

Embodying Civility: Civilizing Processes and Symbolic Citizenship in Southeastern China

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IN THE SUMMER OF 1998, I returned to the village of Shanlin in Fujian's eastern Hui'an County, a site where I had conducted fieldwork for nearly two years in the mid-1990s.¹ As my hosts eagerly updated me on changes in the community since my last visit, I was struck by their vivid descriptions of a new statue that had been erected atop one of the nearby mountains. A towering twenty meters tall, this stone carving of a woman in local attire had been installed on International Women's Day earlier that year, part of a township initiative designed to attract greater numbers of tourists to this only recently accessible coastal area by highlighting the "appeal" of local folk culture. When I hiked up to view the statue, I found a figure that displayed many of the distinctive features of women's dress in the region: a headpiece and headscarf; loose, flowing cropped pants; a short, tight-fitting, side-buttoned top; and an exposed abdomen marked by a prominently carved navel. An inscription at the base of the

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Underlined text indicates Minnan dialect, the language spoken in Hui'an County and throughout southeastern Fujian and Taiwan. Minnan terms are romanized according to the system used in the 1982 *Putonghua Minnan fangyan zidian* (Mandarin Minnan Dialect Dictionary).

¹Shanlin is a pseudonym for the village in the eastern Hui'an township of Chongwu where I conducted research for eighteen months from 1995 through 1997 and again in the summers of 1998, 2000, and 2002. All personal names used in this article are also pseudonyms.

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statue identified the figure as “the industrious, frugal, virtuous Hui’an woman” (*qinlao jianpu xianhui de Hui’an nü*).

As I stood gazing up at this imposing image visible over great distances from both land and sea, I could not help but marvel at the fact that such a contentious figure was now celebrated as a tourist attraction, thereby erasing a long history of political struggle over women’s attire in eastern Hui’an. Beginning in the early 1950s, local representatives of China’s new socialist regime had singled out women’s physical appearance as an obstacle to be overcome in the march toward socialist modernity. Their efforts to reform women’s dress and headpieces constituted a key element of the regime’s “civilizing mission” in eastern Hui’an (also known as Huidong). This mission rested on state-sponsored visions of civilized practice that motivated specific interventions in and interpretations of Huidong women’s appearance, attributing meaning to bodies in ways that have excluded such women from an idealized community of civilized socialist citizens.

This civilizing mission and the particular forms that it has assumed in eastern Hui’an over the decades since 1949 constitute the subject of this article. In particular, I show how state civilizing efforts—ranging from the Maoist reforms of the 1950s to the socialist spiritual civilization campaigns of the 1990s—have produced complex “figures” of local women whose hybridity forces us to interrogate the very meaning and power of categories such as civilization, citizenship, and quality. By tracing the changes and continuities in civilizing processes from the Maoist to the post-Mao period, I elucidate forms of inclusion and exclusion that call into question the homogeneity of China’s Han majority and its constitution in opposition to ethnic minorities. Extending this analysis into Shanlin itself, I show how the discursive production of these hybrid figures has also engendered new social hierarchies and power disparities at the local level, pitting different sectors of the community against one another as they strive to identify themselves as civilized socialist citizens. I introduce the concept of symbolic citizenship as a means of understanding how civilizing processes define citizenship through embodied (often gendered) practices that mark individuals and groups as appropriately or insufficiently civilized, thereby establishing their eligibility for inclusion in or exclusion from an idealized socialist body politic.

Civilizing Projects and Socialist Citizenship

Tracing the origins and usages of the term “civilization” in Europe, Raymond Williams highlights its dual sense both as an achieved state and as a process leading to that celebrated condition (1976, 48–50). Both connotations inspired the European colonial “civilizing mission” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was informed by an Enlightenment emphasis on historical progress as well as by an evolutionary hierarchy that ranked civilization above its “barbaric” predecessors (see also Young 1995, 43). This sense of civilization as progressive movement also infused an older Confucian vision that Prasenjit Duara describes as the “civilizing process,” an active engagement in “bringing true and proper civilizational virtues to all” (2001, 122). Those committed to this Confucian civilizing process not only transformed or enlightened (*bua*) the people on whom they acted but achieved moral and social regeneration for themselves as well (Rowe 2001, 406–8; see also Harrell 1995, 18–20).

By using the concept of civilizing mission or civilizing project to describe socialist China, I seek to recapture this sense of civilization as an active process, acknowledging its roots in both neo-Confucian principles and Enlightenment ideals of evolutionary progress. Influenced by the reforms of Meiji Japan as well as by a Marxist theory of historical stages, Chinese intellectuals and officials throughout the twentieth century have advocated civilization (*wenming*) as “a national strategy for radical social transformation” (Anagnost 1997, 81–82). Stevan Harrell (1995) reminds us that these civilizing projects have always been defined by a fundamental inequality between the civilizing center and the peripheral peoples on which it acts; in fact, the ideological construction of civilization as both hierarchical and attainable justifies the domination specific to the civilizing process. Moreover, this practical, transformative conception of civilization has not only suffused the relationship between successive Chinese governments and the minority groups with which Harrell is concerned. It also reached new heights in a range of state-sponsored movements carried out in Maoist China that were directed at certain segments of the Han masses, such as residents of eastern Hui’an (see fig. 1).

In the 1950s and 1960s, Huidong residents found their relatively isolated, easternmost part of the county beset by wave upon wave of reform campaigns that aspired to alter radically the ways in which local women dressed and adorned themselves as well as to transform their distinctive marriage practices, labor patterns, and formalized same-sex relationships. Ultimately reformers aimed to liberate Huidong women from what they depicted as “feudal” constraints, remaking them as liberated socialist citizens.² In broader terms, then, the development of socialist rule in post-1949 China has also required the shaping of a socialist body politic, a process of molding the Chinese people (Han and non-Han alike) through repeated civilizing campaigns and the civilizing discourses that motivated and justified such state interventions. Although these campaigns have certainly differed across groups and regions, their formulation and outcome in eastern Hui’an offer insights into the broader consequences of post-1949 civilizing projects and, in particular, their impact on the constitution of Han populations and Han women. By introducing new languages of distinction, civilizing processes separate individuals or groups who have been successfully liberated by the promise of socialism from those deemed external or even developmentally prior to socialist civilization. In the process, they also create standards for civilized citizenship that increasingly restrict access to this coveted national status.

The intimate linkage between civilizing processes and citizenship ideals appears most prominently in the domain that I term “symbolic citizenship,” which defines how a national community is imagined and sets the terms for identifying idealized citizens. In other words, symbolic citizenship goes beyond characterizing “the nature of social membership within modern political collectivities” (Turner 1993, 3) by establishing what kinds of people are imagined as eligible for that membership in the first place. Since 1949 certain groups in China have been excluded from this domain precisely because they have been deemed insufficiently civilized. The dilemma of civility has been particularly acute for ethnic minorities who experience a contradiction between modernization goals and the expectation that they maintain traditional identities as a basis for incorporation into the Chinese nation. “To the

²In this article, I intend the term “feudal” (*fengjian*) to be understood critically as an official category of the socialist regime rather than as an objective, developmental marker. Quotation marks are implied throughout.

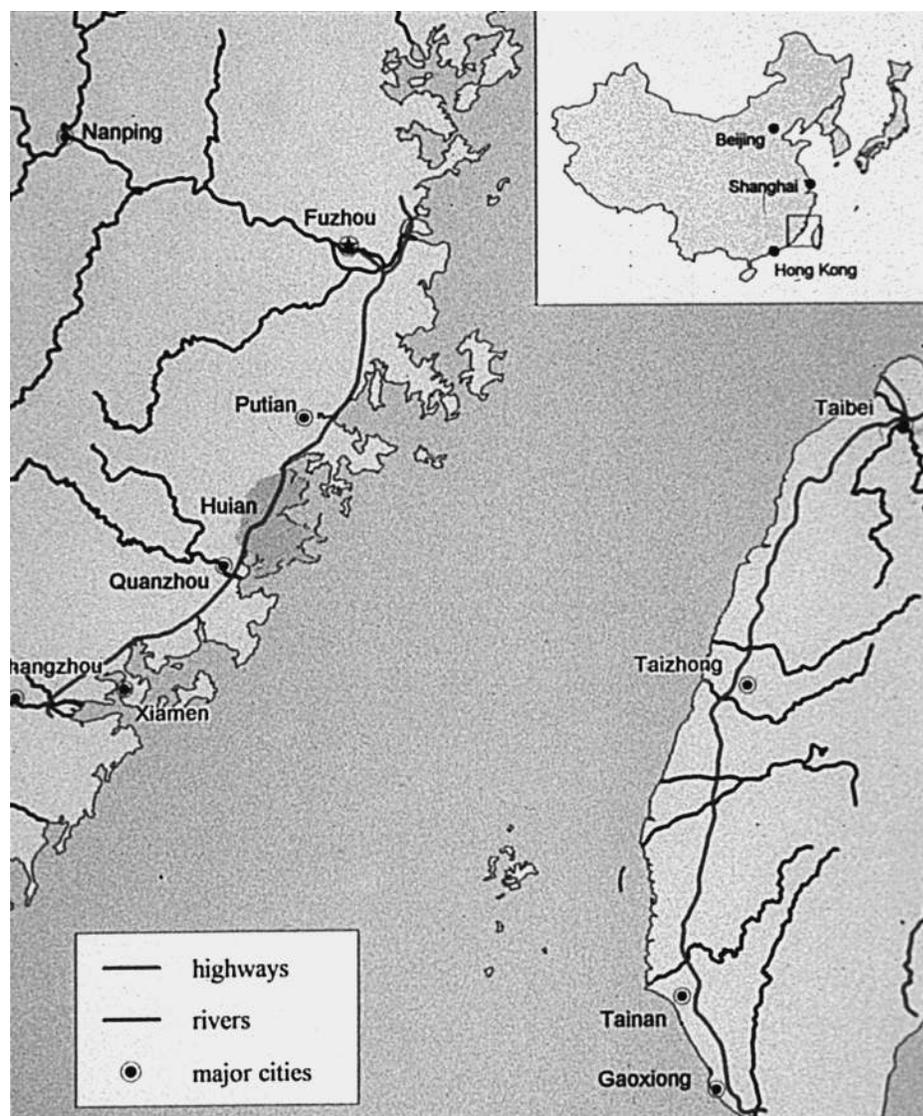


Figure 1. Map of eastern Fujian and Taiwan.

extent [minorities] lose tradition and culture,” Susan McCarthy perceptively notes, “they lose the identity through which their Chinese membership is bestowed; to the extent they don’t modernise, they are inferior citizens” (2000, 114). This “developmental double bind” (Litzinger 2000, 225) demands that minority groups submit to civilizing processes (at once social, cultural, and economic), while it also requires their adherence to traditional identities and practices that incorporate them into the socialist body politic as inferior to the majority Han.

Huidong residents have generally responded to civilizing efforts in a manner different from that of official minorities. Despite their adherence to an array of local cultural practices that deviated noticeably from rural Han norms, they were not classified by the socialist regime as non-Han, nor did (or do) they identify themselves

as anything but Han.³ In other words, as a result of their majority identification, Huidong women and men have no claim to an “ethnic” identity around which to mobilize in the face of reformist civilizing campaigns. Residents’ very status as Han further destabilizes the powerful dualisms that define the processes of exclusion and inclusion so critical to symbolic citizenship. In short, their majority classification has the added effect of undermining a pervasive conception of the Han as the unmarked category that stands in for the Chinese nation as a whole; it calls into question the necessary identification of Han-ness with socialist modernity, civilization, and citizenship (Gladney 1994, 98–103).⁴

By the same token, the very fact that Huidong women define the region’s marginal status requires attention to the embodied nature of symbolic citizenship and its gendered dimensions as a form of practice.⁵ By offering a vision of national belonging shaped by embodied practices rather than abstract, disembodied principles, the concept of symbolic citizenship supplements a dominant approach in citizenship studies that focuses on rights and obligations as constitutive elements of the relationship between the nation-state and its people (on China, see Goldman and Perry 2002; O’Brien 2001; Solinger 1999; Wong 1999). This emphasis on the embodied nature of citizenship practice is intensified by civilizing processes that constitute the idealized citizen as an iconic sign. In other words, the idealized citizen comes to signify socialist citizenship through resembling its essential qualities, in this case civility, progress, and productivity. Iconicity both naturalizes and dehistoricizes this resemblance (Herzfeld 1997, 28–32), in effect obscuring the role of civilizing processes in creating a particular vision of what a citizen should be (or look like). At the same time, iconicity also places the citizen in a larger signifying chain that links the idealized citizen to the modern socialist nation. As part of what semiotician Charles Peirce identified as the “infinite process” of signification (see Parmentier 1985, 29), the ideal citizen comes to stand in for the nation as a whole, itself a sign of progress, civility, and productivity. This signifying chain produces a structure of symbolic

³Similarities in language and economic livelihood (two of Stalin’s four nationality criteria) between Huidong villagers and those in surrounding areas likely prevented their classification as anything other than Han. The process of ethnic identification was first undertaken in Hui’an County in 1952 when the county government sent cadres to investigate the possibility of Hui (or Muslim) ethnicity among residents in a southern district of the county (HXDBW 1998, 799). In April 1954, the county government carried out investigations in districts and administrative villages throughout the county and delineated an ethnic minority population of 5,337, all of whom were classified as Hui (183). According to the 1990 national census, Han made up 99.9 percent of the Chongwu Township population (HXRPB 1991, 12–19). As Chinese scholars began studying Huidong society again in the 1980s, much of their work focused on uncovering the ethnic origins of the region’s residents (Guo 1997; Jiang 1989; Qiao, Chen, and Zhou 1992). As a result, the question of ethnicity has been pushed even further into the past, maintaining an official veneer of Han identity in the present.

⁴I use the concept of socialist modernity or modernization (*shehui zhuyi xiandaihua*) not as a fixed idea that remains unchanged over the post-1949 period but, instead, as a signifier whose referent has shifted along with changes in state policies and goals. Thus, the socialist modernization of the Great Leap period meant something very different from the socialist modernization of post-Mao spiritual civilization campaigns, yet the term itself remained the same.

⁵I borrow this concept of citizenship as practice from Bryan Turner, who argues that “citizenship may be defined as that set of practices . . . which define a person as a competent member of society, and which as a consequence shape the flow of resources to persons and social groups” (1993, 2). Unlike Turner, who focuses on the unequal distribution of resources produced by the class structure of the nation-state, I examine the discursive, social, and political processes of symbolic exclusion that bar certain individuals or groups from full membership in an idealized national community.

citizenship in which the citizen is made responsible for the civilization and progress of the socialist nation.

Due to the specific kinds of practices in which they have engaged and the meanings attributed to those practices, Huidong women have effectively been excluded from this domain of symbolic citizenship. Because symbolic citizenship rests on embodied practices, the criteria for citizenship are literally read off the body, in both its appearance and its practices. The perceived failure of Huidong women to embody the key qualities of civility and progress (and hence citizenship) is confirmed by the production of hybrid “complex figures,” such as the “the Hui’an woman” and the young woman “who wears the headscarf” that I discuss in greater depth below. This form of hybridity, Homi Bhabha suggests, characterizes “complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (1994, 1). By locating hybrid figures in the political and material contexts that structure their emergence, we can utilize the largely textually based insights of scholars such as Bhabha in our own efforts to understand the contradictory impulses *within* socialist civilizing processes and their consequences for visions of socialist citizenship.⁶ Although hybrid figures of Huidong women are themselves the product of state civilizing processes, they also bridge differences across time and space that civilizing discourses define as distinct. As a result, the embodied practices that constitute these figures have often inspired direct state interventions in social and individual bodies. These interventions subsequently generate complex negotiations over civility within local communities as different groups of women and men struggle to conform to changing standards of civilized socialist citizenship.

The Hybrid Figure of “the Hui’an Woman”

Socialist reformers at the provincial, county, and local levels in the Mao era portrayed Huidong women’s attire as a sign of the feudal, backward past, locating both its function and aesthetic in a time and place ostensibly made obsolete by socialist progress. Despite this portrayal, women from the villages of eastern Hui’an continued to adopt distinctive local styles of dress, headpieces, and hair arrangements even in the late twentieth century. Although such styles varied somewhat from one generational cohort to the next, they maintained certain elements that had come to compose the standard image of Huidong women, such as that represented in the statue now towering above Shanlin: a patterned headscarf draped over a frame that enabled the

⁶Although I clearly take inspiration from Bhabha’s formulation of hybridity as “the moment in which the discourse of colonial authority loses its univocal grip on meaning and finds itself open to the trace of the language of the other” (Young 1995, 22), I also acknowledge the critique that scholars of postcolonial syncretism must consider the contexts of global capitalist domination and political inequality in which such syncretism emerges (see Dirlík 1996; Parry 1994; Shohat 1996). Rather than drawing conclusions about the exercise of power exclusively from readings of discursive indeterminacies (Parry 1994, 11), I explore how socialist governance assumed a particular form in post-1949 China in part because of the regime’s commitment to particular civilizing processes that, *when put into practice*, have produced contradictory, hybrid images of Huidong women—images that have had very real consequences for women’s relationship to both the state and their own embodied practices.



Figure 2. Young woman wearing the hoegin headpiece (photograph by the author).

wearer to frame her face while also covering her neck and the back of her head; colorful hair ornaments and elaborate hairstyles that decorated the exposed top of the head; a pointed yellow bamboo hat vividly adorned; a side-buttoned, cropped top (usually, but not always, made from bright blue cloth) that revealed the wearer's abdomen; and, except among the youngest generation, low-waisted, flowing black pants reaching only to midcalf and held in place by a silver waistbelt and embroidered belts (see figs. 2–3). When I conducted research in Shanlin in the mid- to late 1990s, many of these items constituted the norm for female attire. Village women not only identified themselves by some variation of local dress, but they also acknowledged that their appearance made them easily recognizable to outsiders who were steeped in the imagery of “the Hui’an woman” produced in films, television programs, newspapers, and magazines both across Fujian Province and nationwide.

This figure of “the Hui’an woman” has had a much longer history, however, one that locates her emergence firmly in the civilizing campaigns of the Mao era.⁷ Beginning in the early 1950s, state reformers initiated a series of movements designed

⁷For information on pre-1949 Guomindang reform campaigns in eastern Hui’an, see Friedman 2002; forthcoming, chap. 2; Zhuang 1992.



Figure 3. An adult woman dressed in the full panoply of local attire. Because she is participating in a funeral, she has replaced her typically blue top with a white one (photograph by the author).

to transform the atypical Han peasants living in the coastal townships of eastern Hui'an into civilized, socialist citizens.⁸ With promulgation of the 1950 Marriage Law, reformers focused their attention on residents' distinctive marriage customs, practices that distinguished them from other rural Han, including those in the western and southern parts of the county and elsewhere along Fujian's coast. Unlike most rural Han women who took up immediate residence in their husbands' homes upon marriage, Huidong women did not live with their husbands until they bore a child. Instead, they remained with their natal families after marriage and visited their husbands only when summoned by female conjugal kin—typically on major festivals

⁸The four townships singled out in these campaigns were Jingfeng, Xiaozuo, Shanxia, and Chongwu (the latter including only the villages outside the township seat, Shanlin being one of them). Residents of Tuzhai, Dongling, and Wangchuan—inland districts closer to the county seat—also faced similar movements to reform local marriage practices and disband all-female networks, but women in these communities did not adopt distinctive dress and head-piece styles.

or during the busy planting and harvesting seasons—a practice that in Shanlin led to average postmarital separation periods of five to six years. Reformers identified these “abnormal” marriage customs with a host of other local practices, including gender divisions of labor in which women performed all the agricultural and heavy manual labor (while men engaged in fishing), intimate same-sex bonds (known as *dui pnuā*) that were identified as the source of high rates of collective female suicide, and elaborate (even wasteful) sartorial and adornment styles.⁹ Work teams sent down to the villages of eastern Hui’an in the early 1950s characterized these practices as the core of a particularly oppressive and exploitative feudal system, one that prevented conjugal intimacy and obstructed marital freedom, created excessive work burdens for young women, and led multitudes of women to take their own lives—often collectively. In the eyes of socialist reformers, women’s dress and adornment styles physically embodied this oppression.

Unlike officially recognized minorities who were initially protected from the new regime’s civilizing policies (Dreyer 1976, 95, 119; Litzinger 2000, 116–18, 183–86; Schein 2000, 80–88), Huidong residents were subjected to the full force of early campaigns such as those implementing the 1950 Marriage Law.¹⁰ Condemning local practices as emblems of feudal oppression, state reformers simultaneously produced the figure of “the Hui’an woman” as the condensation of all that was backward and oppressive in local society. This figure stood for a feudal subject par excellence in her marital behavior, her commitment to what reformers described as norms of extreme chastity, her mode of thinking, and her physical appearance. Not only did “the Hui’an woman” perpetuate backward practices, but she also produced the conditions of her own oppression by aggressively defending those practices, even to the point of taking her own life. Work team reports, provincial and county Women’s Federation documents, and Marriage Law–implementation committee statements uniformly portrayed this figure as mired in feudal thought and customs that prevented her from “turning over” (*fan shen*) and realizing her productive potential. To liberate “the Hui’an woman” thereby required intensive education and mobilization on the part of state actors.¹¹

⁹This complex of distinctive practices bears striking similarities to features of Pearl River Delta communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (as well as to the practices of certain minority groups in the south and southwest, although space constraints prevent me from addressing these here). Whereas delta women developed forms of marriage resistance beyond delayed coresidence, however, women in eastern Hui’an did not. One possible explanation for the absence of marital resistance in Huidong was that women had limited access to independent wage income, whereas early twentieth-century delta women engaged in highly valued work in industrial silk filatures (Sankar 1978; Siu 1990; Stockard 1989; Topley 1975).

¹⁰I do not mean to suggest that ethnic minorities survived the early 1950s entirely unscathed. As elsewhere, the socialist regime created new state institutions in these communities that often destroyed existing forms of governance and social organization. With land reform, relations to land and labor were also radically transformed. But in most cases, cadres (who were increasingly drawn from their own communities) initially refrained from attacking marriage, attire, life-cycle rituals, religious practice, and other customs. Erik Mueggler provides a particularly detailed and moving account of this process of state encroachment and popular resistance in a Yunnan Yi community (2001, chap. 6).

¹¹The discussion that follows is based on interviews with retired cadres and older community members conducted during my fieldwork from 1995 to 1997 and on return visits in 1998 and 2002. It also draws heavily on provincial and county party archive materials that document Marriage Law campaigns and other state reform initiatives in Hui’an in the 1950s and 1960s. Where appropriate, I cite specific documents. For a more detailed discussion of these materials, see Friedman forthcoming.

One of the first reforms promulgated by the new communist government in eastern Hui'an was a wholesale transformation of women's headpieces and hairstyles. Initiated by village cadres who were later joined by county-dispersed work teams, this early 1950s' campaign preceded by several years the urban dress reforms of later in the decade, a harbinger of growing concern over the proper sartorial culture for a socialist citizenry (Chen 2001; Finnane 1999, forthcoming). Reformers in eastern Hui'an aspired to remove what they perceived as the corporeal vestiges of women's "feudal oppression." Existing styles of dress and adornment were depicted as both physically and socially oppressive to women; work-team reports and propaganda folk songs described "the Hui'an woman" as literally weighed down by the burden of an elaborate headpiece, shackled by heavy silver bracelets and waistbelts, and reluctant to sleep with her husband for fear of disturbing her intricate hairstyle (see, for example, "Dong Zhou" 1952). The costs required to maintain these styles, in terms of both money and time, also came under attack, particularly as the party began to promote ideals of thrift and simplicity.

In villages such as Shanlin, work teams and newly appointed local cadres came together in condemning women's adornment not only as a sign of feudal consciousness and wasteful excess but also as a practice that further encouraged oppressive marriage customs and restricted labor productivity. In addition to attacks on the wastefulness of certain sartorial elements such as the *tit bue* (a long vest made from a patchwork of colorful fabrics), representatives of the new government focused their efforts on eradicating the *gin'a*, a black head covering that extended out as far as one foot in front of the face, along with the intricate hairstyle and ornaments that accompanied it (see fig. 4). There were two forms of the *gin'a*: an elaborate version and a simplified style for everyday wear. Women wore the elaborate *gin'a* on their wedding day as well as after marriage when participating in auspicious rituals or visiting as guests. They decorated it with silver flowers and an array of colorful ribbons and ornaments. They arranged their hair in an intricate bun that extended straight out from the back of the head, held in place by a supporting hair piece and a variety of silver hairpins. The simpler form of the *gin'a* used fewer decorative ornaments and substituted bamboo hairpins for silver. It was worn by married women when visiting their husbands or after they assumed conjugal residence. Both styles included a long piece of black cloth attached just above the forehead that could be let down to conceal the face (see Chen and Shi 1990, 199–200).

According to retired cadres in Shanlin, reformers attacked the *gin'a* on a number of fronts. They focused on the sheer weight of the headpiece and decorative ornaments (roughly seven to eight pounds) that hindered women's ability to engage in productive labor, while also criticizing the practices of nonresident wives who often refused to sleep with their husbands at night for fear that their elaborate hairstyle would come undone.¹² When I asked one retired cadre about efforts to eliminate the *gin'a*, he recalled, "[women] had it so hard then. They couldn't turn over (*fan shen*), [their lives were so] bitter. With liberation, [we] wanted to change and eliminate this unreasonable system" (interview, February 2, 1997). This man's use of the expression

¹²Elderly Shanlin women stressed that the cumbersome size and sheer weight of the headpiece made it extremely difficult to perform the tasks required of them as "proper" daughters-in-law (carrying heavy buckets of water from the well, cleaning, or laboring in the fields). We can see, then, how reformers would also have viewed eradication of the *gin'a* as one step in the process advocated by Friedrich Engels of liberating women by freeing up their labor power for socially recognized, productive activities.



Figure 4. Middle-aged woman (on right) posing in the *gin'a* head covering (photograph by Jiang Changyun; Chen and Shi 1990, n.p.).

“turn over” is pivotal here because it succinctly links two underlying premises of headpiece reform. In its more literal meaning, “turn over” referred to the fact that when wearing the *gin'a*, women could not physically turn over in bed. Elderly Shanlin women vividly described for me how, if they did lie down with their husbands, they were forced to sleep either sitting up against the headboard or on their side. Moreover, reclining easily disturbed the hairstyle and ornamentation, making a woman’s immodest behavior (that she had slept with her husband) apparent to all. By eradicating the *gin'a*, officials also sought to eliminate one of the many factors that they asserted encouraged wives to avoid conjugal visits.

The figurative meaning of “to turn over” is equally as evocative here. In the Communists’ new language of revolution, “turning over” meant emancipation, literally throwing off the shackles of the old society and constructing a new order built on equality, access to the means of production, scientific thought, and democratic politics (see Hinton 1966, vii). The term *fan shen* was used to refer broadly to ending the class oppression experienced by Chinese peasants as a whole as well as to the gender oppression faced by women specifically. The project of eliminating “this unreasonable system” of headpiece adornment brought together village and township cadres and



Figure 5. An elderly woman sporting the hairstyle and hair ornaments similar to those adopted after the *gin'a* was banned (photograph by the author).

county-appointed reformers in a joint effort to liberate “the Hui’an woman” from the general “bitterness” of feudalism and the specific “bitterness” of what they identified as an oppressive style of local adornment. This perceived opposition between liberation and an oppressive, “unreasonable system” was based on a vision of rationality newly defined in socialist terms but one whose civilizing impulse also derived from both Enlightenment and Confucian ideals.

At the same time, the *gin'a* further marked “the Hui’an woman” as visibly different from her Han counterparts. It contributed to her hybrid status as officially Han, yet culturally not quite Han. Perhaps for this reason, new village cadres and outside work teams took unprecedented measures to eliminate the headpiece. Efforts to educate women through propaganda folk songs and literacy schools were coupled with more forceful interventions. According to a former Shanlin official who had helped organize the campaign, as early as 1951 local cadres posted sentries at the major intersections leading in and out of the village. If a woman tried to leave or enter the village wearing the *gin'a*, the sentries would not allow her to pass until she had removed her headpiece. This approach effectively reached the sectors of the female population most likely to wear the *gin'a*: nonresident wives off to visit their husbands in other villages and all married women who set out to visit other villages or participate in auspicious rituals. Despite the several decades that separated the anti-*gin'a* campaign from the present, many an elderly Shanlin woman became agitated as she described for me how government representatives literally “tore” (*tiah*) the *gin'a* off women’s heads and forced them to cut their hair and wear it in a simple bun (see fig. 5). They also recalled the backlash produced by these forceful measures, as some women resorted to suicide rather than remove their headpieces, too ashamed to expose their faces and heads outside their natal communities.

The interventionist methods adopted by reformers from the county on down to the village indicate the pressure that state actors at different levels of the new

bureaucracy must have felt not only to “liberate” Huidong women but also to remake forcibly the physical appearance of women whom they claimed were members of the Han majority. Identified as leaders in the effort to develop socialist modernization and civilization, the Han were encouraged to move beyond the “irrational” practices characteristic of a feudal past; moreover, they were expected to do so more rapidly and more thoroughly than their minority counterparts. Although it might have been acceptable (at least temporarily) for official minorities to maintain distinctive dress and adornment styles, it clearly was not the case for Han communities such as those in eastern Hui’an.¹³ Perhaps by eradicating such a visible sign of difference as the *gin’a*, higher-level officials also sought to quiet nagging doubts about Huidong residents’ ethnic status.

In an article originally written after he was sent to assist with land reform in Hui’an County in 1951, Xiamen University professor Lin Huixiang set out to explain the origins of Huidong’s distinctive customs. Focusing on local marriage practices, Lin noted the striking similarities between Huidong marriages and the customs of minority groups such as the Buyi, Miao, and Li in southern and southwestern China, as well as those practiced by some Han inhabitants of the Pearl River Delta region. Lin argued that all these forms of delayed postmarital coresidence represented remnants of an ancient transition from a matrilineal to a patrilineal society. They derived, according to Lin, from women’s belated struggles to retain the power that they had enjoyed in a matrilineal system.¹⁴ Unlike non-Han women, however, Huidong women (like women in the delta) faced severe restrictions on extramarital sexual relations, a distinction that Lin attributed to the fact that the original inhabitants of these regions had, at some point, become assimilated into Han society. Because Han peoples had “become civilized” at an earlier time than most non-Han (1981, 276), he argued, they had also progressed to the feudal stage sooner, meaning they had experienced more extended exposure to feudalism’s emphasis on female chastity and patriarchal control. As a result, in both Huidong and the delta, women’s sexual freedom was curtailed both before and after marriage. Lin’s historical reconstruction thus depicted contemporary Huidong women (together with their delta counterparts) as living remnants of an ancient moment of evolutionary and ethnic transition; their suffering, evidenced in his view by sexual repression, conjugal discord, and high suicide rates, proved the aberrant status of such marriage practices, given the current level of Han civilization.

Lin’s account, in short, emphasized the extent to which “the Hui’an woman” constituted a temporal and ethnic hybrid. His Marxist-inspired evolutionary analysis, together with the writings and recollections of official reformers, defined “the Hui’an

¹³ For instance, in the mid-1950s, local officials across eastern Hui’an collected women’s silver hairpins, silver waistbelts, and other jewelry as part of a campaign to discourage elaborate adornment styles and encourage thrift. By contrast, in one Guangxi minority region in the early 1950s, local cadres were criticized for “compelling” minorities to turn over their silver ornaments because such actions were seen as signs of Han chauvinism and disrespect for minority traditions (Dreyer 1976, 122–23). By the Cultural Revolution, however, Ralph Litzinger found that among the Guangxi Yao, “almost all forms of ethnic customs [including traditional clothing] were eventually labeled unwanted remnants of the feudal past” (2000, 184).

¹⁴ This theory of primitive or matrilineal residualism pervades Han ethnological accounts of ethnic minorities throughout the post-1949 period, implicitly reinforcing a vision of the Han as the pinnacle of modernity and civilization (see Gladney 1994, 101–2; McKhann 1995). Moreover, this formulation also appears in the writings of minority ethnologists themselves, men and women fully steeped in the evolutionary principles of Marxist social science (Litzinger 2000, 207).

woman” as straddling the boundary between Han and non-Han, socialist and feudal, civilized and backward. Her inability to fit neatly into established categories meant that she was not sufficiently “other” to exclude her from the socialist civilizing project. On the contrary, her distinctive features demanded attention to the repeated threat of feudal resurgence and latent incivility within the socialist nation. In other words, “the Hui’an woman” forced state reformers to acknowledge the powerful obstacles that they faced in striving to realize socialist civilization.¹⁵ As a potential (Han) socialist citizen, this figure did not reaffirm the boundaries of the civilized nation as much as she exposed its limits. Her embodied practices cloaked what was supposed to be familiar and understandable in unfamiliar garb, unsettling officials at various levels of the bureaucracy and inspiring intrusive and sometimes violent interventions in women’s bodies. As both an ancient and feudal remnant in a moment of socialist transformation, the figure of “the Hui’an woman” reminded state actors that “within the frontiers, the alien [was] already there, an exoticism or sabbath of the memory, a disquieting familiarity” (Certeau 1984, 129).

From Eradicating Feudalism to Building Civilization

Despite successes in banning the *gin’a*, local cadres and outside work teams were unable to eliminate all distinctive aspects of Huidong women’s dress and adornment styles. Sartorial reforms continued with the establishment of the commune system and the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and 1960s, when commune officials used the work-point system to regulate women’s attire. Shanlin women were encouraged to wear trousers in place of low-waisted, loose, cropped pants; by 1965 the commune had even begun to dispatch teams of seamstresses to sew these trousers in the villages (Wang 2002, 30). Those who refused to adopt the new styles were banned from meetings and demonstrations in the commune center, activities for which villagers received work points if they participated. By barring women who failed to conform sartorially, commune leaders manipulated the work-point system to fulfill noneconomic goals. Older Shanlin women who had participated in such activities claimed that in those days the government “controlled [us] through work points” (interview, June 8, 1996). At the same time, however, they acknowledged the limits to such control, describing for me how they simply changed back to their old style of dress once they returned to the village (see also Wang 2002, 30).

Stripped of the *gin’a* and its elaborate hairstyle, young and middle-aged women in Huidong villages gradually adopted a simplified hairstyle and a headpiece known as the hoegin, the frame and headscarf that covered part of the head as well as the

¹⁵ One would assume that delta women’s marriage practices would have provoked similar responses from the new socialist regime, yet I have not been able to document how long delayed-transfer marriage or marriage resistance persisted in the delta, nor how socialist officials responded to these and other practices. Janice Stockard briefly mentions efforts after 1949 to force nonresident wives and spinsters who remained in the delta back to their “proper” homes and reports the possible reemergence of delayed-transfer marriage in the 1980s (1989, 115–16). C. K. Yang describes the presence of four “old maid houses” in a village outside Guangzhou in 1948; the sixty women who lived in these houses included what he terms “separated wives,” widows, and unmarried women. He does not discuss, however, what happened to these women after 1949 (1959, 15, 85–86).

back and front of the neck (see figs. 2–3). Even this adaptation was briefly attacked during the Cultural Revolution, when, as Antonia Finnane has argued, the political climate “was unfavourable . . . to any form of gender or status distinctive dress” (1999, 22). Huidong women were once again urged to wear army caps and fitted trousers in place of the headscarf and loose, flowing pants, sartorial elements that conformed more closely to the ideal of the military-style uniform widely promoted in the 1960s (Chen 2001, 156–59). Such alterations did not outlive the political turmoil of the period, however, and most women soon returned to local dress styles and the *hoegin*. By the post-Mao era, the figure of “the Hui’an woman” had been joined by a new image of contention, that of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” (*baohogin’e*).

Like her predecessor, the young woman “who wears the headscarf” occupies a position of ambiguous marginality within the socialist nation. She is the product not only of the antifeudal civilizing discourses of the Maoist period but also of a new discourse of civilization conveyed through the post-Mao campaigns for “the building of socialist spiritual civilization” (*shehui zhuyi jingshen wenming jianshe*). This more recent discourse, defined by the key terms quality (*suzhi*), culture (*wenhua*), and civility or civilization (*wenming*), reorients the state’s civilizational model away from a Marxist stage theory of history to individual features both learned and innate. Yet at the same time, the process of reorientation is never fully completed. Accusations of “being feudal” continue to plague the post-Mao civilizing project by generating a contradictory temporality: the feudal, backward past that repeatedly erupts within the ostensibly modern, socialist present. The figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” serves as a bridge that enables this mixing of temporal and civilizational modes. Antifeudal civilizing discourse and spiritual-civilization rhetoric jointly produce this new figure. Their powerful convergence is not, however, simply a top-down exercise of state power in an altered guise. While this convergence authorizes new state interventions in villages such as Shanlin, it also engenders new hierarchies within local communities. These hierarchies show that despite the socialist regime’s obsession with its “despotic double,” it cannot fully control the meanings attributed to the terms of its own civilizing project.

Socialist Spiritual Civilization

The post-Mao regime’s concern with civilization (*wenming*) in both its material and spiritual forms first emerged at the Third Plenum of the Communist Party’s Eleventh Central Committee in 1978, the meeting that launched market reforms across the nation. The division of *wenming* into material and spiritual components justified Deng Xiaoping’s call for renewed attention to economic forces without altogether eliminating the relevance of the ideological field (Anagnost 1997, 84–85; see also Dirlík 1982; Gold 1984). The building of spiritual civilization focused on transforming citizens’ thought and behavior so that they conformed to ostensibly socialist ideals, even as the party moved away from those ideals in the 1990s as it proceeded apace with market reforms. The catchall, rather vague concept of spiritual civilization enabled the leadership under Jiang Zemin to maintain a commitment to ideological work while simultaneously preserving economic growth as the centerpiece of post-Mao governance. At least rhetorically, then, the party identified the building of spiritual civilization as a key element in its future development plan:

The major goal for the next fifteen years is to establish and build a common ideal of socialism with Chinese characteristics throughout the entire nation; to establish firm

support for and unwavering confidence in the party's basic line; *to achieve clear improvement in the quality of citizens* [as seen in] the cultivation of thought and morality, the level of scientific education, [and] concepts of democratic rule of law; *to achieve clear improvement in the quality of cultural life* based on demands for active health, abundance and variety, and service to the people; *to achieve clear improvement in urban and rural civilization levels* according to the major markers of social atmosphere, public order, and living environment.

("Zhongguo gongchandang" 1996, 1; emphasis added)

The three key components of spiritual civilization mentioned above appear prominently in this statement: quality (*suzhi*), culture (*wenhua*), and civility or civilization (*wenming*). The attention to quality refers directly to a rapidly growing population (particularly a rural population) that state officials and intellectuals alike perceive as lacking the skills and discipline necessary to boost China's productive capacity without draining existing resources through uncontrolled (*luan*) consumption (see also Anagnost 1995; 1997, 86–97; "Zhongxuanbu, nongyebu" 1995, 1). The improvement of citizens' *suzhi* has come to be seen as essential to the modernization of the country and its successful incorporation of capitalist forces, goals that require rational (rather than uncontrolled) production and consumption. In other words, having initiated the process of economic reform, the post-Mao leadership has sought to foster the kinds of citizens who will not only produce wealth but also know how to spend their wealth constructively while maintaining a commitment to collective welfare (Anagnost 1997, 91–92). Thus, rather than replacing citizens defined by their relation to the state with those defined by their ties to the market (Miller 1995, 44), spiritual-civilization campaigns strive to instill a "proper" commitment to both the market and the state, promoting an ethos of production and consumption that is market driven yet collectively oriented.¹⁶

This discourse of quality, in short, is directed at a population perceived as ill prepared for an era which is simultaneously more progressive and more economically demanding. As something measurable (it can be "high" or "low") and qualifiable ("good" or "bad"), quality marks both bodies and minds; like Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) *habitus*, it encodes embodied characteristics, inculcated ways of speaking and acting, and degrees of cultivation (moral, status based, or otherwise).¹⁷ *Suzhi* reflects the subjective orientation of spiritual-civilization campaigns which promote a mode of being that must be internalized through the didactic power of the state and then displayed through practice and speech (see Xue and Yuan 1986; Xue 1996). Particularly when combined with "culture" (as in *wenhua suzhi*), it can be deployed to refer to a diverse range of attributes, skills, and experiences.¹⁸

¹⁶This tension between constructive and excessive consumption is not unique to socialist societies, although the role of centralized economies, as what Katherine Verdery (1996) calls "redistributive regimes," has historically made consumption a contested domain of practice across the socialist world.

¹⁷I would like to thank Li Zhang for suggesting these parallels between *suzhi* and *habitus*. She makes a similar argument in her analysis (2001) of rural migrants in Beijing and their "migrant *suzhi*."

¹⁸In a volume devoted exclusively to analyzing the problem of quality in contemporary China, Jie Sizhong (1997) outlines eight different categories of *suzhi*, ranging from personality (*renge*), spirit (*jingshen*), morality (*daode*), and culture (*wenhua*), to science (*kexue*), health (*jiankang*), profession (*zhiye*), and aesthetics (*shenmei*). He ultimately offers a rather pessimistic portrayal of the current quality of China's citizens in all these forms.

The linking of culture with quality reinforces the common view that China cannot improve the quality of its vast population without intensive efforts at education (see Jie 1997, chap. 10).¹⁹ Popular and scholarly usage frequently employs culture as a stand-in for education, with those who “have culture” (*you wenhua*) being better educated than those who do not (see Kipnis 1997, 179, 182). Yet, this usage is perhaps too narrow. As I discuss below, Shanlin residents’ references to the “low cultural quality” of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” encompass more than simply her level of education, already presumed to be quite low.²⁰ Cultural quality can also be read from behavior, particularly when it involves contested forms of practice, such as marital or sexual relations. Furthermore, cultural quality is also determined by speech, including both manner of speaking (coarse versus cultivated) and the ability to speak Mandarin as opposed to only local dialect. In sum, both *wenhua* and *suzhi* mark patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, and personal attributes such as dependability, modesty, and diligence.²¹ They evoke a practice-based understanding of civility that, when combined with both the subjective and pragmatic orientation of spiritual-civilization campaigns, inspires new state interventions in Huidong as local officials draw on the language of spiritual civilization to justify efforts to remake both the human and physical face of their communities.

The building of spiritual civilization in 1990s’ Shanlin motivated a series of highly practical state campaigns, with cadres organizing short-term adult literacy classes, forcefully clearing the streets of obstructions, dredging the polluted village canal, planting trees, distributing trash receptacles, and building new and sanitary public bathrooms. The catchall nature of these campaigns reflected the diverse connotations of the very concept of spiritual civilization, its vagueness enabling local officials to subsume a wide range of goals under its rubric. Despite Shanlin officials’ limited attention to improving the “quality” of village residents, the subjective dimension of spiritual-civilization discourse provided justification for officials’ pragmatic—and, as many argued, overly intrusive—interventions in the community.

Toward the end of 1996, village officials, together with township government representatives, initiated a widespread campaign to clean up the environment and create an orderly village atmosphere. This initiative sought not only to remove trash and “beautify” the face of the village but also to eliminate the traffic snarls that plagued the village’s narrow streets. Toward this end, it called for the removal of stone slabs and other valuable building materials that residents had stacked along roadsides for use in future house-building or renovation projects. After giving villagers twenty-

¹⁹This concern with education coalesced in the mid-1990s in two nationwide policies: a campaign to eradicate illiteracy and a commitment to enforcing nine years of compulsory education. In Shanlin attention to the first policy was only cursory (as evidenced by the short-lived nature of the adult literacy classes sponsored by the village government). The second inspired a greater commitment, particularly with the building of a new junior middle school to serve Shanlin and a neighboring village.

²⁰When I began teaching a basic literacy class to Shanlin women in their teens and twenties, other villagers assumed that my students had to be women “who wore the headscarf.” In fact, most did not wear local attire, confirming the arbitrary nature of the link between dress and level of education.

²¹Compare with Mayfair Yang’s depiction of classes in “culture and etiquette” (*wenhua liyi*) attended by young Shanghai women where they learn skills such as speaking graciously and skillfully, socializing at banquets, appreciating music and art, and dressing fashionably (1999, 49–50). For other discussions of quality and culture as they have been used by intellectuals in regard to peasants, see Su and Wang 1991, 169–70; Flower 1997; Kipnis 1997, chap. 9.

four hours' notice, officials let loose hired gangs that smashed building materials remaining outside after the deadline. The village government also fined the owners of these materials for blocking traffic and cluttering the streets. When I asked one village cadre why such forceful methods were necessary, he responded by appealing directly to the discourse of spiritual civilization: "The people here, [their] quality is low (*soozit ge*); they won't take the initiative." Thus, "low quality," rather than motivating an expansion in the pedagogical scope of the campaign, justified punitive methods that forcefully remade the face of the community. In a strikingly Foucaultian twist, what this cadre identified as villagers' point of resistance to spiritual-civilization campaigns (their "low quality") actually produced the state's own disciplinary intervention.²²

The cadre's reference to the low quality of Shanlin residents reflects the extent to which the rhetoric of spiritual civilization (the triad of quality, culture, and civilization) has been adopted by both low-level officials and, as I will show below, villagers themselves. This linguistic dissemination suggests that despite the often limited practical impact of spiritual-civilization campaigns, the movement has been able to introduce new languages of distinction and value that shape widespread understandings of civilized behavior and citizenship.²³ Shanlin villagers' discursive production of the young woman "who wears the headscarf" offers a valuable opportunity to examine how villagers integrate both Maoist and post-Mao civilizing discourses in ways that create such distinctions of civility within local society but often without the direct intervention of state actors.

The Young Woman "Who Wears the Headscarf"

The figure of the young woman "who wears the headscarf" has emerged in Shanlin at a time of dramatic changes in both the local economy and marriage and courtship practices. As the effects of market reforms were felt more keenly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Shanlin and Chongwu Township as a whole witnessed a decline in fishing and agriculture—the long-standing cornerstones of the collective economy—and a dramatic rise in a newly mechanized stone-carving industry that provided profitable wage-labor opportunities for young women and men. The mixed-sex nature of factory work has subsequently fostered new social spaces in the community where

²²Accusations of "low quality" have also been directed against rural officials themselves—for instance, as a rationale for favoring urban over rural representatives in the composition of both the National People's Congress and local congresses. As Kevin O'Brien notes, such discrimination is justified by claims that "equal weighting of urban and rural residents [in people's congresses] . . . would produce large majorities of low quality (*suzhi*) rural deputies, which might diminish the vitality of representative assemblies" (2001, 413). Rural officials' willingness to use the discourse of quality against their fellow villagers might very well reflect their own insecurity about their standing in a national political hierarchy organized around both place and civilizational markers.

²³When I returned to Shanlin for visits in the summers of 1998, 2000, and 2002, I found streets and paths once again littered with garbage and traffic halted by building materials that blocked the flow of cars, trucks, and bicycles. When I pressed them about the decline in sanitation and public order, village officials offered little comment; their attention had turned to new demands by higher authorities despite grumbling and complaints from community members.

young men and women socialize openly with one another. Together with a now stringently enforced legal marriage age (twenty for women, twenty-two for men), these transformations have created an environment in which young people increasingly choose their own spouses, date prior to marriage, and even engage in conjugal visits on their own initiative—the overall result being not a rejection of local marriage practices, but a significant reduction in the length of postmarital separations. With the rise of mixed-sex socializing and new marital expectations, the young woman “who wears the headscarf” has become an increasingly contentious figure.

This figure has also achieved prominence at a time when styles of dress and adornment in Shanlin have become increasingly diverse, producing greater distinctions among generations of women as well as between young women who continue to wear local attire and growing numbers who have adopted urban dress (known locally as “the new style” [*sin sik'e*]). Despite this diversity, young women who wear local styles rarely comment on their choice, shrugging it off as a natural decision that they attribute largely to individual taste and preference.²⁴ Within the category of “new style” dressers, however, we find women who have never worn the headscarf and its accompanying attire, as well as those who have deliberately decided to “change dress” (*gaizong*), permanently switching from local garb to the new style, usually in their late teens or early twenties. The reflections of those who have made this decision provide some insights into how they viewed the figure of the young woman “who wore the headscarf” and what that figure had come to represent in local society. I present here the comments of one young woman whose decision to change her dress occurred during my stay in Shanlin but whose views are representative of the many members of her generation with whom I discussed this issue.

While passing through the village market one fall day in 1996, I walked blithely past Kingden, a young woman roughly twenty years of age, without recognizing her. As far as I knew, Kingden had always worn local dress, but that fall she had suddenly decided to change her attire. When I asked her why, she explained that “it is more convenient to go out [of the village]” dressed in the new style than in traditional garb (interview, October 7, 1996). She followed this allusion to convenience with a more specific reference to the stares and expressions of curiosity that women who wore local dress attracted when they ventured out of the Huidong region, an experience that she compared to the alienation faced by migrants who had come to eastern Hui'an from elsewhere in China. Young and middle-aged women had often described similar experiences of being stared at and talked about when they traveled to nearby cities, but in most instances these incidents had not motivated them to change the way that they dressed. In Kingden's case, however, her appeals to convenience suggested more dramatic changes in the kinds of activities in which she sought to engage, those that would require social as well as geographical mobility.

As she continued with her explanation, Kingden suddenly justified her decision to change her dress by referring to activities of a very different order: “If you wear

²⁴Despite repeated efforts, I was rarely able to elicit any sustained commentary from young women in their teens and twenties who wore local dress as to why they chose to adopt the headscarf and related attire. Most simply responded that they wore the style that they most preferred, even when other friends or siblings had chosen the new style. I did notice some indication, however, that social pressure might play a role in a young woman's decision to maintain local dress. For instance, young women who changed to the new style while working outside the region almost invariably switched back to local attire upon returning to Shanlin, a decision that they often attributed to concern that other villagers would gossip about them otherwise.

the headscarf and go out dancing, then everyone will laugh at you,” she added (interview, October 7, 1996). With this statement, Kingden associated dress with both a social and personal image. Her explanation implied that a village woman who wore local attire was not the kind of woman expected to go dancing in a public place, nor would she be expected to *desire* to do so. Going dancing in public was a new and not yet fully accepted activity for young women in Shanlin; like singing karaoke in KTVs (or karaoke parlors), going dancing inevitably aroused suspicions about a young woman’s modesty and sexual activities. Village gossip was even more incendiary if the young woman involved wore local attire, as I will explain below. By changing her dress, Kingden opened up a new range of possibilities for behavior and subjectivity, possibilities that potentially enabled her to transform the very image that she sought to project to others and to create for herself. In fact, after Kingden adopted new-style attire, I noticed that she began to spend more time in public spaces such as the village market where she could be seen socializing with mixed groups of young women and men. Soon after, she also opened a stylish clothing shop on a side street in the market area, a business that required her to travel outside the county to purchase the newest urban fashions.

To argue that all these changes were a product of Kingden’s decision to switch her style of dress would be farfetched. The fact that she had recently been rejected by her boyfriend, with whom she had maintained a somewhat unconventional relationship, also played a major role in encouraging her lifestyle shift.²⁵ Nonetheless, she expressed her desire to transform her activities and self-image by altering her public presentation, as seen most vividly in her rejection of the headscarf and local attire and her adoption of new-style dress. This decision reflects two connections between physical appearance and subjectivity. On the one hand, Kingden clearly perceived a strong link between her dress and the image that she conveyed to others. On the other hand, she also attributed a disciplining role to sartorial styles in that her mode of dress required conformity with patterns of behavior and desire deemed appropriate for that appearance. The figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” was associated in village discourse with qualities of (sometimes excessive) modesty, close-mindedness, and the inability to understand how to be progressive or “open” (*kaifang*). Therefore, not only was such a figure expected not to visit sites such as karaoke parlors or dance halls, but if she did, it was assumed that she was up to no good. Villagers often asserted that such a visit would imply that the woman was working as a prostitute, using one of several terms that identified prostitutes by their dress (traditional or new style) and place of origin (Huidong villager, town resident, or migrant) (see Friedman 2000). By changing her appearance, Kingden implicitly acknowledged the constraints engendered by the discursive production of this figure. As someone who no longer “wore the headscarf,” she sought to legitimate her desire to go out dancing as both progressive and socially acceptable.

Let us look at some instances in which the figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” is invoked by the reflections of other groups of villagers, particularly young women who have never worn such attire (usually because of higher levels of

²⁵During the day, I often found Kingden at her boyfriend’s home, where she engaged in the activities typical of married women, such as cooking, washing clothes, and caring for her boyfriend’s son by his first marriage. Her boyfriend’s first wife, a close friend of Kingden’s, had committed suicide. Although Kingden’s situation was not typical in Shanlin, it did reflect the growing prominence of nonmarital relationships between young women and men, not all of which ultimately culminated in marriage.

education or extended residence outside the village) and educated men. I have selected these two groups because they have the most at stake in reinforcing boundaries between “feudal” and “civilized” behavior, or between those who “lack culture” or have “low cultural quality” and those who do not. Young women who wore urban attire and educated village men revealed in their narratives a creative appropriation of terms drawn from both Maoist and post-Maoist civilizing campaigns. At the same time, their narratives implicitly expressed concerns that they, too, might be implicated in the very feudal practices or low quality that they were quick to criticize in others. Like Shanlin cadres who used the language of spiritual civilization to justify their intrusive interventions in the community, “new style” young women and educated village men employed socialist civilizing discourses to distance themselves from those whom they saw as outside the scope of civilized citizenship. For both groups, these discourses “form[ed] a kind of symbolic fence, both marking a boundary and enclosing a category, and therefore avoiding dangerous categorical mixtures” (Caldeira 2000, 68–69). Their boundary-defining efforts further solidified a conception of citizenship as a symbolic construction based on embodied practices, wedding a vision of the ideal citizen to powerful discourses about civilized practices, gendered bodies, and rational forms of consumption and production.

In our many conversations over the two years that I spent in Shanlin, A Hun, a stylish young mother in her early twenties, repeatedly sought to distinguish herself from childhood friends “who wore the headscarf.” She claimed that she had outgrown her friendships with these women because they were unable to understand her more progressive thinking inspired by several years of residence in the provincial capital Fuzhou and extended contact with urbanites such as her brother’s wife. On other occasions, A Hun defined this disparity in terms of marital behavior. Whereas she had visited her husband voluntarily before they lived together, she claimed that young wives who wore local dress waited for their mothers-in-law to summon them for conjugal visits. “We who wear this kind of dress [the new style] don’t need to be called,” A Hun assured me. “Only those who wear the headscarf do” (interview, May 27, 1996).²⁶ In other words, A Hun posited a direct link between how a woman dressed and how she could be expected to behave in relation to changing marriage practices (of course, those expectations need not conform to actual behavior). As someone who wore the new style, she depicted herself as open and progressive (she did not need to be summoned for conjugal visits). The woman “who wore the headscarf,” however, was seen as inherently conservative and therefore less likely to visit her husband on her own.

Although A Hun clearly opposed the figure of the young woman “who wore the headscarf” to her own self-image as open and progressive, her bases for that opposition were somewhat shaky. She certainly looked the part of the sophisticated youth, dressed as she often was in stylish outfits with her face tastefully made up. Yet despite her quite passable Mandarin skills, A Hun frequently bemoaned her lack of education and minimal literacy, weaknesses that she argued prevented her from finding satisfying employment or creating a lifestyle different from that of other village women. Although she had lived in urban Fuzhou for several years prior to marriage, she had spent her time there working in a factory like other rural migrants. Despite having married into one of the wealthiest families in Shanlin, she nonetheless

²⁶Recall that prior to the mid-1990s, young wives generally did not visit their husbands unless they were called for by their mothers-in-law or other female conjugal kin. Even when summoned, moreover, many refused to visit or stayed for only a few hours or one night.

continued to work as a stone polisher and later in a fish-processing factory (together with many young women who wore local attire) as well as to care for her son and perform household chores. Her reference to marriage practices as the key marker of distinction enabled her to deflect attention away from these similarities and, as a result, claim a more urbane, cultured identity. By the same token, A Hun also perpetuated the stereotypical construction of the young woman “who wore the headscarf”: a close-minded figure excessively shy and modest in her marital behavior.

Other village women defined this form of modesty as explicitly feudal, drawing on an earlier Maoist discourse that had linked feudal practices to backwardness, restricted productivity, and oppression more generally. In early 1997, a young woman by the name of Sioklei returned to Shanlin to marry. She had been working as a stone carver in another township in Hui’an County and had come back rather unhappily to formalize an arranged match. In the days leading up to her wedding, Sioklei desperately avoided participating in any wedding preparations. One January evening we sat chatting in a friend’s shop where Sioklei had sought refuge, reluctant to fulfill her task of bringing some items to her future mother-in-law. She did not want to make the visit alone and asked another woman present to accompany her. When this woman agreed, Sioklei suggested that she bring the items inside her fiancé’s house, enabling Sioklei simply to wait outside. At this, the woman retorted: “Are you [one] who wears the headscarf or who [dresses] in the new style? Such embarrassment/shyness!” (*Li si bao hoegin’e a si sin sik’e? Ziok pnai se!*).

Sioklei in fact did dress in the new style, but her unwillingness to enter her future conjugal home suggested to this woman—who herself wore local attire—the attitude of someone “who wears the headscarf.” The connection to actual dress is clearly irrelevant in this case; instead, the figure of the woman “who wears the headscarf” is invoked as a sign of excessively shy, even feudal, marital behavior and attitudes. A teenager who observed this interaction later explained the attack on Sioklei in what were to her rather straightforward terms: “[Those] who wear the headscarf are more feudal” (interview, January 4, 1997). Like A Hun, this teenager did not wear local attire but, instead, associated those who did with marital practices identified as overly modest and thus backward. In fact, it is precisely in the contemporary context of rapidly changing marriage and courtship practices that continued use of the term “feudal” produces powerful new social distinctions. By accusing “reluctant” peers of being feudal, young women such as this teenager who socialize openly with boyfriends, fiancés, and husbands can justify their own radically new practices as being specifically “not feudal,” and thus appropriate, given China’s new era of “reform and opening” (*gaige kaifang*). In the process, however, some of the older connotations of feudal, such as its association with women’s limited productivity and the need for class-based liberation, disappear. As they remove the term from a Maoist signifying chain, these examples reveal the extent to which use of the signifier “feudal” no longer operates in village society as a state disciplinary strategy but, rather, functions as a popular tactic for ensuring social distinction and acceptability. Put another way, although young women “make sense of their own world and experience with the language by which they are discriminated against” (Caldeira 2000, 85), they nonetheless do so in ways that undermine the univocality of the state’s authoritative discourse (Bakhtin 1981, 342–44; see also Litzinger 2000, 211).

When we turn to the narratives of educated village men, however, we find that the figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” did more than signify backward marriage practices. For these men, this figure generally represented precisely the opposite of extreme modesty or shyness: excessively liberal, even chaotic (*luan*),

marital and sexual behavior. I often interviewed different generations of village men about their perceptions of the current state of village society, the economy, and Chinese socialism more generally. Among the minority of respondents who were somewhat better educated (usually meaning that they had gone on to high school or junior vocational school), I began to notice a common refrain: without any prompting on my part, such men often referred to the figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” as the source of chaotic behaviors and social disorder emerging in the market-reform era. In particular, they attributed to this figure unruly practices such as breaking off engagements, divorcing without cause, frequenting KTVs, and having extramarital affairs or dating multiple men (accusations not unlike those of prostitution mentioned above). This undisciplined, liberal behavior, educated men in their twenties through fifties argued, was a product of this figure’s “low cultural quality” (*wenhua suzhi di*), often, but not exclusively, a reference to low levels of education and limited knowledge. They claimed that because of their low quality, young women “who wore the headscarf” did not fully understand what being open or progressive meant; they were unable to adopt the liberatory ideals of the reform era in a balanced, healthy manner. These men employed the language of spiritual civilization to formulate a critique that distinguished healthy or moderate mixed-sex interactions from those that were uncontrolled, even promiscuous, in their eyes.²⁷

Being “civilized,” in sum, required controlled sexuality, not the chaotic interactions that educated men attributed to “uncultured” young women who adopted local attire. This association of unrestrained sexuality with traditional dress inverts a more commonplace image in China and elsewhere in Asia of women who wear Western or urban attire as being sexually promiscuous (see, for instance, Ong 1987, 179–86, 198–99). Although Shanlin villagers occasionally voiced such concerns about specific women who dressed in the new style (particularly because their attire tended to be more form fitting and afforded greater bodily exposure), accusations of promiscuity were hurled more frequently at the generic category of young women “who wear the headscarf,” for whom the perceived transgression was even greater. Critics rarely made clear who was actually engaging in these chaotic sexual interactions; in fact, the very vagueness of the accusations enabled them to express uneasiness about rapidly changing social mores without accusing specific actors. The figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” served this purpose well, transforming Shanlin’s experience of “reform and opening” into what many educated men described as an “uncultured opening” (*meiyou wenhua de kaifang*). Their discomfort with this figure and her “chaotic” behavior also evoked a more diffuse sense of anxiety about economic reforms in general and specifically the gendered (potentially wasteful) consumer practices encouraged by new market forces.

The reflections of these two groups (young women who wore urban dress and educated men) generated the figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” out of the convergence of two discourses of civilization: one, a Maoist rejection under the sign of the “feudal” of all that had to be overthrown in order to construct a liberated, productive, civilized socialist society (but a sign that functions somewhat

²⁷Of course, this criticism did not mean that men necessarily found traditional attire unattractive. There are clearly contradictory impulses at work here, in that quite a number of these men were married to women who wore local dress and they expressed aesthetic appreciation for its features. These tensions between civilizing/modernizing and erotic impulses are common in contexts of rapid social change or displacement. In a recent article, Louisa Schein (2004) similarly argues that the traditional Hmong beauty occupies a position of polysemous contestation in diasporic Hmong video portrayals of an eroticized homeland.

differently today); and two, a post-Mao concern with quality and culture as the keys to forging the disciplined, productive citizens necessary for China to assume its rightful place in a global community of civilized nations. Yet, this discursive convergence produces a figure that, like its predecessor “the Hui’an woman,” bridges multiple boundaries. The young woman “who wears the headscarf” brings the feudal past into what is purportedly an enlightened, civilized socialist present; at the same time, she is unprepared for this present, mired as she is in the chaos induced by “low cultural quality.” The convergence of lack and excess in the figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” illustrates the powerful social divisions that civilizing discourses have engendered within Huidong society itself, divisions that shift as the state loses control over the very meaning of its own civilizing language. We begin to see how through these discourses, officials and villagers alike produce figures of Huidong women that bridge multiple forms of difference, exposing tensions at the heart of the socialist civilizing project about how to define and foster civilized socialist citizens.

The Contradictions of Civilized Citizenship

One of the most visible forms of hierarchical difference in the post-1949 period has been the distinction between the Han majority and China’s various national minorities. In fact, the construction of the Han majority as the pinnacle of socialist civilization and modernity has occurred in large part through portraying the minority other as its antithesis. As Dru Gladney contends, “the objectified portrayal of minorities as exoticized, and even eroticized, is essential to the construction of the Han Chinese majority, the very formulation of the Chinese ‘nation’ itself” (1994, 94). Other analysts have further clarified this opposition between Han and non-Han by elucidating the ambiguous status of the minority other who serves on the one hand as an object of Han desire and a source of “imagined liberation” from Confucian and socialist moral constraints (Litzinger 2000, 237) and on the other hand as a constant reminder of the backwardness that the Han majority itself has already overcome. Louisa Schein’s work offers critical insights into the role of the non-Han woman as a powerful site on which these contradictory responses are enacted: “[S]he [is] evidence of the uninterrupted existence of a well-preserved ‘traditional’ culture in changing China . . . [while] her intractable otherness [makes] clear the need for the civilizing practices, however defined, of the ‘superior’ Han” (Schein 2000, 129). The “intractable otherness” of the non-Han woman not only inspires the civilizing process but further confirms the superiority of the Han majority as the epitome of civilization.

In the images of Huidong women discussed above, however, we see how civilizing processes have produced figures whose otherness is far from “intractable” and whose very presence calls into question the homogeneity of Han-ness itself. This ambiguity justifies the civilizing response in eastern Hui’an and consequently makes the stakes involved in achieving “civilization” so high. For if ostensible members of the Han majority fail to conform to state-sponsored visions of civilized citizenship, then how can that majority validate a civilizational order premised on the “backwardness” of minority groups? By looking further at the linkage of civilization with citizenship, we can better understand the motivations behind socialist civilizing projects and the commitments that various groups have to them.

Symbolic citizenship rests on a particular conception of the ideal citizen as a figure who literally enacts the civility, progress, and productivity of the nation through

specific kinds of embodied practices. As icons of uncivilized lack and excess within the nation, both “intractable” others and hybrid figures such as “the Hui’an woman” and the young woman “who wears the headscarf” are excluded from this idealized position, yet for somewhat different reasons. As living examples of the past in the present, as theoretically Han but in practice not quite Han, these figures of Huidong women constitute not the far side of a boundary—as does the minority other—but instead a bridge.²⁸ “The bridge,” Michel de Certeau suggests, “is ambiguous everywhere: it alternately welds together and opposes insularities. It distinguishes them and threatens them. It liberates from enclosure and destroys autonomy” (1984, 128). In other words, the bridge modifies space by breaking down barriers between interior and exterior, by transporting the limits of the nation (defined here by ethnicity, gender, geography, and even class) into its very center. For instance, as part of China’s open, burgeoning Han coastal core, the figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” resists affiliation with the stereotype of the poor, “uncivilized” peasant of the interior or the backward ethnic minority—yet neither is she identified with the progressive Han, urban or rural. Moreover, both “the Hui’an woman” and the young woman “who wears the headscarf” integrate ostensibly disparate temporalities; they bring the past into the present by reinstating the feudal in moments imbued with the glimmerings of socialist civilization and modernization. Both spatially and temporally, then, these figures “bridge” the Chinese nation by confounding categorical divisions between civilized and backward, socialist and feudal, Han and non-Han, coastal and interior, economically comfortable (*xiaokang*) and poor—in short, between the space and time of the national self and that of the marginalized other.

What do these figures mean for actual Huidong women and men who struggle with and against them in their daily lives? If the image of local women produced by civilizing discourses fails to conform to widely touted expectations of civilized citizenship, then how does this failure affect the ways that Shanlin residents imagined their place in a national order? As an exclusionary practice, citizenship involves the drawing and maintaining of boundaries between one nation and another. Civilized citizenship, moreover, establishes boundaries within the space of the nation itself; it makes certain groups (Han, urbanites, the educated, men) responsible for the civilizing of others (ethnic minorities, peasants, the uneducated, women). “The boundaries that define members [of a citizenry] are usually drawn around the geographical community,” Dorothy J. Solinger tells us, “[b]ut they may also delineate only some of the groups within it” (1999, 6). Although civilizing discourses appear to advocate the uplifting of all, they in effect privilege some groups over others. For those whose membership in any one group remains uncertain, the stakes in espousing and enacting standards of civilization assume even greater proportions. Thus, we see how various groups within Shanlin have engaged in a process of internal othering by appealing to different civilizing discourses, with local cadres, educated men, and young women with urban, progressive aspirations repeatedly displacing the markers of incivility onto others, particularly young women who continued to wear local attire. As they symbolically construct a vision of the ideal socialist body politic, civilizing discourses promote an understanding of citizenship that excludes not only “intractable” others within the nation-state but also those whose very practices and bodies resist the binary formulations on which such an imagined community rests.

²⁸As Schein reminds us, the exoticized figure of the ethnic minority “never quite [fits] with the pace and standards of the nation, but always somehow [signifies] its limits, its margins, its feminized other” (2000, 11).

Finally, the emergence of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” precisely at the height of China’s market-reform era also raises specific questions about the viability of socialism and its broader appeal, for the citizen targeted by spiritual-civilization campaigns is defined specifically as a socialist citizen. The emphasis on “building” (*jianshe*) in 1990s’ civilizing discourse exposes the gaps at the heart of the socialist endeavor, the anxious desire for something essential but still absent despite almost fifty years of party rule. The figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” is generated out of this moment of uncertainty; for those who stand to benefit the most from market reforms, she represents a locus of anxieties about their standing and abilities at a time when the very meaning of socialism is increasingly uncertain. At the same time, production of this figure also shifts attention away from the broader economic challenges and disparities that have long plagued Shanlin residents. As a “semiotic hinge” (Povinelli 1999, 39), the figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” redirects villagers’ attention to the gendered and embodied practices that have distinguished Shanlin and the Huidong region from other parts of rural Han China. By exploring the movements of this hinge, we can begin to see that what is at stake in the figure of the young woman “who wears the headscarf” is not only the civility of the citizen but also potentially the form and future of Chinese socialism itself.

Conclusion

The towering statue of “the Hui’an woman” that I discovered on my return to Shanlin in 1998 initially seemed to be a sign of local efforts to reclaim the physical image of Huidong women from the fraught history discussed in this article. I soon came to realize, however, that such an interpretation would overlook the impact of new forms of representation spreading across the country. With the widespread development of a market economy, powerful forces of commodification have begun to celebrate precisely those forms of difference denounced in prior decades. New modes of display, such as the recently erected statue, extol the exotic appeal of the nation’s marginalized others as they market that appeal to domestic and foreign consumers. The commodification of ethnicity epitomizes this process, as Ralph Litzinger suggests: “Once banished from the social landscape as a remnant of the feudal past, the ethnic minority had become, in the midst of Deng Xiaoping’s frenetic reforms, an object to be displayed, an identity to be tried on, a cultural world to be momentarily inhabited” (2000, 231). This commodification of the very signs of ethnic and evolutionary difference denounced by civilizing processes calls into question both the success of the state’s civilizing project and its current grounding in socialist ideals.

Late 1990s’ Huidong witnessed both the raising of “the Hui’an woman” statue and the building of an outdoor statue park in Chongwu’s township seat. Constructed in 1997–98 as part of a township “makeover” designed to attract greater numbers of tourists, the two sites were inspired by a model of ethnic tourism widely promoted in official minority regions (Oakes 1997, 1998).²⁹ Upon entering the statue park,

²⁹Chongwu Township invested 21.4 million yuan in the statue park built on a prized site in the township seat overlooking the ocean (*Fujian nianjian* 1998, 187). The opening of the park was scheduled to coincide with a several-day-long “Hui’an Fishing District Culture Festival” (Hui’an yu qu wenhua jie) organized by the county government and Provincial Tourism Bureau in November 1997. Just as in official minority areas, folk/ethnic appeal was employed as an “enticement,” luring in not only tourists but also businesspeople who might invest in the county (Oakes 1998, 10). The massive statue of “the Hui’an woman” was also erected by the township government with contributions from a local stone-carving factory.



Figure 6. A statue of “the Hui’an woman” in the Chongwu statue park (photograph by the author).

visitors first encounter three larger-than-life stone sculptures of traditionally attired women in a range of poses, each displaying the trademark features of local dress on statues marked by voluptuous detail (see fig. 6). Similar sculptures are scattered throughout the park amid life-size carvings of historical personages, Buddhist iconography, and figures from Chinese mythology. Entry to the park requires a substantial fee, reinforcing its status as a tourist attraction rather than a site for local recreation.³⁰

The statue park, like other theme parks throughout China, creates an idealized vision of the historical Chinese nation by erasing any reference to the more recent—and more disruptive—socialist past (Anagnost 1997, 164–65; Oakes 1998, 52–57). It absorbs “the Hui’an woman” into a timeless display of cultural icons, thereby

³⁰Park admittance is free to residents of the township seat, I assume in compensation for the houses and tracts of land that town residents were forced to relinquish in order to build the park. Given that women of the township seat are not the women represented in the statues, this privilege has no impact on those whose bodies form the basis for images of exotic allure, namely village women.

incorporating her into a still-powerful ideal of “Chinese civilization.” By doing so, however, the park (like the massive statue) eliminates any reference to this figure’s contentious status in an evolving socialist vision of civilization and modernity. The tourist site recuperates “the Hui’an woman” by resituating her in a mythical past, yet it does so by displaying the figure in a form that resignifies her as exotically, even ethnically, alluring. In other words, in this commodified space of touristic display, “the Hui’an woman” is now identified not as uncivilized, feudal Han, but as exotic, even erotic, ethnic minority. This signification is certainly not lost on the predominantly Han tourists who frequent the site. As they complete their voyeuristic journey through the park, tourists are given the opportunity to have their picture taken while wearing the attire not of mythical or historical figures, but of local Huidong women, a practice familiar to any who have traveled to official minority regions (Schein 2000, 157–58).

Ann Anagnost has argued that *wenming* (civilization) “encapsulates what has been called the ‘Janus-facedness’ of the national imaginary, looking toward the past to face the future; it marks simultaneously a place of plenitude and of lack” (1997, 164). As products of different civilizing discourses in socialist and late socialist China, the figures of “the Hui’an woman” and the young woman “who wears the headscarf” embody these contradictory impulses in national projects of civilization and modernization. During the Maoist high tide of socialism, local and higher-level state actors aspired to fix the terms of civility, an endeavor reflected in their power to act on the bodies of Huidong women in order to mold them into liberated socialist citizens. By eradicating the *gin’a* and attacking other distinctive features of dress and adornment, state actors also sought to solidify Huidong residents’ status as members of the Han majority. The recent turn toward ethnic commodification in eastern Hui’an suggests that their efforts did not so much clarify that status as simply defer debate, thereby enabling the market forces of a more open era to seize on and commodify an ambiguous local identity.

In the post-Mao period, officials have retreated from earlier reformist actions on local women’s bodies, turning to a new discourse of spiritual civilization as a means of shaping the contours of the civilized socialist nation. The terms of that discourse become intertwined with the antifeudal orientation of Maoist campaigns, making them available for a diverse array of projects. Young women who adopt urban attire deny cotemporality to their locally dressed counterparts by accusing them of feudal marital and dating practices; in the process, they resignify a prior state civilizational discourse and apply it to newly defined progressive ends. Educated men, on the other hand, appeal to the language of “quality” and “culture” in denying a rational progressiveness to young women “who wear the headscarf.” Yet, that denial also reveals considerable insecurity about both their own place in an emerging market economy and the post-Mao regime’s commitment to ensuring economic prosperity for all. In short, as the socialist state “loses its univocal grip on meaning” (Young 1995, 22), the very language of civilizing discourses can be made to serve local projects with goals quite distinct from the socialist civilizing aims of both Mao-era and post-Mao state actors.

These limits to socialist civilizing projects do not, however, necessarily weaken the power of symbolic citizenship. Despite their ability to resist state interventions (as did older women who redonned local attire upon returning from commune meetings) or redefine the terms of civilizing discourses, Shanlin women cannot fully escape the exclusionary forces that bar them from an idealized vision of civilized socialist citizenship. The fact that they are widely recognized as wearing their

difference on their bodies—whether in their adornment styles or marital and sexual practices—means that they often find themselves constituted as not quite Han, not quite civilized, and, hence, not quite citizens. The growth of the mass media and tourist commodification only enhances this recognition, spreading images of “the Hui’an woman” across the nation and thus making it more difficult for actual Huidong women (regardless of their attire) to avoid being identified with them. In the 1950s, Tina Mai Chen contends, clothing functioned “as a nodal point in the interplay between citizenship, the politics of nation-building, and gender-formation”; in so doing, it also “participated in the creation of socialist citizens to populate the new nation” (2001, 144). The legacy of that linkage between clothing and socialist citizenship persists today, even as the very meanings of civility, citizenship, and socialism are being reworked both by local actors and in official discourse.

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