



Actions at the Margins

Author(s): Lau Kin Chi

Source: *Signs*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Spring 2011), pp. 551-560

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/657493>

Accessed: 20/10/2011 11:24

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Signs*.

References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1994. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin.
- . 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boraine, Alex. 2000. *A Country Unmasked*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Eliot, T. S. 1920. "Gerontion." In *Ara Vos Prec*. London: Ovid.
- Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla. 2008. "Trauma, Forgiveness and the Witnessing Dance: Making Public Spaces Intimate." *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 53(2): 169–88.
- . 2009. "Working through the Past: Some Thoughts on Forgiveness in Cultural Context." In *Memory, Narrative, and Forgiveness: Perspectives on the Unfinished Journeys of the Past*, ed. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Chris van der Merwe, 148–69. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 1994. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Guenther, Lisa. 2006. *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1991. *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Saunders, Lesley. 1988. *Glancing Fires*. London: Women's Press.
- Tavuchis, Nicholas. 1991. *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Tutu, Desmond Mpilo. 1999. *No Future without Forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday.
- Waterhouse, Ruth. 1993. "The Inverted Gaze." In *Body Matters: Essays on the Sociology of the Body*, ed. Sue Scott and David Morgan, 105–21. London: Routledge.

Actions at the Margins

Lau Kin Chi

In *Grassroots Post-modernism*, Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash proclaim: "An epic is unfolding at the grassroots. . . . The promise and the search for a new era beyond modernity are a matter of life and death, of sheer survival, for these struggling billions—whom social plan-

ners call ‘the masses,’ ‘the people’ or ‘common’ men and women. Daily, they are compelled to invent postmodern social realities to escape the ‘scientific’ or even the ‘lay’ clutches of modernity” (Esteva and Prakash 1998, 1–2). The rural reconstruction movement that has unfolded in China since the turn of the millennium is one of these responses to the tide of drastic changes brought about by whirling currents of modernization.¹ Notwithstanding the worldwide enthusiasm about China’s so-called open-door reform, only a small fraction of China’s population has managed to gain access to the lines of social mobility necessary to become the *nouveau riche* and the middle class. The majority find themselves subjected to an absurd situation: only modernization can offer them a life of dignity and well-being, yet for modernization to take its course, they must become expendable. It is this contradiction in the modernization process that also reveals the conditions of possibility for escape. While the majority are being marginalized, left behind, or excluded, they are at the same time being inserted into hierarchically ordered systems of dependence, particularly with respect to the markets, which are increasingly becoming the sole suppliers of the means for satisfying people’s needs. Modernization’s double bind of inclusion-cum-exclusion solicits the people to act against foreign threats for the building of a strong China. It requires the people to surrender their agency to the state, becoming at once dependent on and expendable to the state in exchange for promises that are, ironically, not meant for those assigned to the position of the expendable.

In the face of such a contradiction, the rural reconstruction movement seeks to take hold of the uncertainties occurring as a result of the breakdown of dependency in order to work out something different within the relentless march of modernization. Adopting the language of official promises, it promotes Three Ps—people’s livelihood, people’s solidarity, and people’s cultural diversity—through the regeneration of local land, water, food, energy, biodiversity, and communities (Wen 2008).

Mariarosa Dalla Costa uses the term “reruralizing the world” to denote the endeavors to recover the concept of the land/earth as a common good, “above all as a source of life, of nourishment, and therefore of plenty if preserved as a system capable of reproducing itself” (Dalla Costa 2007, 114). She points to the paramount importance of “a different will regarding the relationship to the earth, one that plays itself out through farming,” as a “first step towards a different will regarding modalities of

¹ For more details on the unfolding of the rural reconstruction movement, see Lau (2008, 194–97).

life in their entirety, a different food project for a different social project” (117).

What supports reruralizing is not only a different will regarding the relationship to the land/earth but also a different will regarding human relationships. The rural stands not for nostalgia for the bygone or resentment of the modern but for a different mode of relating to fellow humans and to nature. It is a breaking free from the assemblages that reduce society to an economy, allowing the economy to be reembedded into society and culture as part of the ethicopolitical question of the articulation of collectivity.

Along this line of thinking, a global project named 1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005 was launched in 2003, attempting to articulate the thoughts and actions of subalterns inhabiting the margins. Across the globe, nominations were invited, and after selection and documentation, one thousand women from over 150 countries were collectively nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. In 2006, the project was renamed PeaceWomen across the Globe.²

Women have been chosen by this project without the intention of essentialization or biological polarization against men. In highlighting women’s nurturing relations in everyday life, which are critical for overcoming violence and fostering lasting peace, women as a category is used in order to stress the historical marginalization and exclusion of women. The marginalization of women, like that of the indigenous, rural, and other groups, needs to be examined against the complex relations of forces that keep them in the position of subalternity. At the same time, women’s initiatives and resistances from the margins also need to be made visible and represented so that they can inspire imaginings of different modes of relating and becoming, different modes for producing life and subjectivities, so that people’s initiatives from different quarters can converse with one another.

From the position of subalternity, which is produced in a complex of shifting relations of forces in daily life, the initiatives of women pursuing paths regarded as impossible, irrational, and impractical by the rational minds that see with the eye of the center and speak the language of the center have much to teach us—not only of the wisdom and the audacity they show but also of the possibility of changing the relations between

² See <http://www.1000peacewomen.org> and <http://www.1000peacewomen-china.org>.

center and margin. PeaceWomen across the Globe is a global project of hope, of the alliance of hope.³

While most of these women work primarily at the grassroots level, in different locations with their respective specificities, they are not isolated in their conditions of marginalization. The forces of industrialization, urbanization, and marketization in the service of modernization have driven millions of rural women to seek work in the cities, with almost no protection against exploitative and appalling working and living conditions. The same forces require other women to stay behind to till the land alone while men seek jobs in the cities, lured by the possibility of higher earnings. However insecure and underpaid these jobs in the cities may be, they still represent a change from the state of being driven into indebtedness by the agrichemical methods of modern farming imposed by the world market in agricultural products.

For the subaltern of the so-called underdeveloped countries, globalization is, on the one hand, the globalization of conditions of exclusion and marginalization and, on the other hand, the globalization of dependency on the market for commodities and services “prescribed” for consumers.⁴ In other words, in order to enact this double bind that includes by excluding (and vice versa), local cultural practices, knowledges, and skills that resist commodification and sustain more or less self-reliant local groups and relations of interdependence among them must be destroyed. The marginalized, particularly women, are immersed in hostile territories flooded with do-not-enter signs. One of the driving forces behind the PeaceWomen Project is the desire to build a platform for women to tell their stories to one another. These are stories of the efforts women have made to turn limiting conditions into openings by relating to those conditions in innovative ways, actualizing potentials for connection other than those dominated by the forces of commodification within global capital.

The PeaceWomen’s nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize is thus an

³ This project shares the spirit of hope with many similar efforts that view the starting point not as something in the distant future but as an engagement with the present. For example, the People’s Plan for the Twenty-First Century (PP21) was an effort to build an alliance of hope in Asia; the keyword for the 1989 PP21 gathering in Minamata, Japan, was *janakashaba*, meaning “a world standing not like this” (Lau, Daniel, and Fernando 1996, 345). The World Social Forum has as its slogan “Another world is possible,” and when the Chinese delegation I was part of in 2002 rendered the slogan into Chinese for the parade banner, we paraphrased it as “Can this world afford not to change?”

⁴ For a critique of the discursive and nondiscursive practices of development and the justification of capitalist expansion with the inauguration of the concept of underdevelopment, see Goldsmith (1996) and Sachs (1996).

intervention into the dominant politics of recognition by making the efforts of women visible. Women's efforts at the margins are largely invisible and not only because they are deemed too minor, local, and fragmentary by the global perspective that establishes itself as the dominant center by excluding what it cannot domesticate. They are also made invisible by the logic of the destructive forces of globalization and modernization: that which is to be destroyed must be dismissed; that which resists such destruction must be made invisible.

Thus, making visible the invisible is an intervention of countermemory, countering the scripted memory of that which destroys in the name of progress, growth, and development for the benefit of mankind. Furthermore, the intervention itself is an effort to make possible the impossible by turning limiting conditions into openings for something unlikely to happen—the world media coverage of that which is considered to be local, fragmentary, and unlikely to ever amount to anything. This making visible is above all an announcement of the actualization of women's capacity to multiply connections. It is the capacity to multiply connections in the face of marginalization and exclusion that is being communicated rather than a notion of individual genius. It is not about conferring praise on an individual's contribution to the progress of mankind toward a better future. Instead, this capacity to turn constraints into a space for maneuvering exists within the interactions among individual efforts and within the complex relations of forces constituting the specific milieu in which the individual is immersed.

The turning around of constraints is at the same time a critique of institutional violences, and in this respect it is very different from the usual practice in which a ruling body identifies particular individuals as laudable for an important achievement for mankind. This kind of institutional praise is directed at a future that does not necessarily require the questioning of the status quo as a precondition for its imagining.

The intervention that makes capacities visible as productive critical energy also foregrounds a different relation to the concept of peace. The women's efforts to turn constraints around by making connections that are unimaginable from the perspectives that underlie instruments of exclusion and marginalization are at the same time a multiplication of affective relations actualized in the intersections of daily lives. These efforts are not reducible to the global level of relations among states or to the question of state security. It is in and through the immersion in the present, in the immediate web of relations of forces affecting and being affected by one another, that the women's efforts disclose the understanding that lasting peace is more than the prevention of war and abuse of power by

political means, democratic institutions, and the rule of law. That is, the efforts of states are inadequate and may not be the most effective means for the realization of peace. Any genuine concern for peace must recognize everyday life as the site of contestation for a deeper understanding of the work in building affective bonds and cooperative relations among people and between people and nature—work essential to guaranteeing lasting peace.⁵

A Story

The story of Wang Pinsong and her community is an inspiring example from which efforts to counter the forces of modernization, including the efforts of the rural reconstruction movement, can learn. Wang is a PeaceWoman nominated from China. She is aged but not frail, widowed but not solitary, marked by the hard lines of life but not miserable or plaintive. Hope is generously on offer from her.

In 1924, Wang was born in Shangri-La by the Gold Sand River in southwest China, which has been inhabited by over fifteen ethnic groups for generations and generations; Wang's family alone is composed of five ethnicities.⁶ The many ethnic groups celebrate their histories with rich indigenous traditions and rituals, with a particular respect for nature.⁷

⁵ The project has evoked much interest and enthusiasm in many parts of the world. Even the Nobel Peace Prize Committee endorsed a special process for this nomination. Normally, nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize should remain confidential. For this project, however, confidentiality cannot be adhered to because it is precisely the point of the project to make visible the contributions of one thousand women who represent millions of women. Without depending on winning the Peace Prize for its development, before the end of 2005 the project had produced a 2,200-page book and an exhibition featuring the one thousand women and their stories. Within five years, over one thousand exhibitions in various languages had been staged across the globe.

⁶ Wang is of Bai ethnicity, her husband Han, her daughter-in-law Naxi, and her granddaughters-in-law Pumi and Hui.

⁷ For example, a Naxi legend goes like this. In the remote past, Nature and Human were half brothers and played and slept together when they were small. When they grew up, in scrambling for property, Human used his killing skills to massacre the beasts and used his metal and fire to slash and burn the forests. Nature waited for some time, then hurricanes came with hail, dark clouds hurled heavy rain, lightning and thunder ravaged, the mountains shook, the torrents swallowed up farms and fields, and the beasts came after Human. The weaker brother, Human, was totally crushed, and he pleaded for the intervention of the God of the Heavens, whose mediation brought Nature and Human to the negotiation table. The two signed a pledge, whereby Human agreed not to shoot the deer, catch the fish, hunt the bear, destroy the forest, or pollute the lake, and Nature agreed not to hurl hurricanes with hail, floods with landslides, earthquakes with thunders, or plagues. Nature also agreed to

The name Pinsong literally means “character of the pine-tree,” that is, integrity and uprightness. Wang has lived all her life in Shangri-La, though she almost went away to see the larger world. Upon finishing primary school, she stole away from home, walked three days to the town to sit for an examination for normal school, and came in second in the examination, but her family refused to let her study because she was a girl. She taught arithmetic for one year in a primary school, becoming the first woman teacher in the region. At nineteen, she married. The tradition in her region was that men busied themselves in the arts—music, calligraphy, painting, and poetry—while all labor at home and in the fields was left to the women. Wang’s husband was often away from home, and he returned to Shangri-La as the first Communist Party member in the village. With her husband sometimes hiding in the mountains for revolutionary work, Wang assisted in communication and liaison activities. Her eyes glistened with pride when she recounted how when once soldiers came to make arrests, she ran up the hill faster than the soldiers to alert the party members.⁸ After the Communist Party came to power in 1949, though, the family suffered because of their background in the landlord class, and they engaged in heavy labor throughout the years until 1978.

Today, Wang is most revered in the village for her capability, generosity, and optimism. As a midwife, she has welcomed three generations into the world. Wang is addressed intimately by all as “grandma,” and she is respected and loved for her dedication and simplicity. The sense of community in this region has always been strong. With so many ethnic groups living in the village, a culture of tolerance and mutual respect has prevailed. In this region, people relate in a special way. Those born in the same year, regardless of race, ethnicity, or clan, relate to each other as “kin of the same root” and remain friends throughout their lives. In addition, all their relationships are extended, so that the father, mother, brother, or cousin of a “root kin” are one’s “root” father, mother, brother, or cousin. Hence, all families in the village are related in one way or another, becoming one big family. A special respect for difference and diversity is unique in this rural region by the beautiful river.

With such bonds of intimacy in the village, it is not surprising that the

allow Human to hunt, graze, farm, and use the woods and rivers. In return, Human agreed to perform a ritual every year to show appreciation to the favors of Nature. This ritual has continued to this day (He 1997).

⁸ During the author’s interview with Wang at her village in December 2005, her kin and neighbors were also invited to the gathering around the fireplace in Wang’s home. Wang recounted this experience with laughter, which was complemented by remarks from the other women who were present.

villagers have been united in their resistance against the project of the building of a dam at the Tiger Leap Gorge. If the dam were built, one hundred thousand would be displaced, and thirty-three thousand acres of fertile land by the riverbanks would be submerged and the diverse cultures of this region destroyed along with it. The villagers have responded to the developers' solicitation of the conditions for them to sell the land: "There is no condition; our land is not for sale; our land is priceless; our land is our very dear life; we are not giving it up; if it will be so, let us be submerged with our land" (in Lau 2005–6, 82). The villagers have organized art troupes to tour the region with their own songs:

Of beauty and calm is Gold Sand River,
 Now put at stake at developers' hand;
 We compatriots and natives here,
 Arm in arm, defend our land.
 Of beauty and calm is our native land,
 The solidarity of all ethnicities
 Makes a bond
 For us to defend Gold Sand land.
 The land is invaluable treasure for us peasants,
 Tons of gold cannot part us from our land.

The deep involvement of the villagers with one another in their daily lives and in their actions against the dam is something like a second nature to them, a nature grounded in their ties to, and their care for, the soil, the mountains, the water, the plants, and the people that constitute their world. The diversity of nature nurtures them as they oblige themselves to nurture the diversity of nature in return. Hence, like nature, they are open to diversity and difference, the critical life force of all sustaining relations of peace.

Wang has lived through the most tumultuous years of the twentieth century and experienced the many ups and downs at the grass roots. Amid the turmoil of war and revolution, amid the aspirations for peace and freedom, she has lived with her personal pains and losses. She has suffered the traumatic loss of her eldest grandson, Xiao Liangzhong, who died a premature death in the course of fighting against the building of the Tiger Leap Gorge dam.

What Michel de Certeau says about the indigenous peoples of the Americas is also true for this respectable woman: "The body is memory. . . . This *tortured* body and another body, the *altered earth*, represent a

beginning, a rebirth of the will to *construct* a *political* association. A unity born of hardship and resistance to hardship is the historical locus, the collective memory of the social body, where a will that neither confirms nor denies this writing of history originates. It deciphers the scars on the body proper [*le corps propre*]*—*or the fallen ‘heroes’ and ‘martyrs’ who correspond to them in narrative*—*as the index of a *history* yet to be made” (de Certeau 1986, 227). Wang’s suffering opens her heart to other sufferings. The affective bonds connecting her to the soil sustain her efforts, opening her to connections for a future to come.⁹

Brian Massumi has argued for “a politics of *belonging* instead of a politics of identity, of correlated emergence instead of separate domains of interest attracting each other or colliding in predictable ways” (2003, 223). He proposes that instead of exclusive identities, which require one to champion or denounce particular identities or positions, the focus of politics could be on how practices interact in an open field, how they belong to an indeterminate and emergent “sociality,” and how things can “meet at the edges and pass into each other” (240). With this emphasis on perceiving all borders as “porous” (230), Massumi quotes Gilles Deleuze: “We need to be able to find a way to ‘believe in the world’ again.” Massumi continues: “We have to live our immersion in the world, really experience our belonging to this world, which is the same thing as our belonging to each other, and live that so intensely together that there is no room to doubt the reality of it. . . . Because it’s all about being in *this* world. . . . Ethical, empirical—and creative, because your participation in this world is part of a global becoming” (Massumi 2003, 242).

On the level of affect, Wang is inspiring in her practices. She shows us the potentialities of the politics of becoming, a politics characterized by openness. Wang is open to a quiet passion for life, a reticent intimacy with her community, a furious tenderness for the land, a tender fury against injustice and exploitation, and an uncertain living in the present, with hope. It is an affirmation of life that allows one to immerse oneself in it, opening to the capacity to affect and be affected. In the face of the daily forces of marginalization churned out by institutional violences—political, economic, and legal—as well as cultural violences along axes of ethnicity and gender, the practices of Wang and many women of her generation exhibit ingenuity and determination in their unyielding efforts to inhabit the margins. They show us how to imagine peace without succumbing to the institutional and cultural violences that dominate the understanding

⁹ A documentary film has been made featuring Wang and other PeaceWomen in China called *Let the World See* (2007).

of peace. They show us that peace is not an end to be achieved by people vying for the center of control. They show us that peace is a pedagogical process here and now in our daily lives, a process through which we continuously learn to live with differences and diversities in relating to one another and to nature, with the readiness to be responsive to the other. It is a process through which difference, rather than being threatening and in need of eradication, nourishes and enriches us.

Department of Cultural Studies
Lingnan University

References

- Dalla Costa, Mariarosa. 2007. "Reruralizing the World." Trans. Enda Brophy. *Commoner* 12:111–18.
- De Certeau, Michel. 1986. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Esteva, Gustavo, and Madhu Suri Prakash. 1998. *Grassroots Post-modernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures*. London: Zed.
- Goldsmith, Edward. 1996. "Development as Colonialism." In *The Case against the Global Economy: And for a Turn toward the Local*, ed. Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith, 253–66. San Francisco: Sierra Club.
- He Pinzheng (強暴·戰爭與民族主義). 1997. "多彩的和平" [A pledge with the mountain gods]. *Shancha: 恐懼·暴力·家園·女人* [Camellia: A journal of human geography], 2.
- Lau Kin Chi. 2005–6. "Culture chinoise contre capitalisme sauvage" [Chinese culture against primitive capitalism]. *Maniere de voir, Le Monde diplomatique* [Point of view, diplomatic world], December–January, 82–83.
- . 2008. "Economic Representation and Subjectification: China and Modernization." In *Economic Representations: Academic and Everyday*, ed. David Ruccio, 183–98. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lau Kin Chi, Lakshmi Daniel, and Tarsi Fernando, eds. 1996. *Shaping Our Future: Asian Pacific People's Convergence: People's Plan for the 21st Century*. Hong Kong: PP21.
- Let the World See*. 2007. Directed by Kou Yanding. Produced by Lau Kin Chi, Dai Jinhua, and Chan Shun-hing. Hong Kong: Lingnan University.
- Massumi, Brian. 2003. "Navigating Movements." With Mary Zournazi. In *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*, by Mary Zournazi, 210–42. New York: Routledge.
- Sachs, Wolfgang. 1996. "Neo-development: 'Global Ecological Management.'" In *The Case against the Global Economy: And for a Turn toward the Local*, ed. Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith, 239–52. San Francisco: Sierra Club.
- Wen Tiejun. 2008. "Four Stories in One: Environmental Protection and Rural Reconstruction in China." Trans. Lau Kin Chi. *Positions* 16(3):491–505.