

Strange circulations: the blood economy in rural China

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Abstract

The commodification of blood in the Chinese countryside in the 1990s led to the rapid spread of HIV infection among rural villages in Henan Province where the sale of blood had become an important source of household revenue. The unsanitary practices in semi-official and illegal blood collection stations that led to the spread of HIV have now been revealed in the domestic and international media. But what needs to be dramatized more fully is what this strange new circulatory system can tell us about the transformed terms of exchange between the agricultural economy and schemes of 'national development' that set up the 'rationalities' putting these economic actors into motion in an economic restructuring of opportunity and despair.

Keywords: China; rural economy; commodification; HIV-AIDS; blood industry.

In the context of China's economic reforms, new conceptualizations of value reflect the dramatic polarization of wealth and poverty of the last decade, in which the value coding of bodies produces very real material effects. This value coding takes discursive form in the Chinese term *suzhi* (quality), which becomes a measure of human capital produced through education and other investments in the embodied capacities of the neoliberal subject, who is now responsible for his or her own profits and losses. The body of the rural migrant becomes, in this formation, a body of low value, despite the fact that the exploitation of migrant labour is the hidden source animating China's economic take-off. The discourse of *suzhi*, in this respect, is an inverse figure

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of value, in which it becomes something that must be invested in the body rather than emerging from the body's capacity for labour. The migrant's desire to be recognized as a body of value through the power to consume draws her into the market economy as a willing body for exploitation.

In this article, I wish to reawaken the gothic imagery of Marx's *Capital* (1967) to critique the *suzhi* discourse as a kind of common sense in logics of capital accumulation. Marx vividly used the image of blood sucking in his discussion of the extraction of surplus value; however, what are we to think when the figure of the vampire becomes more than just metaphoric? This question arises in relation to the exposé of the spread of HIV through the sale of blood in the Chinese countryside in the 1990s, which I read below as an effect of the 'spectralization' (Spivak 2000; Yan 2003b) of rural life, which has been evacuated of any hope of providing a life for rural people. China's economic reforms of the last 25 years have been, for millions of rural households, a kind of 'tease', luring them into a market economy with promises of increased autonomy and control over their surplus product while eroding all forms of collective property and security. The bankrupting of the rural economy in China's rapid turn to a market economy has contributed to the devaluation of rural life in two senses: as a meaningful form of social existence and in the value-coding of the rural body as being of low quality. The economic reforms have, in effect, produced the Chinese countryside as the constitutive outside of capitalist economic relations by making it bear the hidden costs in the reproduction of labour for a global labour regime. The countryside is the source for an apparently inexhaustible supply of cheap labour, and it is the place where workers return when they are laid off or seek respite from the harsh working conditions in the city.¹

I begin with my reading of the film *Ermo* (dir. Zhou Xiaowen 1995), which portrays the sale of blood in 1990s China as an expression of the changed relations of exchange between the city and the countryside. Ermo, the film's heroine, sells her blood to purchase a large-screen television set. Her self-alienation in this exchange both metaphorizes the subsumption of the rural economy, while also instantiating, in a stunningly material way, the global reorganization of the value of life itself. I then track the circulation of blood value as it moves globally across vastly different terrains stretching from government offices in the First World promoting biotechnical investment in China to semi-official (but now illegal) blood collection stations in Henan Province, a rural county that is one of China's most impoverished. And finally, I argue that the figure of vampiric capital, which Marx used to make visible the hidden abode of production as the source of wealth in societies can also be usefully applied here to draw out the ways in which value is drawn from the countryside through its capacity to absorb the 'externalized' costs in the reproduction of a flexible and cheap supply of labour, while also setting up the possibility for the accumulation of new forms of biovalue.

The seduction of Ermo

The film begins in a rural village in north China where Ermo, the young wife of the retired village chief, struggles to keep her young son from spending time at the home of Blindman (*Xiazi*) and his wife, their more prosperous neighbours who have a large-screen television. The daily absence of Ermo's son amplifies a sense of household decline caused by the loss of her husband's political power due to reforms in rural government that have led to the former village chief's physical inertness, profound depression of spirits, and consequently his sexual impotence.

The neighbours' prosperity, founded on new opportunities opened by the economic reforms, figures as an inverse image of the village chief's decline – a triumph of market forces over the fading charisma of the party's political authority. The large-screen television is an indexical sign of this reversal of fortunes. Not only does it become a potent symbol for Ermo as a status marker but it will also become a window onto a landscape of strange new desires and subjective enticements.

However, her husband initially fails to recognize the possibilities that Ermo sees in the commodity's potential to revitalize their lost social prestige. For him, building a new house represents a more conventional symbol of peasant prosperity that would guarantee the social reproduction of the household by attracting, at some future date, a bride for his son. He fails, at least at first, to recognize the possibilities that Ermo sees in the commodity's potential to revitalize their lost social prestige. Consumer distinction would replace political authority as the logic of social positioning, and the commodity's power lies in its magnetic ability to attract back into their sphere the physical presence of those who have abandoned it. Therefore, Ermo sees the television as an 'apparatus of capture', the presence or absence of which effects the filling up or emptying out of the peasant household. Here we see how commodity desire affects a restructuring of the 'biopolitical from below' and a transformation of the household from a space of production and reproduction to a space of consumption.

But this transformation cannot be effected entirely within the economic circuit of the local economy itself; it requires an infusion of cash from somewhere else. In this sense, the possession of the commodity thing indexes the power of the household to tap into these new sources of capital that come from the market economy. A central focus of the film is the transformation of Ermo's labour as it is 'deterritorialized' from the sphere of household reproduction to migrant wage labour. However in pursuit of her goal, she progresses through successive stages in the alienation of her body, its capacity for labour, and even its very life force. In this respect, she becomes a paradigmatic figure of the course of the economic reforms in China's rural hinterland.

As Ermo first enters the market as a petty commodity producer making and selling noodles in the local marketplace, she embodies the figure of the

entrepreneurial peasant householder promoted as a new model for rural citizenship in the early reform period of the 1980s. Early in the film, we see Ermo at her noodle press as she turns the screw to extrude the stiff dough into skeins of noodles that she will sell in the local market as a source of cash revenue. The camera hovers close to her body to convey the physicality of her labour. We see her muscles working and the drops of perspiration on her brow; we hear her sharp intake of breath and the sighs that accompany the effort she is expending. This depiction of her work is as intimate as that of sexual intercourse – a veritable pornography of the labouring body. Judith Farquhar (2002: 273) suggests that this erotics of labour represents a displacement of desire from sexual intercourse itself onto the commodity that the labour will ultimately produce. Watching Ermo's labouring body, one can almost feel the articulation of one's own body with the noodle press. Our muscle synapses fire off their charges in response to this image of labour so close to our faces. These images of Ermo's labouring body visually set up a structure of exchanges that negotiate uneven development in the idiom of contrasting technological regimes: the simple technology of the hand-operated press with the invisible electronic labour of televisual communications. One scene shows Ermo with her family in their bed at night, their very dreams invaded by the sound of their neighbour's television cutting through the night air as if to taunt them with their lack.

When Ermo discovers that petty commodity production does not offer a means of accumulation rapid enough to satisfy the urgency of her desire, her neighbour Blindman, who is a long-distance trucker, introduces her to a job making noodles for a restaurant in the city. There she visits an electronics store where she stands among other gawkers whose gaze is fixed by a bank of television sets all turned to the same channel broadcasting a scene of adulterous love from a foreign film, foreshadowing, if not indeed a necessary precondition for, Ermo's subsequent seduction by her neighbour. She thus begins an imaginary relationship with the largest of these television screens, which she does not yet have the means to purchase but visits daily as if to reassure herself of its material reality. In her imagination, she has already begun to take possession of the television as she saves her money to purchase it. On one visit, she admonishes the shop clerk to turn 'her' television off, despite the crowd of onlookers for fear that it might be 'used up', as if the television set itself shared a similar economy of depletion with her own body that she expends to acquire it.

Ermo, therefore, descends from the position of 'independent entrepreneur' engaged in a regime of 'self-exploitation' to the position of hired labourer. However, when a fellow worker loses his hand while operating the electric dough mixer, she accompanies him to the hospital to donate blood only to discover that her blood can be exchanged for money. What she had given freely, albeit fearfully, as a gift, appears to have economic value. This adventitious discovery leads her to descend still lower in her self-alienation by enthusiastically becoming a frequent blood donor to supplement her wages

as a labourer. As she sits in a noodle stall across from the clinic to wait for the nurses to change shift, Ermo drinks large bowls of salted water to replenish her body fluids so that she can go and give blood again and again.

Having finally accumulated the price of the television, Ermo bears it home in triumph. As her neighbours help move it into the house, we come to recognize what an alien presence it is in the world of objects of Ermo's village home. They move it from the top of the vat (but how will we ladle out the water?) to the trunk (but how will we get our things out?) to the bed (but where will we sleep?) where it finally comes to rest. Ermo's noodle strainer is commandeered to serve as a makeshift antenna. Like the house itself, the 'use value' of this humble but necessary domestic object is 'made over' to accommodate a new order of commodity things. The television imposes a transformed economy of space within the household that is now reorganized around the practice of television viewership. The acquisition of this dream object magically reanimates her husband from a state of passivity and inaction. He bustles around, much as he once did as a village official organizing a communal meeting, to borrow seating for the inflow of neighbours who gather around the television as if attracted to a magnetic power.

In the final scene of the film, it is late at night and the neighbours have all returned home. Ermo and her husband and son are asleep in their seats in front of the set as if they had been too mesmerized to move or even turn it off. The object has, in fact, displaced them from the bed as their habitual place of repose. As the programming for the day draws to a close, the weather report introduces an eerie simultaneity as it reports in turn the daily temperature in cities across the globe, each urban place visually represented by a veritable catalogue of rocket-like structures (Shanghai's Pearl Tower, Sydney's Opera House) representing economic 'take-off'. Through the magic of the screen, this 'spectralized' place deep in the Chinese hinterland is linked to the phallic hypermodernity of the global city. After the end of broadcasting for the day, a pale glow of white static shimmers from the screen to play its light over the drained and enervated face of Ermo, her 'bare life' itself expended in service to commodity fetishism. Transformed into a consuming subject, she is herself consumed.²

The spectralization of the rural

The story of *Ermo* parallels the history of China's economic reforms. In the 1980s, peasants were 'lured' into the break-up of the agricultural collective with visions of entrepreneurial success but with little comprehension of the potential costs of this restructuring.³ Ermo is initially empowered by the market but in a way that ultimately renders her subject to an exploitation that is unimaginable in terms of what it extracts from the body. Yet she does it to herself. A neoliberal subject, she is responsible for

her own profits and losses. However, her willingness to participate in the market for blood is contingent upon a new bioeconomics in which rural life has been devalued and in which blood had become both a raw material and a form of venture capital.

The early period of reform (1979–84) was a period of increasing prosperity for many rural communities due to the new market incentives offered to rural households following decollectivization and a rise in the price of agricultural produce. By the early 1990s, however, as the cost of agricultural inputs and other industrial goods began to rise, income from agriculture failed to keep up. Prices for agricultural produce stagnated, and agriculture's share in state capital investment was decimated (from 10.7 per cent in 1979 to 1.7 per cent in 1994) (Yan 2003b: 585). Local governments, increasingly forced by changes in the national budget to finance themselves, placed a further burden on farming households through the imposition of local taxes and fees for services. At the same time, access to education and basic health care diminished for rural households (Gao 1999: 65–6). A report posted on the China Labor Watch website shows the balance sheet from a 'typical' rural family in Jiangxi Province in which annual income was calculated to be less than the total of taxes and other fees levied by the government at all levels (Li 2002). The unprofitability of agriculture accounts, at least in part, for the willingness of rural people to seek employment in urban areas or in the coalmines, despite the physical hazards and the frequency of mining accidents.

Ermo's seeking employment in the city also illustrates this new mobility between country and city. The restrictions on rural to urban migration that characterized the Mao years were relaxed in the 1990s, allowing rural migrants to leave home for the more economically developed regions of the coastal provinces. Despite this movement, the distinction between rural (*nongmin*) and urban (*shimin*) residents continues to be managed through the household registration system (*hukou zhidu*), which denies urban resident status to rural migrants. Moreover, it has been further marked through a discourse of population quality (*renkou suzhi*), which compares the 'low quality' of rural migrants, the so-called 'floating population' (*liudong renkou*), against a presumed higher standard of civility and self-discipline of educated urbanites. This difference in quality references the expendability of the migrant, who is obligated to return to the countryside when not actively employed or when her youthful vitality has been used up or impaired through industrial injury (Pun 2005; Yan 2003b).

The widening of the rural-urban income gap throughout the 1990s has more recently become recognized as a crisis for China's economic reforms, which is discursively phrased as the *sannong wenti* (the 'three problems of the rural economy': farming income, rural infrastructure, agricultural development) (Cai 2003: 2). Growing economic inequality has now led to what some social scientists in China and in the West consider to be a potentially explosive level. One of the most prominent indicators through which this is represented and

circulated in public discourse is the Gini coefficient, which measures income disparities.⁴ Another is the annual statistical record compiled by the public security apparatus that tracks the rising number of riots, protests, and demonstrations occurring in rural China protesting unfair taxation and the seizure of collective land for quasi-private development schemes. In 2005, this number rose to 87,000, over 6 per cent higher than the previous year (Cody 2006). In these public security statistics, the ghost of Mao rises up to confront the present with the spectre of peasant insurgency, despite the fact that many of these uprisings are directed at corrupt officials at the local level rather than against the central government and its economic policies.⁵ With the rise of Hu Jintao to leadership, this concern has led to renewed attention to rural development and a rural tax reform that began to be implemented in 2003 to decrease the burden on farming families.

As demonstrated by Hairong Yan (2003b: 584–5), the spectralization of the countryside as a form of ‘death in life’ has ideological and cultural dimensions as well as purely economic ones. The countryside has become a wasteland in which young people no longer can imagine a future, while the city has become the privileged site for forming a modern subjectivity through the accumulation of body capital, cosmopolitan experience, and purchasing power. For those who remain in the villages, the goods that invest one’s existence with dignity cannot be acquired from agriculture but from remittances sent back to families by migrant workers from the city. Even within the village, the pathways to prosperity are not a level playing field. For example, Blindman’s prosperity rests on his purchase of an old truck that was most likely at one time collectively owned prior to decollectivization. Those households that acquired a means of transport when the agricultural collectives were broken up were on the forefront of those who prospered under the economic reforms due to the demand for transportation created by the increased circulation of goods in a market economy. If Blindman’s truck is redeployed for private gain, this is minor compared to the looting of assets from state-sector enterprises for conversion into entrepreneurial capital, as state-sector workers were laid off in the late 1990s and replaced with an eager reserve army of labour from the rural areas. However, the expendability of labour is no less mirrored by job insecurity for these migrants, whose dependence on the rural economy for basic subsistence continues in response to the flexible demands of the capitalist workplace.

A vampiric economy

The film *Ermo* now seems prescient in noting the relationship between the title character’s commodity fetishism and the blood economy. The increasing commodification of blood in the Henan countryside during the late 1980s and 1990s led to the rapid spread of HIV infection rates

among rural villages where it had become an important source of household revenue. Provincial authorities found in biotechnology the illusory promise of big profits that could revitalize a devastated landscape left in the wake of the rural economic reforms. Beginning in 1992, the head of the Henan Provincial Department of Health used his political capital to set up a biological pharmaceutical company. In this scheme, blood was more than just a raw material for biotechnology and for the production of biopharmaceuticals – industries that the central government had earmarked as a major focus of investment to foster the development of the national economy – it had also become a form of venture capital. Medical teams were sent to rural villages to collect blood and this, in turn, spawned an underground industry of rural middlemen who collected blood themselves or recruited donors for the official blood stations.

In 2000, due to the heroic efforts of a retired woman doctor named Gao Yaojie, the global media picked up the story of widespread HIV infection in rural villages in Henan. Gao's efforts to distribute information to people in the countryside about HIV transmission led to her persecution by the government for allegedly 'affecting the investment environment' in Henan Province (Pomfret 2001). The powerful provincial-level civil and military officials who were directly involved in the production and sale of blood products were largely responsible for the cover-up as well. According to an official internal document dated August 2002 obtained by AIDS activist Wan Yanhai, who circulated it via the Internet, drug companies 'blindly expanded the scope of production and raced to compete for supplies . . . completely ignoring the quality of the [collected] blood' in order to meet the commercial demand for blood products (Gittings 2002).⁶ According to this document, the sale of blood had been supplementing low incomes in parts of southern Henan since the 1950s, but it had suddenly 'become more profitable in the 1990s because of a "vogue" among Chinese consumers for medicines containing blood plasma'.⁷

Human albumin has a myriad of uses in clinical care and drug therapies. However, there was also a growing domestic market for human albumin as a daily health supplement; marketed as an OTC (over-the-counter) drug, the production of albumen points to a new set of practices for self-care in the face of the disintegration of the health-care benefits in both rural and urban areas. Market projections for the future growth of the Chinese domestic market for biopharmaceuticals focus on health preventive products and have become of interest to transnational investors as well. For example, a 2001 Canadian government report on investment opportunities in the Chinese biotechnology market states:

Asian culture strongly encourages the use of preventive medicine. . . . The dietary supplements segment is considered to be the fastest growing segment of the Chinese health-care market. . . . A growing number of middle-class residents and rising income levels are also contributing to an increased demand

for ... products ... perceived to have preventive health qualities. Chinese consumers are very active in their own personal health and well-being, contributing to growing demand.

(Market Research Centre and the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade 2001)

Preventive health products, for those who can afford them, are increasingly becoming part of the 'care of the self' integral to a neoliberal regime in which the health of the body becomes an enterprise into which one must invest to maximize health and vitality to offset the increasing costs of health care.⁸ If such biological products contribute to the physical 'quality' (*suzhi*) of the middle-class body, then one must make ironic note of the circuit of value that ties the blood of rural poverty to urban self-care, a form of monstrous accumulation in which the very substance of the body is removed and 'grafted' elsewhere.

However, this case must also be set within a transnational circuit of value. The same Canadian government report warns potential investors that they should view China 'as a collection of regional markets, each with their own unique trade practices, purchasing policies and regulatory environments' (*ibid.*). What this calculation of regulatory environments suggests is a redistribution of risk that is, in a sense, off-shored to a space of underdevelopment that is being actively produced by the restructuring of the capitalist economy at its margins.

The commodification of blood first arose because voluntary donation has long been difficult to obtain in China due to people's fear of infection and the threat of bodily depletion. This problem led to a quota system imposed on urban work units for blood collection during the Maoist period. Moreover, China has perhaps the highest donor-to-donor infection rate in the world (generally most blood-borne infections in the collection of blood are from donor to recipient). This high rate of transmission has to do with the reuse of needles and tubing of blood collection equipment and the practice of pooling the remaining blood components after the desired elements have been filtered out and pumping them back into donors to minimize the depletion of their blood supply, in part so they can maximize the frequency of blood donation. These practices have resulted in high rates of HIV, Hepatitis B and C, and syphilis infections among blood donors. In urban areas, the reluctance to donate has been overcome by fining work units that do not meet a government-imposed quota. Work units who come up short may hire paid blood donors to make up the deficit. Thus blood had been set up as an object of exchange across lines of economic inequality by government policies prior to the biotechnology bubble that drove up demand for blood products. It would seem to me that the real scandal underlying this tragedy is the way in which the blood economy preyed on the economic disadvantage of rural people eager for access to cash. The incidence of HIV, which is of course catastrophic for the individuals so infected, is merely a by-product of a broader process

redefining the value of life itself as a new domain for speculation and capital accumulation.

The villages hardest hit by HIV infection rates due to the sale of blood appear to have been extremely poor. Henan, with a population of over 100 million people, is China's most populous province and its countryside is notoriously impoverished. In fact, the money from blood sales was not spent so much on consumer electronics, as in Ermo's case, but to replace one-room thatched huts with mud-brick houses. It was spent on educating children, providing dowries for daughters, and paying back taxes and fines levied for out-of-plan births.⁹ The fact that blood money was used to pay household debts to the state is an especially stunning discovery that must be put into the larger context of why the agricultural economy has been reduced to the point where the balance sheet of a farming household is driven into a deficit that can only be repaid with blood, as if blood were yet another form of 'agricultural produce' (Shao 2006). The internal document leaked by Wan Yanhai in 2002 states: 'When peasants saw people who had sold blood building [new] houses and starting up businesses, they also began to enter the ranks. . . . Some peasants in [the village of] Wenlou have admitted giving blood 11 times in two days, and the usual rate was once or twice a day' (Gittings 2002).

As Lawrence Cohen (2001: 24) has noted for the organ transplant industry in India, the sale of body parts has become a 'fantasy of re-animating a family form experienced as stuck' while also marking the 'everyday articulation of one's economic limit'. Blood, however, at least has the advantage of being a renewable resource. Wenlou Village, where the scandal was first revealed, had been officially designated as a 'poverty village'. Many of those who sold their blood were women because, as Ermo had also noted, they lose blood to menstruation anyway on a monthly basis. Men's blood is perceived to be less expendable and selling it would presumably pose a threat to male vitality and by extension their ability to support their households through agricultural labour. Therefore, the commodification of blood extends its circulatory system into a gendered economy of bodily fluids within the family, in which the 'fantasy of sacrifice' falls predominantly on women (quoted phrase from *ibid.*: 24).

Although this blood collection scam would appear to be quite localized, scattered evidence suggests that it is much more widespread throughout China's interior provinces. In any case, reports have mentioned that rural people travelled great distances to sell their blood, especially to Xinjiang where the payments were reputedly higher. Donors from as far away as Sichuan travelled to Henan to sell blood. This 'floating population' (*liudong renkou*) of blood donors were often organized by professional blood sales 'heads' (*xietou*) who 'delivered' donors to blood stations or, in some cases, collected the blood themselves. The sale of blood was made illegal by the PRC Blood Donation Law effective 1 October 1998, and this has further driven underground the illegal sale of blood as a form of organized crime. Even before then, illegal blood collection stations were springing up in back yards and in buildings

disguised as other kinds of enterprises, in one case as a disposable cigarette lighter factory and in another case, in Shaanxi Province, a sugar processing plant (Zhao and Shang 2001). In other words, these illegal enterprises would seem to present the 'illusion' of economic development for rural villages still caught within what has become a bankrupted agricultural economy.

Other news reportage appears to blame these migrants for being 'too willing' to sell their blood with complete disregard for their own health or that of others. This is the tone of a report that appeared in a Sichuan paper in which this 'floating population of paid blood donors' was compared to 'rivulets of blood joined to form a river that carried the viruses of uncountable number of disease carriers' (US Embassy 2000). This image of flow is commonly attached to the rural migrant population as evidenced by the term *liudong renkou*. Although this phrase is usually translated in English as 'floating population', the meaning of *liu* (flowing) *dong* (movement) is more mobile. It is meant to convey a sense of unregulated circulation and a moving source of contagion (of social disorder, incivility, and now disease) from the country to the city.

Animating the undead

The vampire can be deployed as a figure of critique to reveal not only the ways in which China's economic take-off has relied on the capacity of the countryside to absorb the hidden costs for the reproduction of a flexible (expendable) migrant labour force, but also how this vampiric relation sets up the conditions of possibility for it to take more material form in the sale of body products. Mark Neocleous (2003: 683) suggests that Marx used the metaphor of the vampire to capture 'the rule of the dead over the living' in a capitalist economic system. Capital is the accumulation of dead labour that springs into life again through the draining away of the vitality of the worker. The dead becomes the undead, renewing its vitality, but at the cost of the body of the worker who is subject to 'premature exhaustion and death' (Marx 1976: 376). Marx's deployment of the vampire figure in *Capital* is most evident in his chapter on the extension of the working day. The intensification of labour in a capitalist regime hits its limit point in the needs of the body to replenish its energies through rest and recuperation. These are processes that fall into the realm of reproduction, which includes not just biological procreation but the costs incurred for returning the worker to the factory floor revitalized to labour again and again, the costs of which are always considered exogenous to the economic system within neoclassical economics.

In the case of Ermo, her body's capacity to renew itself is exploited in a new way in which the vitality of the body itself, and not just its labour, is seen as a 'standing reserve' from which value can be extracted. This objectification of the body requires a process of alienation in which Ermo feels that it is only through the commodity that she can tell herself that she is truly living. 'The desire to live one's life through commodities is the desire to live one's life

through the dead' (Neocleous 2003: 683). Therefore she appears to be doing this to herself in service to a commodity fetishism that invests in goods the power to grant the consumer the status of a body of value, a civilized being, and a modern subject.

However, Ermo's willingness to become a wage labourer and from there to be a seller of blood does not derive from a struggle for existence. In the relative scheme of things, peasant life has not been reduced to a state of want so much as a state of meaninglessness, in which the costs of production have made agriculture no longer a viable livelihood and a widening gap between rural and urban income levels has exacerbated a sense of being left behind in China's prosperity and new constructions of consumer citizenship. Ermo's family has to live in the shadow of a material deprivation that is increasingly being registered through new modes of consumption. In her desperation we might seek the answer to the two questions that neoclassical economics mostly refuses to pose, much less answer: 'Why do workers allow themselves to be exploited?' (Pun 2005; Yan 2003b) and 'Why [do] people want goods?' (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 15, cited in Buck-Morss 1995: 461). This refusal relegates these questions to a separated realm of psychology in the attempt to render economics as a depersonalized system of natural laws. Therefore, a critical political economy must attend to those factors that are deemed to be exogenous to the system.

By drawing attention to the 'externalization' of costs of not only the reproduction of labour, but also of keeping it as a 'flexible' work force that can be downsized whenever the profit margin commands it, I wish to revalorize the rural which has been otherwise spectralized. Neocleous (2003) remarks that the emphasis on the 'spectral' in recent theoretical discussions of Marx needs to be supplemented by Marx's own use of the vampiric as a means of speaking back to the political economists' focus on capital as the life-blood that circulates within the body politic as a source for its vitality. Perhaps we can use the vampire to critique another metaphor of circulation. The Chinese term *liudong renkou*, translated into English as 'floating population', more literally means a 'flow' of population. Hairong Yan (2003a: 516, n29) plays with this image by noting it as a flow that can be controlled by turning the tap on and off, as the labour market requires. She also compares it to the increasing commodification of water that is bottled at its source to emphasize the way in which the newly recruited migrant represents a more easily exploitable resource due to her unknowing acceptance of how her labour is valued.

The unknowingness of the migrant labourer therefore attains a value that also makes the body of the worker expendable. Once he or she becomes a more savvy negotiator of the terms of labour, she loses her value as a willing body. In this metaphor, the rural becomes the 'spring' from which capital can renew itself. It is the vitality that revivifies the possibility of its own annihilation through a falling rate of profit. The mythology that envisions the 'inexhaustibility' of the supply of labour in the Chinese countryside masks the ways in which the rural village absorbs the hidden costs of capital accumulation. The

countryside has a value, but it is a value that can never be recognized. Instead it is seen as radically segregated from the economic dynamism of the city as if the two existed in distinctly different value regimes. The value of what the countryside offers to the city is derogated precisely to deny costs that must be excluded from economic calculation.

In China today, wealth is envisioned as arising from the unleashing of the successful individual from the constraints of a socialist economy. The liberation of this productive potential is celebrated in its individual form but reviled in its collective form as a mobile population that threatens the social stability. Nonetheless, this 'circulation' of labour between the country and the city is where the secret of the current regime of capital accumulation lies.

If the vampire can be used as a figure for the way in which capital renews itself by drawing its vitality from the countryside as the hidden source of rapid economic growth, it is all the more useful for exploring the workings of the blood economy. Commodity fetishism is the motive force in Ermo's exploitation of her physical vitality. I use the verb 'to exploit' here not in the classical Marxist sense referring to the extraction of surplus value from labour but in its more general sense of the extraction of value out of nature, in which nature is perceived as a standing reserve that can be brought into productive account through human endeavour. Heidegger's notion of the 'standing reserve' stresses the 'orderability and substitutability of objects' that are thereby 'on call for duty' (Heidegger 1977: 17). Moreover, he sees in 'the talk about human resources' the possibility that 'man himself belong[s] even more originally than nature within the standing-reserve' (ibid.: 18). The phrase 'human resources' enframes 'human potential' as something that is latent and therefore waiting to be brought into presence. This is perhaps the essence of *suzhi* as an accumulated form of body capital. However it is not just the latent potential of embodied cultural capital that is in play here. With the emergence of biotechnology, the materiality of the body possesses a latent potential for improving and extending 'life itself' but possibly at the cost of 'less valuable' bodies (Waldby and Mitchell 2006: 187).

The widening chasm between the country and the city and between mental and manual labour marks the divide between those bodies made valuable through capital inputs and investments of all kinds and those from which something is taken. Ermo's story, therefore, suggests how we might deploy the figure of the vampire in two different registers that are nonetheless complexly intertwined. First, it helps us shift our analysis from the 'hidden abode of production' to that of 'reproduction' – what Spivak calls the whole 'dynamics of birth-growth-family-life reproduction' (1988: 163). Second, it enables us to think through the dangers of enframing the body as a standing reserve in which its fertile processes of growth and regeneration become the means through which the dead labour of capital finds itself revived through the extraction of biovalue as a form of therapy for a moribund economy. It is not that biotechnology in itself is bad, but what is required is recognition of how

conditions of social inequality give it the potential to become vampiric, to suck out the vitality of the living so that the dead may rise again.

Nonetheless, it is Ermo herself who exploits the bare life of her body in service to commodity fetishism. As Susan Buck-Morss (1995: 456) points out, Hegel critiques the capitalism of his time as a social world in which commodities attain the status of 'ciphers' that establish the distinction between savagery and a civilized life by becoming 'invested' in social meanings and personal desires far in excess of their utilitarian value. He saw this insatiable desire for goods as virtually inexhaustible not to mention monstrous, 'an internally agitated life of the dead' (Hegel cited in *ibid.*: 458). Here we see a link between Hegel and Marx in the anticipation of Marx's notion of the commodity as a 'social hieroglyphic' (Marx 1967: 74) as well as the notion of capitalism as not only the awakening of the undead, but also as a form of 'monstrous accumulation'. This notion appears in the opening line from Marx's *Capital*: 'The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist modes of production prevails presents itself as an 'immense accumulation of commodities', its unit being a single commodity' (*ibid.*: 35). As Thomas Keenan (1993: 157) notes, in German the adjective *Ungeheuer* (meaning 'immense') conveys not only the idea of size but also the idea of a gigantic and misshapen animal. Therefore the wealth of capitalist societies is a monstrous accumulation, not just something vast in size, but 'something(s) assembled or collected in such a way that the parts don't add up to a whole'.¹⁰

However, alongside this monstrous image is a ghostly figure. The commodity in the circuit of exchange becomes abstracted as a value; the thing as such becomes insubstantial. The value of the commodity can only be determined in relation to other values in a circuit against which it can be exchanged. The materiality of the thing is emptied out in order to transfer it to another place. In the words of Keenan (*ibid.*: 161), the commodity 'carries, its "own" vacancy; it holds nothing but a place, the site of a possible relocation'. This abstracted value of the commodity is as much a social phenomenon as is language (such as in an 'economy' of sign value). Its emptying out not only gives the commodity a ghostly form as an 'empty body' but also a monstrous one, when it becomes 'estranged' from its place of production and 'grafted' elsewhere onto an 'immense accumulation' – the body of a monster.

But what if the 'stuff' of this empty vehicle were in fact bodies and body parts, things that are not in themselves the products of 'a human making' and yet appropriated as if they were – estranged from their place of origin and transferred elsewhere, grafted onto this body of immense accumulation. Do not the monstrous in this case exceed Marx's metaphoric use of it to confront us with an all-too-real materiality? Therefore the monstrous commodity reveals a scandal that the process of commodification is not limited to objects of a human making; it does not respect persons as free agents in exchange when their very bodies become the empty vehicles of value – that which can be appropriated in its various parts and grafted elsewhere. Indeed, it is the idea

of a 'universal humanity' of all agents in an economic system that is *the necessary condition* for the abstraction of their labour as a value in the circulation of commodities. The monstrous commodity threatens the unquestioned assumption of this shared humanity. It raises the possibility that some bodies may be understood as having more 'value' than others, or that some bodies *have* 'value' *for* others, but only when they are disassembled into their several parts and grafted onto other bodies.

While some might question if this figure of the monster is not more applicable to the commodification of organs rather than blood as a renewable resource, I would respond that just as the length of the working day poses a limit point to the extent to which the vitality of the worker must be renewed on a daily basis so that he or she might continue to labour, blood also can be subjected to this logic of a marginal utility. We see this when Ermo forces herself to drink fluids to speed up the process of replenishing her blood supply, in her mind, a way of maximizing her profit by surreptitiously diluting the value of what is given, while nonetheless draining her vitality until she is a mere shadow of herself, a ghostly presence upon which we see projected the white noise of the television screen as it plays upon her face. True, she has put herself as a free agent into the terms of this exchange, but she is no less lured in by the forces that conspire to suggest *this* as a reasonable way to access a world of consumption that is otherwise closed to her, an exclusion that also denies her the power to be recognized as a body of value by any other means.

From production to reproduction

The figure of the vampire attained a certain literary currency in nineteenth century England, one that Marx translated directly into his analysis of the commodity form. 'Capital', he writes, 'is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' (Marx 1967: 233). Capital is no less than the accumulation of dead labour that drains surplus value from the living. Marx is careful to locate this ghoulishness in the 'hidden abode' of production, for 'the truth of capitalist production lies not in the open market, but in the enclosed, secret lair or workshop, like all the best family skeletons and Gothic terrors' (Baldick 1987: 126).

Marx invokes the image of the gothic as an ironic repudiation of the bourgeois myth of his time that wealth is the reward for personal character, thrift, and inventiveness, something intrinsic to the individual. However, prior to Marx, Adam Smith had already drawn attention to the stunting of the worker's body through the division of labour in industrial production. 'The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations . . . generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become' (cited in Buck-Morss 1995: 448). As Susan Buck-Morss (*ibid.* 448–9) points out, the paradox lies in the realization that 'each real body is stunted in order for the social body to prosper. . . . The division of labour, upon

which the wealth of nations depends, creates (against nature) a society of unequals.' This paradox is only apparently resolved when the worker reappears in Smith's analysis as a 'well-clad consumer'. The worker gets back what has been lost in the form of 'domestic' goods made affordable through such economies of labour. Buck-Morss (ibid: 450) describes this shift in focus as a 'sleight of hand' – a manoeuvre that makes thinkable Adam Smith's figure of the 'invisible hand' of a social body composed of 'a web of commodities that connects people who do not see or know each other. These things make it a civilized body'. They become the means by which workers can 'console themselves' because their possession of them 'marks them as superior to much of the world's population' (ibid.).

However, this desire for goods becomes in itself something monstrous in its insatiability. The capitalist subject comes 'to desire the pleasure of desire itself' (ibid.: 452): the commodity becomes the 'decoy' of happiness. But it is a desire that is blind and blindness here 'is the state of proper action' so that the composite effect is the rationality of the market. This paradoxical twining together of narratives of production and consumption, labour and commodity desire, is captured by Buck-Morss (ibid. 454) as follows: 'Self-discipline is required of the producer, and insatiable desire is required of the consumer; but since they are the same person the construction of the economic subject is nothing short of schizophrenic.'

If Ermo is drawn from her rural village to the city by the lure of the commodity, then, it is important to understand the symbolic power of the commodity form as a repository for more than just economic value but as something that can shore up the eroding dignity of life in rural places. It is important to track the transformations of value that mediate between the country and the city to render the peasant body as ripe for exploitation, even when it is done through their own 'freedom of choice'.

At the same time, it is also important to look anew at the strategies that promise sudden 'windfalls' of value creation through the commodification of life itself. Ermo 'chooses' to sell her blood when the economic processes of petty commodity production and wage labour do not yield a return that is fast enough to satisfy her desire. This desire is in itself fuelled by social logics that for her become increasingly urgent. In doing so, it requires her to objectify her body and its economy of fluids as an exploitable resource, a standing reserve. The body's own life processes are thereby directly caught up in a calculus of 'investment and return' (Shao 2006). But it does so at more than one level. For Ermo, it becomes a strategy of self-development (*zimo fazhan*) in her desire to become a 'consumer citizen' in a society in which recognition as a 'body-of-value' is increasingly focused on one's access to purchasing power. But her process of self-objectification is matched at the macro level in the global spread of the 'promise' of biotechnology to provide the motor for rapid economic development.

If biotechnology is producing capital in new forms as biovalue, then it is important to see how it articulates with other modes of production. The hype

of biotechnology has been theorized as an important actant in attracting venture capital and stimulating market demand, but the gap between promise and fulfilment is also a well-known story (Sunder Rajan 2003). Yet the 'fantasy of abolishing disease' and extending life that biotechnology promises appears often to be blind to the question of who these interventions may be for and who may be disempowered by this very possibility. The anthropology of 'emerging forms of life' (Fischer 2003) needs to attend to how big science operates also as a fantasy of regenerating economies devastated by economic restructuring where the momentum of capital accumulation has moved elsewhere. If we are moving from a biopolitical regime to one driven by bioeconomics, as Nikolas Rose (2001) suggests, then biovalue is being produced out of the body's own vitality and thereby becomes a new frontier in the logics of capital accumulation.

In thinking through this question of the constitutive outside of capitalism in the production of new formations of biovalue, Cheris Thompson has returned to a feminist critique of Marxism and its overemphasis on production at the expense of reproduction when it is the latter, she suggests, that is the primary generator of wealth, agency, and value (cited in Franklin and Lock 2003: 7). As Sarah Franklin and Margaret Lock (2003: 7) argue, capitalism has always been based on prior modes of production that become new sources of value production. These prior modes, or what Marx refers to as 'the means of production already produced' (*ibid.*), may perhaps be defined as reproduction, defined broadly not just as human birth and nurture, but also as the fertility of the soil. Land and labour are what Marx calls 'false commodities' in that they do not spring from a human making and therefore supply the means for a primitive accumulation. Here, of course, we must be aware of feminist and anthropological framings of an artifactual nature, especially in the way that land and labour are now being rendered up anew for capital accumulation with the break-up of China's socialist farming collectives.

Taking the broader sense of reproduction to include the fertility of the soil, Hannah Landecker (2003) has remarked that biologists do not make DNA, organisms do. Hence we can speak of biopharmaceutical production as a kind of 'pharming', that is, as agriculture in another form, necessitated by the very biological nature of biological therapies. Landecker concludes that biocapital is not just dependent on reproduction so much as constituted by it.

Conclusion

The concern of many scholars doing critical work on the new life sciences is how bioproducts extracted from bodies may in turn confront them in an alienated and possibly harmful form. The spread of HIV in Henan Province suggests that what has been produced by the biotechnological enterprise is a new economy of life and death that forces us to consider how the active production of inequality has both been the condition of possibility for it while

also exacting a retroviral revenge. The initial refusal of local governmental officials to take responsibility for this catastrophic result and the punishment initially enacted on Chinese HIV/AIDS activists and health professionals who have struggled to bring the epidemic to international attention further suggests the extremes to which rural residents have become devalued. What is hopeful to me is the way in which local activists are using an international forum to pressure both central and local governments to recognize their social responsibility. And yet villages badly affected by HIV still struggle for provision of even basic-level health care.

Finally, stories that depict China as monstrous, as if it were somehow outside the 'regulated' circuits of international economic exchanges must show how these practices are connected to logics of accumulation in which North American subjects are equally implicated, if only because just about everything that we use and wear has probably been made using Chinese migrant labour (see also Blecher 2005: 16). The monstrous beckons the critic to engage in a hermeneutic project to force the 'social hieroglyphic' that is the commodity to reveal its hidden meanings. Tracking this value in a global network of exchanges would in effect dissolve Asia as an object organizing our inquiries and replace it with the idea of the value chain in which the logics that organize the production of biovalue in China's blood trade are raised as a spectre that haunts the normativity of our everyday encounters with the commodity form.

Notes

1 More recently, this inexhaustible supply appears to have dried up, creating a labour shortage in the coastal areas, especially around Guangzhou. This would have been inconceivable a few years ago. Either workers are 'voting with their feet', as Andrew Ross (2006) speculates, or the recent rural tax reforms have made labour migration less of an imperative.

2 Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) point out this play of meaning of 'consumption' between the nineteenth-century wasting disease and commodity desire as the vital force of 'millennial' capitalism.

3 See Anagnost (1989) and Yan (2003a) for discussions of how peasants were incited to entrepreneurial subjectivity in the early 1980s and mid-1990s respectively. One cannot help but note the co-temporality of Ermo's descent with the descent of agriculture in general. Nonetheless, one should be cautious of a hermeneutic of intentionality in the logics that set up the rural as the constitutive outside of capitalism. The bankruptcy of agriculture is the product of a contingent play of forces that have overdetermined results that may not have been entirely predictable. For discussions of overdetermination in rethinking 'capital logics', see Gibson-Graham (1996) and Mitchell (2002).

4 Marc Blecher points out that from having one of the most egalitarian income distributions in the world, 'China is now one of Asia's most unequal societies'. In 2002, the per capita income in urban and rural areas had reached 3:1 (Blecher 2005:1–2). The Gini coefficient, an international measure of income inequality has grown from a low of 0.33 in 1978 to approaching 0.5 in the first quarter of 2005 ('Income gap in China widens in first quarter' 2005).

- 5 There is a debate among policy makers as to whether the appropriate response to social unrest should be suppression or poverty alleviation. Marc Blecher (2005: 16) points out that the policies of reform still retain popular support despite the growing inequalities.
- 6 Gittings (2002), along with many other sources, also reports that Wan Yanhai was subsequently detained by Chinese state security in Beijing for revealing a 'state secret'. He was eventually released after an international outcry at his arrest.
- 7 The practice of selling blood by rural people during the 1960s was the basis of Yu Hua's novel *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, which was written prior to the exposure of the spread of HIV in Henan (Yu 1996). For comparative purposes, see Waldby and Mitchell (2006) for an account of the commodification of blood in the United States in the 1950s.
- 8 Anagnost (2004) discusses more at length this 'entrepreneurialization of the self' in China's neoliberal restructuring. See Farquhar (1999, 2002) for the links between food, health, and medicine.
- 9 See Rosenthal (2000) for the gendered nature of blood sales in Wenlou. A report by Cindy Sui (2000), entitled 'Chinese village riddled with AIDS left to die by government', gives examples of what the money was used for.
- 10 Keenan (1993) excavates this etymological monstrosity from Gerhard Wahrig (1987). See Baldick (1987) for how the meanings of the monstrous include both the deformation of the body and its fragmentation into parts and reassembly into anomalous wholes.

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