

# SARS, a shipwreck, a NATO attack, and September 11, 2001:

## Global information flows and Chinese responses to tragic news events

### ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine how Chinese citizens in China and abroad used discourses of Chinese backwardness to make sense of tragic news events while simultaneously trying to avoid becoming identified with that backwardness. I focus on various interpretations of NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999; the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks; the sinking of a Chinese ferry in 1999; and the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic to explore how Chinese citizens negotiated between their own ambivalent loyalties and the contradictory official, unofficial, local, national, and international narratives in which these events were embedded. These negotiations suggest that global information flows are creating a transnational panopticon that increasingly enables neoliberal governmentality to operate on transnational levels. [*China, globalization, media, citizenship, nationalism, identity, death*]

**I**n this article, I examine how Chinese citizens used a discourse of Chinese backwardness to make sense of tragic news events while simultaneously trying to avoid becoming identified with that backwardness. I focus here on four events that provoked powerful emotional responses among Chinese citizens I met in the course of my research among urban Chinese families and among youth from China studying in Europe, the United States, and Australia:<sup>1</sup> the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on May 8, 1999; terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001 (9/11); a Chinese shipwreck on November 24, 1999; and the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic that originated in China and spread worldwide in the spring of 2003. Although many other events in the news as well as in the daily lives of Chinese people I knew also provoked discussions of the issues of backwardness and modernization that I explore in this article, I have chosen to focus on these four events because they were discussed by the largest number of people I knew in Dalian for the longest time after they occurred. By examining how discourses of backwardness and modernization shaped Chinese reactions to these tragic news events, I show how the increasing speed, intensity, and volume of global information flows are enabling the panoptic schema and governmentality described by Michel Foucault (1977, 1979, 1983) to operate not only at the individual and national levels but also on the world stage.

Tragic news events are particularly likely to highlight the issues at stake because of the intense emotions and extensive discussions they generate (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997). Although tragedies are overwhelming when they seem senseless (Behar 1991), they can serve as sites of meaning making when they are interpreted as part of broader narratives. As Eric Muegler notes, "Mourning engages with power not as private, micropolitical maneuvering, but as a collective ethics, meant to manage the ways the daily, creative activity of production is brought into relation with abstract economic forces and the political authority imagined to underlie them" (1998:983). Tragic news events like those I discuss in this article are thus important sites for struggles over political meanings, which in China often

revolve around the manipulation of information that can affect perceptions and constructions of China's image on the world stage.

The news media stake their legitimacy and purpose on claims of providing accurate information about events that have actually happened. Yet even accurate information is conveyed through subjective representations that make sense of actual events through the lens of broader narratives. As Foucault argues, "There is a battle 'for truth,' or at least 'around truth' . . . it's not a matter of a battle on behalf of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic, political role it plays" (1980:132). Here, I show how reactions to tragic news events can reveal how Chinese citizens deal with battles about the status of truth in their relationships with the Chinese state and the global neoliberal system.

The Chinese state had the upper hand in these battles under the Maoist government (1949–76), which maintained strict controls over the flow of information and resisted processes of globalization. As the post-Mao government began promoting globalization and a market economy, however, its control over information flows weakened. Mayfair Yang (1997, 2002) observed that global information flows liberated Chinese citizens from the centralized power of the Chinese state, even while drawing them and the Chinese state itself toward global capitalism. As telephones, televisions, radios, cell phones, Internet access, foreign language skills, international travelers, and Chinese citizens who had spent time abroad became increasingly common in China (Constable 2003; Link et al. 2002; Louie 2000; Lozada 2006; Nonini and Ong 1997; Pieke et al. 2004; Siu 2005; Smart and Smart 1998), it became difficult for the Chinese state to control the flow of information into, out of, and within China. Global information flows carried international narratives of Chinese backwardness in ways that alarmed Chinese citizens, even as such narratives enabled them to construct alternatives to the perspectives presented by the state-controlled Chinese media and to use these alternatives to critique the Chinese state.

Confronted with such alternatives, the post-Mao Chinese state tried to bolster its own legitimacy with official narratives that drew on subtler versions of strategies practiced by the Maoist government. Like their predecessors in the Maoist government, post-Mao Chinese leaders have trumpeted China's achievements of modernization (*xiandaihua*). At the same time, they have encouraged the state-controlled media to use depictions of Chinese backwardness to dramatize such achievements. The Maoist government had promoted "speaking bitterness" (*suku*) rituals, during which people publicly declared how they had suffered prior to Communist rule (Anagnost 1997). Drawing on a similar strategy, the post-Mao government often condoned media representations of Chinese backwardness to legitimate its own role as rescuer of the Chinese nation, co-opting the

same international discourses of Chinese backwardness that Chinese citizens often used to critique the Chinese state. But unlike Maoist "speaking bitterness" rituals, which recalled how backward China had been prior to Maoist rule, post-Mao representations of backwardness were often drawn from the present or the very recent past.

Although this post-Mao state strategy was necessary to deflect the critiques of an increasingly well-informed citizenry, it was also dangerous because it could reinforce Chinese citizens' sense that their state had failed in the very modernization project that served as the basis of its legitimacy. This strategy depended on fraught negotiations of "public secrets" of the kind described by Michael Taussig (1999) and Andrew Shryock (2004b)—embarrassing secrets that are widely known and constantly retold yet also constantly denied. Michael Herzfeld argues that, although such public secrets can undercut the national reputation promoted by the state, "most nationalisms would have a hard time keeping popular support without such disruptive familiarities" (1997:28), which flourish within insider zones of "cultural intimacy" that are supposed to remain hidden from outsiders. As Taussig observes, "Wherever there is power, there is secrecy, except it is not only secrecy that lies at the core of power, but public secrecy" (1999:7).

The discourse of Chinese backwardness is steeped in this kind of public secrecy, based simultaneously on an uneasy recognition that China is defined as backward by international discourses and on the insistence that this backwardness can be, and indeed already has been, eliminated by the quest for modernization. The increasingly rapid and accessible information flows that have accompanied globalization have increased the likelihood of publicity even as they have raised the stakes of secrecy on a world stage where an embarrassing national reputation can lead to economic impoverishment and military encroachment as well as personal humiliation. The result is a globalization of the Foucauldian panopticon and the disciplining of nation-states as well as individuals in a regime of global neoliberal governmentality.

Foucault argues that, in the carceral culture created by the panopticon, one "who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (1977:202–203). Although Foucault's discussions of the panopticon focus on institutions such as hospitals, workshops, schools, and prisons, he also argues that "Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used" (1977:205). The panoptic schema thus serves as the basis of the modern national government, which enforces its governmentality through a combination of state bureaucracy, institutions

run by professional experts, and individual self-governance, all of which draw their power from the assumption of constant mutual surveillance.

Anthropologists working in China have found the panoptic schema a powerful explanation for the relationships between state power, governmentality, neoliberal discourses, and individual discipline in understandings and implementations of national policies such as birth limitation, the cultivation of healthy bodies, the maintenance of boundaries between rural and urban citizens, and neoliberal economic reforms (Anagnost 1997; Farquhar 2002; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Kohrman 2004, 2005; Pun 2005; Rofel 1999; Yan 2003a, 2003b; Zhan 2006; Zhang 2001). I extend their analysis by using ethnographic observations grounded in a longitudinal study of the lives of Chinese individuals to show how global information flows have created a transnational panopticon that works simultaneously at the individual, national, and global levels. This transnational panopticon enforces a transnational, neoliberal governmentality that disciplines the behaviors of governments as well as the individuals they govern. As the institutions, experts, and standards for individual self-governance instrumental to governmentality have become increasingly globalized and transnational, so has governmentality itself.

### **Global information flows, the transnational panopticon, and discourses of backwardness and modernization**

Global information flows are a cause as well as an effect of the neoliberal governmentality that originated in and has been promoted and enforced by the developed world—a loosely organized and flexibly bounded but increasingly united formation of countries that consistently place at the top of GDP per capita rankings. These countries are often referred to as the “First World” or the “core regions,” recognize each other as political and military allies, and participate in reciprocal visa waiver programs that allow each other’s citizens to travel quickly and easily across each other’s boundaries while strictly excluding citizens of developing countries. Australia, Canada, Japan, the United States, and the western European countries are usually included on each other’s lists of developed countries and are recognized as developed countries by leaders and citizens of countries that are not on those lists. Chinese people commonly refer to the developed countries as “fada guojia,” in contrast to China and other “fazhanzhong guojia” (developing countries).<sup>2</sup>

Although national borders are important for separating the developed from the developing, they are also porous enough to allow the developed world to encompass developed individuals from developing countries. As Aihwa Ong notes, neoliberalism “is allied to a moralized system of distributive justice that is detachable from legal citizenship status” (2006:16), and the rise of “flexible citizenship” (Ong

1999) has enabled enterprising individuals to transcend the borders of their developing countries. Global information flows move through and are shaped by all countries that participate in the global neoliberal system, but they are dominated by the developed world, and particularly by the developed countries with the greatest economic, military, and political power (Caton 1999; Pedelty 1995; Peterson 2003; Velthuis 2006). Although the global neoliberal governmentality that results in and from global information flows is accepted and promoted (albeit to varying degrees) by all countries and individuals that are part of the developed world or seeking to join it, it disproportionately draws support from and favors the perspectives of those countries and individuals with a disproportionate share of economic, military, and political power (Hardt and Negri 2001; Harvey 2003; Ho 2004; Lutz 2006; Wood 2003).

China’s participation in this system of global neoliberal governmentality has subjected Chinese individuals as well as the Chinese state to the panoptic surveillance and discipline of global information flows, operating in the form of news, entertainment, academic discourses, and the personal communications of travelers and migrants. Media producers from developed countries situate China in often contradictory but coexisting narratives of “China as powerful rival and threat” and “China as poor, backward country stuck in the past.” The particular emphases of these narratives may vary from country to country and from individual to individual, but the technologies and economics of the developed countries’ news media ensure a remarkable consensus in the broader narratives they produce about developing countries (Baisnee and Marchetti 2006; Hannerz 2004; Peterson 2003; Sreberny and Paterson 2004). At the same time, in a world of increasingly rapid, powerful, and difficult-to-block global information flows, developed countries’ narratives have themselves become products of, as well as sources for, the contradictory but coexisting narratives of backwardness and modernity produced by developing countries (Bishara 2006; Caton 2006; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Hasty 2005; Nyamnjoh 2005; Ong 1999, 2006; Pedelty 1995; Pederson 2003; Smith 2007; Stahlberg 2002). Such struggles over narratives of modernity and backwardness frame the reactions of Chinese leaders, journalists, and citizens when they are confronted with tragic news events.

In Chinese citizens’ conversations with each other and with me, I noticed that they frequently used the term *backward* (*luohou*) to describe all the ways China’s society, culture, and economy lag behind those of the developed world. The poverty, ignorance, corruption, weakness, inefficiency, cultural inferiority, low technology, and “low quality” they considered typical of life in China were all cited as evidence of “backwardness.”<sup>3</sup> The antidote to backwardness was modernization (*xiandaihua*), which they defined in the same way many developed-world social scientists did: as progress toward the adoption of a modern economy that is likely to

improve a society's position in the global neoliberal system (Friedman 2000; Fukuyama 1992; Goode 1970; Inkeles 1974, 1983; Lerner 1958; Parsons 1971; Rostow 1990). Such progress could be measured objectively by statistical indicators of health, education, living standards, demographic patterns, and per-capita GDP and subjectively by the degree of a society's cultural resemblance to the countries widely acknowledged as developed (Fong 2004b; Greenhalgh 2003b, 2005a, 2005b).

Chinese citizens' anxieties about backwardness and modernization are part of a global narrative about the teleological, dichotomous, unilineal evolutionist division of the world into developed countries that sit at the top of the global social, economic, and political hierarchy and developing countries that must play by the rules of the global neoliberal system to modernize and become developed. This narrative portrays developed countries as existing in the present and developing countries as existing in the past and denies their contemporaneity and mutual influence (Fabian 1983). Although this narrative has saturated everyday and official discourses in developing as well as developed countries, its roots lie in the imperialist-colonialist campaigns that originated in western Europe (Wolff 1994). This narrative was eventually adopted by most countries worldwide.

The global neoliberal system of today is rooted in the capitalist world system, which began with the emergence of capitalism in western Europe during the 15th century, spread until it encompassed almost every area of the world, and based itself on an international division of labor that divided the world into "core" and "peripheral" regions (Wallerstein 1974, 1979, 1998; Wallerstein and Smith 1992). Teleological, allochronic, unilineal evolutionist discourses were developed by the core regions to explain and justify the inequalities that structured the capitalist world system and to legitimate that system by promising an evolutionist path by which peripheral countries and individuals that played by the rules of the capitalist world system could modernize and eventually become part of the developed world. As the developed countries became increasingly invested in globalization, a knowledge-based economy, and Western-style democracy, the capitalist world system increasingly based itself on neoliberalism, which David Harvey defined as a "theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2005:2). As the proportion of individuals who submitted to neoliberal governmentality increased, the capitalist world system developed into a global neoliberal system. This system is based on the same hierarchies and exchanges that structured the capitalist world system but offers individuals greater opportunities for deterritorialization, flexible citizenship, and transcendence of state sovereignties (Ong 1999, 2006).

A variety of responses to the hegemony of developed countries' teleological narratives of development have emerged among citizens of developing countries. Some who tried to play by the rules of those narratives, but ended up much worse off than they were before, responded with despair and disillusionment (Errington and Gewertz 2004; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1999; Gewertz and Errington 1999; Smith 2007). Some accepted teleological narratives but inverted these narratives' implicit prestige hierarchies by emphasizing the superiority of the past and the inferiority of the present, or asserted that they themselves were actually part of the developed present rather than the backward past (Berdahl 1999; Glaeser 2000; Herzfeld 1987). Although some countries and some individuals are more likely than others to favor one or another of them, these discourses usually coexist in the same country and can also be espoused by the same individual at different times, as I often saw in my discussions with Chinese citizens.

Increasing access to the global neoliberal system's narratives, which assumed, enacted, and proclaimed developed countries' superiority over China while exposing problems that the Chinese government tried to cover up, caused many Chinese citizens to perceive their country as backward and challenge the Chinese state's claims of development. The Maoist government had kept the Chinese media silent about Chinese problems, and even about devastating disasters like the famine that accompanied the Great Leap Forward (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996), but the post-Mao government could no longer do so. To attain the credibility necessary for profitability in an increasingly market-driven economy, the Chinese media had to report bad news about China that Chinese citizens were likely to learn from international sources anyway.

The state-controlled Chinese media thus became complicit in the same global information flows that threatened the legitimacy of the Chinese state. Even state-approved stories in the Chinese media about the triumphs of state campaigns against crime, corruption, poverty, unemployment, and various political and religious dissidents could be picked up by the international media, transformed into stories about the backwardness of China's social, political, and economic system, and pumped back into China through the Internet; international travelers; Chinese citizens who returned from abroad; television and radio broadcasts from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and organizations like the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Voice of America; and Chinese media refutations of international claims about Chinese backwardness that served to confirm the existence of those claims. The Chinese media were also free to broadcast news about events, ideas, and people in other parts of the world that had no overt relation to Chinese problems. Music, movies, and television shows from abroad were widely circulated in China, either through official channels or through an illegal but ubiquitous trade in pirated video compact discs.

Although not explicitly critical of China, even global flows of supposedly apolitical information produced yearnings for the lifestyles and opportunities available abroad and dissatisfaction with the unavailability of those lifestyles and opportunities in China. As Arjun Appadurai argues, global information flows can cause people worldwide to “no longer see their lives as mere outcomes of the givenness of things, but often as the ironic compromise between what they could imagine and what social life will permit” (1996:54).

Like many anthropologists from developed countries who study developing countries they identify with (Behar 1996; Dominguez 2000; Ebron 2002; Louie 2004; Mankekar 1999; Smith 2007), I was ambivalent about how I should understand and respond to the discourses of inequality that underlay many conversations I heard or participated in during my research. Because of the identification with China that I felt as a person of Chinese descent and because of the values I held as an anthropologist with egalitarian ideals, I was initially dismayed that just about everyone I met in China complained about their country's inferiority to developed countries. I insisted to them that developed countries had their own share of problems, such as poverty, loneliness, violence, crime, racism, family instability, and overcommodification, and that Chinese life had many advantages missing in developed countries, such as stronger ties of kinship and friendship and the excitement and opportunities that came with rapid social change. Chinese citizens who heard my arguments insisted that developed countries' problems were natural and inconsequential compared with Chinese problems, claimed that what I considered Chinese advantages were actually Chinese problems, and redoubled their condemnation of China. They chided me for forsaking my duty, as an “American scholar” with “the most modern education,” to criticize backward aspects of Chinese society. As one high school teacher told me, “We need you to tell us which of our methods are unscientific, so we can modernize.” Like many anthropologists from developed countries who work in developing countries where people yearn to become part of the developed world (Gutmann 2002; Lemon 1998; Pigg 1996; Schein 2000), I was often put in the uncomfortable position of being asked to evaluate the progress the society I studied was making toward becoming more similar to developed countries, even though I felt ambivalent about whether attaining such similarity was a desirable goal.

Eventually, though, I grew tired of trying to defend China and started joking and complaining about China's problems in the same way I had heard many Chinese citizens do. To my surprise, my Chinese interlocutors responded with indignation. Many who started out complaining about China's problems switched, as soon as I concurred with them, to passionately defending China, saying that the problems they had complained about were inevitable because of historical and economic circumstances, were not the fault of the Chinese government or people, were likely to be overcome

soon, and were similar to or less serious than problems in developed countries. My defense of China had positioned me as a loyal Chinese descendant eager to downplay Chinese backwardness. As long as I played this role, Chinese citizens felt comfortable about including me in a zone of cultural intimacy in which complaints about Chinese backwardness were safe, and they even suggested that I should criticize China as well. As soon as I did so, however, I positioned myself as an arrogant American and a disloyal Chinese who had to be reminded of the importance of protecting cultural intimacies. This pattern was often repeated during discussions of news events that highlighted inequalities between China and developed countries.

### **Negotiating China's place in the world: The NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999**

Ambivalence about the public secret of Chinese backwardness was evident in the way people I knew in Dalian discussed the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. From March 24 to June 10, 1999, NATO forces conducted air strikes to force Serbia to withdraw its troops from Kosovo, a Serbian province where the Albanian majority was demanding autonomy. The Chinese government opposed these air strikes because they could set a precedent for foreign military intervention to help Taiwan gain independence from China. The Chinese media did not present extensive coverage of the situation, however, until May 8, 1999, when NATO forces bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists and injuring 20 other Chinese citizens who were staying at the embassy. NATO officials insisted that the destruction of the Chinese embassy was an accident caused by pilots' use of inaccurate maps, but Chinese officials insisted that the attack was a deliberate attempt to bully China into submission. The Chinese officials' narrative was featured prominently in the Chinese media's extensive coverage of the bombing. This narrative cast China as a victim of “imperialism” (*diguozhuyi*) and “hegemonism” (*baquanzhuyi*) perpetrated by the “U.S.-led NATO” (*meiguo weizhu de beiyue*). This narrative of China's victimization produced an outpouring of nationalistic sentiment, as Chinese citizens rushed to defend their bullied fatherland. At the same time, however, it also served to define China as a backward nation that could be bullied by foreign powers and had little ability to retaliate. Images disseminated by the Chinese media portrayed a Chinese population united in its anger at China's victimization, but a discourse that criticized the Chinese government for being too weak to retaliate flourished in everyday conversations.

Many people I knew in Dalian reacted with anger as soon as the news was reported on television, but they did not dare to channel their anger into organized protests

until the news media suggested that such protests would be deemed patriotic by the government. As soon as they saw the sympathetic newspaper and television coverage of college students protesting in Beijing, however, college students in Dalian knew that their protests would have the Chinese government's tacit approval. "NATO Wantonly Bombs Our Country's Embassy in Serbia: China's Government Issues a Pronouncement of the Strongest Protest," read the headline of the top story (Xinhua News Service 1999a) in the *Dalian Daily*, Dalian's most prestigious newspaper. The story was written by China's official news service, which could not have used such strong language without the Chinese central government's approval. At the center of the front page was a picture of college students shouting, holding Chinese flags, and raising their fists in protest outside the U.S. embassy in Beijing. The story accompanying the photo was headlined, "Resolutely Support Our Government's Official Pronouncement Strongly Condemning Act of American Hegemonism: College Students of Beijing and Shanghai March in Protest of NATO's Bombing of Our Embassy in Serbia" (Xinhua News Service 1999c). With encouragement from the Chinese media and permission from police and school officials, college students in Dalian and other cities throughout China marched in protest, bearing banners proclaiming slogans such as "Safeguard China's sovereignty," "Long live China," "Strongly condemn American imperialism," and "Revenge for blood debts." Protesters damaged U.S. embassies and burned down the U.S. consulate general's residence in Chengdu, a southwestern Chinese city. The nationalistic outrage Chinese officials had hoped to invoke threatened to spiral out of control.

Despite their strong words, Chinese leaders recognized that China's quest for development depended on maintaining good relations with the developed world and on not allowing nationalistic demonstrations to violate the standards of global neoliberal governmentality. The day after protests began, then Chinese vice president Hu Jintao (who would later become China's president and paramount leader) appealed for calm on national television, stating:

We must prevent overreaction, and ensure social stability by guarding against some people making use of the opportunities to disrupt the normal public order. We will uphold the policy of reform and opening to the outside world. We will protect, in accordance with relevant international laws and norms of international relations as well as relevant laws of China, foreign diplomatic organs and personnel, foreign nationals in China and those who have come to China to engage in trade, economic, educational and cultural undertakings, and reflect the civilization and fine traditions of the Chinese nation. [Hu Jintao 1999]

Officials in China's central government directed police and school officials across the country to order students

to stop the protests. College students who had joined the protests in Dalian told me that their professors and administrators declared that the best way for them to respond to NATO's attack was not to protest but, rather, to focus on their studies, because their education would eventually help them make China so strong and modern that no one would dare bomb its embassy. Some agreed with this logic, but others were disgusted by their government's timidity.

"Our leaders talk boldly, but when it comes to actually doing something about a violation of our national sovereignty, they don't dare anger the foreigners," college student Yu Yang told me.

Liu Ling, another college student I knew, fumed to her friends, "If China doesn't do anything about this, it just shows that our country is weak and doomed. But what can we do? China is so poor and backward that we can't fight back. It's inevitable that those that are backward will be beaten."

"Don't talk like that—there's an American standing next to you!" Liu Ling's friend Zhang Datong replied, inclining his head toward me. "She'll go back to America and tell them that Chinese college students look down on their own country."

"She's Chinese, just like us," Liu Ling said in my defense. "She also opposes American hegemony."

"Of course I do," I agreed. Because I was perceived as a loyal Chinese descendant wise to Chinese sensitivities, I was sometimes included in zones of cultural intimacy. Just as often, though, I served as a reminder of how difficult it was to maintain the boundaries of these zones in an era of transnational linkages. China's dependence on exchanges with developed countries guaranteed that Chinese cultural intimacy would be violated, even, and especially, by the state leaders who claimed to protect it. The same leaders who used the mass media to emphasize their willingness to stand up to developed countries also tacitly acknowledged the superiority of developed countries by sending their children there to study and work.

High school student Lan Haibo had invited me to his home several times, mainly to ask me for advice about how he might get opportunities to study in a developed country, preferably the United States. Once, several weeks after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, I was at Lan Haibo's home when his father ranted to his mother, "If we bombed the American embassy, they would retaliate by bombing China right away. We should bomb America just to show them we can't be bullied."

Lan Haibo's mother scoffed, "China would never bomb America—too many of the high officials' children are there!"

Although the bombing angered Lan Haibo and his parents, their desire to have Lan Haibo study in the United States or another developed country did not abate after the embassy bombing. "Strong countries like America can do anything," Lan Haibo said about the bombing. "We want China to be strong too, so we should learn from foreigners, and if

I study abroad I can get their knowledge and use it to make China stronger.”

The protesters I spoke with in Dalian varied in their views about whether the protests should have been stopped so quickly, but none of them favored continuation of protests against government officials' orders. In response to those orders, the protests had ended immediately and peacefully. College student Xiao Chen explained to me that she felt that violent conflict between protesters and police would play right into the hands of foreign imperialists who “want China to be chaotic and weak” because “they won't need to bomb us if we bomb ourselves.” Concerned that violent protests and defiance of the state would be interpreted as a sign of backwardness not only by their own government and fellow citizens but also by the transnational panopticon of the developed world, protesters like Xiao Chen disciplined themselves in accordance with the standards of a global neoliberal governmentality that disdained violent protest and civil unrest.

Xiao Chen's mother was even more wary of violent resistance against the Chinese state. She had worried when she learned that her daughter had joined in a protest march against the NATO bombing. Her desire to protect her daughter and the Chinese state from each other was apparent in a conversation I observed while I had dinner with them several days after the protest ended. Xiao Chen's mother warned her daughter against any action that might provoke the kind of violence that had occurred during 1989, when student protesters demanding reforms of the Chinese government had defied government orders to end their protests. Chinese leaders ordered the military to disperse the students by force, and many were killed or imprisoned on June 4, 1989, a tragedy that Chinese citizens call the “June Fourth Incident” (*liu si shijian*).<sup>4</sup> The developed countries' media had portrayed innocent protesters ruthlessly massacred by agents of the Chinese state, but the Chinese media had emphasized the violence inflicted by protesters against the Chinese state. Ten years after 1989, the most vivid image that Xiao Chen's mother recalled from Chinese television news coverage of the June Fourth Incident was that of protesters burning a Chinese soldier to death and mutilating the soldier's burned corpse. “I could hardly stand to look at that,” Xiao Chen told her daughter. “They went too far. You must never be like them! The foreigners wanted to make China chaotic, and those students helped the foreigners make China chaotic.”

Although they regulated their own behavior in accordance with a global neoliberal governmentality that defined the limits of acceptable political action, the Chinese citizens I knew did not simply accept the narratives promoted by global information flows. Even those I knew who had ample access to global information flows did not favor the perspectives of the developed countries' media, which portrayed the 1999 anti-NATO protests as an unjustifiable overreaction orchestrated by the Chinese government. In addition

to disagreeing over whether the embassy bombing was accidental, the Chinese media and the developed countries' media also disagreed over the degree of agency exercised by Chinese citizens who demonstrated against it. The Chinese media insisted that the demonstrations were expressions of the patriotic consciousness of Chinese individuals acting as free agents in a modern, democratic society, but the international media suggested that the demonstrations were performances orchestrated by an authoritarian Chinese state that controlled and manipulated its subjects. By global neoliberal standards, voluntary political consciousness was a sign of modernization and authoritarianism was a sign of backwardness (Özyürek 2004a, 2004b; Paley 2001; Turner 1986). The Chinese citizens I knew accepted these standards and were pained and embarrassed by aspects of the Chinese political system that defied them. At the same time, however, they insisted that foreign perceptions of Chinese authoritarianism were exaggerated and that, as Chinese citizens, they exercised the voluntary agency characteristic of neoliberal governmentality.

Chinese students I knew who had participated in the anti-NATO demonstrations were therefore incensed when they read U.S. news reports that suggested that they lacked such agency. *USA Today* ran a news article with the headline “Anti-U.S. Vitriol Continuing to Gush from Beijing” (Wiseman 1999) and noted in an unsigned editorial that the Chinese government risked “cataclysmic” consequences by encouraging protests that recalled China's Boxer Rebellion “blunder” of defying the West (*USA Today* 1999: 14A). Thomas Friedman wrote in a *New York Times* column, “I am sorry about the Chinese Embassy, but we have no reason to be defensive here. We are at war with the Serbian nation, and anyone hanging around Belgrade needs to understand that” (1999: A23). In a *Washington Post* editorial, Jonathan Kolatch argued that Chinese protesters were angry because they had been duped by the Chinese government's proclivity for “manipulating the news” and its presentation of anti-NATO news coverage in which “nary a line is devoted to the miserable plight of the Kosovars” (1999: A21), whose demands for autonomy were part of the reason for the NATO attack on Belgrade during which the Chinese embassy was bombed. Kolatch suggested that Chinese citizens would not have been so angry about the NATO bombing if they had had access to international news sources that favored NATO and reflected what Kolatch called “prevailing world sentiment in such things as the Kosovo situation” (1999: A21).

The attitudes of people I knew in Dalian were certainly shaped by the Chinese media's focus on heartrending images of Chinese citizens killed or injured by the bombing and of their grieving family members, as well as by numerous commentaries by Chinese officials, experts, and journalists who all seemed convinced both that NATO's intervention in the Kosovo situation was wrong and that the bombing of the Chinese embassy was deliberate punishment for China's

opposition to that intervention. People I knew in Dalian cited these images and commentaries when describing the reasons for their anger at the bombing, just as some Americans who discussed the issue with me cited images and commentaries from the U.S. news media to support their belief that NATO's intervention in Kosovo was justified, that the bombing of the Chinese embassy was an accident, or that Chinese protests against the bombing were orchestrated by the Chinese government. In her discussion of how patriotism shapes understandings of one's own country's actions on the world stage, Catherine Lutz notes that "it can be asked of any society, 'What do its people refuse to know?'" (2001:102). Yet this does not necessarily mean that either the Chinese or the Americans I spoke with were hapless dupes, parroting whatever their respective countries' media told them. The same Americans who told me that they believed the U.S. media's portrayals of the issues surrounding the embassy bombing were highly critical of biases in the U.S. media's coverage of many other issues (such as former president Bill Clinton's impeachment hearing, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the U.S. presidential elections of 2000 and 2004). Likewise, the same Chinese citizens who told me they believed the Chinese media's portrayals of the issues surrounding the embassy bombing were highly critical of the Chinese media's coverage of many other issues, such as unemployment among Chinese workers and corruption among Chinese officials.

It was common for Chinese citizens to be critical of the biases they saw in the Chinese media (Louie 2004; Lull 1989). Like the East German who told Dominic Boyer that the state-controlled news media were so divorced from her lived reality that listening to the news was "like listening to reports from another planet" (2003:538, 2005), Xin Yibin, a Dalian college student who had participated in the protest against NATO, told me that he believed all Chinese news stories were "untrustworthy" and "intended to fool people." He often listened to Voice of America radio broadcasts and read news from international news organizations on the Internet to get information he could not get from the Chinese media, and he had consulted these sources after he learned about the bombing of the Chinese embassy.

Yet exposure to these sources did not convince Xin Yibin that their coverage was "accurate" and that the Chinese media's coverage was "biased"; on the contrary, he told me that Western media coverage was just as biased as Chinese media coverage and that Western media denials of the significance of the bombing and insinuations that protesters like him were just puppets of the Chinese government only made him angrier. "We all know the Chinese news covers up bad things about China, and sometimes foreign news has some knowledge that can't be seen in Chinese news, but what is there to cover up about this?" he asked me. "The foreign news and the Chinese news agree about what happened. Not even the foreigners are denying that they bombed our embassy. Of

course the Chinese journalists are angry because they love our country, and of course the foreign journalists support their own countries, but there's no denying that the bombing happened and Chinese people were killed." Xin Yibin's attitude was shared by many other Chinese people with access to global information flows. A survey of 1,211 elite university students in Beijing conducted by Dingxin Zhao (2002) found little correlation between exposure to Western media sources and the degree of anger those students felt about the bombing of the Chinese embassy. Between 2003 and 2006, when I conducted research among Chinese citizens who had left China in the early 2000s to study in Australia, Ireland, Malta, the United Kingdom, and the United States, I found that, despite their daily exposure to the perspectives of NATO countries in the media and everyday life, all of those with whom I discussed the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade were still convinced that it had been intentional and unjustifiable. Despite their access to foreign media perspectives, these Chinese citizens favored nationalistic Chinese perspectives in line with their sense of personal loyalty to China (Fong 2004a).

The anger that Chinese citizens I knew expressed about the bombing of the Chinese embassy was motivated by their ambivalent but powerful identification of their own interests with those of the Chinese nation and not merely by unquestioning belief in the Chinese media or ignorance attributable to lack of access to global information flows. Although they were angry that foreign powers could bomb their embassy with impunity, this incident only reinforced their sense of China's inferiority to developed countries. They resented the Chinese state for failing to overcome the backwardness that allowed their nation to be victimized, but they were wary of criticizing their state in ways that could further weaken their nation. Even as they railed against the Chinese state's failure to protect them against an infringement of national sovereignty, they sought to protect their state from the instability that could result from expressions of their own anger.

### **Negotiating China's place in the world: The 9/11 terrorist attacks**

Smoldering memories of the NATO bombing and its aftermath later served as the subtext for Chinese understandings of how and why, on September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four U.S. airplanes, crashing one into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., two into the World Trade Center in New York City, and one into an empty field in Pennsylvania. In the aftermath, U.S. media outlets interpreted the event as an outrageous watershed moment that signified a shocking, instantaneous transition from their previous narrative of the United States as simultaneously invincible and innocent on the world stage to a new narrative of the United States as a grimly determined nation at war with dangerous, invisible foes. "Not since Americans realized that small men in black



pajamas could neutralize our military might in Vietnam has there been such a shock to our system and blow to our pride,” journalists wrote in *U.S. News and World Report* (Simon et al. 2001: 16).

Media from other developed countries, meanwhile, fit the attacks into narratives of developed-world solidarity and focused on declarations of sympathy from leaders of various developed countries. European newspapers emphasized that NATO ambassadors had agreed for the first time in history to invoke NATO Charter Article 5, which stated that any attack on one NATO member amounted to an attack on all members, and they quoted NATO Secretary-General George Robertson’s claim that “an attack on one is an attack on all” (Gordon 2001; Ward 2001; Wright 2001). They reported how EU representatives asked all Europeans to observe three minutes of silence on September 14, which they declared a day of mourning in all 15 member nations because the attacks were “not only on the United States, but against humanity itself and the values of freedom we all share” (AFX European Focus 2001; Agence France Presse 2001; Baltic News Service 2001). “Act of War—US Attacked,” declared the front-page headline of the *Daily Telegraph* of Australia (Clifton 2001). “We are all Americans,” declared the front-page headline of *Le Monde* of France (Colombani 2001).

The Chinese media also covered the attacks sympathetically and extensively (but without the tone of fervent solidarity common in the Western media), situating the episode in the Chinese media’s official narrative of China as close to the developed world, sharing that world’s sensibilities and sympathies. The Chinese media frequently repeated then-Chinese president Jiang Zemin’s statement of condolence to U.S. President George W. Bush:

I am shocked to learn that some parts of New York and Washington D.C. were disastrously attacked, which caused severe casualties. On behalf of the Chinese government and people, I would like to express sincere sympathy to you, and through you, to the U.S. government and people and condolences to the family members of the victims. The Chinese government consistently condemns and opposes all manner of terrorist violence. [Jiang Zemin 2001]

I was living in the United States in 2001 and received many e-mails and phone calls from friends in Dalian expressing their condolences and inquiring about my safety. Their accounts of television news coverage and the Chinese newspapers I read on the Internet suggested that Chinese media coverage of 9/11 was very similar to that provided by the developed world’s media, right down to the same incessant replays of video footage of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center. At first, my Chinese friends seemed to express the same horror and grief as my U.S. friends. After more extensive phone conversations, however,

I realized that my Chinese friends were also participants in an alternative discourse of amusement that they seemed uncomfortable admitting to me.

“All my friends say Bin Laden’s a hero,” Jiang Qian, a store clerk I had tutored in Dalian, told me. “They say America deserves to be attacked. No one is sympathetic. I can’t believe they say these things.”

Later in the same conversation, however, she said with glee, “China’s soccer team had good luck, and will compete in the World Cup finals. It seems that whenever America has bad luck, China has good luck!”

Zhao Jiyun, a junior college student in Dalian, at first expressed concern for my safety and condemnation of the attacks. “This is too terrible,” he said. “We were worried about you. How could anyone do this?” Gradually, however, he started talking about the amused reaction he had observed among his classmates and in Chinese Internet bulletin boards and chat rooms. He repeated a story, written by an anonymous poster to the popular Chinese Internet portal sohu.com:

Once, there was a teacher named United States. She taught at a school called the United Nations. She was a very unfair teacher, who divided her students into three levels. Her favorite was the first level, which consisted of the children of her friends and relatives. Her second favorite was the second level, which consisted of students who had given her money or favors. Everyone else, including Classmate China, was in the third level, which was mistreated and despised. So they all hated Teacher United States. One day, Sept. 11, 2001, a plastic bag of feces was thrown at her by a student. It spilled all over her, and when she opened the door, a bucket of feces fell on her. So she yelled, stinking, in front of classroom. She said, “Who did this?” Classmate Bin Laden had broken her window before, so she assumed that he must also be the culprit this time. Classmate England, the teacher’s pet, helped her beat him up. Many students, especially in the third level, disapproved, but they didn’t dare voice their dissent. Only Classmate Afghanistan was defiant, so the teacher beat him up. Classmate China and Classmate Russia claimed that they condemned Classmate Bin Laden, but they were secretly laughing.

Hoping to stave off government interference by maintaining the socially responsible reputations of their Internet communities, Chinese bulletin-board operators and website managers usually deleted postings they considered offensive or politically incorrect. Zhao Jiyun told me that, to avoid having the story deleted, the anonymous poster had used homonyms for sensitive key words such as *Bin Laden*, *America*, *Afghanistan*, *Russia*, and *China*. Still, when I checked sohu.com, right after Zhao Jiyun told me about the posting, the story was gone.

Zhao Jiyun’s tone shifted from earnest concern to appreciative amusement as he related the story to me. Still, after

he finished, he became worried that he had inappropriately included me in a zone of cultural intimacy to which my U.S. identity would not allow me to belong. "I'm sorry I told you that," he said. "Are you offended? You must think Chinese people are very callous now. I shouldn't have told you that story."

Like their developed-world counterparts, Chinese journalists emphasized the suffering of the victims and blamed the attacks solely on the terrorists themselves. In Chinese zones of cultural intimacy, however, an alternative discourse flourished, full of amusement, vicarious triumph, and a tendency to blame the attacks on hegemonic, imperialistic U.S. policies that invited vengeance from developing countries. This discourse was kept out of the official Chinese media because it conflicted with China's efforts to join the developed world. Many Chinese citizens I knew also found this discourse embarrassing. They worried that, in addition to displaying an unseemly joy at others' suffering, this discourse suggested that Chinese citizens identified more with the developing world from which the terrorists emerged than with the developed world that stood in solidarity with the United States. Their ambivalence resembled that expressed by African American women in a discussion group for families of children with chronic medical conditions, who struggled to balance their sympathy for victims of the 9/11 attacks with critiques of the privileged assumptions underlying the dominant narrative of U.S. innocence (Mattingly et al. 2002:747). Like those marginalized Americans, the people I knew in China felt alienated from that narrative despite their desire to be part of the developed world that produced it.

### Chinese problems: The Chinese shipwreck of 1999

The ambivalence I observed in Chinese efforts to confine public secrets to zones of cultural intimacy was not limited to heavily publicized international issues. I observed a similar ambivalence in how people talked about a poorly publicized local tragedy that occurred a few months after NATO bombed China's Belgrade embassy. On November 24, 1999, a ferry caught fire and sank in the cold, stormy Bohai Strait on its way from Yantai (a city in Shandong Province) to Dalian. Of over 300 passengers and crew, only 22 survived.<sup>5</sup> The international media reported that this was the most deadly shipping disaster in the history of the People's Republic of China (News Services 1999), but most prestigious Chinese newspapers downplayed it. On November 26, the first day the disaster was reported, the *Dalian Daily* included only one brief story about it (on the bottom right corner of the front page; Xinhua News Service 1999b). As was commonly the case, the lead story that day (under the headline "Grasp Problems, Use Real Numbers, Earnestly Improve") reported the local government's latest interpretation of the political

philosophy of then Chinese president Jiang Zemin (Liu Xing 1999). That same day, the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of China's central government, placed the story of the shipwreck at the bottom of the last page of the domestic news section (Yin Jianhua and Zhang Songqing 1999), while the stories on the front page discussed agricultural reforms in Hunan Province (Wu Xinghua 1999), Chinese leaders' meetings with foreign leaders (Liu Shuiming and Wang Chuanbao 1999; Zhang Jingning 1999), and how high technology boosted the development of Shenzhen City (Hu Mou 1999). Still, the shipwreck provoked strong emotional reactions among people I knew in Dalian. They relied on rumor and conjecture to fill in the blanks of media accounts that were vague about the causes of the disaster and the details of the rescue attempts. Although the Chinese media portrayed the deaths that resulted from the disaster as inevitable casualties of natural forces, some people I knew in Dalian proposed more cynical explanations that blamed the deaths on Chinese backwardness.

Wang Xinnian, a company manager, lamented angrily to his siblings,

Chinese lives are worthless. Probably the family of each person who died when the ship sank will only get 20,000 yuan each in compensation. That's about the same price you'd spend to buy an expensive dog. If this had happened in the West, the Air Force would have come to rescue them. In China, though, the Air Force didn't, because they were afraid that no one would pay for it. If there had been one American citizen onboard, the American president would have called the embassy and made sure the American was saved. If Jiang Zemin or Jiang Zemin's son or [then Dalian Mayor] Bo Xilai's son were on the ship, the Air Force would have been out there immediately. But since they were just ordinary Chinese people, their lives are not worth much. And the company running the ship knew that there was heavy wind, but went ahead anyway, in order to make money, which was more valuable than human life.

Zhang Nan, a high school student I tutored, expressed similar suspicions, but then warned me, "Don't tell my Ma I said any of this. She's an active Communist Party member, so she yells at me when I say bad things about China."

Yet, when Zhang Nan was not around, his mother likewise told me that she suspected that many more of the drowning deaths would have been prevented if China had more altruistic rescue workers and more modern equipment. "But what can we do? China is so backward, we can't even enjoy basic guarantees of safety," she lamented. Then she added hastily, "Don't tell my son that I say bad things about China. I don't want him to feel hopeless about his own country."

In contrast to the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which were discussed

repeatedly in both the Chinese media and the international media for years afterward, the 1999 shipwreck was rarely ever mentioned by the Chinese media or the international media after the first few days following the disaster. Yet, for several months after it occurred, I frequently heard people in Dalian talk about the disaster in zones of conversational intimacy, and even years later I still heard it mentioned occasionally by Dalian people in relation to anger about Chinese government cover-ups or fear and disgust about the backwardness of Chinese transportation systems. I heard rumors that family members of those who died in the shipwreck threatened or participated in violence against those responsible for sending the ferry out and that they went to the port from which the ferry departed, crying, screaming, and refusing to leave until they were dragged away by police. Some of these rumors alleged that protesting family members managed to negotiate higher compensation payments than they had originally been offered; those who repeated such rumors portrayed the protesting family members as greedy, manipulative troublemakers. Other rumors alleged that protesting family members were beaten or arrested; those who spread such rumors railed against the cruelty and injustice of the state. I could not get a lot of details about these rumors, much less assess their veracity. My efforts to inquire further were often stymied when those with whom I was conversing said, "Don't talk about it, it's no use" and changed the subject. The shipwreck and its aftermath were widely regarded as painfully ugly and embarrassing, and my efforts to find out more about the episode were sometimes rebuffed as unseemly efforts to "expose the ugly side of China." Yet this did not keep people in Dalian from frequently mentioning it to me and to each other when they wanted to express their disgust with Chinese backwardness.

In April 2000, while discussing why he wanted his 15-year-old daughter to go abroad, snack peddler Liu Rufeng brought up the 1999 shipwreck as an example of the backwardness he hoped his daughter would be able to escape if she went abroad. "Those people wouldn't have died if China didn't have such backward technology and backward thinking," Liu Rufeng told his wife, his daughter, and me. "The news reports say that heavy winds prevented the ships and Air Force from rescuing people, but that just sounds like an excuse. Either they had really broken-down equipment, or they just had low quality and didn't want to bother to rescue people."

"You're just speculating," Liu Rufeng's wife chided him. "You shouldn't be saying such nonsense in front of her," she said, nodding toward me. "She'll go back to America and tell them that it's not safe to travel in China because our equipment and rescue workers are backward!"

"No she won't," Liu Rufeng said in my defense. "She's also Chinese, and she's not out to expose the ugly side of China. She won't talk about things like this in America. Isn't that right?"

"Well, this probably won't come up much, since my research is about childrearing and education, and not about ferries," I said. "But it's not a big deal even if it does come up. Transportation accidents happen everywhere, including America."

"But you won't tell them that China is not as safe as America, right?" Liu Rufeng's daughter demanded. "When people say that China is backward and dangerous, you should say 'No! China is beautiful and modern, so you should go to China and do business, and buy snacks from peddlers!'"

"Yes, I'll say that," I replied. "But if I don't tell them about the problems as well, they'll learn about them from the other foreigners who come to China and from the Chinese who go abroad, and then they won't believe anything I say, even when I tell them that China is beautiful and modern despite the problems."

### Chinese problems: The 2003 SARS epidemic

Liu Rufeng's daughter did not get an opportunity to go abroad, but some other young people I knew in China did. In June 2003, while I was in Ireland visiting Wang Xiaoyan and Peng Huaxi (both of whom had left China in 2001 to study in Ireland), I asked whether the SARS epidemic would cause them to cancel their long-awaited plans to return to China to visit their families that summer. Wang Xiaoyan and Peng Huaxi got their information about SARS from a combination of Irish news programs, Chinese bulletin boards and news sites that they accessed through the Internet, what their Chinese and Irish friends and coworkers in Ireland told them, and what their friends and family members in China told them. In our conversation about their travel plans, they alternated between fear for their own health and the health of their families and friends in China, anger at the initial cover-up, suspicion that a cover-up was continuing, and insistence that the international media were exaggerating the dangers of SARS. They criticized the international media for their sensationalistic coverage of China's role in the epidemic and for insinuating that it spread because of Chinese backwardness, but they also criticized the Chinese media for not taking SARS seriously enough. Wang Xiaoyan was the more fearful of the two, and she mentioned numerous examples of how unsafe China could be, including the 1999 shipwreck, which she cited as a particularly egregious example of how poorly Chinese officials tended to handle disasters.

"Don't look down on our motherland like that," Peng Huaxi countered. "Everywhere has danger. Recently there was a car accident in Dublin, and people were killed. Thousands of people were killed in America on September 11. There's no government anywhere that can protect you from everything. If you're so afraid, you might as well not go outside your door!"

Peng Huaxi's refusal to characterize China as more dangerous than other places was echoed by my friend Niu

Xiaolin, a 20-year-old salesclerk living in Dalian, when I called her in March 2003 to discuss whether I should cancel my own plans to travel to China in light of the SARS epidemic. "It's not a big deal," Niu Xiaolin had told me. "The foreigners are exaggerating it. Maybe they just want to distract people from what they're doing in Iraq. Everywhere is dangerous. Aren't you afraid of terrorists? You should come to China now. China's the safest place in the world these days." Niu Xiaolin changed her mind in May 2003 (after the Chinese government instituted strict quarantines) and advised me that it might be too risky for me to go to China after all, but by July 2003, when the epidemic seemed to be ending, she was once again encouraging me to go to China.<sup>6</sup> My university's restrictions on research travel to SARS-infected areas led me to postpone my trip to China by a year, and Wang Xiaoyan also postponed her trip to China for over a year, but Peng Huaxi left Ireland for China in July 2003 and spent a month there visiting friends and family before returning to Ireland, having experienced no problems, and triumphantly boasting about the accuracy of his assessment of China's safety, with its implication of patriotism, to his more cautious Chinese friends.

In the years that followed the SARS epidemic, Chinese citizens I knew in China discussed SARS and the Chinese government's failed cover-up of it with the same kind of ambivalence and diversity of opinions that I observed among Chinese sojourners abroad. When the SARS epidemic was first beginning in March 2003, however, there had been striking differences between the unconcerned attitudes of the Chinese citizens I knew in China, most of whom had remained convinced by the Chinese media of the unimportance of SARS for over a month, and the more skeptical attitudes of the Chinese citizens I knew abroad, who had more instantaneous access to the international media's alarming coverage of the growing epidemic. When SARS first appeared, it was reported by the Chinese news media as an outbreak of atypical pneumonia (*feidianxing feiyan*), a dangerous but known disease, that started with a patient in Guangdong on November 16, 2002.<sup>7</sup> Even after Chinese officials learned how unusually deadly and contagious the disease was, they still directed the Chinese media to downplay the epidemic, which spread rapidly throughout China (Saich 2005). Although Chinese officials hoped to prevent fear of the disease from disrupting local stability as well as global flows of business and travel, they could not keep the disease or information about it from flowing out of China. On February 21, 2003, a Chinese doctor who unknowingly carried the disease visited Hong Kong to attend a wedding reception and spread it to other travelers who then spread it throughout the world.

The SARS epidemic and the Chinese cover-up of it fit into two dominant, often mutually contradictory, international media narratives—the narrative of China as a threat to global security and the narrative of China as a poor, back-

ward country. As the disease became a global threat in March 2003, the international media produced increasingly alarming coverage of the SARS epidemic. The Chinese media, however, limited their coverage to occasional brief, reassuring stories that portrayed it as a small outbreak that had been contained in southern China and Hong Kong and was not unlike other respiratory disease outbreaks that usually occurred during winter (*Renmin Ribao* 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d). Some people I knew in Dalian told me that, on the Internet, they had read less reassuring rumors and news stories about SARS written by foreigners, Chinese citizens abroad, and even Chinese citizens in China, but even they insisted to me that global fears about SARS were exaggerated, because they had not heard of anyone getting the disease in Dalian.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the Chinese media provided heavy coverage of the U.S.-led war in Iraq (which began on March 20, 2003) just as the international media did, although the Chinese media differed from the U.S. media in that they focused first on the strength of Iraqi resistance, then on injured and dead Iraqi civilians, and, finally, on the looting and riots that resulted when Iraq's political and law enforcement infrastructure was destroyed. During this period, whenever I expressed concern about SARS during telephone calls to China, my friends there insisted that I should be more concerned about terrorist reprisals against the United States for the war in Iraq.

As the initial invasion of Iraq wound down in April 2003, the international media intensified their coverage of the SARS epidemic. To avoid further damage to their credibility, the Chinese media also expanded coverage of SARS, albeit still with a reassuring tone. The Chinese government could not stop the flow of information about SARS out of China, as Chinese doctors told international journalists that the epidemic was far larger than their government had claimed. Most of this information flow occurred anonymously, with the exception of a bold public campaign by retired Beijing military doctor Jiang Yanyong, who contacted and gave frank interviews to Chinese and international journalists.<sup>9</sup> By late April, the international news media were focusing heavily on SARS, and the Chinese government was facing demands for an open campaign against the disease from Chinese medical workers, the World Health Organization, the Chinese and international media, and governments, businesspeople, and travelers worldwide.

On April 20, 2003, top Chinese leaders (most significantly, Hu Jintao, who had long been groomed to replace Jiang Zemin as China's paramount leader and who had officially become China's president on March 14, 2003) responded to these demands by blaming Chinese Health Minister Zhang Wenkang and Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong for the cover-up, removing them from their posts, and authorizing an open campaign against SARS. The very next day, Chinese media coverage of SARS switched from muted

and occasional to alarming and incessant. Chinese officials at all levels implemented aggressive measures to contain SARS, including the quarantine of suspected SARS patients and their contacts; heightened enforcement of prohibitions against spitting on the ground; the dismissal or punishment of local officials who continued trying to cover up the epidemic; the prohibition of the trade in wild animals like the civet cats, raccoon dogs, and ferret badgers that were found to be carrying the SARS virus; severe restrictions on travel; the disinfection of public areas, workplaces, and schools; the temporary closing of schools, restaurants, dance halls, movie theaters, Internet cafes, and many other workplaces; daily monitoring of individual health statuses by teachers, employers, and neighborhood committee workers; and the stationing of body-temperature checkpoints at train stations, airports, and even road entrances to cities and villages. By the end of July 2003, these measures had ended the spread of SARS in China.

The international news media blamed the SARS epidemic on Chinese officials' efforts to censor information about it as well as on China's impoverished public health system, on unsanitary Chinese habits such as spitting on the ground, and even on Chinese people's predilection for eating strange animals that may have been carriers of the SARS virus (Eckholm 2003; Epstein 2003; McDonald 2003; Rosenthal 2003a, 2003b; Sheridan and Rogers 2003). In trying to keep outsiders from perceiving China as backward, the Chinese government had only heightened that perception. Once they recognized this, Chinese leaders quickly shifted from the strategy of denying Chinese backwardness to the strategy of highlighting "past" Chinese backwardness to demonstrate "present" modernization. The backward "past," in this case, was the time before government policy shifted on April 20, 2003, and the modern "present" was that of officials who now tried to distance themselves from those who had been dismissed for covering up the epidemic.

Many of the same Chinese citizens I knew who had seemed unconcerned at the start of the epidemic were later angry at how Chinese officials had initially tried to cover up SARS at the expense of Chinese lives and China's reputation. They cited the SARS epidemic and attempted cover-up, along with earlier disasters like the 1999 shipwreck, when discussing reasons for their desire to emigrate or have their children emigrate. Chinese citizens studying abroad also cited such events when explaining their reluctance to return to China for permanent residence. At the same time, however, Chinese citizens I knew in China and abroad also criticized the international media for unfairly depicting such tragic events as the kinds of things that only, or mainly, happen in China. They pointed to events like 9/11 as evidence that tragedies could also happen in the most developed of countries, and that a developed country's government could also be blamed for leading its people to tragedy. They cited

the aggressive measures that ultimately ended SARS in China as evidence of the strength, efficiency, and heroism of the Chinese people, and even of particular Chinese leaders, who could be seen as vanquishers of more backward elements in the Chinese government itself. Jokes about SARS spread through China via the Internet and cell phone instant text messages, some of which associated SARS with the inadequacies of China's government and society, but others of which mocked local and global overreactions to SARS or celebrated the intensity of the anti-SARS measures the Chinese government eventually implemented (Zhang 2005).

As Richard Wilk (2002) argues, time lags in access to global information flows can allow local elites to consolidate power by serving as mediators of those time lags. Unlike non-elites in Belize (where, Wilk argues, such time lags disappeared as instantaneous access to global information flows increased), non-elites in China still experience such time lags, which the Chinese government tries to maintain through censorship and control over media technologies. Yet, as the failure of the attempted cover-up of the SARS epidemic demonstrated, such time lags are not only shrinking but also increasingly seen in China and abroad as evidence of a backwardness that must be eradicated if China is to become a developed country. The maintenance of such time lags by a government that based its legitimacy on its purported role as rescuer of China from backwardness angered Chinese citizens I knew in China and abroad, most of whom were, nevertheless, reluctant to complain too much, because such time lags embodied a backwardness that could stick even to Chinese individuals who decried it. Global fears about SARS and the factors that caused it to originate in and spread from China resulted in social stigma and loss of tourism and business for Chinese citizens, not only in China but also in Chinese communities worldwide (Kleinman and Watson 2005). Although Chinese citizens I knew shared in those global fears, they also feared the stigma that fear itself could cause to stick to them and their nation.

Like other disasters that could potentially be blamed at least partly on Chinese backwardness, the shipwreck of 1999 and the SARS epidemic of 2003 were embarrassing for the Chinese state, which limited media coverage of them to forestall criticisms. Such media silences only encouraged the criticism to flourish in conversational zones of cultural intimacy, and in the case of SARS to explode onto the world stage despite the Chinese government's efforts to hide it. Chinese citizens were concerned that such criticisms could damage their country's reputation as a key node in global trade, tourism, and transportation networks—a reputation that they directly or indirectly depended on for their livelihoods. Yet their anger at their government's poor handling of these tragedies led them to perpetuate these criticisms, which developed lives of their own and resurfaced in

conversations about other tragedies and disasters that seemed to enhance global and local perceptions of China as more backward and less safe than the developed world that Chinese citizens and leaders wanted China to join.

## Conclusion

It was not just state leaders and journalists in the state-controlled media who tried to keep the public secret of Chinese backwardness from escaping Chinese zones of cultural intimacy. On the contrary, the same Chinese citizens whose participation in global information flows threatened the state were also complicit in the simultaneous proclamation and protection of this public secret. This was true even of Chinese youth who were living abroad. As J. Lorand Matory argues, "Diasporas, like nation-states, propagate secrets and defend their own intimate zones" (2004:184). During my research among families in China and among Chinese youth studying abroad, I noticed that people in a wide array of socioeconomic positions often complained to me and to each other about Chinese backwardness. This discourse highlighted their own victimization and desire for modernization, but it also embarrassed them by serving as a reminder that the backwardness they detested was an integral part of their lives and national identity. They feared that the discourse of Chinese backwardness could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, convincing foreigners and Chinese people alike that it was hopeless to try to modernize China. Backwardness could mark China as an easy target for foreign military aggression and as an unworthy contender for foreign investment, tourism, and trade. If China is considered backward, then Chinese individuals will be considered unworthy of opportunities for work, business, and education offered by developed countries.

Therefore, although state leaders, journalists, and citizens alike continued to use the discourse of Chinese backwardness to highlight their own identification with the neoliberal governmentality of the developed world, they also tried to limit this discourse to zones of cultural intimacy that they hoped would remain inaccessible to Others who might use it for purposes at odds with their own. Such Others included foreigners who could use such discourse to legitimate their own superiority over Chinese people, Chinese people who might use the idea of China's backwardness as an excuse to give up on efforts to modernize China, and foreigners and Chinese who might accuse a Chinese person complaining about Chinese backwardness of being part of the problem of backwardness rather than the solution of modernization.

Erving Goffman (1963) argues that any deviance from social norms will cause an individual to feel stigmatized. Because most people deviate from social norms in some way, just about everyone engages in efforts to hide, deny, or defend their own deviance. Goffman focuses on deviance from local norms of gender, class, health, ethnicity, and sexual-

ity. In a world in which migration and the mass media have created global social norms, however, Goffman's theory of stigma can apply to entire nations on the world stage as well as to individuals who belong to those nations. By the standards of a global neoliberal system dominated by the developed world, developing countries are stigmatized by their backwardness. I found that the public secret of Chinese backwardness was critical for understanding what was really at stake in how the Chinese citizens I knew made sense of tragic news events and, more broadly, of the world and their place in it. As Andrew Shryock notes, "Public stages of identity display cannot be constructed, nor can they be understood, without reference to zones of cultural intimacy; yet the very publicness of these representational contexts tends to obscure such references and understandings" (2004a:18).

Anthropologists have criticized terms like *development* and *modernization* for promoting pernicious and erroneous assumptions about a desirable, inevitable, universal, and unilinear evolution toward the conditions of the developed countries (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Coronil 1996; di Leonardo 1998; Escobar 1995; Fabian 1983; Ferguson 1999; Greenhalgh 2003a; Herzfeld 1987; Lowe and Lloyd 1997; Lutz and Collins 1993; Ong 1999, 2006; Scheper-Hughes 1997; Warren 2002). But these were the very assumptions Chinese citizens embraced in their quest to join the developed world. In a world of international migration and media discourses, those marked with the stigma of backwardness tried to hide this stigma from public gazes while simultaneously relying on it as a key for understanding the world and their place in it. Access to global information flows helped persuade many Chinese citizens that they and their nation are backward, even as participation in those flows enabled them to challenge efforts by Chinese leaders and the state-controlled Chinese media to claim that Chinese backwardness has been safely relegated to the past.

At the same time, however, even Chinese citizens with no ties to the Chinese government or media were complicit in efforts to hide, challenge, or downplay the very discourse of Chinese backwardness they helped produce. Even as they lamented the present reality of Chinese backwardness in zones of cultural intimacy, they were also invested in the Chinese state's vision of China as a strong, modern nation that had successfully vanquished that backwardness. Their complicity resembled less the obedience of subjects who feared government repression than participation in the kind of neoliberal governmentality described by Foucault (1977, 1979, 1983), in which the individual is made part of the state through regimes of knowledge, discipline, and practice rather than overt repression. But Chinese citizens were not just involved in the governmentality of the Chinese state. In an increasingly interconnected world, governmentality also worked at a global level, disciplining states as well as individuals in a regime of neoliberalism. Although the state has long mediated between its citizens and the global system,

global information flows can also position citizens as mediators between the global system and the state.

## Notes

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1. This article is based primarily on 32 months of longitudinal research (1997, 1998–2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, and 2006) in Dalian, a city in Liaoning Province, northeastern China, where I conducted participant-observation in a junior high school, a vocational high school, and a college prep high school and in the homes of 107 families that invited me to tutor their children in English or to provide them with information about going abroad. I established long-term relationships with 31 of these families and participated in their social lives, leisure time, and everyday activities. I also spent a total of 13 months (2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006) living with 16 children of the families I first met in China who were taking English classes and working at low-wage jobs in Australia, Ireland, Malta, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as they pursued opportunities for upward mobility that were unavailable in China. In addition, I surveyed, interviewed, and conducted participant-observation among 85 of their Chinese friends and roommates in these countries. All names besides those of authors whose work I cite and public figures are pseudonyms. Some of the Chinese people described in this article have been mentioned under other pseudonyms in previous publications based on my longitudinal research, but I have given them new pseudonyms in this article to avoid revealing their identities through too many cumulative details in my published work.

2. New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and some of the wealthier Caribbean, Middle Eastern, and eastern European countries are sometimes also included in Chinese and global lists of developed countries but other times are not; these countries seem to be situated at the nebulous border between the developed and developing countries. In addition, mainland Chinese people I knew also talked about Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan in the same way they talked about developed countries, even though they considered these places part of China.

3. The term *high quality* represented a prestigious, respectable kind of personhood (Anagnost 1997; Kipnis 2006; Yan 2003a).

4. The 1989 demonstrators had also tried to balance their discontent with the state with their loyalty to their nation by presenting themselves as patriotic, nonviolent reformers, but they (along with some sympathetic officials) apparently underestimated top Chinese leaders' fear of chaos and capacity for ruthlessness (Pieke 1996). The tragedy that resulted served as a warning to later generations of officials and would-be demonstrators alike about the dangers that demonstrations could pose to the Chinese state as well as to the demonstrators themselves.

5. Media reports agreed that 36 people were rescued and 22 of them survived, but media estimates of the total number of people on the ferry at the time of the shipwreck ranged from 302 to 336 (Eckholm 1999; News Services 1999; Xinhua News Service 1999b; Yin Jianhua and Zhang Songqing 1999).

6. The SARS epidemic ended in China in July 2003, although it was difficult at the time to know for certain whether it had really been contained.

7. The term *atypical pneumonia (feidianxing feiyan)* remained the Chinese term for SARS even after the English term *severe acute respiratory syndrome* was coined by the World Health Organization.

8. Dalian only had five reported probable cases of SARS as of June 17, 2003. In contrast, Beijing had 2,521, Guangzhou had 1,300, and mainland China as a whole had 5,326 by that date (People's Republic of China Ministry of Health 2003). Although Dalian may have had more cases than reported, it is unlikely that its government covered up more cases than governments had covered up in other Chinese cities. Even doctors I knew in Dalian told me that they had not heard of more than five cases in their city.

9. Because the SARS cover-up had been defined as part of “past” backwardness to be overcome, the Chinese government did not take reprisals against Jiang Yanyong or other doctors for providing information about it to the international media. Jiang Yanyong was detained for seven weeks and then placed under house arrest for eight months in 2004, however, for writing an open letter to Chinese government officials requesting a reexamination of the Chinese government's responsibility for the June 4, 1989, crackdown on protesters in Tiananmen Square (Chan Siu-sin 2005).

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Vanessa L. Fong  
Graduate School of Education  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
v@vfong.com