Rethinking Modernity: Space and Factory Discipline in China

Lisa Rofel
Anthropology Board
University of California, Santa Cruz

The search for the modern is the zeitgeist, if there is one, of China’s recent period of economic reform (1978–89). This is but an intensification of a process that has marked at least the entire 20th century in China. One of the most telling ways to examine this process is through changing representations of urban space. Spatial relations, as cultural, political, and economic practices, have featured prominently in discussions of modernity (Davis 1990; Harvey 1989; Holston 1989; Rabinow 1989). Urban design is, arguably, the epitome of modernity (Rabinow 1988:361). How can we evaluate this project in China? As the Chinese party-state rather self-consciously claims to be borrowing at least selected Western practices, can we therefore conclude that modernity there is like that described for “the West”? Most important, do various people’s struggles with modernity in China present a confirmation of, or a challenge to, recent discussions in the United States and Europe that have been rethinking this category? In what follows, I argue that hegemonic transnational flows of commodities and values create a powerful discourse on modernity spreading out of the West, but we must nonetheless remain wary of creating unified readings out of local Euro-American practices and allowing those to overpower interpretations elsewhere.2

Of Panopticons and Polysemy

The idea that spatial relations have the power to shape subjectivities has recently led Western intellectual practitioners on a journey in search of cross-cultural panopticons.3 The panopticon, that visionary architectural plan of Benthamite utilitarianism, was transformed by Foucault into a metonym of the modern disciplinary gaze (cf. Foucault 1979). Intended as a design for prisons, the panopticon is a circular building with a guard tower in the center. The peripheral building contains individual cells structured such that the inmates are visible at all times, but they can see neither their fellow inmates nor the person in the guard tower. According to Foucault, the panopticon is the perfected apparatus of coercion by means of a hierarchized, continuous, and functional surveillance independent of any person who might exercise it—a gaze that never stops gazing. It produces subjects who assume responsibility for “self-discipline,” because the
power of the gaze is visible to them but unverifiable. The power created through this architectural structure is thus pervasive, anonymous, and productive, rather than repressive. It fosters a regulated and productive population. Foucault argued that this "disciplinary regime" marked a turn in European history beginning in the 18th century. Since that time, individuals have increasingly become subjects and objects of surveillance and knowledge by various institutions (e.g., prisons, medical clinics, schools), as well as by the disciplines of the human social sciences (cf. Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Foucault 1973, 1975, 1980).

Although Foucault addressed himself specifically to the cultural history of Europe, recently his work has been read as a more general statement about the rise of an episteme called modernity. What is now meant by this term? The explosion of recent writings on modernity (cf. Berman 1988; Escobar 1988; Habermas 1987; Harvey 1989; Horn 1988; Rabinow 1989; Urla 1988; Yang 1988) has presented us with sophisticated analyses about the links between epistemology, power, and subjectivity. These descriptions of modernity's effects contain an urgent sense that we reexamine some of the most cherished Western ideals of liberty and progress. They also convey an implicit assumption that modernity constitutes a unified set of practices, in part because it takes place amidst an implosively interconnected "global ecumene" (Hannerz 1989). That is, transnational interconnections make modernity appear to be a whole new way of experiencing the world. Thus, for example, Marshall Berman claims that

there is a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils—that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience "modernity." [1988:15]

The term modernity, as recently employed, encompasses the belief in the triumvirate of Reason, Progress, Truth; the rational planning of ideal social orders; and the standardization of knowledge and production that takes Man as the norm for understanding—in short, the European Enlightenment project (cf. Harvey 1989). This further includes the belief in an objective science, a universal morality and law, and an autonomous art. Modernity manifests itself in metanarratives (e.g., Marxism, liberalism, et cetera) whose teleological tales grope for idealistic utopias. It is a positivistic, technocentric, and rationalistic stance toward the world that espouses an active break with what it constructs as the irrationalities of religion and superstition found in "tradition"—its dependent and relational "Other." Following Foucault, modernity has been taken to mean a particular focus of power on the welfare of the population, on regulating its physical and spiritual health, life, and growth (Yang 1988). Finally, as Berman has argued, modernity is the experience of life as radically contradictory, ceaselessly revolutionizing itself while searching for the ultimate stability, a world in which "all that is solid melts into air" (1988). Nowdays, one seems to come upon this project of modernity virtually everywhere. Contemporary nation-states adopt visions and methods for creating "efficient," "productive," and "functional" social orders from the crisscrossed
terrain of transnational flows. Architectural plans for a "rational" urban life; assembly-line techniques for producing mass consumption goods, often for export; increasing surveillance of bodies through new reproductive technologies; sophisticated military methods of torture; satellite communications technology; literary narratives and popular culture forms; plastic surgery to make Asian women look Western—these form the transnational cornucopia from which "citizens of the world" (to paraphrase Kant) are seemingly created. Whether one envisions these global connections as center-periphery relations (Hannerz 1989; Wallerstein 1974) or as multiple "scapes" of overlapping disjunctures (Appadurai 1990), it is clear that this search for modernity occurs in an unequally balanced world, where the position of the United States as a model to be emulated remains hegemonic.

How do the revolutionary transformations of the past decade in China speak to these issues of modernity? State discourse in China on the Four Modernizations (industry, agriculture, military, and science and technology) has inscribed its version of the universal efficacy of science, progress, and rationality. There was a rigorous attempt to create a "factual" separation of economics and politics, as the state urged the populace to leave off with ideology and "seek truth from facts."

As elsewhere, structural designs that induce effects of power in China are most obviously sought in the industrial discipline of urban factory work. The factory is the icon par excellence of modernity. In this respect, China is no different than Lowell, Lancashire, or Juarez. Factory managers, urged on by the party-state, have adopted "capitalist" techniques of scientific management in the intensive pursuit of that quixotic thing called profit. And factory cadres have begun to redesign factory architecture in the name of efficiency. In the silk industry, the focus of my research, the emphasis upon exports has led to intimate interweavings into the global political economy. All of these transformations have wrought their disciplinary effects on the subjectivities of workers.

Yet even the panoptic gaze of industrial discipline needs to be captured in its historical and cultural specificities. Even in a space as seemingly global as an urban factory geared toward export, spatial productions of modern subjectivities collide with polysemous histories of past spatial relations. For space—and the authority to construe it—is a contested domain of relations of production because of its recognized connections to power. These polysemous histories are located in several sites: in the specific interpretations of scientific management by local factory managers; in architectural histories rooted in the early years after Liberation (1949), as well as in the prerevolutionary era; and finally, in workers' memories of past spatial relations, memories that have taken on the hue of subversion in the context of economic reform. As a result, modernity in China does not neatly replicate the hypothetical transnational (i.e., European) model.

In the midst of my several years of fieldwork in China (1984–86), I joined the work force of a silk weaving factory in Hangzhou, a moderately sized eastern coastal city that serves as a center of light industry. Managers assumed I would join in a supportive dialogue with them about the best ways to interpret and suc-
cessfully implement scientific management. Their approach led me to realize that workers’ interpretations of management’s interpretations of “discipline” was one site where local histories were being expressed. Throughout the factory, I found prep workers sitting off the shop floor chatting, young men leaving their looms to have long, leisurely cigarette breaks, and inspection workers who would sit outside during their shift and relax in the sun. Western tourists who visit similar factories often comment on the lack of “industriousness” of Chinese workers. There is not a little irony in this characterization, given the orientalist notion of Asians as hardworking. And the obvious essentialism of this observation makes it easy to dismiss. Yet, one is still left with a puzzle: the spatial logic of the factory can be read as conducive to certain disciplinary effects; the current self-conscious efforts of the state even more so. Why, then, are they only partially effective?

In what follows, I hope to suggest an approach to spatial disciplining of workers—and thus to the issue of modernity—that takes account of the way history comes into play with epistemic structures. That which has been taken as homogeneous and called modernity, I argue, obscures a range of diverse practices, for memories are not erased by the introduction of newer epistemes. At the very least, we might want to begin speaking of “alternative modernities” (Appadurai 1992). This article can be read as a cautionary tale, urging us to be wary of creating a new “Master Text” of modernity from Foucault. After all, we have already been through modernization and dependency theories. We need to retain the sense of modernity as an ideological trope—both in Europe and elsewhere. As such, it generates meaningful struggles because people have a commitment to the term. More than a specific set of practices, modernity is a story that people tell themselves about themselves in relation to Others. It is a powerful story because nation-states organize the body politic around it (Dirks 1990). As a story, it can illuminate matters and affect people’s consciousness. But it can also fool and mislead us. Yet, even in those moments when, for example, the party-state in China declares itself to be faithful to the Western version of modernity, specific histories that reside in various people’s memories turn it into another form. For, like all tales, its meanings acquire different valences with its various narrations.

Spatial Disciplining

China’s party-state imagines new levels of wealth and power it might attain in the global political economy. To that end, factory cadres have adopted Western “capitalist” techniques to induce dramatically higher levels of “efficiency” and “productivity” in urban factories. They have embraced “scientific management,” that quintessential bio-powerful technique for producing disciplined workers. In the silk weaving factories of Hangzhou, state bureaucrats and factory managers yearn for a perfectly ordered, spatially disciplined, and therefore productive work force. Their visions have been created in opposition to the spatial modes of authority prevalent in the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

The Cultural Revolution, currently portrayed as a maelstrom of meaningless violence, in fact raised several deep-seated issues: the relationship between eco-
onomic development and hierarchical work structures, especially the mental and physical division of labor; the place of intellectuals, long part of China’s ruling class; the production of social inequalities within a socialist society; and China’s relationship to the capitalist world system (Dirlik and Meisner 1989). In the seemingly distant past of the Maoist era, workers, through various political campaigns, were periodically encouraged to leave their work positions to focus on other concerns, namely their political consciousness. In the initial years, virtually all workers left their work posts to reinvigorate that consciousness through factory-wide meetings in which they forced managers to confess crimes of following the capitalist road. The more radical workers, mainly from the younger generation, left the shop floor in pursuit of political rights; they challenged managerial authority by dragging managers out of their offices and forcing them to do manual labor on the shop floor. Workers continuously moved on and off the shop floor, one moment weaving some cloth or spinning thread, the next moment participating in a political meeting. When not engaged in political struggle, workers’ work regime still involved political discussion meetings with other workers.

High political consciousness often became equated with refusal to participate in production. The sign of a politically “red” worker was her or his zeal in political struggles rather than in production of commodities. Leaving the shop floor was thus a peripatetic statement of political rights to challenge managerial authority. The combination of struggle sessions against managers with “bourgeois” ways, factional fighting among workers, and disruptions in regional supply networks meant that workers took a measure of control over organizing their own daily movements, mixing the space of the factory with “domestic” space by doing their laundry, shopping, and washing bicycles at the factory or during work hours. Workers during the Cultural Revolution thus challenged the meaning of their place, both physically and in terms of social divisions of authority and power. Walking away from one’s work position to engage in politics put one at the forefront of the radical faction. Even after 1973, when managers returned to their place in the offices, they did not punish or pressure workers to produce more silk goods. For then, too, the most important product to come off the shop floor was supposed to be political consciousness.

Just as significant, the labor process during the Cultural Revolution era was structured such that it did not matter at which position any particular worker prepared thread or wove cloth, for workers were conceived of as laboring in collective groups. Collectivity was the hallmark of Maoist production processes. Even when bonuses were restored after the Cultural Revolution, they were initially allocated to groups of workers. Amounts produced were measured, but were not tied either to individuals or to particular work stations.

That system has been rigorously criticized as one of the many inefficiencies of the Cultural Revolution. With economic reform, the intensification of production placed a new measure of importance on the individuation of workers. The abandonment of the collectivist production of the Cultural Revolution and the objectification of the individual worker through spatial arrangements, measurement, and quantification are part of the same political project. The creation of the indi-
individual subject—minus the exhortations toward bourgeois freedom of expression—has been very much a project of the state.\textsuperscript{15}

Silk factory managers sought to spatially root each worker in one work space through an appropriately named position-wage system (\textit{gangwei gongzi zhi}), instituted in 1985. Each worker receives wages based on the position on the shop floor that she or he occupies; bonuses are calculated by piece rate, again tying individuals to work positions. In the prep shop, each worker’s number of filled spindles is recorded by the shift leader at the end of the day. In the weaving shop, each worker’s name is sewn into the side of the cloth produced. Alienated labor it might be; still, the identification of individual, product, and position is total. Even when one worker substitutes for another, the spatial ordering of individuals is such that the cloth or thread from that work station is recorded under the original worker’s name. Workers are thus spatially ranked and specified so that anomalies in the working body can theoretically be more readily discerned.\textsuperscript{16}

That ranking is magnificently displayed on a gigantic production board hung on a shop floor wall where Mao’s larger-than-life picture once stood. Mao had exhorted workers to discipline their political consciousness. Now, the production board exhibits the monthly amounts that each worker has produced. Yet this is not only a spatial disciplining of bodies, but a spatial disciplining of consciousness as well. Each worker is to identify with a particular work place and with the thread or cloth produced there.

In the imagined plans of Party cadres and factory managers, each worker remains fixed to a designated spot on the shop floor, leaving it only for meal breaks and at the end of the shift.\textsuperscript{17} As part of this spatial disciplining, each worker is to stand at a set interval from the next worker, the distance prescribed by the number of spindles or looms at the work station. The machines are evenly spaced so that the shift leader, shop supervisor, or master teacher can readily discern production problems when they walk up and down the central aisle of the shop floor. To ensure that workers do not leave their positions, management has instituted a number of disciplinary rules, discipline having been lost, they said, during the Cultural Revolution. Workers are not allowed to chat with one another during their work shift. Due to the pounding, deafening noise of the looms and spinning machines, chatting would require leaving one’s work space. Nor are workers allowed to leave the shop floor to accommodate the kinds of “personal” labor chores they had incorporated into their work during the Cultural Revolution. Neither, however, can workers remain unduly attached to any work station. A worker must accept a change in assignment—for example, from twisting the silk threads to sweeping the floor—without protest. Individuation also means interchangeability of the parts.

Thus, in rearranging spatial modes of authority in the factory, state cadres have imagined a space of national wealth and modern nationhood (Anderson 1983). A “reformed” nation-state. The paradox, however, is that these silk factory spaces have been constructed as sites of global interconnections. Factory managers proudly told me of their efforts to mimic faithfully Western techniques for disciplining workers. During my sojourn in Hangzhou’s silk factories, a Ger-
man manager came to lecture; factory engineers and cadres went to Como, Italy, to study dyeing techniques; and the American bestselling manual of business success, Peters's *In Search of Excellence* (1982), was popular.

The silk itself, as both a commodity and a cultural artifact, signifies the transnational nature of the factories. Once worn only by the Imperium, silk has become one important sign of China's place in a global cultural and political economy. Over 40% of Hangzhou's silk production is for export. But China does not export its own patterns and uses of the silk, which are mainly elaborate symbolic designs for wedding quilt covers. Instead, they "blank out" their notions of beauty and utility by producing plain white silk for Western designers. Or they weave Western desires and tastes into the cloth. In this case, then, one cannot simply conclude that transnational flows consist of an Asian appetite for Western "culture," for here, things "Chinese" are increasingly difficult to distinguish from things "Western." These silk factories, though recognizably in China, in effect are no longer solely "of" China. These sites have been reterritorialized. The place of the factory is shifting underneath workers' feet, even as they remain in "place."

In this sense, workers in China, too, can be thought of as "transnational."

These intimate microconnections of power that link artifacts to bodies should not obscure the specificities of China's search for the modern. The introduction of Western techniques does not erase history, much as this might be factory managers' intent. For their visions of scientific management embody a particular history. In pamphlets written in 1979 and 1980, silk corporation cadres broke down and subdivided the body's movements in space to have a better handle on them. Their inspiration, they told me, came from American Taylorism. A section of one pamphlet on prep work reads:

For the task of rewinding pure silk thread that has not been twisted:

1. Relieving the previous shift:
   Accomplish the one link, three checks, one do well.
   "One link": Enter the production position fifteen minutes early, link with the previous shift over the production situation (including the raw material, the batch number, etc.); check the machinery's condition.
   "Three checks": Check the last shift's markings for mistakes; check the ring frames for roundness; check the patterns of the thread spinning on the spools for regularity.
   "One do well": Do well the markings for dividing the shift.

2. Making the rounds:
   The path for making the rounds must be rational [helili]. When inspecting for quality, use hands, eyes and ears together. Differentiate the weight and tension of the thread. Do the easy first and then the difficult. Stop the spools or the ring frames to fix problems.
   The path for making the rounds should follow the shape of the character for "bow," starting from the head of the first line of spindles to the end of the second line. The second round should still begin from the head of the first line, in proper order, and not return along the path.
   Both eyes should look to the left and right at the ring frames and spindles and not stare idly. Concentrate without rushing.
Both hands should be industrious. Accurately lift the thread, accurately correct the tension.

When checking the quality of the filled spools, do not entangle the ends, get grease or sludge on the thread, or other defects. If it does not meet quality standards, do not go on to the next production process.

Should the ear hear a strange sound in the machine’s operation, immediately take care of it. [Hangzhou Municipal Silk Bureau 1980]

Microtechniques of the body these may be; yet they have their specificities in the way that consciousness and literacy come into play. Taylorism in the West treated the body as if it were a machine, so that movement would become rapid and automatic without any thought involved. In contrast, here one finds an emphasis on the need for workers’ participatory consciousness in their actions rather than on a mere physical reenactment of motions in space. The pamphlet recalls recent Maoist history that took “consciousness” as the site of political possibilities and political threats. Cultural Revolution sessions consisted of yelling and beating someone into a conscious realization of their class errant ways. But consciousness in this case is not the repository of a unified subject’s inner truth. It is rather a permeable site that is reflected through outward actions. With economic reform, Maoist “consciousness raising” has continued in the form of “thought work” (sixiang gongzuo). Party cadres in the factory now do thought work to bring workers’ thoughts to bear on production. There is no work without thought. The opposite also holds true.

Perhaps most striking in the pamphlet is the importance of tracing characters as a form of discipline. The characters themselves are significant. Writing, in this instance, is not simply the transparent medium of Western communication, in which signs “represent,” or “mirror,” reality. Signs here are rather an outline of the body’s actions, a display of action that both imitates and constitutes the form of its signified.

Body manuals have a rich history in China. This handbook is reminiscent of earlier choreographies, especially prerevolutionary ritual manuals, in which writing was viewed as an enactment of the world (Zito 1989). As Angelo Zito has argued, writing was treated as a way to discern the pattern of interpenetration between natural and social worlds and as a way to keep reproducing that pattern. Together with painting, ritual, and architecture, it was viewed as one of the significant forms that shaped consciousness and human agency. The writing was crucial to a good ritual performance because it was in itself a performative enactment of the world.

It is in this sense that following the correct characters with one’s body is so essential to good production. Characters can only be known from the consciousness and perception of the person performing the action. There is no “rational” reason to require literacy of workers. Yet workers must skill their bodies up rather than down, for they need to train their bodies to move in strict accordance with the strokes for “bow.”

This form of rationality in production does not replicate Western notions of deskilling (Braverman 1974). “Rational” is often invoked as a key sign of the
modernist project (Harvey 1989). In our post-Foucauldian haste to chart modernity, it might be useful, then, to remind ourselves, as Donham (1990) has recently argued, that "rationality" has no a priori content and makes sense only in a given cultural context. Scientific management does not, as they say, lend itself to the "free" play of signification. In specific material worlds, people invest categories with meaning based on imaginations that are shaped by historical developments.24

Spatial Subversions

These, then, are the spatial disciplinary efforts that party cadres and factory managers put into practice and imagined would come to fruition. They have partially succeeded. Yet these same factory spaces and the bodies and consciousnesses that are objects of control contained memories of past spatial arrangements that held a different semiotics of production. Managers were not rearranging blank spaces. The history of earlier eras—the 1950s and the recent Cultural Revolution—still resided in them. Certain workers questioned and contested the new authority of efficiency with memories of previous spatial relations through which they still moved about on the shop floor. Through these memories, they created spaces of subversion, both subtle and direct.

During the time I spent at Zhenfu Silk Weaving Factory, I was struck by three particular spatial sites in which distinct cohorts of workers marked out their identity. The most dramatic, it appeared to me, was the one entailing the reappropriation of public space. In the context of economic reform, resting rather than working formed part of a political assertion about the identity of a "good worker." A group of six or seven women on the "A" shift of Zhenfu’s Number Two Prep Shop had claimed a comfortable and visible place to take breaks, where it would be clear to all they were not at their work positions: a small table just off the shop floor, in full view of the shift leader’s desk and the front entrance to the shop. It was the only place to sit down.

This was no simple matter of taking long breaks. These women flaunted their presence by sitting and loudly complaining about the new production pressures. Occasionally Xiao Ma, the shift leader, yelled at them to return to work, but they simply responded in kind. Once, angry about having been penalized for spinning the wrong box of silk yarn, one of the women joked to the others about needing to get back to the old method of hanging signs on people, as they did during the Cultural Revolution, and calling them "capitalist roaders." Theirs was an overt and brazen challenge to the reform attempts to re-form them into new kinds of subjects. They postured against the authority of efficiency. This was the generation that had come of age in the Cultural Revolution.

Most of this generation no longer held onto the specific politics of the Cultural Revolution. They, too, had become disillusioned with its excesses and the sense, as one person put it, that "we had a carrot sitting on our heads and didn’t know it."25 Yet, they went to great lengths to retain their political rights to challenge managerial authority, or, perhaps more accurately, their political rights to not have managers challenge them. They remained conscious that work experi-
ences in the factory were political—as against efforts by the state to separate the "economics" of the factory from the "politics" of the state. Once I asked Xiao Bao, a 31-year-old member of this cohort, the delicate question of whether she planned to become a Party member. Xiao Bao responded that she had no interest in joining the Party, because it was simply a method to mold her into a model worker, which in turn only meant pressuring other workers to produce more.

In newspaper articles and cartoons, in statements by factory cadres and by intellectuals, workers had become naturalized into people who tended toward laziness and who understood only the power of material incentives. They were a "problem" to be solved. But the Cultural Revolution generation contested this sign of "laziness" with which the state has tried to refigure their bodies by retaining the memory of what it had previously meant to be a good worker—to maintain a consciousness of class—and therefore of the ability to move on and off the shop floor without managerial authority to position them.

Adding to their refusal of spatial disciplining was the sense among several of these women that they might have attained the status of intellectual had it not been for the Cultural Revolution's shutting down of all schools. Their insistence that they were not really workers but just stuck in the factory by the ill will of history reflected a dominant discourse fostered by the economic reform state that replaced workers with intellectuals as the heroes of China's future. Through their retrospective claim to the possibility, now lost, of an intellectual identity, these women refused the spatial authority of reform that placed them in the category of mere worker by forcing them to remain on the shop floor.

A second site in which an older generation marked out its identity appeared to me more marginal than the table, yet just as crucial. This was the dense and massive space of the spinning, twisting, and combining machines. For memories also resided in these machines and their alignment, memories that, in Raymond Williams's terms, were now residual in their counterhegemonic form (1977). These machines loomed a head taller than workers, so that prep workers disappeared among the rows of spindles. No central vantage point, no panopticon, existed from which to gaze upon them. To see what they were up to, management had to walk up and down each and every row, a disciplined disciplining in which they rarely engaged. Older groups of workers, women who had begun working in the silk factories in the 1950s, gathered periodically amidst the thick forest of machinery to rest and chat with one another. Their activities recalled previous practices: these older workers, as part of the so-called conservative faction of the Cultural Revolution, had taken refuge from, and refused to participate in, the ever more chaotic and vindictive political winds of revolution. Their identity was tied to the memory of work just after Liberation, when silk work was a skill displayed with pride, a skill that women worked hard to attain. These women countered efforts to turn their bodies into ever more efficient producers by insisting upon recognition for the hard work they already performed. Their actions both accommodated and resisted economic reform spatial authority. Yu Shifu, a woman in her late forties who had entered the silk factories at the age of 13, once remarked that the women of her mother's generation were in much better health than the
women of her own. This was despite the fact that, as she implied, her mother’s generation was often portrayed as more physically constrained by “feudal” gender ideology (iconized through footbinding).

The final site of spatial subversions resided in the very sinews of the bodies of the youngest generation, in their gestures and their movements around the shop floor. These women, in their late teens and early twenties, were newly arrived from the countryside and had just begun to enter the factories in the previous year. Subject(ed) bodies, they nonetheless refused to remain spatially rooted in one place or move in the prescribed circuits. There was a steady stream of back-and-forth visiting. Their bodily movements did not mimic new standards of rationality. They did not work quickly enough. They made mistakes in the tension of the thread. They did not look carefully to the left or to the right; they did not check, link, or make clear markings. They did not use their hands, eyes, and ears to inspect for quality. Quality, for this group, was well below the standards of the other shifts in the prep shop. Their consciousness did not participate in production problems. They rarely concentrated. Few made a “rational” inspection of their spindles, and none followed the character for “bow.” After all, as management complained to me, these peasant women could barely read.

Shop managers characterized these women from the countryside as being slow and dull-witted. Their comments were an ironic twist on the “nimble fingers, patience” litany that has shaped “oriental” women in the context of transnational industries’ relocation to Asia (cf. Ong 1987). That gendered technique of bio-power was also employed by managers about women workers in China as part of a reform discourse essentializing women’s capabilities. But these “dull-witted and clumsy” peasant women subverted the gendered disciplinary regime of space by acknowledging their differences from city women while continuing to move freely about the shop floor.

**Architectural History**

Workers’ abilities to challenge the reform disciplinary regime so openly were fostered by a seeming paradox in the factory architecture. Factory spatial relations are not just the setting for disciplinary actions, but are themselves part of the same mode of power and authority. Factories are sensuous embodiments of productive power (producing both goods and subject positions).

The architectural paradox begins with the relationship between the offices and the shop floor. Each workshop—prep, weaving, and inspection—is housed in a separate building, each with its own shop office. But the workshop offices are virtually hidden from the shop floor. At Zhenfu, the office is set off to the side in the prep shop, a few floors above the shop floor in the weaving shop, and in a separate building in the case of the inspection shop. The main offices of the party secretary and factory director are, in homologous fashion, set in a separate building well apart from the workshops. The offices are completely walled off from the shop floor. Separation is effected through thick concrete walls. Office windows look out toward the other buildings, but no windows exist to look into the
These offices were spaces in which managers separated and distanced themselves from the shop floor. The office, then, did not serve as a site from which anything even approaching a panoptic gaze could emanate. Equally significant, workers could not observe managers in their exercise of power. They could only imagine their activities. In fact, it appears that this spatial relation was not so much for managers to look out at workers, but to keep workers from looking in at them.

This structure has its roots, I believe, in two cultural schemes, one having to do with a prerevolution “metaphysics of display” and the other having to do with recent revolutionary history. When these factories were built in the early 1950s, the architectural design stood as a display of hierarchy. They still bear a striking resemblance to prerevolutionary design, specifically the Imperial Palace in Beijing, known as the Forbidden City. The Forbidden City’s architectural logic was in turn echoed in the homes of the previous gentry elite, in the dynastic tombs, and in the numerous local official residences known as yamen. The Forbidden City’s architectural logic was in turn echoed in the homes of the previous gentry elite, in the dynastic tombs, and in the numerous local official residences known as yamen. In nearly identical fashion, contemporary factories, the Forbidden City (now a museum), and old gentry homes are walled off from the rest of the city, though set within its midst, by thick brick walls more than high enough to discourage any outsider’s gaze. Each is a mimesis of an entire universe unto itself. The main factory office building, known as the changbu, houses the highest level management. It sits, like the Emperor’s Inner Court, in the center of the factory grounds, well apart from the shop buildings where manual labor occurs. Within this two-story main office, Party cadres sit on the floor above technical managers. As a group, they sit apart from shop supervisors and, of course, from workers. The shop buildings radiate outward from the changbu in linear fashion to the front, back, and either side. Again, this layout mimics the Outer Audience halls of the Forbidden City and the successive courtyards of wealthier urban homes (Pruitt 1979).

The features of the Imperial Palace embodied the king’s power to center the universe. The symbolism of the center was constructed as the nexus of inner/outer and upper/lower (Zito 1989). That which was most inner (nei) equaled that which was most upper (shang). The architectural design symbolically displayed and reinforced Imperial power. The display of hierarchy by itself sufficed as a strategem of power. It was meant to be enough to rein in the populace. This is the cultural scheme I found still embodied in Hangzhou’s silk factories. Managers, it appeared to me, still relied upon a metaphysics of display through which to discipline workers. Newspaper articles urging factories on to ever more efficient production tellingly focused on the “problem” of factory managers who always sat in their offices and never walked onto the shop floor (e.g., Weekly Digest [Baokan Wenzhai], 19 November 1985). This, I would argue, was not simply a matter of bureaucratic bumbling and laziness, as the media would have it. It was equally a matter of changing cultural logics of power—moving from a hierarchy of display into a disciplinary regime.

The second cultural scheme informing factory architecture overdetermined the first. This scheme lies in the more recent history of the 1949 Revolution in China. This was, after all, a revolution in the name of workers and peasants. The
party-state therefore set about inscribing in space their mythologizing gestures toward the proletariat. Consequently, factory construction of the 1950s was, in part, high socialist realism. Inspired by the Soviet example (and by Soviet aid), the state built workshops of massive concrete, with straight lines and a solid utilitarian look. They were a paean to proletarian lives.

Yet these factory spaces embodied a contradiction, for the workers did not run them. In the Maoist era (1949–76), at least, a certain discomfort existed in any brazen display of power over workers. The office–shop floor arrangement enabled managers to avoid the discomforting gaze of workers. Equally important, knowledge in the form of state directives, Party documents, and personal dossiers (all tellingly referred to as “inside section,” or neibu) resides in the offices. Those who have access to the knowledge contained in these documents have power because they can interpret the state’s will to control populations. Managers therefore keep workers out of the offices and away from such knowledge.

It is striking, then, that during the Cultural Revolution, workers challenged hierarchical class relations by storming the offices and, besides pulling managers out of them, reading and burning their personal dossiers. The old hierarchy was toppled, if only for a brief moment. Yet that moment still lives on in the memories of workers who have resumed their place on the shop floor. Their daily resistances—as well as their accommodations—indicate that the hierarchy of display, overdetermined by socialist realism, is no longer sufficient in itself to discipline. These earlier cultural logics have not been erased, but rather incorporated into the search for modernity. At Zhenfu, a new six-story weaving shop was built at the start of 1985. It was a monument to the reform calls for higher productivity. The shop towered over the changbu, the main office building, which stood directly opposite. But Zhenfu’s Party Secretary let me know that they planned to erect a new changbu that would equal the height of the weaving shop. The logic of display is alive and well in China’s search for the modern.

**Conclusion: Rethinking Modernity**

I have argued that changing spatial relations exemplify projects of modernity. These changes are perhaps most vividly displayed in urban factories, architectural paeans of modernist aspirations. In China’s silk factories, global exchanges fostered by the party-state’s economic reform have sutured China into a world political economy. The silk factory site, though shaped by nationalist aspirations, is no longer bounded by them. It has become reterritorialized into a veritable transnational landscape, where Western and Chinese commodities and desires have become interwoven.

Yet, this spatial reordering is no simple matter of a unitary set of practices called modernity being reworked on a local basis. The cultural and historical specificities of spatial relations in Chinese factories manifest themselves along several dimensions. Scientific management in China does not mean turning bodies into machines, but rather implies a level of self-consciousness and an approach to literacy and writing that echoes both recent Maoist notions of consciousness and
earlier ideas of writing as performance. Architectural reform means that a disciplinary regime is overlapping and incorporating a hierarchy of display. The relationship between disciplinary gazes and microtechniques of power is not one of the panopticon. History has not been erased by the search for the modern. Indeed, as Nicholas Dirks so cogently reminds us, History is one of the most telling signs of the modern (1990). Whatever counts as "the modern episteme"—should we even want to employ such a singular term—derives from the ways in which China, and other "local" places, interpret modernity. This is my main argument. There is no singular transnational standard, with its local digestions.

The Chinese state aspires and claims to enact a faithful reproduction of Western modernity—a claim echoed (until the Tiananmen demonstrations) in the Western press. Yet they carry out their program in sites and through bodies that hold memories of past spatial relations. It is in the disjunction between these specificities and transglobal borrowings that managers’ interpretations and workers’ subversions have their effect. Thus, the connection between space, memory, and resistance must be brought to the fore in any analysis of spatial disciplining.

To maintain that the order of power in China does not exactly replicate our own is not to exoticize it. Nor is it to place China in a world of essentialized oriental difference. To the contrary, by arguing for the specificities of Chinese workers’ experiences, I hope to further the critique of the universalizing tendencies of Euro-American social theory.

How, then, does my argument about China’s search for the modern require us to refine Foucault’s and others’ notions about space and discipline? It is not my intention here to engage in a textual exegesis of Foucault. For we need not be “text-positivist” (Rosaldo 1989) in our approach to post-structuralist theories. I want to encourage us rather to engage in a “faithful blasphemy,” to paraphrase Haraway (1985), of the Master. A serious commitment to end metanarratives requires more than its mere assertion. Suffice it, then, to raise two points in brief.

First, we should be cautious about assuming a bourgeois subject, with its attendant consciousness, as the site of all disciplinary regimes. Whether or not one wants to argue that Foucault himself disregarded his own positionality in theorizing subjectivity and therefore reinscribed the West as Subject (Spivak 1988), it might be useful to heed Spivak’s reminder that contemporary relations of power, including the role of Western intellectuals within them, rest upon the intersection of representations, colonialism, and the political economy of global capitalism. The subject-positions available to Chinese cadres and workers have been forged through neocolonial hegemonies as well as by a Chinese Marxist state. As such, they display historical configurations that fracture consciousness along specific fault lines.

Second, the project of Foucault, as I read him, is to excavate—and then hold in tension—the discursive productions of subjectivities and, equally, the ways that ordinary people embrace, appropriate, and sometimes transform these as they recast their embodiment of past practices. Indeed, this dual analytical focus is one of the challenges now facing anthropology. We need to attend to the power of dominant cultural narratives, on the one hand, while paying close attention to the
resistances as well as the reaffirmations by subjects positioned in particular relations of inequality. For us to counter a textualist reading of modernity that inadvertently privileges Western voices requires tracing how subjects absorb representations and what they do with them.\footnote{33}{Or, in de Certeau’s (1984) terms, we must pay attention not just to the production of discourses, but to their consumption and to how consumption, unexpectedly and in small ways, subverts the dominant order. The consumption of discourse is ultimately part of its production.} Modernity, then, is an “empty set” category, a site of continuous hegemonic power plays and thus shifting meanings. Further, the relationship between history and modernity is contested terrain. The state in China has created one version of a story about modernity as a force that will overcome China’s “feudal” past—a past extended to include the Maoist era. The power of that narrative was made vivid for me when I recently returned to China and discussed with friends my analysis of this relationship between space, history, and the search for the modern. Feeling sure of the need to emphasize specificity, I was reminded of the power of representations and my own positionality when they sympathetically cautioned that an argument in favor of historicity was fraught with political implications that China was still mired in feudalism. Yet, as Spivak has argued, such periodization of modes of production is itself part of the history of imperialism (Spivak 1988). On the other side of the political spectrum, my argument equally transgresses that of young Chinese radicals who condemn the entire history of “Chinese culture” as signifying “weakness,” and who consequently call for an embrace of modernity, though not on the state’s terms. (The controversial serial River Elegy exemplifies this theme [cf. Wakeman 1989].) My claim, in my engagement with these voices, is for the need to recognize the vital role China has always played in the creation of contemporary meanings about parity and inequality among nation-states.

Notes

Acknowledgments. Twenty months of field research in China (1984–86) were supported by a grant from the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People’s Republic of China. The writing was supported by a University of California, Berkeley, Center for Chinese Studies Postdoctoral Fellowship. Special thanks to Anna Tsing for taking the time to think through these issues with me. I also wish to thank Christine Gilmartin, Akhil Gupta, Gail Hershatter, Carma Hinton, Emily Honig, Jean Jackson, David Keightley, Renato Rosaldo, Orin Starn, Sylvia Yanagisako, Marilyn Young, and Angela Zito.

\footnote{1}{China’s party-state claims that economic reform is still on, but they essentially signaled its death knell in their terrible parody of its effects in the June massacres of 1989. Of course, it was just these sorts of destructive effects that Nietzsche and others, including Horkheimer and Adorno, saw as part of, not counter to, the project of modernity. For an especially lucid summary, see Harvey (1989).}

\footnote{2}{Partha Chatterjee (1990) has made a compelling argument in this vein about the universalizing tendencies in Western philosophical discussions of the concept of “civil society.”}
As will become evident below, I mean "panopticon" metaphorically. Those who have contributed to the reassertion of a spatial perspective in contemporary social theory include Bourdieu (1977), de Certeau (1984), Giddens (1984), Jameson (1984), Moore (1986), and Soja (1989).

I suspect that scholars are, in part, interested in this category because, following Foucault, it seems to bring together the specificities of our academic practices with political and artistic ones.


Those who are exploring this topic do not by any means agree on the stance one should adopt toward this project of modernity. Habermas (1987) and Berman (1988), for example, argue that modernity still has liberating potential and we should continue it. Foucault (1979), Lyotard (1984), and many who support a postmodern stance criticize modernity for being a project of domination through its claims to absolute truth and universal answers. Although their positions are thus radically opposed, I would argue that their differences are ones of degree rather than of kind.

The paraphrase of Kant is found in Foucault (1961:27) as cited in Rabinow (1988:355).

Of course, China's search for the modern is not new. Some would date this process back to the 16th-century Ming dynasty to emphasize the importance of China's internal history (Spence 1990); others would begin in the 19th century, with China's response to the territorial onslaught of Western imperialism (Hsu 1990); still others emphasize the early 20th-century efforts at state building (Duara 1988); and finally there are those who would insist upon the Revolution of 1949 as the key turning point in the state's full penetration in the government of everyday life (Yang 1988). Each of these periodizations is defensible, for, to get ahead of myself, the meaning of modernity is ideologically variable. But it is clear that, with economic reform, the search for modernity acquired a new intensity in China. This was in large part due to the party-state's virtual abandonment of Marxist-Maoist theory and its enthusiastic embrace of things Western.

I do not mean to say that China is becoming a capitalist country. "Capitalism" and "socialism" are tropes of very contested meanings in contemporary China.

The history of modernity as a contested political category in Europe, especially in the context of colonialism, needs excavation. Such a history would illuminate and deconstruct the center-periphery nature of the trope. For an excellent recent example, see Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) on colonialism and modernity in southern Africa.

For a discussion of the cultural construction of productivity, see Rofel (1989a).

Worker creativity was also stressed at different moments in the Cultural Revolution.

After the initial battles, many workers would come to work and then leave because lack of supplies left them with virtually nothing to do. These actions have also been reinterpreted as signifying laziness.

For analyses that address the issues of ideology and consciousness in Mao's writings, see Schram (1969) and Wakeman (1973).
Anagnost (1989) has written of the homologous program to individuate peasant households in China’s rural areas.

For a more detailed discussion of social divisions of labor under economic reform, see Rofel (1989b).

I follow Ann Anagnost’s (1992) notion of the “imagined state” here to emphasize the symbolically constructed character of the party-state.

Export of silk from China began at the turn of the century and has continued, with only a brief interruption during the two years after the Communist Revolution of 1949. See Li (1981) and Rofel (1989b).

In his otherwise excellent discussion of bourgeois distinctions in taste, Bourdieu (1984) pays little attention to the decisive role of neocolonial hegemonies in the construction of European tastes.

Taylorism, derived from F. W. Taylor’s The Principles of Scientific Management (1911), attempts to increase labor productivity by breaking down each labor process into component motions and organizing fragmented work tasks according to rigorous standards of time and motion study (cf. Noble 1977).

See Cheng (1986) and Hu (1944) for a similar sense of the concept of “face” in China.

Yet, I would maintain that this form of disciplining is distinct from other forms found in the Maoist era (1949–76). To lump them together as China’s singular project of modernity would, I think, miss the specificities of history. With the economic reform regime, for example, Party cadres have turned to “psychology” as a repository of truths to be mined for thought reform.

A simultaneous Western intellectual tradition of questioning the transparency of signs begins with Saussure (1986) and continues through Derrida (1974). But their point is to question the correspondence between signifier and signified. They do not theorize about how writing might bring into existence the world. Kristeva (1980) and Lacan (1985) raise this point with respect to the Symbolic, but do not discuss it as performance (cf. Zito 1989 for an excellent discussion of these issues in relation to China).

This point is cogently argued in a different vein by Kathleen Weston (1990) in her critique of performance theories of gender.

This quip refers to inner-party struggles at the highest levels that increasingly became common knowledge near the end of the Cultural Revolution and led many people to feel manipulated by the very leaders, especially Mao Zedong, they had followed.

This held true until the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989. See Barlow (1992) for a discussion of the place of intellectuals in economic reform China. For a history of intellectuals in the early 20th century, see Grieder (1981).

Thanks to David Keightley for pointing this out to me. See Chang (1977) and Pruitt (1979).

Ida Pruitt writes of a Beijing gentry home:

There was, I knew, endless variety within the pattern in those compounds guarded by the great gates and by the spirit screens inside the gates and shielding them. Credited with keeping ghosts and demons from entering the compounds
and wandering through the courtyards and house, the spirit screens effectively kept out the peering eyes of those who passed on the streets. [1979:10]

29For state-run factories, this often means an attempt to build a self-contained social world by including a dining hall, nursery, beauty salon, showers, and a small shop that sells sundry goods. Workers receive everything from food rations to permission to marry from their work units. See Walder (1986).

30Dirks’s argument (1990) that History has been colonized even as it has produced the nation-state is suggestive of my point about modernity.

31Emily Honig’s study of women workers in 1930s Shanghai textile mills (1986) makes a similar point about the complexity of these women’s lives, situated in the intersections between foreign influenced work structures and their own practices of, for example, Buddhist sisterhoods.

32Dipesh Chakrabarty (1989) has recently engaged in just such a critical reading of Marx and the problem of applying Marxist theory to Indian working-class history.

33One might address this critique to postmodern readings of space. Jameson’s compelling description of the Bonaventura Hotel (1984), for example, lacks any positioned gaze. Yet Jameson presents his reading as the universal meaning of that architectural design.

References Cited

Anagnost, Ann

Anderson, Benedict

Appadurai, Arjun

Barlow, Tani

Berman, Marshall

Bourdieu, Pierre

Braverman, Harry
Chakrabarty, Dipesh

Chang, K. C.

Chatterjee, Partha

Cheng, Chung-ying

Comaroff, Jean, and John Comaroff

Davis, Mike

de Certeau, Michel

Derrida, Jacques

Dirks, Nicholas B.

Dirlik, Arif, and Maurice Meisner

Donham, Donald

Dreyfus, Hubert L., and Paul Rabinow
1982 Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.

Duara, Prasenjit

Escobar, Arturo

Foster, Hal, ed.

Foucault, Michel
Giddens, Anthony  

Grieder, Jerome  

Habermas, Jurgen  

Hangzhou Municipal Silk Bureau  

Hannerz, Ulf  

Haraway, Donna  

Harvey, David  

Holston, James  

Honig, Emily  

Horn, David G.  

Hsu, Immanuel  

Hu, Hsien-chin  

Huyssen, Andreas  

Jameson, Frederic  
1984 Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. New Left Review 146:53–92.

Kaplan, E. Ann, ed.  

Kristeva, Julia  

Kroker, Arthur, and David Cook  

Lacan, Jacques  

Li, Lillian M.  

Lyotard, Jean Francois  
Moore, Henrietta
Nicolson, Linda, ed.
Noble, David F.
Ong, Aihwa
Peters, Thomas J.
Prutt, Ida
Rabinow, Paul
Rofel, Lisa
Rosaldo, Renato
Saussure, Ferdinand de
1986 Course in General Linguistics. Roy Harris, trans. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court.
Schram, Stuart R.
Soja, Edward W.
Spence, Jonathan D.
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty
Taylor, F. W.
Urla, Jacqueline
Wakeman, Frederic, Jr.
Walder, Andrew
Wallerstein, Immanuel
Weston, Kathleen
1990   Do Clothes Make the Woman? Gender Theory and Lesbian Eroticism. Arizona
       State West University, unpublished MS.
Williams, Raymond
Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui
Zito, Angela
1989   Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance: Ritual and Writing in Eighteenth Century