

**TEMPORALITY AS TROPE IN DELINEATING INEQUALITY:
PROGRESS FOR THE PROSPEROUS, TIME WARP FOR THE POOR**

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Introduction

China's market "reforms," in addition to generating rapid rises in average incomes, have been responsible for some unsavory outcomes, in particular, conspicuous polarization in standards of living. This fact has already been roundly acknowledged. But it has become a cliché to claim that serious poverty in China should be viewed as *geographically*-based, whether rural versus urban, coastal versus inland, or east against west. Indeed, there is now a cottage industry documenting these disparities ((Shue and Wong 2007; Davis and Wang 2009; Gustafsson, Li and Sicular 2009; Gallagher and Hanson 2009).

Here I take a different tack. Rather than a focus upon *spatial* variability, I instead center my analysis on *temporality* as a trope to investigate the material disparities between the two poles at the extremes of inequality in the cities. Accordingly--concentrating only on the urban sector (and speaking just of the urban-registered, though of course there are sizable pockets of poverty among rural migrants living in cities as well (Wu et al., 2010))--I argue that one way of distinguishing the wealthy and well-to-do from the poorest in the municipalities is by viewing how each group is positioned with respect to *time*.

Thus, the age of marketization and economic reform is (and has been) propelling the prosperous forward, into the future, toward the

practices of the cosmopolis, the global, the cutting-edge, the novel; the poverty-stricken, on the other hand, are pushed backward, toward the socialist past. The daily tangibles that comprise the substance of consumption for those at the two extremities therefore can be configured as being decades, not just miles, apart. A discourse of modernity and obsolescence accompanies these material dissimilarities.

Variable styles of consuming mark buying capabilities. They also set into relief the cast and the bounds of the new class structure under construction in the metropolises, a structure in which the victors are visible, the defeated mostly out of sight. In line with the political elite's preoccupation with urban peace, one could argue that the very invisibility of the indigent is a prominent component of the model of modernity that the leadership both envisions and has fashioned.

Before pursuing the extent of this opposition, a word on the notion of "reform": The fundamental connotation of this word conveys the notion of a march forward: According to one dictionary, to reform is to "make changes for improvement in order to remove abuse and injustice; to bring, lead or force to abandon a wrong or evil course of life or conduct and adopt a right one" (Longman, 1995: 1188). This definition suggests a directedness toward the future in its suggestion of an amelioration of past practices. What has been was in error; what is to be is rectification, the term implies.

Such a viewpoint means reform can amount to a step ahead, one compatible with the "*modern*," defined by William Kirby as "the material transformation of everyday life" (Kirby 2000). Though the large majority of China's urban population has experienced a rise in living standards, thereby making this view the meaning of urban reform for perhaps some eighty percent-plus of the urban populace, the official *China Daily* reported in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century that just about 100 million, or a mere seven percent of the total Chinese populace (both urban and rural), belonged to the "middle class" (Croll 2006b: 103). It is these people who stand in the forefront; they are the beneficiaries of the reforms, the vanguard of modernity. Their steps are upward, onward.

But marketization, which has entailed, as well as new wealth, enterprises being urged to push for profit (with the less well-endowed firms shunted into bankruptcy, their former workers abandoned to unemployment) has also involved the privatization of benefits that had once been state-funded and guaranteed. These measures have meant that for those who lost their jobs and with them their welfare and their wherewithal, if not their homes and their health, the years since these alterations began to unfurl (after about 1996) have seen not forward motion but *time warp*. These people's steps are downward and backward, a descent toward the past.

To again delineate the label I use, “time warp” specifies “a hypothetical discontinuity or distortion occurring in the flow of time that would move events from one time period to another or suspend the passage of time.” Alternatively, the notion conveys a circumstance in which something has “not changed even though everyone or everything else has; an imaginary situation in which the past or future becomes the present” (Longman, 1995: 1517).

For these losers, though they may have seen gains in the days from the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s—new consumer durables, higher salaries--the positive impacts of the reforms passed them by with the ravages of unemployment that took off after 1997. For them, despite the presence in their homes of a color TV or a CD player--purchased before that stage of change—materially, life has in many ways returned to the pre-1978 times of old, to the days when all ownership was public (or so-called “collective”) and poverty was pervasive and unexceptional, thus pretty much normalized.

Today, by contrast, it is they alone who experience impoverishment in the midst of commonplace complacency, and who therefore depart from the mode. Their numbers—like those of the well-off--are uncertain, but in 2004 the Asian Development Bank announced that there were somewhere in the range of 14.7 million urban poor if per capita *income* were counted, but perhaps as many as 37 million (or 12 percent of the

urban populace) in poverty if per capita *spending* were the measure (Croll 2006b: 123). These individuals left behind have been forced to resume features of dailiness not fully identical to, but familiar enough from, life in the cities in pre-Deng times: austerity, characterized by miniscule if any disposable income, few or no discretionary purchases, and cautious spending undertaken just to satisfy basic livelihood demands (Buckley 1999:17: Davis and Sensenbrenner 2000: 77: Lu 2000: 25).

Additionally, whereas before their circumstances were firmly undergirded by state guarantees and a supportive discourse of equality, they live now in destitution wholly without security, and with the status loss that has come alongside the banality of comfort for their neighbors. Looking at the "reform" measures that have metamorphosed the municipalities, this paper centers on the variable impacts the reform-era changes have had on quality of life and cultural consciousness for two extremely different social strata. In short, we see here an opposition: on the one side is prosperity, privatization and progress, on the other, regress, or, at best, stasis. Thus, the new poor live as if in a warp of time as the world of the global whirls around them on all sides, its partakers prancing into the future.

In the chapter that follows I trace these discrepancies, by examining how two grossly variant segments of the populace experience

the same *categories* of goods and services in their diverse forms of sustenance and the language that goes with the differences. I do so by positing two modal, contrasting modes of procurement and consumption in relation to new possibilities in the search for comfort created—or, alternatively, necessitated--by social reforms--for luxury, pleasure and extravagance, on one side, yet only for bare survival, on the other.

I also address official justifications for these variations. And I draw on quotations from interviews with people placed at the lowest limit of livelihood in Wuhan, a major city in central China, to illustrate empirically their hidden conditions of existence, which, since out of view, cause observers to presume that all the poverty of China adheres to the agrarian regions, especially those areas that lie within the deep interior of the country. Throughout, I make a case that even a quick glimpse of these parallel but conflicting images of dailiness lived by two sets of people helps uncover a huge split in urban society, each ultimate edge of which is inhabiting quite different moments in time.

Two Variable Forms of Life in the New Urban Marketplace

Food and Eating

The opening of the retail sector--allowing stores to set their prices and fill their shelves in accord with demand (instead of having costs dictated by the State Price Commission, as under the planned economy,

and in lieu of having to stock only what the state plan dictated should be offered) (Solinger 1984)—eventually allowed enormous nutritional divergences to emerge between the monied and the needy.

A first-cut means of establishing this disparity is by using the Engels coefficient--a measure of the proportion of income spent on food--which predicts that a decline in the proportion of expenditure on food occurs as incomes increase (Hooper 2000: 93; Lu 2008: 22). Though this percentage on average had dropped from 57.5 percent in 1978 nationally down to only 35.8 percent in 2006, the poorest five percent of city households still spent 47 percent of their total consumption on eating that year, while the top 10 percent used just 27 percent, a huge gap of 20 percent (calculated from Zhonghua renmin 2007: 348-49; Lu 2008: 22). (See Table One.)

With the enterprise layoffs of the late 1990s that rendered tens of millions without steady jobs, shoppers in the outdoor farmers' fairs that as early as 1980 signaled the onset of reform are apt to be people looking for a bargain. The wealthy, by contrast, patronize private groceries, supermarkets stocked with imported goods, and other specialty food outlets to meet their high-class demands and desires (Veeck 2000: 109).

A poignant comparison of the eating conventions of the two population groups emerges in pitting 2007 interviews in the homes of the

recipients of the state's sop to keep the poor "stable," the urban minimum livelihood guarantee (the *dibao*, or *zuidi shenghuo baozhang*) (Solinger forthcoming) against an essay on exotic meals enjoyed by the elite (Zhan 2008). The recent interviews found the poverty-stricken enduring on wilting vegetables and scant protein; even eggs were a precious food reserved, on the rare occasions they were purchased, just for growing children. For the poorest, grain accounted for 15.4 percent of the diet, while those at the other end of the income scale depended upon grains for a mere 4.7 percent of theirs (See Table Two). Disadvantaged people, thus, have been thrown back to what one sociologist alluded to as "the monotonous diets of the 1970s" (Davis 2000: 6).

But simultaneously, across town, snakes, tiger frogs, porcupines, and African ostriches to be swallowed as delicacies, purely for the thrill of novelty, decorated the upscale-restaurant plates of the well-to-do, consumed to symbolize the eaters' pretensions to worldliness and sophistication (Zhan 2008: 151, 156, 159), while banquets of a dozen courses allowed wealthy patrons to gorge and waste. Fast-food eateries, frequented by the economically comfortable connoted "a bridge to affluent, industrial Western modernity" (Davis 2000: 14; Yan 2000: 215). As Fernand Braudel recounted in his magisterial volume, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400-1800*, "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who

you are”; and “his food bears witness to his social status and his civilization or culture” (Braudel 1967: 66).

Housing

Shelter stands as second sort of divider in the cities of China in the present era. In this domain too, shifts appeared in the beginning of the 1980s with the commercialization of housing, starting with the sale of once-publicly-owned homes to enterprise employees at greatly subsidized prices (Tomba 2004: 16; Davis 2003). The widespread privatization of public housing, though, did not take off in force until a State Council decree of 1998 fully opening the market for housing; the move also created a genuine mortgage market, through which banks offered loans for buying apartments (Zhang 2008: 27; Tomba 2004: 2-3; Davis 2003). Urban home ownership consequently shot up to 87 percent among urbanites by 2007 (Davis 2006: 283; Lu 2008: 18).

But it is not just the fact of being a new title-holder that distinguishes the well-off from those living on the brink; it is also the style of living. Today the richest can be found in possession of several dwellings, including villas on the outskirts of cities, townhouses in the city center, spacious apartments, or condominiums in new developments, all decked out in designer-interior decor. The grounds of their compounds are fitted with artificial lakes, fountains and gardens; security gates, surveillance cameras and guards mark off the entrances, while exclusive

mini-malls and service centers surround the buildings (Croll 2006b: 83-84, 87; Davis 2006: 294; Fraser 2000: 31; Guang 2007: 59; Latham 2006: 2; Zhang 2008: 24-28; Tomba 2004). Serenity, lush greenery and beauty grace these elitist neighborhoods (Fraser 2000).

At the other end of the spectrum, the laid-off and penurious remain huddled in cramped, often one-room, rundown apartments left over from the days of the state-sponsored, industrial *danwei* of the Maoist era, true relics of the past (Fraser 2000: 30). There these people subsist, even as their original work-units have disappeared, praying that their tiny space will not soon be demolished by the ubiquitous urban developers and rezoning projects invading more and more urban space (Croll 2006b: 120).

Even as massive new construction spurred by reforms in zoning allowed average living space to double in the mere 14 years between 1978 and 1992 (from 3.6 square meters per resident to 7.1 square meters), and to 22 square meters by 2006 (Davis 2000: 8; Wu 1999: 119; Lu 2008: 19), this was far from a universal change: One impoverished household head worried that if his 16-square-meter room, shared by four family members, were to be torn down, he “would never again be able to acquire so much space.” People such as he serve as the security guards and domestic help to the wealthy, ease the cares and

take charge of the chores that beset “modern” people of means (Yan 2007).

Commodities, stores, and leisure spending

As privatization of commerce and the legitimatization of conspicuous consumption progresses, it is matched by a vibrant business culture in the municipalities. These developments amount not just to a “consumer revolution” (Davis 2000); they also contribute--especially with the sudden impoverishment of many thrown out of work--to a widening gulf between those who can splurge extravagantly and those who can only go on wearing clothing from the past, shopping as cheaply as possible, and trying to make do with products that have long worn out their wear. So while name-brand shoes, sportswear and fancy dresses are common for middle-class children, whose parents buy them multiple sets of clothing per season (Davis and Sensenbrenner 2000: 63, 67, 77), the offspring of the new poor persist in dressing as they had under Mao, in hand-me-downs.

Meanwhile, those whose parents can afford to spend lavishly on their behalf are the recipients of piano, martial arts, calligraphy, and swimming lessons, video games and other high-quality toys (*Ibid.*, 58, 62, 67, 74). And whereas the poor never leave their hometowns, unable to afford either train fare to or lodging in other places--much like their parents in their own youth--the young of the rising classes frequent

amusement parks, seaside resorts and boating trips on vacations (*Ibid.*, 75, 76).

For adults, privatization of commerce spawned private retail shops by the early 1990s, targeting the newly rich and specializing in foreign imports and designer goods, whether clothing, perfume, or expensive jewelry and accessories (Garner 2005: 209; Hanser 2007: 79-81; Croll 2006b: 97). Western-style specialty retailers came to be prevalent even in middling-sized cities, while international top-of-the-line shops dotted the avenues of the major metropolises (Garner 2005: 84; observations, Jingzhou, Hubei, summer 2008). Those with the assets to do so amuse themselves with high-cost sports, such as golf, and in night clubs, dance halls, discos and karaoke bars, health clubs and gyms just as their international peers are doing today (Davis 2000: 14; Croll 2006b: 95).

But at the same time, unemployed former workers stare hopelessly at old small-screen TV's purchased years ago, and poor factory hands spend their one day off per month purchasing such simple items as cheap lipsticks, jeans and T-shirts, by way of contrast (Ngai 2005: 157-63). Just as city parks served as the principal venue for amusement and pleasure for the populace as a whole in the pre-reform days (Davis 2000: 12), so they continue to do for those among the destitute with the spirit and the energy to venture out of their homes for recreation.

The lowest income groupings both had much larger numbers of tape recorders, video recorders and cameras in 1995 than they had in 2006. In 1995, among the poorest five percent, 39.5 households of every 100 owned tape recorders, as did 40.5 percent of the poorest ten percent; 9.4 percent of the very poorest and ten percent of the lowest decile had a video recorder that year; and for cameras, the respective proportions were 15.7 and 16.8 percent, respectively.

By 2006, only 20 percent of the lowest five percent had tape recorders and 22.8 percent among the lowest ten percent had them; for video recorders, the percentages had dropped to 3.6 and 4.5 percent, respectively. As for cameras, just 11.4 and 14.2 percent of households among the poorest five percent and the poorest decile had them in 2006. These data suggest either that those who owned these appliances in 1995 may by 2006 have discarded obsolete or broken-down objects that they possessed earlier, or that they had sold these things by 2006, in search of cash. (See Tables Three and Four.)

Education and health care

Education

As China's planned economy fell away, decentralization of finances became one more economic "reform." And as the central government began charging local governments with funding education, local governments dumped much of the financial burden onto the users'

families. By 2002, the share of funding for schooling borne by the state fell to just one third of the total, with consumers underwriting nearly twice that much. For the poor, education became affordable--as it had been for all children during the time of Mao--only when subsidized by the state. Sadly, in this day when just the affluent count, many impoverished families do not receive the subsidies they are meant to get.

In the 1990s, schools began requiring that pupils pay substantially increased tuition charges, as well as many new miscellaneous fees--for using school equipment, school uniforms, books, and school trips, among other charges, even at ordinary neighborhood schools (Mok and Yu 2008). Fees mounted as the student progressed to higher grades, and switching from one's neighborhood school to a better one (or, unlikely though that may be for the poor, to a "keypoint school"), would be higher still. So the offspring of the poor languish in ordinary neighborhood schools (as in Mao's time, when keypoint schools were abolished), later unable to advance in the face of new and fierce educational competition (Personal observations and Dang and Ci 2008).

Fees go unnoticed by families of means, whose young also benefit from private tutors, and by the turn of the century a "boom of private or 'elite schools'" (Wu 1999:8). Parents among the elite spend a high proportion of their income on education, even laying out money at costly

kindergartens, and in some cases overseas (Croll 2006b: 85; Garner 2005: 84).

Interviews in Wuhan in 2007 bear out the plight of the poor in education. One mother, her husband off serving a sentence in labor reform, had become resigned to her son's having dropped out of school: "He's 16, after finishing junior high he discontinued his studies, staying home. There's no money for him to go on." Another parent of a 16-year-old boy, determined to put him through higher education, fretted anxiously:

Yes, there's no question that he'll go on, but when I think about college I get so worried my scalp tingles. When the time comes, if I can come up with a solution to this problem, that'll be good..I'm considering making him study at a free teachers' college, relying on the *dibao*, but that little money is far, far from enough.

Apprehensions exist even about younger children: One mother of 10-year-old twins, considered a precious blessing at their birth--when people like her were all employed--bemoans her fate:

Now while they're at primary school it's okay, don't have to spend too much money..later if they both go on to middle school, expenditures will be too much, their father and I are very worried, can't not let kids go to school or in the future there will be even less of a way out. And both are boys; if they were girls, and found a good marriage we could be done

with it, but with boys there are more considerations. These are things we ordinarily don't want to give too much thought to, as soon as we think about them we just worry, so we pass our days like this and then we'll think about it.

Even while agonizing over finding the cash to cultivate their children, such parents imagine those very same children as their future saviors. But in truth, recipients of the *dibao* are locked into an inter-generational trap whose long-term label must be "the underclass."

Health care

Marketization has also meant a considerable increase in the charges for health care; again there is a huge repositioning in the proportions of spending done by individuals versus that by the state. While private outlays amounted to just over a fifth of spending in 1980 (21.2 percent), by 2006, more than 49 percent of these costs were borne by individuals, with the state's contribution plummeting from 78.8 down to 18 percent (78.8 percent if "social expenditure" referred to rural communes in 1980 and so could be combined with formal "government expenditure"; it is unclear what that category, comprising 32.6 percent of the total, means today) (China Institute 2008: 12).

With the lifting of medical responsibilities from the shoulders of state enterprises, costs for health care have been transferred to urban areas and families, the poor among them totally unequipped to pay (*Ibid.*, 50-51). While for the nouveaux riches and emerging middle class, hospitals, clinics and

pharmacies are conveniently located (Chen 2008: 127), their prices significantly above the negligible costs that families bore under the planned economy, when workers received full reimbursement for their health care, and family members got 50 percent deductions.

Today, for the poor a new choice has arisen, "between paying for medical care and medication or [for] other basic necessities, such as food, clothing or shelter" (*Ibid.*, 128). Though medical insurance has been instituted, those able to buy into it remain the well-off. Given that, as of 2006, "per capita private spending (on health care), in real terms [had] increased .. to a level 35 times higher than in 1978" (China Institute 2008: 16), it is blatantly obvious that those living hand-to-mouth will have to do without much of the treatment they need. Thus, as before the reforms began, many families simply do not pay. But at present this is not because, as before, there are no costs, but because there is no way for poor people to meet the charges that now exist.

In my 2007 interviews, where someone was in poor health, s/he stayed home, lay on a bed nearly all the time, was unable to work, and contrived to subsist, if barely, by swallowing a minimal amount of medicine, visiting a hospital only in times of dire emergency. Here are several typical examples:

First the husband speaks:

My wife [aged 44] got uremia [urine poison illness] in 2002; she's from the countryside and has never worked, for her medical funds she's

completely dependent on me. Before, when she wasn't sick, she could do household chores, now she can only lie on the bed, can't do anything. The medical fees are very high, she sometimes gets dialysis. We basically despise this illness, everyday she stays home, takes a little medicine, and in this way drags on.

Soon the wife chimes in:

The doctors in the hospital would let you stay there for treatment, but we haven't so much money, basically we can't afford it. Each day I can take some medicine to control the illness, and that's very good. I can't hope to cure the illness, can just live a day and write it off [*huo yitian, suan yitian*]. Sometimes I think if I can only lie on the bed all day like this, unable to do anything, it's the family's burden, not as good as dying earlier.

As she speaks, there's a tear in her eye and her daughter quietly goes away.

In another home, an old mother is prostrate, paralyzed on her bed, as she has been for half a year. "Now she's very old," explains her daughter-in-law, her health situation is very poor, her pension is all used up in seeing doctors and buying medicine." Yet one more desperate scenario features a wife, aged 47, again confined to her bed. She contracted a thyroid disease nine years before. "At first, it wasn't serious and we didn't pay much attention to it," she recounted. Then she continued:

Afterward, it slowly got severe, and I took a lot of hormone-type medicine. Now you can see I got fat, it's a side-effect of the medication. Each month, must take about 100 yuan of pills to control the illness. The doctor can examine me every month and check the condition of my relevant body signs, but a general check-up costs 300 to 400 yuan and we just can't afford it...Ordinarily I'm at home, and keep track myself. I do what I can to control it, but don't lightly go to the hospital.

Communications and transportation

Communications

An information revolution has coincided with the transformation of material life, as linkages with the outside world were paired with a late 1970s encouragement to scientists to serve daily life, not just defense and heavy industry. New modes of interpersonal connections--some having the potential to produce substantial transformations in relations among citizens--cropped up accordingly.

But, as with other shifts of the post-Mao era, those in the strata with income to spare modernized their modes of contact, while those lacking means continued to live much as they--and their parents before them—had in the past. I refer not so much to television--which by the 1990s could be found in the majority of households (Zhonghua renmin 2004: 368), (though not everywhere via cable and satellite)--but to the computer, with its capability for sending electronic messages and accessing news, information, and blogs, and for joining

Chinese urbanites with people afar. By late 2008, some 624 million Chinese people (close to half the country's total population) worked such a phone; probably about 350 million were using the Web as of early 2009, while since the 1990s pagers and faxes were linking the well-to-do (Richburg 2009; Latham 2006: 1).

In 2006, among those with the greatest wealth, 91.4 homes of every 100 were equipped with computers, while just eight of every 100 households among the poorest were. Though the ratio was not as extreme for mobile phones, the gap was apparent: 153 phones per household was average, but for the poor (though having a phone at all was remarkable) the mean fell to 64.3, while 211 phones were found in every 100 wealthy homes (Zhonghua renmin 2007, 353-54). (See Table Four).

Clearly, for the social elite and the middle stratum of today, media communication has become *au courant*, and rapid, associations with the West relatively widespread. But for the destitute, interpersonal interactions and extra-local exchanges are nearly unchanged since pre-reform times, when contact was "conducted largely in person" (Croll 2006a: 29); personal phone calls were "rare" and had to be made in public locations (Davis 2000: 12). These descriptions make it clear that as the Chinese elite moved forward into modernity, the penniless stayed in a relative stasis, in the past.

Reforms in the urban sector ushered in major modifications in communications for the impoverished, but these were not positive changes.

First, in losing their place of employment, they were deprived of meetings with former colleagues and co-workers. Secondly, many, surviving on state charity through the minimum livelihood guarantee, expressed disinclination even to talk with neighbors because of shame over their plight, which they consider “dishonorable” [*buguangrong*].

A third switch in their circumstances came from prohibitions against using modern means of communication if they wished to remain on the dole. In one typical Wuhan community, people, however poor, were prevented from entering the *dibao* program if they were found to be involved in any of a list of 18 sorts of behavior, including having recently purchased a computer or having run up phone fees above 40 yuan per month. Other bans included operating a cell phone or other hand-held communication device (even if having obtained it as a gift or loan), or going on the Web, both of which could mean the end of financial assistance (Interview, August 27, 2007; “Jinan guiding 2006;” “Zhongguo chengshi” 2006). Thus, even as cosmopolitan means of communication expanded substantially for the well-off, the availability and possibility of contacts contracted for the impoverished, consigning them in several regards to the ways of pre-modernity.

Transportation and travel

Similarly, the opportunity to enjoy up-to-date technologies of transport separated the era in which the well-off resided from that of the needy. Spurred by joint ventures in automobile production that taught Chinese managers and

workers how to mass produce cars for the general public (Mann 1997), tens of dozens of auto factories sprang up throughout the country. Driving one's own car became more and more widespread--though only among those who could afford it, as most popular brands of automobiles cost about 100,000 yuan, a price that just 4.6 percent of Chinese households could manage in the early 2000's (Croll 2006b: 91-92).

There are other signs of disparity related to movement. School buses escort the children of upwardly mobile families to special, magnet-like institutions (Fraser 2000: 27); this would not be necessary for poor children, whose destination—as it had been throughout the Mao period--is the nearby neighborhood school. And passports and foreign visas became much more easily accessible, at least among business entrepreneurs and tourists with elevated incomes (Croll 2006b: 93); at the same time, domestic travel for pleasure and what has been labeled “trophy holidays” came within reach for growing numbers (Garner 2005: 84, 93-94).

For the poor, however, echoes of old times are poignant: just as back then, when “nonofficial travel was difficult to arrange and expensive” (Davis 2000: 12), so it remains today for people just scraping by. Not only do the destitute lack the money to purchase automobiles: a mere .41 percent of poor households had a car, compared with 20 percent among those in the top income decile by late 2006 (ZGTJNJ 2007, 353-54). Additionally, while taxis became standard transport for middle- and upper-income travelers within cities

by 2000, transportation subsidies that had underwritten the masses' journeys before the 1990s disappeared during that decade (Davis 2000: 20), making it all the more unlikely (as compared with before reforms) that poor people would travel any distance at all from their homes.

Besides this throwback, driving a pedicab--an occupation that had offered a means of livelihood for the laid-off--became pervasive, but was banned in the central districts of most urban areas (their officials taking unobstructed roadways as a marker for modernity) after 2002. Some informants spoke wistfully of their time as a driver. One man, 39 years of age with just a junior high education, had made his living that way after being fired by his factory, but was soon forced to relinquish his cart. Ever since, he "very much has wanted to find work, but [was] always rebuffed."

Official Justiciation

How can these gross disparities in the practices of dailiness--whose actors reside at two extremities on the continuum of existence--be rationalized? The reply is simple, if one accepts that the poor stand in the public imaginery as emblems of the rejected *past*, while the well-off represent the worldly, the sophisticated, the *prospective*. For this was the mind-set informing the media, fed to the masses and, perhaps, the genuine perspective of the political leadership, certainly when these gross disparities were first being put into place.

Journal articles around the turn of the century describing the newly unemployed--those discarded by the enterprises around 1997 in response to official orders--routinely characterized them as "lack[ing in] understanding of the realities of market competition" (Chengshi shiye..ketizu 2000:83), unable to grasp the need for behavior that is "normal in a market economy," such as moving one's residence for a job. Such so-called inadequate thinking amounts, it was claimed, to a "*regression back* to the world of the state-owned enterprises" [emphasis added], (*Ibid.*, 84), clearly castigating these unfortunate workers as laggards. Their overall "quality and their concept about a market economy is "inappropriate," states another writer, posing "an obstacle to our country's economic opening and speedy transition" (Mo 2000:20).

According to *Ming Pao*, in 1997, the Ministry of Labor announced that,

We should work hard to educate this group of people to wake up to the fact that the market economy needs competition, competition is bound to lead to bankruptcy and unemployment, enterprises no longer have the iron rice bowl, two-way selection exists between employers and employees, and we should rely on indomitable work for survival (*Ming Bao* December 19, 1997).

Another three years later, the press continued to edify those its publicists tagged "excess workers," as in the following extract:

The superiority of socialism should not be manifested in supporting idle and lazy people. We hope to see such a moving scenario: units can

survive on the basis of their efficiency; people get rewards on the grounds of their capabilities. There will be no place of existence for lazy people. And those who are complacent will, naturally, be removed. If so, the phenomenon of extra personnel, which has put unbearable burdens on government finance, will disappear by itself (*Fazhi ribao*, May 28, 2000).

Since the political elite was poised at that point to join forces with the global economy, as its members prepared to ready the country for entering the World Trade Organization, it seemed impossible to accommodate people whose “cultural level and business skill isn’t high,” making it “difficult to completely meet the demands of market economic structural readjustment and international competition” (Zhongguo quiye lianhehui 2001: 14). The commentator here even went so far as to urge that, “We should as early as possible..establish the view that ‘those who can adapt should exist,’ to blend our enterprises into the international competitive environment” (*Ibid.*, 15).

Though these essayists knew that the problems among the laid-off personnel had to be traced to the long-term influence of the planned economy, they nonetheless tarred former laborers with sustaining a “traditional employment concept,” seemingly only knowing to “wait, depend, and demand,” victims of their own *backward* ways of understanding employment” [italics added] (Shoudu jingji 2001: 61). This analysis explicitly linked the laid-off with the now discredited past. Another labeled such workers “ensnared in passivity”

(Xu 2001: 29). The only solution for such sad cases was viewed as being to “modernize their concept of value,” to “get rid of their *past backward* and narrow mentality” (Hu 2001). [emphasis added]

Even the furloughed workers themselves had internalized this outlook as early as 1999, as I found in interviews that summer. A female worker in her late 30s from the electronics system, having lately lost her job, told me that, “For China to progress, we have to go through this process, [even if] people like us will be affected by it,” and “We need to sacrifice for the next generation..so the country can get stronger..eliminating people is a necessary law of social development.” (Interview, September 1, 1999). Parroted another, a woman of 38 whose thread-making unit had gone bankrupt earlier that year: “For middle-aged people [like us], it’s hard to learn new things,” implicitly admitting her unsuitability for the challenging world of market competition that she found confronting her (Interview, September 6, 1999).

Most humbling of all was a short man charged with mopping my hotel’s marble entrance pillars at 1:30 in the morning, formerly an employee of a small cloth shoe factory, who announced to me with tears in his eyes that, “Without reform and opening, China will remain behind [*luohoude*]..there’s no other future for it” (Interview, September 11, 1999). These disturbing remarks symbolize the symmetry between two divergent physical realities of material life, on the one hand, and the interpretative dialogue that undergirds those realities, on the other.

Conclusion

In every sphere of daily life—in what one eats, where one lives, what one purchases to wear and what one buys for pleasure and does for amusement, in what is spent on one's children's education and on one's own and one's family's health care, and in the modes of transport and communications one can afford—the changes for some have been immense, indeed unimaginable as recently as even 20 years ago. But it must be underlined that alterations that prompt a leading-edge lifestyle are confined to a particular stratum of the urban populace, one whose proportion of the total is indeterminate but still proportionately small.

At the same time, there is a sizable grouping (again, one whose numbers are unknown) whose members are *not* seeing an upward climb or a forward movement into modernity, toward the future. Instead, they experience a sense of loss, of backward turns and downward slides toward times long past. So, while urban reform spurs some citizens into a marketized catch-up with the global cosmopolis, those same transformations and their externalities mean that many others go on as if heading backwards, into a terminal, time-warped trap. Official language limning these divergences appears to have legitimated this lower class lapse.

TABLE ONE

TABLE TWO

PER CAPITA ANNUAL LIVING EXPENDITURE OF URBAN HOUSEHOLDS (2006) BY INCOME DECILE/QUINTILE GROUPS										
ITEM	AVERAGE	1st 10%	1st 5%	2d10%	2d quint.	3d quint.	4thquint.	9th decile	10% highest	
TOT.CONS.(yuan)	8696.55	3422.98	2953.27	4765.55	6108.33	7905.41	10218.25	13169.82	21061.68	
FOOD	3111.92	1586.02	1387.7	2073.45	2484.28	3019.37	3647.94	4392.35	5746.72	
grain	246.46	219.11	213.36	229.81	239.38	246.43	257.74	270.04	272.63	
meat,poultry,process	545.64	346.32	301.25	439.2	496.82	556.63	623.58	685.74	725.79	
eggs	67.6	49.46	44.61	57.94	65.58	70.6	74.19	78.66	76.05	
aquatic	202.87	79.01	64.23	111.16	143.78	188.37	257.57	327.12	417.64	
milk prods.	150.23	60.87	46.52	95.12	121.64	153.18	183.65	217.92	260.34	
CLOTHING	901.78	286.12	225.02	470	665.74	884.74	1120.4	1350.76	1956.6	
DURABLE	233.88	42.66	34.61	75.78	125.4	213.17	280.73	414.56	719.84	
CONSUMER										
GOODS										
MEDICAL	620.54	234.5	213.39	350	425.48	590.45	762.37	1020.2	1311.35	
TRANSP./CMCS.	1147.12	257.72	205.6	431.13	610.03	859.87	1264.52	1801.04	4316.82	
ED./CUL.	1203.03	406.05	332.64	572.38	781.97	1047.48	1469.14	1901.68	3176.07	
RECREA.CONSR.GD	310.26	59.28	43.9	99.41	168.27	256.91	397.74	558.64	943.95	
HOUSING	285.07	59.19	53.9	83.74	135.84	197.06	310.91	506.43	1134.22	
MISCELL.	309.49	85.42	76.18	126.5	183.79	259.6	360.39	519.56	942.1	
RESIDENCE	904.19	427.16	391.51	530.06	655.61	799.32	1009.55	1341.89	2196.59	

Source: Zhongguo tongji nianjian [China Statistical Yearbook] 2007, 348-49.

TABLE THREE										
OWNERSHIP OF DURABLE CONSUMER GOODS PER 100 HOUSEHOLDS AT YEAR-END										
ITEM	BY INCOME GROUP									
	AVERAGE	1st 10%	1st 5%	2d 10%	2d quint.	3d quint.	4th quin.	9thdecile	Top 10%	
Furn. Set * combined fit	46.32	35.15	33.83	38.14	43.83	47.2	50.66	52.43	53.24	
automobile										
video disc player										
tape recorder *regular t	45.31	40.44	39.52	43.94	44.65	45.44	46.63	48.6	46.64	
video recorder	18.19	10.01	9.41	13.37	15.26	17.63	20.71	23.91	27.39	
computer										
camera	30.56	16.8	15.73	19.91	25.32	30.28	36.09	40.74	44.73	
video camera										
air conditioner	8.09	2.26	1.88	3.21	5.4	6.79	9.59	13.16	18.67	

Source: Zhongguo tongji nianjian [China Statistical Yearbook] 1996, 287.table 9-11

TABLE FOUR

ITEM	OWNERSHIP OF DURABLE CONSUMER GOODS PER 100 HOUSEHOLDS AT YEAR-END 2006, BY INCOME GROUP								
	AVERAGE	1st 10%	1st 5%	2d 10%	2d quint.	3d quint.	4th quint.	9thdecile	Top 10%
Furn. Set	79.7	59.12	52.91	67.26	75.01	79.13	84.9	91	103.3
automobile	4.32	0.52	0.41	0.52	1.3	1.9	4.2	8.22	20.11
video disc player	70.15	49.11	44.02	60.78	65.36	69.8	74.8	82.42	90.85
tape recorder	37.7	22.75	20.01	29.41	33.58	37.68	42.8	45.16	52.75
video recorder	15.08	4.52	3.63	8.04	11.09	13.9	18.41	22.57	30.05
computer	47.2	10.91	7.9	21.08	33.33	46.46	61.13	70.68	91.32
camera	47.99	14.18	11.37	24.44	33.99	44.58	59.09	74.38	95.54
video camera	5.11	0.36	0.34	1	1.76	3.53	6.57	9.91	16.95
air conditioner	87.79	23.31	16.75	40.45	61.27	80.97	107.02	135.93	187.55
dishwasher	0.68	0.16	0.18	0.4	0.38	0.56	0.9	1.23	1.42
telephone	93.32	80.92	78.33	86.71	90.71	93.22	97.21	99.94	104.3
mobile phone	152.88	75.05	64.25	113.83	138.42	159.01	173.9	191.37	210.79

Source: Zhongguo tongji nianjian 2007, 353-54.

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