of teaching small children reinforced dominant notions that those with low *suzhi* are incapable of educating and nurturing children.

Their relationship to their levels of *wenhua suzhi* paints a conflicted picture of both acceptance and resistance. Rachael Murphy has described their conflicting relationship to the discourse in the following way:

> The responses of rural people involve both accepting and challenging the labeling and its consequences. Of course internalizing and resisting are not mutually exclusive, and most people’s responses incorporate elements of both.\(^\text{12}\)

These comments exhibited several types of consciousness, which include that of the rural-urban divide, and the nuanced ways in which they articulate their own position in that continuum, and also a larger industry consciousness. Ewick and Silbey found in their ethnographic work on stories and narratives of resistance to dominant social structures, that awareness of these social orders precludes any form of resistance:

> ...if there is resistance to this power it must also operate through the appropriation of these selfsame structures...if there is to be resistance, it must be initiated by an apprehension or appreciation of how social structure organizes those relations.\(^\text{13}\)

Thus, this offers a fitting framework with which to understand the remainder of anecdotes presented. There is evidence that the women understand and acknowledge the discourse. The demonstrate this consciousness by recognizing a ‘quality’ hierarchy, and clarifying their higher position on this continuum.

**Women’s Relationship to the Household Agency**

*Ping An* Housekeeping Agency is central to the lives of these women. Like any agency, this one provides them with training, employment opportunities, dormitory housing if necessary, and a network of mutual support with other domestic workers. Most women interviewed averaged two to four jobs in the past year, all of the women spend their downtime at the agency until the next job is secured. It is not only a matter of time spent at the agency that impacts them, but *Ping An* is also able to deliver them higher wages, and help market them as helpers capable of serving high-class families. For these women, the main draw of *Ping An* Housekeeping Agency were the high wages and the good *laoshi*.

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\(^\text{12}\) Murphy: 14.

\(^\text{13}\) Ewick and Silbey (2003): 1335
When asked why they have chosen Ping An Housekeeping Company, many cited two main reasons: 'relatively good laoshi, relatively higher wages.' While one's salary is based ultimately on their skills, the reputation of the housekeeping agency matters.

Of course the housekeeping agency provides employment [for you], one's own/my own reputation is not enough. 14

In between jobs, I just wait for the agency to find work for me. If I have nothing else to do, I just wait at the agency! 15

If one's own reputation is not enough, then most domestic workers rely on housekeeping agencies to advocate on their behalf.

Typically, the relations between domestic workers and laoshi at agencies also tend to take on an asymmetrical character. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the relationship between domestic workers at agency staff tends to take on an authoritarian tone like that of the teacher-student relationship. In spending over 10 weekends at Ping An Housekeeping Company, the experience left a strong impression on me. The women took real ownership of the space; took it upon themselves to greet newcomer employers and domestic workers looking for work. The most unique characteristic of Ping An was the relationship between the laoshi and the women. The women were always at ease in the presence of the Ping An laoshi, which stood in stark contrast to the tense interactions between laoshi and workers in other agencies. The Ping An laoshi occasionally sat in on the English classes that were organized for the workers; entire afternoons would pass by as workers and laoshi chatted casually for hours on end. Moreover, two of the four laoshi even resided in the worker dormitories along with the domestic workers.

In terms of wages, the average salary range for those employed through Ping An ranges from 1700 to 3000 yuan, 16 with the lowest being 1000 yuan and highest being 5000 yuan a month. In U.S. Dollars, that is equivalent to approximately $215 to $375, with the lowest end of the bracket being $125 and $625 at the highest end. This is at least three times the industry average of 800 yuan. 17

While these women are clearly at the higher end of the earning spectrum, their discussions on salary are still tied to explanations on why they have chosen to be live-in domestic helpers.

That's why we live in someone else's house. It takes care of eating, living. 18

I save more when I'm working because I am living and eating at the employer's. Also there are no transportation costs. When I am not working, I use all the money that I have saved from working. In the end, I save very little.

15 August 5, 2007 Interview.
16 Interview with Chen Laoshi, July 10, 2007.
There is insufficient data to determine whether or not these women interviewed were relatively satisfied with their monthly income (or previous monthly income if they were not working at the time of the interview). What is evident is that specific salary amounts were not at the top of their list of concerns. Wages aside, what remains unclear is the level of influence the agency has over working conditions once the women have been deployed into individual households. As one woman suggested, "Our priority is to find a good employer and earn money."¹⁹

Challenging, Pushing, and Defying

Wages and salary may be the sole purpose of engaging in domestic work, however the ultimate goal is to 'find a good employer.' Overwhelmingly, in discussing how to secure favorable employment conditions in domestic service, these women inevitably arrive at only one way: find a 'good employer.' This concern is not unique to this particular group of women, nor to domestic workers in Beijing alone. The uneven power dynamic in employer-employee relationships is the crux of working and living conditions for domestic workers worldwide. However, it is the off-handed manner in which almost every woman at Ping An discussed the pursuit of a 'good employer,' that ultimately reveals both her hopelessness and lack of control over the process. As one woman mentioned, "You do not have choice over who your employer is." In the absence of legally enforced protections that govern their employment conditions, women see their fates sealed upon being assigned an employer.

At the same time, when confronted with an employer that isn’t ‘good,’ these women have found various strategies to challenge, push and defy the work conditions set by their employer. By internalizing a higher place in the wenhua suzhi hierarchy, they feel entitled. Throughout the following narratives, they seem to be saying that it is not enough that they are of a higher wenhua suzhi, but that it also requires 'a good employer,' thereby implicating the employer’s own 'quality.' Their anecdotes have been categorized into three main concerns: infringement on control over the work process; violations of trust, respect and personal agency; and open acts of resistance.

Infringement on Control over the Work Process

More often than not, they spoke indirectly about good employers through their personal experiences dealing with quite the opposite type of employer. The qualification of 'good' was expressed through anecdotes relating to respect, mental and psychological pressure, and tolerating and enduring their employment conditions.

[There is] pressure when living with your employer. The hours are not stable, some households have kids, meaning you are up at 5am. There is no time to rest. You can be fired at any time, there is not even a place to rest. You are very very anxious and very tired. Some clients are better than others though.²⁰

There are no rest times, especially with the elderly. The employer thinks, ‘I am paying for you. Be like a cow, a bull and keep working.’ It makes them uncomfortable to watch you sit there and do nothing. So they will look for work for you to do. 21

Beijing households have very high expectations. They want their kids raised well, their houses are very large... 22

The comments above speak to the endless amount of work that is expected from live-in domestic helpers. Behind all of them are expressions of angst and frustration aimed at some employers’ constant exertion of control over their working and personal lives, and in spite of this control there are still unstable terms of employment. It can be presumed then that ‘a good employer’ creates an environment that lacks the intensity described above. Undergirding these anecdotes is a pervasive sense of unfairness, so much that the description of these circumstances could in and of themselves be considered acts of resistance. At a minimum, resistant acts acknowledge the power that has produced the unfair situations in which they have found themselves.” 23

Other times, acts of resistance are not as open, they are ‘hidden’ and embedded in narratives that maintain relations of power. In the following narrative, one woman resists by revealing the ridiculousness of her employer’s thinking:

Right. Furthermore we have to take the initiative to tell them, if you do not like me, my skills are what they are, it's not about telling them how good I am, I can only say that my professional level is limited and if they feel I am not a good fit, you can go look for an even better person. Because when I first started going, she had already gone through several ayis through our company [housekeeping]. So she was reluctantly, grudgingly continuing to look for someone here, she has two demands: first, must know English, second is must be live-in. These two necessary conditions, it goes without saying that us Chinese people there are not a lot of us who can know English, so there are not a lot of people who are able to satisfy this condition. Afterwards I felt I could not satisfy her demands, I proposed to the company they exchange me for someone else. 25

She maintains humility about her limited skills. She also connects her experience to that of other domestic workers whom she presumably has never met, but who shared the same fate and experience as her. This strengthens her case that the fault lies with her employer, not her limited skills, and by extension her ‘quality.’ In the end, it is the ridiculousness of her employer’s first condition, and how this woman explained it to me, that constituted this as an act of resistance. If resistant acts are responses to situations that ‘produce unfair constraints,’ 26 then this is an example where she was able to attribute responsibility for these constraints to her employer without undermining authority.

22 June 16, 2007. Focus Group
24 Ayi is a Chinese terms that literally means ‘Auntie’.
“Besides this, not all migrant women agree that urbanites are more civilized than rural people. Despite the power of the linguistic, historical and cultural link between wenhua and wenming, some women repudiate the notion that urbanites’ higher education necessarily makes them more civilized and higher in quality.”

The Ping An women are a part of this group of migrant women who deny that urbanites are necessarily higher in quality.

Violations of Trust, Respect and Personal Agency

In discussing the notion of ‘a good employer,’ the women also shared anecdotes rooted in their experiences with previous employers in particular. It is important to also situate the following comments in the rather unique context in which they arose. All of them were direct responses to questions regarding their health, framed in terms of identifying employment conditions that have an impact on their health, or those health conditions in particular that domestic workers should pay attention to.

The women from Chongqing, who earlier had ascribed herself a relatively higher place in the suzhi hierarchy, explains her only expectation from a ‘good’ employer:

...I don’t like it when you take all of my time and plan it to the fullest. Because I have already completed all my business/matters; after I’ve finished, I still worked, so you have to give me my private space. This is what I’m asking for. This is what I want, working in this industry...But some [employers] cannot even do this, they don’t stop arranging work for you.

Therefore the sphere of the private household is an environment where the scope of the work and working hours are more clearly defined, where women are designated their personal, private space and time, and. Ultimately, this woman felt that her personal agency is violated and has been stripped from her when working under the vigilant eyes of a [bad] employer. This violation is prefaced however with a clear announcement that she had already completed her duties; only after having absolved herself from any possible blame did she feel empowered to establish her own demands for work conditions. She further elaborates:

For example, I go to one place, they are able to provide me with an environment that I want, of course my asks/demands are not that high, I only want them to give me my own personal space, even if it is one room, it will allow me to sit down and reflect/think, then that's all I want. I don’t like it when they endlessly try to lengthen the time I work...to work on this and work on that. You give me instructions, I can take care of it very well for you. But after that, the remaining time you have to give to me. I don't like it when you occupy my time fully. Because your matters I have already completed, I have finished what I am supposed to, then I want you to give me my personal space. This is my ask/demand, this is what I want working in this industry.

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27 Jacka (“Cultivating...”): 16.
Several acts of simultaneous submission and resistance to the discourse are revealed in the above anecdote. First, she once again submits to the notion of employer control when she mentions that she follows her employer’s instructions for her work. This is neither questioned nor challenged. What is of particular interest though is how her voice changes, mid-narrative. She switches from narrating her experience and speaking about the employer in third person to a more forceful voice of speaking directly to a supposed employer. This escalation in tone could have several explanations. Clearly speaking to a third-party interviewer offers an outlet for her frustration. There is no outlet in the present relationship with her employer where she can openly lay down her demands, which she continually underscores as rather conservative and modest. Throughout this anecdote, it is most interesting to note how she negotiates the fine balance between asserting her own wants, while also maintaining the sanctity of the dominant nature of the ‘quality’ hierarchy that has ascribed her employer with higher quality than her own.

Open Acts of Resistance

And other times, there were stories of open resistance. The term shou qi in Chinese literally can be taken to mean ‘to receive someone else’s temper, flare-up.’ Generally, shou qi means to be bullied or to suffer a wrongdoing.

Everything I have is because I myself fought for it. If I don’t like this job, I can leave. I don’t have to bear with their temper.30

She was one of a handful of women at Ping An who openly resisted employer practices. She goes on to explain:

When I work, I have to be in a good mood, if I even see as much as a facial expression or look from the employer, if they are not happy, then I won’t be happy, I just will stop working. This is a prerequisite, if they respect me, respect me a lot, furthermore [if they] are very good to me, only then will I work for them. Otherwise I will not work. That is the most important when I choose my employers.31

The beginning of her anecdote denotes frivolity almost, with her suggesting that an important dimension of her work is to be “in a good mood.” These claims of happiness however quickly extend into an issue of respect. She was adamant that she maintains full control over her work, ultimately exercising a right to withhold her services. This woman defies the notion or suggestion that she should somehow tolerate sub-par work conditions. She completely disregards the discourse that suggests respect is not due to her simply because of her status as a rural migrant domestic worker.

Therefore ‘good’ employers are those who respect the domestic worker. Employers’ respect for their domestic workers is not a common characteristic of these relationships however. One woman who has been in the industry since she came from 4 years ago from Liaoning province

31 July 21, 2007. Interviewee 2
describes her salary as *shou qi de qian* [money received from accepting/receiving someone else’s temper, flare-up].

If they give you more money, you cannot *fankang* [revolt, resist], so you just *ren* [tolerate, put up with] and *shou qi*.

*Ren* [bear, endure, tolerate, put up with] was also another very common theme amongst many domestic workers with whom I conversed. Her comment could explain why more of these resistant acts are not open. Openly challenging the norms could have a financial cost. Therefore, enduring and tolerating seemed to be a general coping strategy when confronted with hardship. The two most common contexts under which the term *ren* was mentioned was when they get sick and don’t have the means to visit a doctor or rest, all the while continuing to work. The other instance is when they feel misunderstood by an employer, wrongly blamed, or scolded.

The employer told me how to do my job. I tolerated it for a few days [and then left].

The reason why I have had so many employers is because I cannot accept a lot of the work conditions. Perhaps the *wenhua suzhi* of other *ayis* are...but I cannot accept a lot of work conditions.

Both these women defied authority by leaving their jobs. Linda Gordon describes an act of resistance simply as one where the subject can ‘experience autonomy’ and one where there is an understanding or consciousness that they can avoid or even control a situation. Their decisions to leave their jobs were certainly acts of resistance. But when the only way to control the situation leaves one unemployed, then what are the costs of open resistance?

**Submission or Resistance to the *Wenhua Suzhi* Discourse?**

Through first-hand reflection on their experiences as household providers, themes and patterns begin to emerge from the *Ping An* womens’ comments and thoughts. Though they may work in complete isolation of each other, in different households, performing different tasks, and at different times, they are most certainly not disconnected. For this group of women, our conversations very rarely centered on the physical strains of the actual work performed. Rather they stressed the uneven nature of relationships with their employers as perhaps the most unjust, intolerable assault on their personhood. More importantly, the recurring theme of ‘finding a good employer’ spoke more towards the ‘bad’ ones, thereby attributing these assaults of their personhood on employers’ lack of ‘quality.’

The fact that *Ping An* is an elite agency, attracting women with higher education levels and more experience, almost precludes the possibility of this specific group of women embodying the traditional notions of rurality, backwardness and lack of worldliness. Thus this group of women enters into private households without this expectation that their supposed “lack” justifies sub-par working conditions and treatment. Their concerns centered around the uneven nature between relationships with employers and the subsequent lack of control over managing their

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32 July 21, 2007. Interviewee #1
33 Gordon: 142.
work and their personal lives. While they may endure the same sub-par treatment as other domestic women workers in the industry, on the whole, they exuded a stronger sense of entitlement and empowerment with regards to their entitlements. They never cited their own lack of suzhi as a justification of the current conditions they endure. Even as rural migrant women with associated notions of low suzhi, they never saw their suzhi as a reason to be discriminated against. Or they believed their higher levels of suzhi exempted them from basic calls of suzhi improvement. Their resistance left on me a very strong, consistent impression on me. Present throughout all of my conversations with these women was a sense of empowerment that was lacking in similar conversations with migrant women domestic workers I encountered at other agencies and social organizations. This was especially apparent when discussing the search for good employers. When unpacking the meaning behind a good employer, many were expressing distress and anger at the inability to control their own working hours, work styles, and sense of self-respect. The women understand that their employers belong to an educated, higher status urban middle-class. Though very few directly implicated their employers’ wenhua suzhi in being a ‘good employer,’ the underlying references are numerous and pervasive. Those who are truly of high ‘quality’ do not make unfair, unreasonable demands.

Resistance must be preceded by a conception of fairness and justice. It is clear that these women have established these conceptions. It is also clear that many of the Ping An women exhibited a defiance of their employment conditions and treatment from employers. Their expectations, based on their accounts, are to find ‘a good employer’ who does not infringe upon or violate one’s sense of self-respect, sense of dignity, and personal agency. These are conditions for which there are no formal protections and are largely governed by societal norms. Finding ‘a good employer’ has almost nothing to do with wages. Again, this group of women is at the higher end of the earnings curve, and perhaps industry-wide concerns about wages are not at the forefront of their concerns. Rather, it is the intangibles of respect, dignity and personal agency that these women are most concerned and impassioned about.

As one woman attempts to summarize her view of the industry, she mentions the following:

In this industry it is not about the physical strain. [It is about] the harming of affective ties. Sometimes I still want to call that employer to set the record straight.

Finding ‘a good employer’ is also intimately tied to issues of maintaining personal dignity and agency in the face of the work they do as well as their relationships with employers. However, this sense of empowerment did not translate into a demand or outcry for labor protections, stronger contracts, or rights per se. The sense of legal consciousness or interest even, was altogether absent.

‘Although migrant women frequently voice outrage at the discriminatory practices of urban employers…, their protests are individual. Most adapt strategies of avoidance of institutional controls, preferring to rely on informal social networks to secure better jobs

or to cultivate affective ties with benevolent employers rather than secure a labor contract."\textsuperscript{36}

It is on the battlefield of affective ties that the struggles between workers and employers play out. It is also on the battlefield of affective ties, where it is difficult to reconcile long-entrenched perceptions and judgments of \textit{wenhua suzhi} levels between workers and employers.

Even these women, who have higher \textit{wenhua suzhi}, are more empowered, they were still unable to positively influence their work conditions. Higher \textit{wenhua suzhi} may have translated into higher wages, a higher economic return for these women. Ultimately the ‘lack’ they faced was not necessarily their own, they seemed to be saying. Their ‘lack’ was the inability to find an outlet to resolve their concerns. Though there were many instances of resistance, either hidden or open, they have been unable to change the social structures—mediated by claims of high and low quality, urban and rural, servant and client—to which they are assigned.

And then there are those few times when the structure altogether is scrapped—simply on the grounds that it is unfair and unnecessary:

\begin{quote}
Q: So are you saying that this type of pressure is external or rather...?
A: It is just the type that comes from the entire society consciousness, that's why for the most part we do not like to say that we are household service people.
Q: You are referring to society?
A:Yes. I feel like you have no way to avoiding these types of unnecessary ways of thinking.
Q: That is to say, in this respect it gives you some pressure?
A: Yes, but personally I feel like this work is very important.
Q: In this respect, you are still preserving a principled stance?
A: Yes, I have my own principles. Don’t feel a great desire to resolve it with other people, I just adhere to my own principles, if the society has a bias, I will not resolve it with you. Because let time takes it course for this evidence to come forth, to resolve it.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

In this final narrative, this woman acknowledges there is prejudice and bias towards her work as a domestic worker. She seems to be acknowledging the dominant societal discourse that relegates all domestic workers to low status in society. But upon acknowledging it, she simply chooses to disregard it and instead draw strength from within and with the hope that in time, respect will be due to those who are applying themselves to important work.

\textsuperscript{36} Gaetano: 72.
\textsuperscript{37} August 5, 2007 Interview.
CHAPTER VI. WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

By now, the presence, uses and references to the suzhi discourse have been explored in the construction of the industry, the household company, and in the voices of domestic worker women themselves. This chapter will explore the discourse as it plays out in one final setting: the women’s organization.

Women’s organizations in China are but one type of social organization [she hui tuan ti]¹ that has emerged as a result of the reforms. The Party-State has recognized to some degree that it cannot cope with all the issues raised by rising inequality and the plight of migrant workers.² They are increasingly turning to popular women’s organizations to help relieve and mitigate the negative consequences of reform.

One of these organizations—the Migrant Women’s Club—grew with support from and within the framework of the All-China Women’s Federation; the other organization—the Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center—was wholly separate and independent from the Federation since its inception. Oftentimes referred to as groups that are closest to the ground, social organizations operate in separate spheres that allow for more freedom. In the context of Chinese Communist Party’s retreat from addressing social issues, they have “gradually redistributed and devolved power, thus rendering ‘society’ a more distinctive scope for independence.”³ This chapter will explore whether there is more room for migrant women domestic workers and their advocates to resist or reproduce alternative meanings for the discourse.

The All-China Women’s Federation in the Reform Era

The All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) was mentioned previously in Chapter 3, in relation to their pivotal role serving as a steady pipeline of rural women to urban centers. This section will trace the Federations’ evolution since then, and their current relationship to migrant women domestic workers.

The Federation was founded alongside the Communist Party in 1949, with the “dual objective of communicating Party policy downwards through the administrative system to women and of representing women by transmitting grassroots opinions upwards.”⁴ To achieve this dual objective, the ACWF maintains branches at every geographic scale throughout the country: provincial, prefectural, county, district, township, and neighborhood levels. Contrary to these stated dual objectives, Cecelia Milwertz characterizes the Federation’s model as operating on an integrative framework led by the Chinese Communist Party. Rather than being an honest representative of women’s interests, it was simply an extension of the Party-State.⁵

¹ Moore: 149.
² Moore: 149.
³ Chun: 216.
⁴ Milwertz: 21.
⁵ Milwertz: 22.
Like many other institutions, the Federation’s duties were suspended during the Cultural Revolution. Since its revival in the reform era however, the Federation has re-aligned its priorities to assist in the Party-State’s project of economic development. Chapter 3 highlighted one aspect of this shift, which has been its new role in recruiting young women into the cities’ household services industry. At the same time the Federation has recognized that the reforms have given rise to “visible contradictions and conflicts, specifically affecting the female population in both rural and urban China.”

To mitigate the adverse impacts of the very specific migration journeys they encouraged, the Federation has also adopted a service provision approach towards migrant women workers in the city. Oftentimes with the support of foreign foundations, they have turned their attention to service provision for migrant women workers, addressing issues such as legal rights and health conditions. The changes are so significant that the Federation has been known to refer to itself as “the biggest women’s” NGO in China rather than as a “mass work department” or “mass organization” of the Party.

The Federation today is still operating on a dual platform, though the nature of the two objectives has shifted. On the one hand, encouraging participation in the national project of reform has meant disseminating calls to *suzhi* improvement and migration. On the other hand, the Federation is fully aware of the “growing disparity between official Party rhetoric regarding gender equality and the inequalities experienced in reality.” Their approach to confronting this conflict is best in the following way:

> the ACWF stresses its function of upholding women’s rights and interests on the one hand, and keep to ask women raise their quality (*suzhi*) rather than reform the mechanism that keeps women’s subordination.

On the one hand, they are transmitting the discourse of self-improvement and development to women so that they can free themselves from subordination. The idea of improving the ‘quality’ of women supplants any Party-State institutional reform. However, there isn’t clarity around the meaning of ‘upholding women’s rights and interests.’ This next section will feature a women’s organization that has defined it for themselves.

**The Beijing Migrant Women’s Club**

Founded in 1996, the Migrant Women’s Club was essentially established within the framework of the Women’s Federation. The two main founders of the Club are connected to the Party-state apparatus in the following ways; *Xie Lihua* was editor of the China Women’s News, the official newspaper of the ACWF. *Wu Qing* is active in local Beijing politics and has been serving on the Beijing Municipal Congress since 1987.

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6 Milwertz: 15.  
8 Milwertz: 22.  
9 Yuan: 7.  
10 Yuan: 9.  
11 Milwertz: 95-96.  
12 Milwertz: 95-96.
The Club was the first organization in China to address the needs of rural migrant women in the city. The main aim of the Club is to offer services to migrant workers in general in Beijing. Today, a mainstay of the organization's work focuses on migrant women domestic workers. The Club describes their work in the following manner:

Migrant women are a marginalized group within China's new market economy. In response to their needs, the Migrant Women's Club aims at upholding migrant women's legal rights, improving their lives, building their capability for self-growth and expanding space for the group's development. To realize these goals, the Migrant Woman's Club has carried out a variety of activities.

The terms self-growth and development are simply extensions of the suzhi improvement discourse. The Club's relationship to the wenhua suzhi discourse paints a fairly complex picture. In many conversations with individual staff, they exhibited a mild refusal and defiance of the wenhua suzhi discourse. They dismissed the practice of characterizing migrant women as low in quality, and therefore undeserving of fair labor conditions. Instead they pointed to the need for labor protections. Meanwhile, their direct service programs to the migrant workers oftentimes served to contribute to their self-growth and development. Additionally, their general membership of migrant workers demonstrated a strong internalization of the wenhua suzhi improvement desires.

**Legal Advocacy: Upholding Women's Rights and Interests**

The Club's advocacy work focuses heavily on legal reform within the household services sector and the promotion of rights for migrant women domestic workers.

Their decision to focus on the domestic service industry stemmed from the relative need of young, rural migrant women who travel from poor western regions with little education to work in Beijing as domestic workers. This decision prompted the creation of the Support Network in 2003 to form a linkage between local sending agencies with receiving household agencies. The former consists mostly of local women's federations that send young rural women to Beijing, and the latter consists of companies that receive the women and provide domestic workers in Beijing. The organization drew on the ACWF's network in order to strengthen communication between the sending and receiving agencies around issues of legal rights, citizenship, and skills training.

In 2005, the Migrant Women's Club founders and staff conducted a research project documenting the current conditions of domestic workers as well as policy recommendations for legal protection. They concluded that low wages, instances of rampant abuse, the widespread lack of rest time and holidays were all attributed to 'imperfect laws' governing the industry.

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13 Migrant Women’s Club website.
14 Migrant Women’s Club website.
15 Migrant Women’s Club website.
16 Migrant Women’s Club website.
17 Research Group of Beijing Migrant Women’s Club: 40.
18 Research Group of Beijing Migrant Women’s Club: 43.
Another key obstacle highlighted by the group was the lack of stable relationships between employer and employee. Termined the “faith and trust system,” this concept refers to the use of affective ties in governing employer-employee relationships and ultimately the types of conditions under which employers subject domestic workers to. The research group’s conclusion was to replace this system with laws that governed the relationship between employer and employee.

The focus on legal rights is especially important and telling. While Ping An Housekeeping Company cites the raising of both employers’ and workers’ suzhi as the key to healthy growth in the industry, the Migrant Women’s Club’s focus on legal rights seems to send the message that regardless of suzhi level, domestic worker women are entitled to basic protections. The language of laws and rights seem to displace and negate the need for a discourse on migrant women’s suzhi improvement.

Claims of ‘quality’ are absent in their path for legal reform. In fact, at times the Club has come out explicitly against the use of ‘quality’:

The Club also aims to support migrant women in recognizing their own strengths in situations in which they are constantly being told that they lack ‘quality’ (suzhi).19

**Direct Service: Providing Suzhi Improvement**

Their direct service programs, however, are composed of training and capacity-building activities that fall squarely into the suzhi improvement types for migrant men and women.

The other major portion of the Club’s work is direct service provision to their target population. Workshops, trainings, and social activities are premised on the concept of self-development of the individual, which incidentally is based on efforts to improve their suzhi. During my three months at the Club, I participated in computer classes for the general membership; I also taught English workshops twice a week. In Tamara Jacka’s ethnographic study of the Migrant Women’s Club, one of her observations was rooted in the notion that individual self-development and these computer and English skills improvement were very much internalized desires amongst rural migrant women.20 This internalization was revealed to me first-hand at the annual Club members’ forum on August 5, 2007. The main purposes of the forum were to evaluate the past year’s programs, as well as identify new directions. Overwhelmingly, participants requested more curriculum and counseling to raise their wenhua suzhi:

Individual suzhi. Migrant people and Beijing people will never be the same. It is my hope that we can be equal.

[trainings] with respect to wenhua

In terms of activities and programs members were keen to participate in, the following is a sampling of responses:

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19 Milwertz: 107.
20 Jacka (“Cultivating..”): 14.
zhixun (consultation) that can raise (our) suzhi. Curriculum that can raise individual suzhi.

Individual suzhi training.

Individual suzhi training was a recurring theme in the topics discussed that afternoon. Many of these members were not in the domestic service trade, but their inclusion in this analysis is important because they have all been active members of the Club and have therefore been exposed to the ideology of the Club.

Overall these members’ concerns with suzhi pay homage to the power of this State-produced ideology. Even at the level of the grassroots, migrants were exhibiting strivings for ‘quality’ that provide evidence that the discourse is an effective way of organizing the suzhi hierarchy and regulating behavior.

“Desires and anxieties over China’s suzhi as a nation thus fuse with competition over families’ and individuals’ personal suzhi, contributing to a powerful form of governmentality based on pressures toward self-regulation and self-development that are internalized among the people as much as they are imposed by the state from above.”

Summary and Analysis

Though the Club’s everyday operations are distinct from the overall framework and control of the Women’s Federation, their approach mirrors the Federation’s priorities. Through advocacy of legal reform, the Club is attempting to uphold women’s rights and interests. At the same time they have not abandoned their calls for suzhi improvement amongst the women themselves. This is the emergence of two types of governmentality. One is premised on legal reform, a governance framework that sidesteps the use of ideological discourse to organize relationships between employers and employees in the domestic service industry. The other regime of governmentality is based on the official Party-State discourse. There were numerous instances of migrants articulating their desire to improve their wenhua suzhi, effectively reflecting the internalized ideology back to an institution.

The Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center

The Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center’s approach to migrant women domestic workers’ suzhi improvement was more explicit and pronounced. In July 2007, I attended a workshop sponsored by the Center for migrant women domestic workers. The representative’s manner of address towards the women, including her explicit language choice, reinforced the notions that those with lower wenhua suzhi should embody a specific code of conduct that involves deference and tolerance when in presence of those with presumed higher wenhua suzhi, in this case, employers.

The Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center was established in 1996 as a service enterprise registered with the Beijing municipality’s Bureau of Industry and Commerce.\textsuperscript{22} It has never been under the auspices of the Women’s Federation, or any other Party-state institution.

The Centre is composed of over 50 hotline volunteers who provide immediate, real-time counseling to women, not only migrant women. The workshop I attended was the result of the Migrant Women’s Club’s effort to provide a mental health or psychological counseling to migrant women domestic workers. The Club invited the Centre to organize a workshop for women at their housekeeping agency. It was clear from the beginning of the session that the contents of the worship were designed with a specific audience in mind: young, rural migrant women who have low *wenhua suzhi*. Through observing this session, I was privy to personal stories of approximately 40 women present. Their stories spoke to the juxtaposition of varying levels of *wenhua suzhi*, or perceived *wenhua suzhi*, between employer and employee. This juxtaposition, in close quarters of an employer’s house, often escalated into clashes.

This portion of the chapter will begin with anecdotes of the women’s stories and their daily struggles that are all premised on the unequal nature of their relationship to their employers.

### The Women’s Stories

One participant raised the issue of how her employer’s family continually blames her for matters for which she has bore no responsibility, let alone wrongdoing. The facilitator’s advice was to learn how to apologize. Strategies for apologizing were discussed including giving the employer the time to forgive them.

Another woman asked the following:

> How do you deal with employers who aren’t as good? Who don’t respect you, who discriminate against you based on your background?

The response was simply to endure, tolerate [臝]. Should they simply not have the capacity to tolerate anymore and are feeling too much pressure from their employer, they should talk to their sisters [other women in the industry] about it. In the facilitator’s words: ‘Mutual consoling between sisters is a great way to deal with it.’ Instead of recommending ways to improve their relationships with employers, the *laoshi* advocated that women accept ill treatment, while knowing that it was sub-par treatment based only the women’s background. In the end, it was her position that they should simply accept their place in the *suzhi* hierarchy.

The woman’s question in and of itself also warrants analysis. Again, there was the qualification—though a vague one—of a ‘good’ employer. It was followed immediately by claims of discrimination based on her background, presumably her rural background, that which is associated with a lower *suzhi*. Her comment showed a refusal to accept disrespect employers based only on her background and *suzhi*.

\textsuperscript{22} Milwertz: 41.
The sampling of advice introduced above provides a lens to understand the Center’s approach to psychological counseling for migrant women domestic workers. Imbued throughout the session were themes of tolerance and deference. To start, the representative introduced the session goal as “How do we adjust our own psychological condition?”

The tone for the session was set with the facilitator’s two openers:

Do you think domestic service is only for those lacking wenhua suzhi?

Do you feel embarrassed to tell people that you are a domestic worker?

Embedded in these questions are assumptions of an audience who is undeserving, lacking wenhua suzhi, and simple not worthy of respect. The coping strategies discussed above precluded the women from being more proactive in their quest to secure better employment conditions for themselves. This approach rather encourages them to continue being subjected to conditions set by employers and to be subjected to violations of their self-dignity.

Summary and Analysis

The messages in this session were simple and powerful: rural migrant domestic workers should accept the place to which they are relegated in society. Their lack of wenhua suzhi means they will be met with discrimination and exploitation. However, presumably also because of their lack of wenhua suzhi, they have very limited options to confront this discrimination. Endurance, tolerance, apologies, and the continual pursuit of winning respect from the employer were the reigning coping strategies.

As an entity wholly separate from the Women’s Federation, or any official Party-State organ, it is surprising the extent to which the discourse serves the interests the CCP. It is used as a way to disempower women from transforming the conditions they face as well as the unequal power relationships they endure.

Push Back or Enforcing the Discourse?

A glimpse into the presence and uses of the suzhi discourse in popular women’s organizations in Beijing has delivered mixed results. The organization with official Party-state affiliation, the Migrant Women’s Club, approaches their work in a way that both sidesteps and supports generic wenhua suzhi improvement concerns. The focus on activities and programs promote legal rights and reform that are not premised on a person’s ‘quality.’ On the other hand, their programs and activities support the self-development and self-growth of these same individuals. Their general membership exemplifies a strong internalization of the suzhi improvement discourse, continually asking for more courses, trainings that can improve their individual wenhua suzhi.

It is not uncommon for a single organization to be pursuing dual objectives, with legal advocacy and reform taking on a long-term nature; and direct service provision as a short-term way to address immediate needs. What is unique is that one objective upholds and follows the prescriptions and norms of the suzhi improvement discourse. The path of legal reform however,
introduces a different type of governmentality, one premised on hard-and-fast rules, legal rights, and explicit labor relations. One particular site could reveal instances of internalization, sidestepping, resistance, and submission to the discourse.

In the private institution of the Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center, an entity altogether unconnected to the Party-State, there are the most reinforcing comments around how those with lower ṭwenhua suzhi should behave. In this setting, there was evidence that in the face of strong deployment of the discourse, there were rumblings of disagreement.

These mixed results evade any preliminary conclusion about whether or not being connected to the Party-state apparatus (via the Women’s Federation) has any bearing on how the discourse is deployed. Perhaps the only conclusion that can be drawn is that this discourse permeates even social organizations, specifically those who attempt to address the needs of rural migrant women workers in Beijing.
CHAPTER VII. THE SEARCH FOR RESOLUTION

This investigation has been an attempt to gain insight into how much of this Party-State discourse is in reality a hegemonic tale. Have the anecdotes, narratives and stories amongst agents in the household services industry demonstrated a successful Party-State attempt to colonize their hearts and minds? Or have there been cracks in the discourse? And how have these different agents—the household service company, the popular women’s organizations, and most importantly, the women themselves—filled these cracks?

This final chapter will tease through the contradicting accounts and definitions of uses of wenhua suzhi as a marker for social standing in reform China. The Communist Party’s legitimacy to rule rests heavily on the ability of this discourse to organize, discipline and regulate the yearnings, desires and behavior of rural to urban migrants. The discourse amongst various players and institutions in the household services sector has revealed both evidence in support of—and in opposition—of a Party-State monopoly on language and thought. More importantly, each party has used the language of the discourse to mold new meanings capable of rationalizing the contradictions of reform as felt on the ground. This final chapter will distill the nature of their contradictions and their use of the wenhua suzhi discourse to explain it.

Characterizing Conflict

This thesis began with a comment about conflict in China. The conversations with various institutional players in the industry have revealed that each one is grappling with a different kind of conflict and contradiction. And all of them have referenced the wenhua suzhi discourse in articulating these conflicts and contradictions. This section will summarize the nature of the conflict as understood and processed by each party.

Household Agency

The private household service agency is caught in a system between workers and employers. They apply different standards and meanings of wenhua suzhi for employers and workers, which in and of itself is contradictory. They are in part drawing upon the official Party-State rhetoric to discipline and organize their contingent of women workers. For them, higher wenhua suzhi translates into higher wages for women workers, which ultimately, raises their profit margin as a household service company. Yet this is not a household service company who stands reticently by as their employees tolerate unjust work conditions. They negotiate and arbitrate not through laws and regulations, but through claims that originate from perceptions of ‘quality’ and differing levels of perceived wenhua suzhi. Frustration is directed at employers’ low wenhua suzhi and it is in part derived from their belief that despite all their work in providing suzhi training to the women, employers’ lack of ‘quality’ impedes healthy relations.

The household service company is facing a contradiction in their application of the wenhua suzhi discourse. In attempting to extend wenhua suzhi discourse to employers, it is never clear how employers could, should, or even have the capacity and willingness to change. The agency has reproduced meanings of the discourse that serve their interests of maintaining a client base
that are cooperative, generous, and respectful of domestic workers—ultimately facilitating the job agency’s role in negotiating employer and employee claims.

**Women’s Organizations**

Today old Communist Party-line focused institutions like the All-China Women’s Federation are introducing new forms of organization to mitigate the negative consequences of market reform. They represent the structural contradictions of joining a market-led economy onto a Socialist society. This contradiction is revealed in their work. The Beijing Migrant Women’s Club’s advocacy efforts center around legal reform in the household services, representing an attempt to establish baseline labor protections for low-wage, low-skilled women workers. These protections are blind to workers’ ‘quality’ levels. On the other hand, their promotion of “self-development” and “self-growth” to migrant women underscores a strong belief that the women themselves are responsible for raising their quality. Trainings and workshops on a wide range of topics form the basis of programming activities at the Club.

**The Migrant Women’s Club is facing a structural, institutional contradiction.** Pursuing two seemingly contradictory strategies seems to be a way to traverse the political, social and economic spheres in the reform era. As an organization, they straddle the lines between State and Society; and between ideological norms of ‘quality’ and enforceable rights. These are the exact lines that are relatively blurred and fluid in China. They were not taking a strong stand against either, but maintaining both. At times, they spoke to official Party-State discourse but at other times, there were grumblings of defiance. My experience at the Club demonstrated to me that there is room for two separate spheres to operate in any one institution.

A very different dynamic appeared at another women’s organization. The discourse at the Maple Women’s Psychological Centre was the most searing and hauntingly similar to official Party-State rhetoric. Their advice to domestic worker women who were subjected to unjust labor conditions and assaults on their personhood was simply to tolerate instances of disrespect and discrimination. The fact that this Centre is built around psychological counseling is even more telling, as it demonstrates efforts to gain a deeper hold on the minds and hearts of these women.

**The Psychological Counseling Centre** promotes acceptance of one’s lower quality and social standing is the way to overcome the contradictions felt when their self-esteem and personal dignity are constantly violated. The Party-State is absent from this.

**Migrant Women Domestic Workers**

The migrant women domestic workers at Ping An Household Service Company had internalized a higher place in the suzhi hierarchy. To them, their claims of higher quality justified more respect, trust, and humane treatment from employers. In their calls for respect, they were yearning for employer approval, and ultimately a change in social status. That is the underlying purpose behind building those affective ties to which many of them referred. They were pushing the limits of the ‘quality’ labels that only refer to their skills, capacity to learn, and higher wages. These are limits that are set and maintained by the household agency and the employers; they are limits that are reproduced and drawn clearly everyday in the household. That is why even in their
acts of defiance, refusal and resistance to the wenhua suzhi ideology, those acts were embedded in the linguistic apparatus of the discourse.

The migrant women domestic workers are facing a contradiction because they are growing out of a discourse that at one point served to organize their desires for higher wages and higher skills sets. As older more experienced women, these women have already reached these levels. Their yearnings are now for less tangible conditions, such as respect and dignity. Meanwhile they continue using the discourse to convey these longings.

**Reaching Common Ground: Using the Discourse to Search for Meaning**

From the voices on the ground, it is evident that all of these women are searching for ways to make sense of the changes that have emerged from the reform. It is a search for identity, whether this manifests itself in the form of a private household agency in a new market economy. The private agency has found itself in a position where they must negotiate working conditions and claims amongst employers and employees. This marks a completely new system of labor relations. The staff at the housekeeping agency are being asked to arbitrate and negotiate employer-employee relations. Even China’s long-standing unions do not have the experience, history of bargaining and arbitration, precisely because of the Socialist nature in which they were able to operate. Therefore, the ideological discourse of wenhua suzhi has filled this void, as a way to explain the conflicts that arise from these labor relations. It is on the battlefield of competing ideologies that they understand the conflicts.

The social organization that has grown within the framework of a Communist-Party remnant is also searching for their identity. The Migrant Women’s Club sometimes draws on the Women’s Federation’s legitimacy and connections; other times they distance themselves by claiming to be a social organization or non-government organization. They promote legal reform to protect baseline interests of migrant women domestic workers, but at the same time are following the prescriptions of suzhi improvement to encourage women to raise their own 'quality.'

Finally, there are the internal conflicts with which the older migrant women domestic workers are grappling. In their trade, it is common knowledge that raising their own suzhi means gaining more experience and a more comprehensive skills set. They have already reached this level and therefore have grown out of a suzhi improvement discourse that guaranteed them higher wages. Their concerns now are deeper, more intangible. They are searching for relationships that offer respect, dignity, and personal agency. They are attempting to push the boundaries of the wenhua suzhi discourse in order to ground these yearnings in the dominant discourse. In this process, they are reproducing and re-fashioning meanings for themselves.

It is the Chinese Communist Party that is the most intent on, and most anxious about resolving these contradictions that have arisen from pursuit of capitalist modernity that has generated destruction on many fronts. What is also clear is that thus far, the Chinese Communist Party is the one searching hardest for their identity. They have not found any single strategy that provides them with a clear path towards their long-awaited wenming. This wenhua suzhi discourse and more specifically the suzhi discourse represent an appropriation of an old strategy to manage a new regime change. And it is not entirely clear that it is sufficient.
The original research question attempted to identify to what extent the Party-State is controlling or influencing the discourse on the ground. This question cannot be answered without a different framework that doesn’t pit extremes of domination versus resistance, of submission versus defiance. The reason is because the evidence has shown that this story is one of contradictions; and perhaps if there is only one key finding in this inquiry, it is that contradictions and conflicts can exist side-by-side, day after day, and this alone is not enough to alter objective working conditions or subjective experiences with subjugation or exploitation. It is possible to live with contradiction, as the Ping An women have demonstrated, and by extension it is quite possible that a country can rule based on these contradictions. Contradictions themselves—as embodied in a nation, in their institutions and in their people—need not be resolved.

Similarly, although the discourse is pervasive throughout institutions and players in the domestic services industry, its prevalence should in no way signal profound, shared agreement. The cracks in the discourse are filling fast. As each of these players’ search continues, we will have to develop more nuanced, complex ways of understanding the new meanings and interpretations they are generating. Or rather, the question becomes one of how long institutions and people can balance these conflicts, all the while searching for ways to understand the nature of the conflict they find themselves in and ways to transgress it.

Ann Anagnost offers one way to appreciate both the limits to and possibilities of the human spirit:

> Whether conditions in China had deteriorated to the extent to which a revolution was inevitable is perhaps besides the point, although this issue animates an impressive body of Western as well as Chinese scholarship. It takes more than oppression and misery to make a revolution, as Hinton makes very clear in this text. The undeniable fact is that a revolution took place in China and that it was not just the result of the objective miseries of existence. There is no threshold of human endurance beyond which human beings automatically become revolutionary. A revolution is the product of the human ability to reflect on one’s conditions of existence and to work those reflections through a system of ideas that provides a vision of a more hopeful future, a social vision that exists at the level of the imaginary in that it conceives of something that does not yet exist¹.

It is in my honest opinion that the discourse will play a major role in resolving the very conditions it has brought about. In fact, the ideology itself must be used to undermine its own legitimacy. Those instances and acts of resistance revealed in this inquiry have demonstrated that these women in the household services sector have already begun connecting their personal interests to a discourse that they do not find completely true or relevant. Their ability to create a more just world, even for themselves, will depend on their ability to more clearly and openly articulate their claims and demands, all the while couching them in an ideological discourse that has become a tool of the Party-State.

¹ Anagnost (1997):34.


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