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Globalization, Women, and Poverty  
A Transcultural Reading of Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls*  
by Kay Schaffer and Xianlin Song

**Abstract**

China's rise within a global economy has had diverse consequences for Chinese women. For the super rich and the rising middle class, it has offered opportunities for vast wealth. For the newly emergent underclass of migrant workers who have flooded to the cities, it has engendered exploitative states of vulnerability, especially for rural women. In this paper we locate our inquiry in the context of globalization and its impact on rural women's lives as witnessed through the medium of a unique and distinctive women's life narrative, Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls*. The text testifies to the underside of women's lives within the new market economy, documenting the cruelty of global capitalism. It presents an alternative version of the history of China's rise in the global economy and maps a trajectory of increasing inequality from a previously silenced female perspective. Sheng Keyi's world speaks to the sordid world of women, the world of *yin*. It coexists with the dizzying ascent of the *yang*---as the powerful nation grapples with social inequality and fragmentation. In its international circulation, *Northern Girls* opens readers to the contradictions and ambivalent aspects of China's economic rise and its consequences specifically for migrant women.

Keywords: rural migrant women, Chinese literature, *suzhi* discourse, and subaltern

There are two Chinas, one rich and one poor and  
I am walking between them.

Xie Lihua

**Introduction**

China's global economic restructuring, authorized by the economic reforms announced by Deng Xiaoping in 1992, has had diverse social, economic, and personal consequences, resulting in immense inequality within the previous socialist system. For the super-rich and the rising middle class, it has offered opportunities for unprecedented wealth, with a lifestyle and status dependent upon the growth, regulation, and sustenance of an underclass of workers in

the service industries. For the newly emergent underclass of rural workers, especially rural women who have abandoned their impoverished villages and flooded to the cities, fueling urban growth, it has engendered exploitative states of vulnerability, alienation, stigma, and social abjection. The resultant social structure has radically reshaped Chinese society from being one of the poorest and most egalitarian nations (at least in its aspirations) to one of the most unequal and socially non-cohesive societies in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Concurrent with the process of introducing the neoliberal market economy has been the emergence of “female consciousness”<sup>2</sup> in Chinese society. In 1995 China hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The conference introduced an array of Western and global feminist ideas. It initiated a dialogue between Chinese and Western feminists working together for equality between men and women in social, cultural, economic, and political life. As we describe in our study *Women Writers in Postsocialist China* (2014), the Beijing Conference on Women impacted women’s writing and women’s consciousness in diverse ways. Women’s writing took on an explicitly woman-centered focus, critiquing traditional ideas about women’s passivity and compliance. It began to explore “personal life, interiority, subjectivity, sexuality, memory, identity, and desire . . . [breaking] away from long-held taboos against expressions of sexuality, including homosexuality, and challenged male dominated discourses and practices in China which had been strictly proscribed by the government and enforced through elite institutions within the academy.”<sup>3</sup> These literary explorations, as they emerged in the global flow of feminist ideas in the 1990s, enabled what Zheng Yi 郑义 calls a new “symbiosis of contemporary Chinese feminist consciousness with a global women’s movement.”<sup>4</sup> Since the 1990s, Chinese women within the new market economy have produced

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<sup>1</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 142.

<sup>2</sup> Huang Lin, “Smiley Feminism,” fly leaf. See also Liu, Tao, “Yi xing yu ai zhangxian nüxing zhuti yishi,” 111-13.

<sup>3</sup> Kay Schaffer and Xianlin Song, *Women Writers in Postsocialist China*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Zheng Yi, “‘Personalised Writing’ and Its Enthusiastic Critic: Women and Writing of the Chinese ‘Post-New Era,’” 45.

an array of life narratives that record and reimagine the possibilities for their lives and explore their embodied experience. These texts imagine new possibilities for figuring and refiguring women as subjects in contemporary China. They document and bear witness to new forms of subjectivity and subjection as women and men renegotiate gender relations within China's new market economy. They also articulate Chinese women's desires for independence, autonomy, and greater freedom.

In this paper we locate our inquiry in the context of China's rapid market globalization and its impact on rural women's lives as witnessed through the medium of a unique and powerful women's life narrative, Sheng Keyi's 盛可以 *Bei mei* 北妹 (*Northern Girls*, Chinese ed. 2004, English ed. 2012). Sheng was a member of China's rural surplus, the vast, so-called floating population of hundreds of millions of workers who migrated from impoverished rural villages to the newly industrialized cities, a phenomenon that David Harvey calls the "largest mass migration the world has ever seen."<sup>5</sup> Bob Carr, the former Foreign Minister of Australia, refers to Deng's revolution of 1978, which promoted this mass migration, as "the only successful revolution of the 20th Century . . . having resulted in a faster and longer modernisation, urbanisation and industrialisation than anything before it in history."<sup>6</sup> Although we might concur with the broad outlines of his optimistic assessment, we are also cognizant of the fact that this process, for all its successes, has a dark underside that is global in scale and transnational in scope.

Sheng Keyi's acclaimed semi-autobiographical narrative, *Northern Girls: Life Goes On*, was published under the title *Bei mei* 北妹 in China in 2004 and translated into English in 2012. It addresses China's great economic "revolution" with reference to the transformation of rural

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Carr, Speech at the Australia in the China Century Conference, September 14, 2012. [http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2012/bc\\_sp\\_120914.html](http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2012/bc_sp_120914.html). Bob Carr was the Australian Foreign Minister from March 2012 to September 2013. He is currently a Professor and Director of the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology, Sydney.

women's lives as they transition from village to city. Written by one who was a migrant worker herself, it tells of women's naiveté and vulnerability, but also of their fortitude and resilience, as they adapted their aspirations, expectations, and experiences to, within, and against the forces of the new market economy. Sheng's text offers an alternative history to the global rise of China in a time of economic reform. It also contributes to understandings of the formation of a unique underclass of migrants that has recently emerged in China but is also global in scale, and whose plight grows daily more desperate. Our reading offers a transnational and transcultural approach that addresses the strength and vulnerability of this underclass of women workers and explores how Sheng's life narrative, as it circulates to readers in the West, can contribute to new understandings of globalization, gender, and poverty for women workers both within China and beyond its borders.

### **Sheng Keyi**

Sheng Keyi (a pen name that translates as "can do") was born a peasant in a remote rural village in 1973 in the northeastern part of Hunan Province. She left her isolated village near Yiyang in 1994, bound for Shenzhen, a newly established Special Economic Zone, a thousand kilometers south of her home. With this move she became part of China's rural surplus, one of the "floating population" of migrant workers who have experienced massive dislocation, disadvantage, and discrimination in their own lives while enabling China's economic boom at the cost of their own social and political exclusion. It would be difficult to imagine a more pronounced cultural transition than from a peasant village on the Lanxi River, cut off from the outside world for thousands of years, to the bustling southern industrial marketplace of Shenzhen, Hong Kong's neighbor, during the economic boom of the 1990s. And yet, Sheng is one of the 800 million peasants, more than 270 million of whom have effected, or will soon effect, a transformation

from village to urban life---a massive and ongoing migration across a cultural gap that is “deep rooted and difficult to cross”;<sup>7</sup> one that affects national and global macroeconomic and structural forces as well as micro social forces within China, shaping everything from family relationships to fashion trends and moral values.

This phenomenon has been of growing interest to sociologists both within and outside of China, although seldom with attention to its gendered dimensions. Until the publication of *Northern Girls*, no life narrative had been produced that followed the (mis)fortunes of the workers, and in particular the women workers, from the personal experience and perspective of one of their own. In fact, the publication of such a story is a unique occurrence in itself. In the mainstream literature, traditionally the domain of elite, male, urban-based writers, one hears little about these women in contemporary China. Even when women began to make a mark on the publishing industry in the 1980s, rural women’s voices were largely absent. With little education or social capital, they had neither the opportunities nor the connections necessary to enter the world of publishing. This is not to say that “peasants” have been neglected in mainstream literature. Their lives have been taken up as the subject of fiction by some elite writers, often sympathetically. However, when those writers, like Tie Ning 铁凝, Lin Bai 林白, Sun Huifen 孙惠芬, Wang Anyi 王安忆, and Yan Geling 严歌苓, portray peasants as sympathetic subjects in their writing, they speak *on behalf of* the voiceless, maintaining self-other distinctions, even if they are motivated by a social conscience or humanitarian spirit, or, if they write with political intent, as a corrective to the workers’ exploitation.

This is why Sheng Keyi occupies such a unique place in the contemporary literary scene. She confounds both tradition and expectation. Not only is she uneducated and of rural origin, she is also the subject of her self-styled novel. Further, although Sheng was born in a remote rural village and presents as a peasant, she has become one of the most promising and

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<sup>7</sup> Dong Han, “Policing and Racialization of Rural Migrant Workers in Chinese Cities,” 597.

successful writers of her generation, with six novels and numerous short stories to her name.<sup>8</sup> Even to become a writer, she had to defy centuries-old literary and cultural traditions and prejudices, negotiating a treacherous boundary between uneducated peasant and elite urban dweller. Defying the odds, her migrant narrative quickly won over an urban audience to become China's most popular, successful, and award-winning novel, read by the masses and the elite alike, before being translated, received, and welcomed into the English-speaking world and nominated for the Man Asia Booker Prize in 2012.

If writing presented a unique set of issues to the author, reading her text presents an equally complex set of issues for its readers, especially if they are located outside of China. To read *Northern Girls* is to be present at a particular historical juncture of global economic restructuring. The text invites us to attend to the impact of changing economic and social forces within China, specifically as they impact upon women's lives and affect formations of gendered and class-based identity and subjectivity. It also presents the transcultural reader with the challenges of reading from elsewhere, which requires that we engage with an unfamiliar environment and negotiate the processes of translating ideas, experiences, and concepts from different social and cultural spaces.<sup>9</sup> In particular, reading Sheng's narrative requires us to register the formation of newly created and gendered subaltern subjectivities, or states of abject being and (non)belonging, produced by the demands of global capital and encountered in emergent minoritarian literature.

### ***Northern Girls: Life Goes On***

As a life narrative produced in postsocialist China, *Northern Girls* presents a grueling personal account of how "floating" rural women shape and are shaped by their embodied experiences.

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<sup>8</sup> *Northern Girls* was Sheng's first novel to be translated into English. Her second, *Death Fugue*, appeared in 2014. Her work has been translated into German, Korean, Japanese, and Dutch.

<sup>9</sup> Schaffer and Song, *Women Writers*, 1-17.

It articulates new forms of subjectivity for these women as they remake themselves and attempt to renegotiate the sexual politics of gender relations from below. The text makes an important contribution to an emerging women's consciousness within the global women's movement. Although she published the text as a novel, and opens it with a direct address to the reader, Sheng Keyi explains that "every character in my writing, man or woman, is me, or part of me, or a transformed me expressing my view of the world . . . I do not write for the reader, every word I write is for myself."<sup>10</sup> In this material and symbolic tension between self, text, and world, the story takes on both personal and political dimensions for the author. The novel's reception and circulation in China and beyond provides readers from elsewhere with a platform from which to imagine Sheng's women's world of sexual vulnerability and economic exploitation juxtaposed with their desires for modernity, independence, autonomy, and freedom. Reading the text offers readers a global cultural space in which to enact a transcultural dialogue with the author and also to consider how China's new market economy has forged new formations of gendered subjectivity, particularly for powerless women of low social standing.

Told in the third-person voice and closely identified with the voice of the author, *Northern Girls* follows the life of the resourceful and resilient Qian Xiao Hong (hereafter Hong), described as "a model citizen, good and decent,"<sup>11</sup> who, at the age of fifteen, leaves her village in search of employment and eventually arrives at the city of Shenzhen with her friend Li Sijiang. They imagine Shenzhen as "the ideal city . . . with dignified men,"<sup>12</sup> an imagined reality from which they will soon be disabused. They arrive with a triple disadvantage: without jobs, without residence permits in the city, and without training for gainful employment. In their precarious positions, the young women encounter a number of messy situations beyond

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<sup>10</sup> Sheng Keyi, "Sheng Keyi fangtan lu," <http://book.ifeng.com/wen-qing/shengkeyi/>.

<sup>11</sup> Sheng Keyi, *Northern Girls: Life Goes On*, 1. All quotations are taken from the English translation unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>12</sup> <3em>, 23.



their control. They face daily physical threats and sexualized oppressions, which foster subsequent concerns with pregnancy, abortion, and sterilization, as well as providing the dual specters of body trade and surrogacy. To emphasize their specifically sexualized vulnerability and introduce a permeating women's consciousness to the narrative, Sheng introduces her central protagonist with reference to one unusual and inescapable attribute: Hong has large breasts, "much too large for civilized, polite society."<sup>13</sup> Described initially as "twin, bulging mounds [that] appear as openly and ominously as storm clouds descending upon an unsuspecting city,"<sup>14</sup> Hong's breasts, the only assets she seems to possess in the hostile environment of the city, are to her a source of both pleasure and pain. They cause men, she complains, to "entertain all sorts of obscene fantasies."<sup>15</sup> As the novel progresses, Hong's bosom swells to gargantuan proportions, until it overwhelms her. Through the effective use of this surreal feminine metaphor, Sheng introduces a critical edge through which to explore the oppressive nature of migrant women's gendered lives. The recurrent *leitmotif* of those ever-expanding and burdensome breasts attunes the reader not only to the multiple predicaments endured by rural workers in the city but also and more specifically to women's sexual difference, the difference that Hong's biological gender makes to the evolving economic, social, and cultural aspects of her existence. They come to symbolize the highly visible (but seldom acknowledged) burden of women's sexuality.<sup>16</sup>

In order to highlight women's vulnerability, Sheng contrasts the characters and motivations of the two central female protagonists, Hong and Sijiang, against the changing backdrop of rapid social transformation. Both are young, naïve, and full of hope as they begin their journey to the city. In contrast to Hong's pragmatism, her friend Sijiang is an idealist and

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<sup>13</sup> <3em>, 1.

<sup>14</sup> <3em>, 2.

<sup>15</sup><3em>, 9.

<sup>16</sup> This theme is further explored in Schaffer and Song, *Women Writers*, 63--65.

a virgin, “pure as mineral water from the mountains.”<sup>17</sup> Her ideal is to find a better life for herself through love, marriage, and motherhood. She desires only to live the conventional life of a modern Chinese woman while also providing for her family in the village. Hong, the more hardened pragmatist, has begun her journey out of necessity. She fled her village in disgrace, having been entangled in a sexual scandal with her brother-in-law when she was fifteen. She yearns for independence. In the city she searches not only for employment opportunities but also for sexual freedom and personal autonomy. Ultimately, both women fail.

Caught in the void between the rural village they left behind and the city that rejects them as abject others, both Hong and Sijiang become what Fan Shuhua describes as tragic figures, the “superfluous beings” of modernity.<sup>18</sup> A series of episodes expose the women’s naiveté and inexperience as they encounter the cunning wiles of bosses, the police, and corrupt government officials. The novel documents a multitude of ways in which women *as women* are subjugated by their embodied sexuality and subjected to exploitation in their marginality, not only by strangers but also by loved ones. In this world, women occupy the lowest rung on the social ladder, mired in an amoral universe with no possibility of escape. Some women resort to desperate measures in order to survive, including body trade and surrogacy. One of their friends, Weimei, resorts to surrogacy, with the promise of 12,000 *kuai* if she gives birth to a boy or 8,000 for a girl. Many of the women workers succumb to prostitution, especially those working in the service industries. Even the highly principled Sijiang finds that she must use her body to guarantee her own survival. Within days of arrival she discovers that her quest for a new life in the city is irrevocably compromised, necessitating the loss of her virginity to one of Shenzhen’s old village chiefs in order to obtain the necessary temporary resident permits that will enable her and Hong to stay in the city. But this is only the first of many misfortunes

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<sup>17</sup> Sheng Keyi, *Bei mei* (Chinese edition), 14.

<sup>18</sup> Fan Shuhua, “Sheng Keyi xiaoshuo zhong de beiju yishi,” 55--57.

to befall Sijiang. By the end of the novel she, who wanted only to find love, marriage, and the possibility of motherhood in the city, has experienced a forced sterilization at the hands of corrupt officials who need to meet their monthly quota. To compound her difficulties, after the sterilization, she is abandoned by her country boyfriend because she cannot bear his child. In defeat and despair, she returns home to her impoverished village without hope, utterly crushed by life in the city.

Hong, although more resourceful, also experiences manipulation, abuse, fraud, and betrayal by a series of male bosses, co-workers, lovers, and strangers who are eager to exploit her perilous existence in the city. In order to improve her prospects she begins to beautify and improve herself. She dyes her hair, learns to speak without dialect, and enrolls in a night school course. She engages in a sexual relationship with a seemingly kind and honest police officer; naïve to the prospect that he will reject her because of her rural origins. When she makes brief trips back to her home village, she faces jealousy, rivalry, competition, and the malicious gossip of women that weakens her spirit and tarnishes her reputation. Merely by being a *beimei* (northern girl), she is fair game for the women and is subjected to malicious gossip in the village. As she encounters these multiple oppressions her breasts continue to expand, growing to the size of rice bags. These breasts, which signal her inescapable female attributes, have become an impossible burden. At the end of the novel, as Hong faces defeat, having been beaten down by the many disappointments and abuses, we are again reminded of the burden of her gendered being, represented by her burgeoning breasts: “She no longer thought of them as breasts, but as two beggar’s sacks, waiting to be filled up with life and achievement. They were not a source of happiness or pleasure. They just kept weighing her down, pulling her down towards the ground.”<sup>19</sup> In the original Chinese edition, the reference to her final debasement is

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<sup>19</sup> Sheng Keyi, *Northern Girls*, 314.

even more poignant: “They are no longer breasts,” it reads, “they are the bags of a beggar, carrying inside all she has begged for and all that she has.”<sup>20</sup>

### **China’s Unique Abjecting Practices: *Suzhi* Discourse and the *Hukou* System**

Like migrant workers around the world, Hong and Sijiang are abject subjects---marginalized, demeaned, and subjected to abuse because of their rural origins, their migrant status, and their gender. They face discrimination on a daily basis. In this they are not unlike other marginalized groups---blacks under South African apartheid or black and Asian workers in early twentieth century America. But there are features of Hong and Sijiang’s marginalization, rooted in China’s cultural imaginaries and regulatory material practices that are specific to China and not comparable to a Western racialized logic.<sup>21</sup> This is an argument taken up by critical race theorist Dong Han, who argues for a more nuanced discussion of racialization within critical race studies. According to Dong, racism is not a particular system but a complex phenomenon that emerges as a result of historical and cultural forces and complex social relations as they are articulated through specific social and political domains. In an attempt to expand global understandings of racialization to the Chinese context, he cites *suzhi* 素质 discourse and the *hukou* 户口 system of household registration in China as contributing to forms of racial stigmatization that impact China’s migrant workers and are “unique to the Chinese context.”<sup>22</sup> Not only do these attributes of “floating” lives characterize the urban-rural divide; they are also a direct result of market reforms as they have reshaped China’s social hierarchies. Non-Chinese readers of *Northern Girls* may not be aware of these specific features of urban life for migrant workers. Dong’s discussion of *suzhi* discourse and the *hukou* system allows readers to register these unique features when confronted with the various ways they affect urban life for the

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<sup>20</sup> Sheng Keyi, *Bei Mei* (Chinese edition), 275.

<sup>21</sup> Dong Han, “Policing and Racialization,” 593--96.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 594.

characters in *Northern Girls*. Not only can we as readers register specificities of how they work to maintain the rural-urban divide within Chinese society, we can also connect the experiences of Hong and Sijiang as migrant workers to an expanding world order of racism.

### Suzhi Discourse

In symbolic terms, within a Chinese cultural imaginary, rural migrants to the cities are perceived to possess low *suzhi*, a term that translates as “human qualities,” but is indicative of morality, intelligence, education, character, and ability. Policed arbitrarily and based on stereotyped physical features like body hair, apparel, personal hygiene, and dialect, rural workers face contempt and are judged as being ignorant, poor, and greedy---thus, described as having “low *suzhi*.” Perceived to be lacking in physical, social, or cultural qualities, with low intellect and poor notions of understanding, their low *suzhi* becomes internalized, an all-encompassing, inescapable stigma attached to their bodies and every aspect of their being. They are *made* abject through ideologies and social policies of exclusion that place them forever on the edges of modernity. All migrants are subject to *suzhi* discourse. Female migrants, however, face the additional sexualized burden of embodied, gender-based discrimination, even within their own ranks, due to the imposition of both racialized and patriarchal norms within China’s postsocialist culture.

### The Hukou System

Whereas *suzhi* discourse symbolically disenfranchizes peasant workers, the *hukou* household registration system materially maintains and enforces the urban-rural divide in China. It ensures that peasants retain a temporary status in the cities even though they may reside there for decades. They are regarded with suspicion and are forever under police surveillance, subjected to the disadvantages of the “three withouts”: without identification cards, proof of employment,

or temporary resident permits.<sup>23</sup> In *Northern Girls*, these “three withouts” are the initial, and remain an ongoing, source of sexual manipulation and exploitation for Hong and Sijiang. For example, after Sijiang secures resident permits for the two women by surrendering her virginity, Hong and Sijiang are able to accept their first jobs at a hairdressing salon, a well-known (but not by them) front for prostitution. This work adds further stigma, not only in Shenzhen but also in their home villages. When they return to the village for a visit, their parents and neighbors greet them with ambivalence and treat them with contempt. When Sijiang makes her first journey back to the village, her father readily accepts her hard-won earnings with one hand but humiliates and shames her with the other---by taking her earnings and then slapping her face. The two women also suffer injustice due to the *hukou* system that withholds the rights of city dwellers from the rural peasants, such as access to kindergartens, schools, medical care, and housing, the latter a constant bane to the lives of our struggling protagonists.

Imogen Tyler, in her study *Revolting Subjects*, calls governmental practices (like the Chinese *hukou* system), exercises of state power through exemption---that is, practices that deliberately withhold rights and privileges in ways that “differentially determin[e] the value of life, adjudicating on who is expendable and who is of worth.”<sup>24</sup> Citing the global phenomenon of rising inequality that characterizes the neoliberal global economy, Tyler refers to the (expendable) underclass of workers as “abject cosmopolitans,”<sup>25</sup> who live in cities but are deprived of the rising wealth and privilege of the affluent urban citizenry. In China, this strategy of systematic discrimination by way of the *hukou* system, overlaid by a crippling and deterministic *suzhi* discourse, enforces the urban-rural divide and leaves the peasant city dwellers not only in a state of vulnerability and fear but also in a state of irredeemable social

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 600.

<sup>24</sup> Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> See Tyler’s chapter “Abject Cosmopolitans,” Ibid., 19--47.

abjection. This is the situation of Hong and Sijiang, who come to discover themselves enmeshed in a racialized system that is policed both extensively and arbitrarily.

In a world where “to get rich is glorious” and money means everything, rural women migrants like Hong and Sijiang are marginal dwellers forever searching for their place; they battle on with scant earnings, little education, and, worst of all (at least as regarded by the society at large), low *suzhi*.<sup>26</sup> As recent Chinese critics like Ma Lingli and Yang Aiqin point out, they are the victims of a triple power structure of phallogocentric, rural and city cultures on the way to modernization.<sup>27</sup> In an attempt to attribute some agency to the migrant women workers, Yang Aiqin asserts that their physical bodies allow them some agency, as they are the only assets they have to survive. However, those assets work in an ambivalent fashion. Whereas they may allow the women to mount a tactical resistance within the realm of everyday life they also subject the women to widespread and systemic exploitation, as Ma Lingli points out.<sup>28</sup> As the narrative of *Northern Girls* amply demonstrates, small victories in the tactics of everyday life are meager and hard-won, whereas state-sanctioned oppression is ongoing and all-pervasive. In everyday life, the (compromised) use of their bodies may provide them with temporary solutions; in a larger social arena their oppression has no political outlet. And this lack of power in the public sphere is the most significant point. There is no redress either for the everyday exploitation, humiliation, and sexual abuse they endure or for the systemic oppression that constitutes their lives as migrant workers. As Tyler observes, these impoverished workers form part of a global underclass that, unlike disenfranchised workers in the past, has no horizon of hope, no probability of revolt.<sup>29</sup> Chinese critic Fan Shuhua concurs,

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<sup>26</sup> Lingli Ma, “Shenti ziyou: yu wang yu fankang de shuangchong chenlun,” 34--36.

<sup>27</sup> Aiqin Yang, “Shenfen zhi tong,” 43--47.

<sup>28</sup> Lingli Ma, “Shenti ziyou,” 34--36.

<sup>29</sup> Tyler is speaking specifically in relation to the British working class, but her point also has relevance to the Chinese situation.

observing that every step in the lives of rural migrant women is tied up with money, politics, and the sexual politics of the phallogocentric social order.<sup>30</sup>

The migrant women's sexual enslavement within the system is one of the many silenced aspects of their existence. Many of the jobs available to them involve an expectation of prostitution, whether the jobs are advertised as hairdressing, waitressing, entertaining, or being a receptionist at a health studio. Rather than directly confront prostitution in the novel (which is formally outlawed in China), Sheng Keyi displaces it with a story of attempted youth suicide. The episode, initially published as a short story in the literary journal *Zhongshan*, entitled "*Huo xia qu*" (To survive), tells the story of Ah Yue, a pregnant fifteen year old "salon girl," who contracted a venereal disease after having been forced into sexual slavery by her boss. Ah Yue attempts to take her life by jumping from the roof of the hospital in which Hong, the protagonist, works as a receptionist. Described in Dickensian-like prose as "just a small thing . . . a little child . . . her face black with dirt [and] wearing a fashionable sleeveless t-shirt and . . . denim shorts . . . that barely covered the curve of her rump,"<sup>31</sup> Ah Yue "had clearly experienced an earth-shattering disaster." In the story, Hong agrees to take the debilitated girl into her apartment and nurture her back to health, only to be dispossessed of her own meager belongings and savings when the girl absconds. This travesty of justice elicits not Hong's rage, however, but a heavy sadness, borne of her knowledge of the necessary survival tactics for the weak and the vulnerable. What Sheng Keyi describes here are the tactics of survival. They are underscored by Tyler's observation concerning impoverished workers around the world. In *Revolting Subjects* she observes that, unlike disenfranchised workers in the past, these contemporary women workers may harbor a desire to improve their lives but that desire has no possibility of fruition within the neoliberal social order; they may make an occasional tactical

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<sup>30</sup> Shuhua Fan, "Dui diceng dagong nüxing de jinjuli toudi," 68--70.

<sup>31</sup> Sheng Keyi, *Northern Girls*, 215.



protest but their protest has no probability of leading to a mass revolt. They live from day-to-day, therefore, without the horizon of hope. For them, the “overwhelming imperative is not transgression, but survival.”<sup>32</sup>

### **The Tides of Change**

Social critics operating in disparate locations from the United Kingdom to China may concur and argue convincingly that the new global economic order offers no hope to its abject subjects. And Sheng’s protagonist, the bosom-burdened Hong, may seem a case in point. But it is also the case that, against all odds, Sheng Keyi, the author whose experience fuels the narrative, has managed to circumvent the ravages of economic and social oppression. At least for now, her unexpected success as a rural woman writer has enabled her a mode of escape from the severity of racialized and gendered oppression. For this she is a noteworthy exception. How has this been accomplished?

First, Sheng had luck, and she had help. After the suicide attempt of her village sister, Sheng visited her in the hospital and offered to act as a translator between the rural youth, whose dialect could not be understood, and the hospital staff. Her language abilities attracted the attention of the hospital director, who subsequently employed her as a hospital receptionist. Sheng Keyi’s first published short story, “To Survive,” modeled on her direct experience in the hospital, was published with the assistance of influential members of the hospital board. This fluke occurrence allowed Sheng to write not only “To Survive” but also to follow it up with a series of stories about young women’s sexual vulnerability, exploitation, destitution, and desperate modes of survival. In the postsocialist economy of Deng reformism and the rise in women’s consciousness decades after the Beijing World Conference on Women, Sheng’s writing was sought after by literary journals looking for new audiences. Her writing was and

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<sup>32</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 4.

remains noteworthy not only for its uniqueness but also for its understanding of migrant women's dystopic social existence in China's era of market reform.

Second, Sheng had innate intelligence and cunning determination. What she demonstrates in her life experience and in her writing is the power of subjugated knowledge. She acts as she writes, in defiance of hegemonic notions of the inferior intelligence and poor perception of those marked with low *suzhi*. Her writing may not provide the basis for hope for the workers as a class, but it does reveal the scope of one migrant worker's subjugated knowledge of human needs and desires. In *Northern Girls* Sheng gives voice to Hong, the country girl with little education, limited social capital, and low *suzhi*, who, through her naïve testimony to her own life events, delivers a stringent critique of the amorality of the new social order and the complex power dynamics within bureaucratic institutions. The novel provides a platform, however fragile, from which to speak back to the power structures that produce and maintain the subjectification of China's new class of abject cosmopolitans, their migrant workers.

In many ways Sheng Keyi's life trajectory, like *Northern Girls* as a novel, does not conform to expectations. She is the rare exception of a migrant woman worker who escaped her fate to become a successful novelist. Not only in her life but also in her writing, she has defied established conventions of contemporary Chinese literature. When commenting on becoming a novelist in her presentation to the China Australia Literary Forum in Sydney in 2011, she admitted that she had no idea how to write a novel before she started working on the book. She related that she approached the page only with a "stomach full of stories."<sup>33</sup> In a recent published interview, Sheng commented on her craft, saying that "novels need the force of violation"---they need to violate life's established norms and challenge darkness and

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<sup>33</sup> Sheng Keyi, Personal interview.

ignorance.”<sup>34</sup> Rather than adapt to the new social conditions that have proved to be so deleterious to the lives of migrant women like herself, she has been afforded the opportunity to live and write in defiance of them.

Unburdened by knowledge of literary customs, Sheng narrates the stories of rural life with ruthless candour. Her unvarnished style has not always won the praise of the critics. In the present era of social consciousness, however, her status has risen. In 2014, for example, Chinese critic Zhou Ting described the social and aesthetic effects of *Northern Girls* in terms of the “beauty of violation.”<sup>35</sup> She continues, stating that Sheng’s words are like “a knife edge” cutting through layers of material and spiritual oppression of women at the very bottom of society, “exposing the brutal realities of life and hidden human weakness.”<sup>36</sup> Another contemporary critic, Zhao Yanping, echoes these words, arguing that Sheng’s powerful novel speaks for the silenced and the dispossessed, enabling their voices to be heard not through the pen of an elite and educated writer, far removed from the day-to-day knowledge and lived reality of abject migrant existence, but from the pen of one who has lived the life of the subaltern.<sup>37</sup>

### **Rectification of Names**

Nonetheless, in the course of her career, Sheng has had to bow to the literary academy. Her success has been carefully watched and guided. Both the author and her works have been “rectified.” She has been made to bow to authority. For example, Sheng wanted to title her novel *huo xia qu* (“to survive”)---the title of her initial short story---a battle she lost to publishers and editors, who insisted on *Bei mei*, and *Northern Girls* in English. And this matters, although in ways that might escape the non-Chinese reader. In a Chinese context, according to

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<sup>34</sup> Sheng Keyi, “Sheng Keyi fangtan lu.”

<sup>35</sup> Ting Zhou, “Ruili de ‘maofan zhi mei’,” 154--57.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>37</sup> Yanping Zhao, “Qianxi Sheng Keyi de diceng xiezuojishi yishu meili,” 42--44.

the Confucian concept of *zhengming* 正名 (“rectification of names”), each person has a social standing framed by the name, which in turn signifies the person’s responsibilities and duties in society: *junjun* (“ruler”), *chenchen* (“minister”), *fufu* (“father”), and *zizi* (“son”) should all fulfil their required social duties prescribed by their names.<sup>38</sup> Neither Sheng Keyi nor “northern girls” had social standing at the time of the novel’s first release. The decision by authorities to insist upon the title *bei mei* rather than *huo xia qu* serves multiple purposes: it “rectifies” the author and her subject within a Confucian worldview and it reinforces a Chinese patriarchal hegemony by categorizing the novel’s subjects as a generic sub-class---“the other”---the “proper” sub-class of “girls” to which the migrant workers belong. It also identifies Sheng Keyi, the author who self-identifies as belonging to this group of “floating” migrants, within this sub-class. By framing a life narrative of survival as *bei mei*, the literary establishment properly signifies the social status of this group of rural women. In doing so, it attaches a label to the group and thereby rectifies the title of the book and the position of the author at the time of writing according to the Confucian patriarchal tradition.

The title phrase, *bei mei*, has a specific set of connotations for Chinese readers. *Bei* (“north”) indicates anywhere north of Shenzhen, one of the southern-most cities in China and the first of the Special Economic Zones to attract migrant workers from multiple locations north of the city. *Mei* (“younger sister”) carries a hierarchical resonance and registers a subservient status for girls within Chinese family structures. *Mei* is also a familiar appellation used in traditional folk songs to refer to a young male’s female love interest. More recently, the word has taken on derogatory and salacious connotations when associated with prostitution and applied to migrant women, such as in the phrase *fa long mei*. To be a *bei mei* is to not only to have a geographic location, but also to have an inferior status within the family, in sexual relationships, in the workplace, and in society. In addition, the title reinforces the stigmatised

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<sup>38</sup> Gongshun Lin, *Lunyu wodu*, 212.

stereotype of the peasant as a category within *suzhi* discourse and of Sheng Keyi as a *bei mei* as well. Furthermore, its subtitle in English, “life goes on,” although roughly equivalent to her self-chosen title and the title of the originating short story, “to survive” in translation, also suggests the possibility of a more aspirational future than the migrant women’s Hobbesian existence allows. It modifies Sheng’s intended focus on raw survival as a way of life for migrant women. Western readers may not register the significance of the decision by authorities within the literary establishment unless they understand the importance of the Confucius concept of the rectification of names and also have access to the associated connotations for the unusual and evolving Chinese idiom *bei mei*.

### **Reception of the Book**

The novel had immediate success in China, in part due to its mass appeal and in part due to its social critique. That is, it addresses a widely felt but seldom expressed disgust with the underside of Deng’s economic reforms, begun in 1978 with the move to a market economy. Yet it is quite an atypical Chinese narrative written in an episodic, naturalistic mode, featuring an ironic narration, and it is without regard for the finer semiotics or stylistics of traditional Chinese literature. And while it reveals the individualistic greed and corruption at the heart of China’s economic reforms, this novel offers no moral judgments, no illusions of hope, and has no uplifting morale. When the book first appeared, critics from the academy were harsh on the author and the text, and were quick to call the writing “brutal . . . the naked truth of life.” They damned it with faint praise, commenting that it was written without regard to Chinese literary conventions, philosophic frameworks, or ideological underpinnings. They criticised Sheng for her lack of learning. Shamed by the rebuke, Sheng reports that she initially reacted to her success by denying her rural origins, preferring to claim that she had been born in the city. For

a time, she also shunned writing and imposed a literary re-education program upon herself.<sup>39</sup>

With the novel's success not only in China but also internationally, critics shifted their approach. They began to hail it for its brutal truths and praise its author for exposing the oppressions of an *earlier phase* of economic development, thus rectifying her name once again. The editors encouraged Sheng to write an afterward to the 2011 Chinese edition, which has been reprinted in the English translation. In it, the author comments that the hardships encountered by rural women living in the cities were “actually more shocking than anything [she] recorded” in the novel.<sup>40</sup> “These are women on the lowest rung of the social ladder, the real working class,” she writes, “and they are almost never brought to the public’s attention.”<sup>41</sup> When seeking cover testimonials for the English edition, publishers included the words of a Chinese critic who claimed to praise the novel by calling it “vulgar, filthy, shallow and shameless.”<sup>42</sup> The inclusion of the afterward to the reprinted Chinese edition in the English edition, as well as the new testimonials included in the new Chinese edition, signal a new approach to the dark side of China’s rising economy and a new platform for Chinese writers. These decisions reflect a turn to social and gender consciousness in contemporary Chinese literature. This new consciousness invites writers to alter the traditionally acceptable focus on novels of everyday life that tend to emphasize the bright side of social reality and carry a didactic moral message. This so-called corrective writing, which has begun to appear over the last decade, addresses economic inequality and social fragmentation with an eye to rebuilding a sense of community. Sheng’s ambivalent positioning in literary and popular discourse, which has shifted from labeling her through a racialized discourse as an untutored, subaltern writer of low ability to hailing her within official academic discourse as an incisive, corrective writer

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<sup>39</sup> Sheng Keyi, Personal interview.

<sup>40</sup> <3em dash>, *Northern Girls*, 320.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>42</sup> Feng Tang, back cover.

with a social conscience, reveals the power of discourse itself as a subjectifying force. Discourse has the power to condemn and delimit and then recoup and reconfigure the novel and its author across multiple contexts: the publishing industry, the mass media, the academy, and everyday life, as well as across multiple transcultural spaces of transmission and translation.

## **Conclusion**

Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls* testifies to the cruelty of global capitalism and witnesses the abject and degraded lives of an underclass of workers whose labor-as-commodity sustains not only China's rise in the economic marketplace but also sustains the neoliberal world order. From a deeply gendered perspective, the text records a part of a formation of an underclass that is unique to the twenty-first century and global in scale. Sheng's narrative documents the policies and practices of social abjection that attend capitalist market economies not only in China but also in Western democratic nations like Britain and the US. Stories that expose the precarious nature of everyday life and the systemic marginalization of a global underclass rupture the optimism of progressive liberal agendas for change. They belong to a new, darker phase of neoliberal capital. They remind readers, in close and far-flung locations, that for this growing mass of people---migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, the poor, the disabled---"there is no way to flee abjection."<sup>43</sup>

Equally, *Northern Girls* presents an alternative version of the history of China's rise in the global economy. It maps a trajectory of increasing inequality from a female perspective that previously would have been silenced. Sheng Keyi's world speaks to the sordid world of women, the world of *yin*. It coexists yet contrasts sharply with the dizzying ascent of the *yang*--as the rising nation with immense economic muscle grapples with increasing social inequality and fragmentation. As the prologue of this paper suggests, global economic restructuring has

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<sup>43</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 10.

refigured the two faces of China to the world: one rich with increasing power and influence; and one poor with *bei meis* “floating” everywhere, abject and adrift. In this cruel age of barbaric capital, China’s *bei meis* flow into a global underclass whose poverty and exploitation seem intractable. Nonetheless, in this age of far-reaching digital technologies and rapid information flows, at least occasionally the voices of the subaltern can be heard and their desires for a better future be registered. *Northern Girls*, in its multiple translations and international distribution, enables a more nuanced understanding of the contradictions of China’s economic rise and its ambivalent consequences for migrant women. The novel’s circulation and reception around the globe builds a transcultural awareness of abject women’s lives within a growing international underclass of workers. It also elicits an interpretation of different processes of racialization and gender discrimination that are specific to China. Whether China, and other neoliberal, post-industrial nations can (or have the will to) reverse their particular forms of racialized discrimination and create the conditions for a sustainable life for those disenfranchised workers remains to be seen. Can there be a horizon of hope?

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