

# ICWA

## LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

### TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard  
Joseph Battat  
Mary Lynne Bird  
Steven Butler  
Sharon F. Doorasamy  
William F. Foote  
Peter Geithner  
Gary Hartshorn  
Kitty Hempstone  
Katherine Roth Kono  
Cheng Li  
Peter Bird Martin  
Dasa Obereigner  
Chandler Rosenberger  
Edmund Sutton

### HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot  
David Hapgood  
Pat M. Holt  
Edwin S. Munger  
Richard H. Nolte  
Albert Ravenholt  
Phillips Talbot

**Institute of Current World Affairs**  
The Crane-Rogers Foundation  
Four West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

AJB-5  
EAST ASIA

*Alex Brenner is a Fellow of the Institute examining how the Chinese are adapting to economic and cultural globalization.*

## Low and Outside Migrants and the Dangers of Namelessness, Part 2

By Alexander J. Brenner

MAY 20, 2004

BEIJING, China—On your way into one of Beijing's ubiquitous hole-in-the-wall restaurants, you'll generally pass a small charcoal grill built into an outside wall for preparing the popular lamb kabob. While the restaurants' owners are often locals, the person who stands outside manning this grill is usually a migrant, usually a teen-age boy who for whatever reason is no longer in school. In most cases a contractor-subcontractor relationship is in effect: the owners want to attract customers with the kabobs, but certainly aren't going to stand outside through boiling summers and frigid winters. They thus rent the grill to a migrant who runs his own mini-business. At my favorite local restaurant, you order your dishes and lamb skewers at the same time. The waitress then screams "Lamb Kabob!" to the griller, who is standing outside. This is the cue for Lamb Kabob to stick his head in the door, at which point the waitress again screams, "Ten kabobs!"

Not once have I heard the waitress or chef (both Beijing locals) address the griller as anything other than "Lamb Kabob!" The message for this migrant, a 16-year-old from nearby Hebei province, is clear. Not only does your entire life revolve around the lamb kabob, you are a lamb kabob. No need to hand people a name card telling them who you are: that lamb kabob you just handed them is your name card. You have no name or identity other than your role that we in the city have bestowed upon you. Furthermore, you should count yourself lucky; there are plenty of others where you came from who would love the chance to be a lamb kabob.

Last report I commented on migrants' mistreatment in the cities, and hinted at the implications of continued migration into urban areas already struggling to create enough jobs. This report will continue to address these implications, but will do so from a specific angle: by analyzing the discrimination faced by migrants. What are the reasons behind the urbanite's disdain for migrants? Why are migrants treated as nameless lamb kabobs? I will attempt to lay out two underlying causes that, taken together, threaten to create and perpetuate a two-tiered urban society: first is an obsession with notions of "quality" (*suzhi*); second is the importance of regional identities and insider/outsider distinctions.

\* \* \*

As I've discussed in AJB-3 and AJB-4, over the 25 years of the Reform Era peasants and migrants have sunk into a kind of new "stinking ninth"—the social grouping reserved for intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, i.e., the lowest of the low. In the prosperous coastal city of Qingdao, urban residents went so far as to propose that a section of city buses (the back, perhaps?) be reserved for migrants so the good townspeople wouldn't have to be smashed up against these dirty, smelly workers. Ideally, migrants could make daily mirrors, leading city residents to face up to the realities outside urban areas. But of course this may be precisely the problem: most urbanites don't really want to

reflect on the dire situation of many of their rural countrymen.

In fact, some such reflection seems to be occurring, at least inasmuch as a renewed emphasis on rural issues in the popular media has accompanied the government's focus on assisting the countryside. A tear-jerking television special I saw about the difficult life of peasant orphans in Gansu province typifies this trend. Meanwhile, a book dissecting rural issues entitled *An Investigative Report of Chinese Farmers (Zhongguo Nongmin Diaocha)* became a surprise best-seller. In fact, it sold so well it has just been banned—let's not let the population have *too* thorough an understanding of reasons underlying rural poverty.

Despite these signs of an upswing in urban interest about the countryside, with city living standards approaching western levels we may be seeing something akin to the exoticization of the Chinese peasant. It's one thing to learn through TV specials and National Geographic-like magazines about peasants living out their tough, traditional existences in harsh yet picturesque natural settings. You have to factor in the Qingdao bus rider, however, to fill out the underlying urban mentality: "Wow, your peasant life sure is hard—move to the back of the bus." Indeed, it seems to me the dominant trend today points in the wrong direction, with the skyrocketing inequality of the last dozen years exacerbating the deep-set class-consciousness in Chinese society.

Just as long-simmering ethnic hatreds in the ex-Yugoslavia re-emerged hotter than ever with the end of communism, traditional class hierarchy in China, flipped upside down for much of the Maoist era, has made a dramatic comeback. Intellectuals and capitalists who literally had their noses rubbed in the dirt (and worse) during the Cultural Revolution are back on top—and often, they're not feeling charitable. I can understand their sentiment that a world turned upside down is being set right again. However, when these resuscitated elites speak of the masses, one can almost smell a whiff of revenge mixed in with self-righteousness. I'll always remember the tone with which an older liberal intellectual told me that peasants aren't ready to vote because "they don't know what is in their own interest." This sort of anti-democratic outlook is not uncommon even among members of the more

liberal, westernized intelligentsia, people who are no fans of authoritarian rule.

Farmers are still conceded a heroic role in the post-1949 building of the "New China," but urban society has long since reverted to full and open contempt of the peasant. The word "peasant," *nongmin*, is itself a common insult, as in: "you didn't know that?! You're so peasant!" (*ni zhen nongmin!*). Peasants aren't just ignorant, they're also unattractive. On sunny days you'll see urban women walking around with umbrellas to avoid tanning—dark skin, oh so peasant. Or take a wealthy friend of mine who, embarrassed with what she felt was a less-than-flattering haircut, proclaimed "I can't leave my house with this hairdo! I look like a peasant! Hahahaha!" Never mind that her coiffing at a chic salon cost a good portion of the *yearly* salary of many farmers.



"Dark skin is oh so peasant."

I don't really have a problem with urbanites poking fun at peasants and migrants—provided they're just as unsparing with themselves, which of course they seldom are. But much more important is the attitude behind the humor. Are you joking and empathizing, or joking and denigrating? Do you care about and support ways to improve migrants' situation—or, like the military officer from my last report, do you slam your car door and glare at them with disdain? Too frequently, the cities slam doors and glare.

The openly hierarchical nature of Chinese society creates groups that keep separate from and exist in adversarial relation to each other. The migrant sits at the bottom of the urban pyramid, but everyone has his or her place. It was a taxi driver who provided me with the most thorough exposition of this point. Unable to find a taxi upon exiting a concert, a friend and I jumped into a tricycle pedicab to take us away from the crowds. When we switched to a taxi, the cabbie was disdainful. "We don't talk to those pedicab drivers; they're all uneducated peasants," he said, and proceeded to complain about their low "quality" (*suzhi*).

He then laid out a detailed breakdown of the various types of drivers in Beijing. This cabbie drove the kind of taxi that costs 1.6 RMB per kilometer; these are usually medium-sized Volkswagens or Citroens. He thus had nothing but scorn for the drivers of smaller, Chinese-

made *Xiali* cabs that cost only 1.2 RMB per kilometer. *Xialis* tend to break down, and their interiors are often cramped and dirty; the front passenger seats are sometimes so worn you feel like you're sitting on the floorboard. "A lot of the 1.2 RMB drivers live out in shabby houses in the suburbs. But I'm a city resident. I go home at night and wash my face and have dinner. I'm comfortable," he said. While a step up from the pedicab drivers, 1.2-RMB drivers are also of low quality, and so this cabbie doesn't speak to *them* either. On the other hand, he admitted that the drivers of 2-RMB-per-kilometer taxis—big, black VW sedans, the only kind allowed to pick up clients at some five-star hotels—didn't talk to him because they were "of higher quality." My driver didn't seem to question his place in the cabbie hierarchy. If the other guy is driving a big 2-RMB-per-kilometer taxi, then it follows that on some level he's *suzhi gao*, "of higher quality."

While most cabbies wouldn't be quite so literal in associating taxi fares with self-worth, I'm quite sure they would agree with a general *suzhi*-based analysis of their profession and society at large. *Suzhi* (pronounced SOO-JER) is in fact a key concept in understanding how Chi-



Familiar positions for both the 1.2 RMB/kilometer *Xiali* taxi (hood open) and their drivers (bent over the engine block).



Drivers of 1.6 RMB/kilometer Citroen taxis pass time with a card game while queuing up outside the Radisson Hotel (no *Xialis* allowed at four-star hotels)

nese people feel about each other and the world. I must hear this word ten times a day; it pops up in almost any discussion in which Chinese comment on themselves and the problems facing their country. No one has yet provided me a comprehensive explanation of what exactly determines a person's *suzhi*, but it seems to depend on a combination of two (obviously interrelated) sorts of elements: those in a person's past that are beyond one's control—upbringing, educational background—and those that reflect on one's current behavior—table manners, honesty, respect for traffic rules, tendency to litter or spit on the sidewalk.

Thus a simple decision to, say, stop spitting, would enable one to raise one's *suzhi*. However, while one does have some control over one's *suzhi*, it's felt that by the time one reaches adulthood it's much harder to rise up in the quality rankings—yet another reason education is so valued. Another way to translate the word is "intrinsic qualifications," a definition that emphasizes the mostly static nature of *suzhi*. My Chinese-English dictionary gives an enlightening example of this usage: "The participation of women in politics should be decided by their intrinsic qualifications."<sup>1</sup> This may help clarify why there is only one woman among the 24 top leaders in the Politburo (and only five women in the 198-member Central Committee of the Communist Party, of which the Politburo is a subset.) Indeed, traditionally, women's *suzhi* was almost lower by definition. And despite a nascent feminist movement, most women still seem to accept their

<sup>1</sup> I personally find this dictionary, put out by Shanghai Jiaotong University Press in 1997, to be one of the best Chinese-English dictionaries, not least since one learns fun facts about Chinese culture from the sample sentences.

place. Urban women play the 1.6-RMB Citroen to the urban male's big, black taxis, while rural men are like 1.2-RMB Xialis—and rural woman are stuck being pedicabs.

The migrant I have come to know best is Young Yang, a furniture maker from Anhui province. I've gone out to his workshop in the suburbs several times, and he's given me a tour of the area on the back on his motorscooter. He has also come to my house to bring and fix furniture, and we've had some long talks. He stayed in Beijing alone for several years, and finally sent for his wife and child after feeling he had established himself. However, when he concluded that his wife was interfering with his business, he sent her back home. "Rural women, they're of low quality, you know," he told me, as if I naturally would agree. In a sense it must be a relief to the male migrant to know after a day in which every urbanite he crosses will look down on him that there is still someone he can look down upon.

It is unfortunately normal for people to take out their insecurities and dissatisfactions on those occupying the next level down. I suspect one reason for urbanites' contempt of peasants and migrants is their own feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis the developed West—and also vis-à-vis the Chinese political and economic elites who, like their counterparts across the developing world, have used position and financial power to effectively buy themselves pseudo-western identities (more on this when I discuss Chinese attempts to become more "foreign"). The upshot for rural women is that there is no one to whom to transfer one's insecurities. Furthermore, rural women are now aware of just how poor and status-deprived they are, compared to their urban counterparts. Experts suspect this is one reason behind the wave of female suicide in countryside. (China is the only country in world where the suicide rate is higher among women than men, and a disproportionate number of these deaths occur in rural areas.)

The one piece of "good" news for rural women is that widespread use of screening technologies to abort female fetuses is leading to a bride deficit in the countryside. Hopefully, those fortunate females lucky enough to be born will be able to increase their bargaining power and demand better treatment. The problem of course is that this bride deficit will lead to millions of single young men—in a country that continues to place tremendous



*Young Yang, center, with two of his migrant helpers at their furniture workshop in the Beijing suburbs.*

social importance on getting married (and producing offspring, particularly males). Since the importation of millions of young women seems unlikely, many of these men will go to the cities and find themselves not just occupying the bottom-most rung of the social ladder, but alone and disgraced as well. These single males—emotionally and socially frustrated—will likely prove the wind-up mechanism of the ticking migrant time-bomb.

Given the difficulty of countering destabilizing realities like the looming gender imbalance, it would seem all the more important for urban society to change its attitudes toward migrants. Where does this unimaginable contempt for the migrant come from? How, at the opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, can one human being hire another human being, have him work for a year, and think it's somehow permissible not to pay him? In a country where unprecedented economic progress has spawned a collective obsession with material wealth, one reason is greed, pure and simple. But as I've tried to explain, another part of the answer revolves around *suzhi*: with migrants considered to be of such "low quality," they barely count as human beings. They are more like soulless machines or animals: you give your pack mule (or your slave) enough food and water to keep him working, but it would be idiotic to pay any more within a power structure that doesn't make you do so. Americans cleared Indian sub-human savages from the land and then made African sub-human savages toil in the fields; China's track record with its own sub-human savages, the peasant and the migrant, provides disturbing parallels.

It would take massive increases in funding for rural education to effect any consequential change in the "qual-

ity” of peasants leaving the countryside, and this isn’t likely to happen anytime soon. In fact, given the increasing urgency with which competition-obsessed urban families are drowning their only children in opportunities for educational and cultural self-improvement, it would seem the *suzhi* gap between city and country can only widen. What occurs after the migrant makes the urban transition is thus all the more important. Here we have to deal with the other fundamental factor leading to contempt for migrants: the strong importance attached to local identity in Chinese society.

\* \* \*

Like immigrants from across an ocean, migrants really are from somewhere else. When they first arrive they are treated as, and feel themselves to be, foreign. Just how foreign is made clear from the language. Here in Beijing, people like myself from overseas are called *waiguo ren*—literally, “outside-countries person.” Migrants are referred to as *waidi ren*—“outside-lands person.” How conflated all of us outsiders are in the minds of urbanites became clear to me one afternoon when I met some migrant rice-sellers from Manchuria at a noodle shop. I had stopped to buy some steamed dumplings for lunch, and we chatted while they waited for their bowls of noodle soup.

There are certain obligatory questions all foreigners here have to answer ten times a day: “Where are you from?” “How much money do you make?” “Are you married?” One question “outside-lands people” in particular like to ask me, however, is “how often do you go home?” I tell them that during my previous years in China I have usually gone home once a year. When my barber heard this, he said, “Oh, just like us.” For almost all migrants, going home to see family over Chinese New Year is a crucial tradition that helps make all the drudgery worthwhile.

These rice sellers wanted to know if I went home to celebrate Spring Festival, the common name for Chinese New Year. No, I said, in America we don’t have Spring Festival. At this point a Beijinger who had been listening in came over—*waiguo ren* and *waidi ren* simply engaging in conversation is sometimes sufficient to attract a curious audience—and launched into a long (and basically accurate) explanation about how Chinese go home to celebrate Spring Festival but westerners go home to celebrate Christmas.

Then this lesson on holidays somehow morphed into a longer

monologue about Beijing and the city’s architectural history. “You’re a *waiguo ren*,” he said, shaking his finger at me. “You’re *waidi ren*,” he said, shaking his finger at the rice sellers. “You don’t know about all the old courtyard houses we used to have here in Beijing.”

This gentleman, a retired chef, exemplified the attitude held by certain urbanites that it is an educational duty to lecture both ignorant foreigners, who don’t know much about China, and ignorant peasants, who don’t know much at all. At that moment I felt a real bond with these rice sellers, realizing how similar we benighted *waiguo ren* and *waidi ren* are. We’re all outsiders. Beijingers can spot us on the street with equal ease. We don’t talk like the natives and we don’t dress like them. We don’t know anything about Beijing’s old courtyard houses. We come to here to work, and then we go home once a year to see our families.

Imagine for a moment you’re an urbanite in one of China’s more developed cities. You live at the center of a strange and powerful vortex: you haven’t gone anywhere, but everywhere else has come pouring in. Particularly in the last decade, your daily routine is set to the background noise of “a giant sucking sound”—the sound of record-breaking foreign investment pouring in from foreign companies, as well as that of a flood of migrants from across China. It’s natural that these twin inflows reshaping your city and your life—the *waiguo* and the *waidi*—would somehow be intertwined in your consciousness. As base, however, *waiguo ren* and *waidi ren* are like opposing tips of a wire bent into circular shape: while the two groups have some overlap, they remain poles apart. You naturally strive to draw yourself closer to the former



and distance yourself from the latter.

For the last couple of months I've been asking every Beijinger I meet how they feel about migrants. Despite the obvious benefits that migrants bring to the city's economy, the first comments out of urbanites' mouths are invariably negative. First, there are too many of them. Second, migrants make the city chaotic (*luan*) through crime, prostitution, poor sanitary habits and generally being of low "quality." Third, from certain lower rungs of the urban economic ladder, they are seen as a source of competition. Once again, it was a taxi driver who provided a telling encapsulation of these points. Although native Beijingers dominate the taxi business, *waidi ren* have made small inroads into the profession. As this local told me, migrants want to earn more money so they work "like robots," up to 18-hour days, often sleeping the remaining hours in their cars. This work ethic cuts into everyone else's business, and these under-slept, "low quality" drivers cause accidents and traffic problems. (In fact migrants as a group are often blamed for Beijing's horrendous traffic—taxi drivers will explain how low quality *waidi ren*, pedestrians and cyclists well as drivers, don't heed traffic rules. This is as true as it is meaningless, since few others on the road heed the rules either).

At base, what urbanites are expressing is an "us" versus "them" mentality: on some level, migrants are seen as an invading barbarian hoard. If the above set of complaints about Chinese migrants sounds at all familiar, it may be because we in America made the exact same arguments in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Starting in the mid-1800s, immigrants from rural China arrived in California and spread to other parts of the West, putting downward pressure on wages and bringing, it was claimed, crime, disease and a decadent appetite for women. Eventually the righteous white folk got fed up, Chinese immigration became a major political issue, and Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. When SARS flared up in Chinese communities in Canada last year, similar accusations resurfaced about sanitation-challenged, disease-bearing Asians.

Americans of course have a proud tradition of blaming problems on the "damn foreigners," be they immigrants undercutting us from inside or unfair competitors stealing our jobs from outside (see today's trade-related China-bashing). Yes, Chinese do lash out at foreigners—at Japanese for not apologizing for behavior during the Second World War, or at Americans for bombing their Belgrade embassy and pursuing "hegemony." However, people here tend not to target foreigners when complaining about economic or quality of life matters. As I discussed in my report on the middle class (AJB-2), at this point integration in the global economy is seen more as a solution to, rather than a cause of, China's many problems.

For the moment, Chinese will continue to look in-



*These migrant construction workers seemed to be as confused by Beijing bus routes as I am.*

side their borders as they attribute blame for problems linked to the country's market transition. For various types of injustices, it's clear that official corruption is at fault. Complaining about the government, however, remains a fairly thankless activity, although certain groups seem increasingly willing to do so. For general malaise, a much softer target is the migrant, at whom you can glare and scream in absolute safety. The migrant thus becomes a handy scapegoat for rising crime, traffic problems and other elements of the increasing "chaos" (*luan*) accompanying China's urbanization. Economists warn that the growth rate of living standards in coastal cities during the last decade may not be sustainable; over the longer run, even a small proportion of migrants climbing up the skill ladder will bring downward pressure on a range of urban wages.

We can already see the outline of the strategy Chinese cities will use to handle migrants. Ding Xiangyang, director of the Beijing Development Planning Commission, commented on plans for the *fourteen* satellite cities to be organized around Beijing: "[the satellite cities] will act as an overspill for some of [the] downtown population and industries. We will also encourage migrants to move there." Now listen to Shenzhen official Yang Lixun discuss his city's population management: "We need to move up a ladder and relocate labor-intensive manufacturing businesses out of Shenzhen... In that way we can gradually slow down the population growth and

improve the quality of our population.”

In other words, let's get rid of labor-intensive manufacturing and the people working in that sector, migrants. The problem is not with the satellite cities themselves. Facing a huge influx of migrants, whole new cities will rise up. The problem is one of attitude. Instead of a vision based on integrating migrants and “raising” their quality, we get an open and unapologetic echo the Qingdao bus riders: “keep them *away*—else we pollute the quality of our urban citizenry.” Migrants are low-quality outsiders, best dealt with by keeping them low and outside.

\* \* \*

America is a country that has opened its doors to immigrants and, more so than anywhere else, aspired to inclusiveness—and yet, few would say we have truly realized the unity and tolerance underlying our various visions of the country as melting pot or multicultural mixing bowl. Nevertheless, it can be argued that China, despite its Han-dominated ethnic and cultural homogeneity, is even farther from possessing a national stir-fry myth of any real resonance. Certainly, there exists an idea of the *Zhonghua minzu*, a greater Chinese race or nation where all are “sons of the dragon.” Modern nationalism, which came into its own in the 19th Century as a response to foreign imperialism and Manchu imperial rule, is today an important factor influencing how Chinese view their country's rise and role on the world stage. When it comes to how Chinese view each other, however, this outward-focused nationalism reveals its limitations. For thousands of years China see-sawed between fragmentation and varying degrees of unity—and even when emperors achieved political unification, the average person's identification with his locality remained stronger than with any broader civilizational idea.

American identities are built on abstractions, the ideals enshrined in our founding documents; when you go through the process to become a naturalized citizen, you are reminded of your new constitutional privileges and duties. Chinese identities, however, are more concrete, the product of the ties that have bound people over thousands of years: blood and soil, family and land. The upshot is that the more immediate families, centered around clan, locality and region—identities often reinforced by mutually unintelligible dialects—often take precedence over the broader, national extended family. The current leadership is well-versed in China's long history of fragmentation and warlordism, and Beijing's obsession with recovering Taiwan, as well as with squelching independence movements in Tibet and Xinjiang, belies a deeper insecurity about holding the whole country together. If Taiwan and Tibet declare independence, then why not Guangdong province? Taiwan's former president Lee Teng-hui played on these fears when he proposed in his 1999 book *Voice of Taiwan* that the main-

land should be split into seven sovereign blocs.

No one is worrying that Guangdong province will secede. An important reason for China's vast regional income gap, however, is that local governments along the prosperous eastern coast have fought vigorously to prevent Beijing from sharing their wealth with less developed regions. Now that millions of people from these poorer areas are flooding in, governments may be simply updating their “us-vs-them” policy of non-sharing by planning for “high-quality” urban centers and “low-quality” satellite suburbs for migrants. For example, while migrants' children will receive better education than their counterparts in the countryside, I would wager that not one of Beijing's top middle schools—which feed into the top high schools, which feed into the top universities—will be located in a migrant-dense satellite city.

The concern is that China, obsessed with notions of “quality” and insider/outsider distinctions, is embarking on a massive urbanization project founded upon the idea of a two-tiered society. While much of officialdom, as well as the broader public, would seem unbothered by this prospect, at least some academics are warning about the potential creation of a permanent urban underclass. In a recent article, sociologist Zhan Shaohua of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences notes that “social exclusions should be seen as part of poverty among migrant workers...The relationship between exclusions and poverty will make migrant workers suffer from marginalization and poverty in the long term.”

The saddest statistic in Zhan's article comes from a survey he cites showing that two-thirds of migrants “would not dare to and will not make friends with local urban residents.” Although China's great migration should progressively forge inclusive new urban identities, the combination of lumping migrants together in suburbs and condescension from officials and city dwellers will hinder this process of integration. For years to come, the wall between urbanites and “outside-lands people” will remain a fault line running through Chinese society.

I've been hinting throughout at similarities to the African-American experience, but the most specific relevant parallel is probably the “Great Migration” in the 1910s and 1920s, when collapsing agricultural prices pushed blacks out of the rural South. The rising industrial power of the North and World-War-One-induced labor shortages led to major regional migration—and, not long thereafter, the formation of segregated neighborhoods across northern and mid-western cities. Like Chinese migrants, blacks were from elsewhere, were deemed of “lower quality,” and often worked the most undesirable urban jobs. Social, economic and geographic marginalization reinforced each other, leading to poverty-stricken inner cities (and now suburbs) stuck in vicious circles.

Beijing's current attempts to promote and protect the

rights of migrants are a kind of equivalent to our Civil-Rights movement. And while huge progress has been made in the US over the last 40 years, ending official civil and political discrimination against blacks certainly hasn't ended feelings of social and economic inequality—the riots in Los Angeles following the Rodney King trial showed what happens when pent-up rage meets shop windows. Chinese migrants may have an easier time blending into the mainstream, with their children at least shedding regional accents and developing fully urbanized/suburbanized identities. The key, then, comes down to economic and social progress. Will the bulk of migrants begin the climb toward the financial and social status of city residents? Or, as the sociologist Zhan hints, could they become an excluded underclass facing long-term poverty? The answer to this question will do much to shape the character, and stability, of China's urban future.

\* \* \*

At 11:50 AM on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2003, I was just finishing a language class at Tsinghua University when a bomb went off in a cafeteria across campus. Later during the lunch hour a second bomb exploded in a cafeteria at nearby Peking University. All told, nine people were injured, and though no one was critically hurt the incidents shocked these ordinarily calm campuses. The perpetrator? Not, as some initially feared, a super-terrorist with ties to Xinjiang province's Uighur Muslim separatists. More like a super-nobody. The 27-year-old bomber, Huang Minxiang, was born in Fujian province and graduated from high school. He attempted post-secondary studies but dropped out, ending up managing four farmhands in a remote agricultural area of Hainan province. According to Xinhua News Agency, he told police "the reason for choosing these two universities was that they are renowned institutions. I'd be famous if I could make explosions there."

As noted in AJB-3, to be "famous" is to be *you-ming*, to "have-name." Huang hadn't come to Beijing to find a job; he had come to Beijing to make a name for himself. Huang may seem like a lone kook, but at root his desire to "have-name" is the same force drawing tens of millions out of the countryside: you come to the city to build a name, to make yourself *somebody*. Almost all of the migrants I spoke to want to establish themselves in Beijing, but there are some, particularly those a bit older, who plan to return home. A waiter I met the other night is trying to save up the cash to go back and find a wife. "No money, no wife," he told me. Young Yang, the furniture maker, hopes to save enough capital to return as a big man to his village in Anhui province. When I asked what he would do with his money, he said, "You know, build a road."

Undoubtedly, his village needs a better road—and undoubtedly, he'd like his name to be on it.

Last fall another 27-year-old nobody, an unemployed migrant named Wang Huan, scaled the outside of Shanghai's 420-meter tall Jinmao Tower, the mainland's tallest skyscraper. Wang was in fact the fourth person to climb the Jinmao, prompting calls to make the scaling of skyscrapers illegal. This news struck me as I had just seen several other newspaper and TV accounts of unemployed migrants climbing buildings or billboards. Threatening suicide—and sometimes committing it by jumping off a building or some other method—is unfortunately a common way to express grievances in China. Not all of the cases I read about, however, were intended as suicide threats. Consciously or not, these migrant Spidermen seemed to be trying to communicate their despair: "Look up at me. I'm here. I exist." In cities where people look right through you, climbing tall buildings is an obvious way to win attention—to have at least 15 minutes of name.

In October of 2001, Fouad Ajami commented on Sept. 11 terrorist Mohammed Atta in a *New York Times Magazine* article entitled "Nowhere Man." "Atta," Ajami wrote, "was born of his country's struggle to reconcile modernity with tradition... A drab, austere society had suddenly been plunged into a more competitive, glamorized world... Atta's generation... were placed perilously close to modernity, but they could not partake of it." These words could well describe the tens of millions of nobodies and nowhere men lurching from China's countryside into the cities. At first glance, Atta's middle class background and foreign study experience would indicate he shares very little with Chinese peasants leaving their farms. As Ajami reminds us, however, Atta, too, was a migrant, pulled from a parched homeland in search of self-fulfillment: "In an earlier age, Egyptians had been known as a people who dreaded quitting their native soil. In more recent years, younger Egyptians gave up on the



Huang Minxiang, being sentencing to life in prison for the cafeteria bombings at Peking and Tsinghua universities. (Courtesy Xinhua)



*Migrants window washers, dangling precariously from wooden seats as they clean the glass walls of the Oriental Plaza office towers.*

place, came to dream of fulfillment—economic, personal, political—in foreign lands. Mohammed Atta, who left for Germany in 1993, was part of that migration...”

Life as a migrant highlights for the outsider just how different he is from the natives—it was in Germany that Atta came to hate what he could never have or be. Ajami suggests that Atta couldn’t “partake” of modernity because the residual pressures of an Islamic upbringing conflicted with the onslaught of easy choices offered by a seemingly decadent West. Chinese migrants can’t partake because they are ever looking in from the outside—washing the windows of glass office towers for a small fraction of the salary of the software designers and human resource managers sitting inside.

Similar to the experience of Mohammed Atta and other young people in the Mid-East, the lives of young Chinese are also being shaped by their country’s rapid, disorienting transformation in the face of globalization and westernization. While the overwhelming majority of people manage to adapt even to strenuous change, a certain percentage, for whatever reasons, are pushed to seemingly desperate behavior. For the moment, of course, nameless, disillusioned Chinese migrants will scale skyscrapers rather than fly airplanes into them. The university cafeteria bombings, however, hint at possible destructive responses when desires to fit into and partake in the mainstream go unmet—or seem so impossible that bombs become attractive short-cuts to names. Referencing the cafeteria bombings among other recent incidents, Chinese scholars have begun employing the term “individual terrorism” to describe the trend of using extreme violence

to respond to social injustice or deal with bottled-up grievances.

In the longer run, authoritarian China faces the same challenge as the Arab world, which lacks any real democratic outlet for discontent—in contrast to, say, India, where millions of poor farmers are at least able to make their voices heard, and just did so by voting for change. Compared to the stagnating living standards in many Arab countries, China is of course seen as a globalization success story. For the last two decades, astounding economic growth—and the realistic promise of more to come—has served to dissipate disaffection. Nevertheless, as a group of well-known Chinese academics noted in their 2002 report *The Most Severe Warning: Social Instability Behind the Economic Prosperity*, China’s stunning creation of wealth masks the discontent of hundreds of millions. Indeed, it is precisely the country’s continuous rapid progress that breeds anger among those left behind—these are the people who could pose the biggest challenge to China’s orderly evolution into a modern, urbanized major power. You’ll find such individuals among various groups, from workers laid-off from state-owned enterprises to new university graduates unable to find jobs. In terms of sheer numbers, however, no other group can compare with the wave of people migrating out of the countryside. To prevent a major swelling of disaffection in the cities, China must avoid an entrenched, two-tiered urban social structure. It’s time to give migrants their names back. □

---

You can reach Alex at [abrenner@aya.yale.edu](mailto:abrenner@aya.yale.edu)





---

# INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## Fellows and their Activities

### Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • CHINA

With a B.A. in History from Yale and an M.A. in China Studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex is in China examining how the country is adapting to economic and cultural globalization following its accession to the World Trade Organization.

### Cristina Merrill (2004 - 2006) • ROMANIA

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceauscescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

### Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • UGANDA

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew is spending two years in east-central Africa, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

### Matthew Rudolph (January 2004-2006) • INDIA

Having completed a Cornell Ph.D. in International Relations, Matt is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot South Asia Fellow looking into the securitization and development of the Indian economy.

### Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • SOUTHEAST ASIA

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt is spending two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt is also examining long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

### Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

Author: Brenner, Alexander J.

Title: ICWA Letters  
(East Asia)

ISSN: 1083-4265

Imprint: Institute of Current  
World Affairs,  
Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial

Language: English

Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: South Asia; The  
Americas; Europe/  
Russia; Mideast/North  
Africa; Sub-Saharan  
Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4265) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548

Fax: (603) 643-9599

E-Mail: [icwa@valley.net](mailto:icwa@valley.net)

Web address: [www.icwa.org](http://www.icwa.org)

Executive Director:  
Peter Bird Martin

Program Administrator:  
Brent Jacobson

Publications Design & Management:  
Ellen Kozak

©2004 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation.

The information contained in this publication may not be reproduced without the writer's permission.