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William Roseberry, Class and Inequality in the Anthropology of Migration

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Abstract
This article addresses the ways in which Roseberry’s work advances our understanding of the processes of transformation under capitalism. Looking at his use of class in selected writings, I explore Roseberry’s ideas on class and class analysis by applying them to the case of international migration. While Roseberry did not engage with the subject of migration, I will argue that his discussions of social differentiation, petty commodity production, fields of force and social class nonetheless have heuristic value in the study of contemporary international migration. They provide the conceptual and methodological tools to enhance our understanding of the nature of social reproduction and dynamics of capital formation in different social and economic sites that are configured by migration. Roseberry’s analytical insights are applied to cases of migration within China, as well as migration between China and France.

Keywords: China ■ commodity ■ differentiation ■ France ■ migration ■ social reproduction

At a time when the analytical lens shifted from questions of production, materialism, exploitation, class conflict and social relations to questions of consumption, culture, identity and social movements, few anthropologists remained as steadfast as William Roseberry with regard to the idea that class is valuable as an analytic concept and that class analysis is a methodological approach that leads to the profoundest understanding of the dynamics of change in a modern world under capitalism. In this article, my objectives are twofold. First, I intend to outline ways in which, in selected texts, Roseberry broached the idea of class. I propose that through his discussions of class our understanding of the processes of transformation under capitalism is significantly advanced. My second objective is to explore the heuristic value of Roseberry’s ideas on class and class analysis by applying them to the case of international migration. Although Roseberry did not engage with the subject of migration, my argument is that, his work nonetheless provides the conceptual and methodological tools to enhance our understanding of contemporary international migration. Roseberry’s ideas on social differentiation enable an analysis of the structural transformations that result from changing processes of social reproduction in the areas of provenance of migrants, on the one hand. On the other, his discussions...
of petty commodity production and social class provide an analytical lens through which the nature of social reproduction and the dynamics of capital formation in different social and economic sites of migrant activity can be viewed. Finally, through Roseberry’s exposition of fields of force, analysts of international and transnational migration can problematize the distinctive ways in which the different sites of social reproduction of migrant lives and livelihoods are articulated. I begin with a discussion of Roseberry and class and then present a consideration of his work in relation to migration within China as well as migration between China and France.

**Roseberry and class**

As one of the key interpreters among anthropologists of Marx’s ideas (see for example Roseberry, 1997), Roseberry’s point of departure was to start from class and move imaginatively and intelligently into problematizing questions of economy, culture, production and consumption, epistemology, hegemony and history, as well as agency and the formation of intellectuals. As Roseberry himself wrote in 1983:

> We should have to look a long time to find a Marxist who did not take class analysis seriously as a point of departure. Our histories, after all, are written in terms of class relations and class struggles. (1983: 10)

In one of his earliest essays, published in 1976, Roseberry applied Lenin’s (1964 [1899]) conceptual framework that outlined the formation of classes among the Russian peasantry to an analysis of social differentiation and the development of class polarities among the peasantry in Latin America. Later, class analysis is used in his ethnography of coffee production in Venezuela to trace the history of the formation and transformation of a property-owning, commodity-producing peasantry and its relations with the rising merchants and landowners whose powers and wealth were becoming consolidated with the development of coffee as a commodity for export. Still concerned to discuss the complexities of the development of coffee as a world commodity, Roseberry (1996) turned his attention to the ways in which the development of what he called ‘yuppie coffees’, and particularly the marketing of coffee as a luxury item, reproduced class distinctions in the USA. In an analysis that was analogous to Bourdieu’s (1984) discussion of consumption and class distinctions in France, Roseberry revealed the ways in which the development of designer coffees specifically condition patterns of consumption so as to produce social class. Through this analysis, he provided insights into the cultural history of US capitalism.

Roseberry’s use of class refers not to a series of strata based on differentials in income or occupation, but to a structural position within a social formation. Yet, by emphasizing process rather than the *telos* of class
formation, Roseberry moved beyond the orthodox, reductionist and also static tendencies of some Marxists’ conceptions of class and class analysis. He claimed that such conceptions were simple in their bi-polarity and as such they were models more suited to earlier historical periods and contexts, for example industrializing England. To broach the problem of using class analysis to understand the complexities of contemporary capitalism, he later proposed that a social situation should be understood as made up of ‘social fields of force’ with ‘multiple sites of domination or forms and elements of popular experience’. To Roseberry, an understanding of a social situation through the idea of a field of force involved problematizing the mechanisms of exploitation, differentiation, class polarization and accumulation in forms of production in their particular and local settings, and also in relation to larger social and economic processes. The analytical focus on the multiple sites of domination in social fields of force allowed Roseberry to elaborate on, and also to confront, the problem of power and its formations among groups like peasants and petty commodity producers, whose forms of organization and political inclinations defied orthodox analysis in political economy.

While Roseberry’s research and writing covers an impressive array of topics, much of his intellectual formation took place when debates over the peasantry served as a key preoccupation in the research of many anthropologists and other scholars. These debates emerged in an era when ‘the agrarian question’ occupied a place of prominence as a means to understand the genesis and implications of what Wolf (1969) called the ‘peasant wars’ of the 20th century and the new societies begat by agrarian revolutions in China, Algeria, Vietnam, Mexico and Mozambique (Roseberry, 1993). Subsequent to these interventions, the implications of these momentous events tended to linger only as folklore, replaced by a growing preoccupation with the changes that condition the character of the modern world in terms of globalization, postcolonialism, post-socialism, transnationalism, flexible accumulation, bodies, identities and the rise of the network society. In the light of these academic discourses and preoccupations, asking questions that originated in the middle decades of the 20th century about peasant organization, control over land and labour, agrarian reform, peasant struggles and class formation seemed to be anachronistic, destined to be submerged under the new waves of ideas in the discipline. The apparent outmoded status of these agrarian questions seemed to be supported by the observation that rural decline would be inevitable as development grew apace. Urban spread and growth has fostered the disappearance of villages. Cities are themselves being peopled by ‘disappeared peasants’. In 1995, Roseberry actually confronted the issue of the significance of agrarian questions in the era of late capitalism. In an article titled ‘Latin American Peasant Studies in a “Post-Colonial” Era’, he presented a compelling case for the continued centrality of work among
peasantries for an understanding of complex social formations and fields of power in the contemporary world of capitalist change. Roseberry also asserted that the vital questions and approaches that were initiated in work on rural societies, such as understanding capitalist development, remain part of an unfinished agenda for developing a critical anthropology of the modern world.

My intention here is to sustain the momentum of working within the critical tradition that Roseberry outlined in that article. I attempt to illuminate the ways in which some of the vital questions Roseberry pursued within the framework of the agrarian question help us to understand recent changes under contemporary capitalism. In particular, I focus on the question of how understandings of the transformations in social relations of production and class formation sheds light on the dynamics of contemporary movements of people both within and across borders in an era that is variously called the age of globalization by students of globalization, and the age of migration by students of migration (Castles and Miller, 2003). I do this by drawing on Roseberry’s idea of the social fields of force to illuminate the ways in which capitalist relations in rural China foster differentiation, polarization, dispossession and finally spatial mobility in the case of transregional movements of people within China and also transnational movements of people between France and China.

Globalization and Chinese migration

Kalb (2004) suggests (following Polanyi) that globalization is a political project of globally imposed marketization. This process has induced increasing numbers to move as a result of the liberalization of the economies following drives to create conditions hospitable to capitalist markets. In the case of China, inter-regional and international migration both embodies and results from the drive that began in the early 1980s to create a market economy under the ‘socialist’ governance of the Chinese Communist Party. This drive required a transformation from socialist relations of production to capitalist relations in agriculture and industry in order to set China on a course to join the world of global capitalism. This objective has been pursued through government policies of ‘reform and opening’. ‘Reform’ of the rural economy has meant the re-introduction of capitalist relations of production and, as communes and collectives are dismantled, land is privatized. In industry it has also meant a revival of capitalist relations in factories as state-run industries are being restructured into private enterprises in order – according to these policies – to enhance levels of accumulation and hence competitiveness on the global market. ‘Opening’ has meant not only opening the economy to the market but also an opening of China’s borders to permit inflows of resources for investment, particularly investment in businesses in special economic zones in the coastal provinces. The provinces of Guangzhou, Fujian and Zhejiang,
then, are where the recent economic ‘miracles’ of industrialization have occurred. ‘Opening’ has also meant relaxing controls on the movement of people themselves. Migrants from the countryside, both the dispossessed and those resisting dispossession by securing additional resources, are being propelled towards the coastal regions to provide the labour to fuel the economic ‘miracles’. ‘Opening’ has further meant that migration out of China has grown apace and increasing numbers of Chinese have joined the ranks of transnational migrants to North America, Europe and elsewhere.

**Roseberry and migration**

The fact that many transregional and also transnational migrants emerge from the ranks of the peasantry makes Roseberry’s work particularly significant. Indeed, while China became the fastest growing economy in 2005, rural livelihoods have become increasingly fragile under the reforms that have been implemented in order to join the global economy. New classes of rural poor consisting of de facto landless peasants as well as de jure landless peasants have emerged. The precariousness of rural livelihoods has impelled members of these classes to leave their locality and seek to make a living elsewhere. To understand how these new classes have arisen while China has sought to insert itself into the global capitalist economy, the analytical perspectives offered by Roseberry are salutary. Roseberry’s work on agrarian change reminds us that the development of capitalism in agriculture produces polarities between different segments of rural populations and classes. The development of capitalism and the reintroduction of capitalist relations of production in China have meant that enrichment becomes possible for some segments of the population and the polar opposite for others – proletarianization. Anthropologists who have theorized globalization have noted that class polarization is in fact embedded into the very nature of globalization processes, and that one of the systematic outcomes of globalization is the ongoing proletarianization of the world population. Moreover, proletarianization itself includes the accelerated transformations of the peasantry into informal and mobile labour (Friedman, 2002, 2004; Kalb, 2004). Roseberry himself focuses on how these processes might occur and addresses the question of how agrarian households engage production and reproduction with the transition to capitalism, and so his work on peasant organization and petty commodity production helps in understanding the nature of Chinese migration.

**The creation of a ‘floating’ mobile proletariat**

The drive to create a market economy through the re-introduction of capitalist relations of production has meant the relaxation of policies that,
prior to the 1970s, regulated the movement of people in China. While the scale of post-reform migration is massive, inter-regional and international migration itself was common in pre-reform China. While international migration was forbidden, inter-regional migration and the movements of people were strictly regulated through the household registration system or *hukou*. The *hukou* system was imposed by the state primarily to prevent peasants from moving to cities. In the pre-reform era, under collective forms of production, this system ensured the production of food surpluses for the non-agricultural populations under conditions of the low development of the means of production. It sustained particular forms of collective production and consumption. The collective subject was also sustained through peasant-worker brigades that produced surpluses (or who were collectively exploited) which were transferred to the industrial sector and the state.

In the period of reform, the drive towards the increasing surplus production was set in motion by the state; the privatization of the rural economy was seen as the means to achieve accumulation in both agriculture and industry. While it is still in effect in the reform era, the controls have become more lenient and official policies actually encourage migration. While in the previous period rural development was to be secured through direct government intervention, currently migration is regarded by the Chinese government as the least expensive and most efficient way of developing the rural regions through remittances, while official attention and resources are diverted to the development of the urban industrial economy (Xiang, 2003; Zhang, 2003).

A key factor in provoking migration from the countryside, then, has been the rural reform programme that dismantled rural collectives in favour of the development of private cultivation. Individuals and households became the new units of production as the state withdrew from production and market regulation. Echoing Roseberry’s reading of Lenin (1964 [1899]), we see here the relation between migration and polarization. As commodified relations replace collective relations, so those with land need capital and those without sell their labour. Those with land ensure the production of surpluses by using migrant remittances from household members to improve the means of production and are thereby also able to expand on to the land of those unable to sustain production on their holdings. The transformation of the rural economy from a socialist command and control system to a largely free market system, and the retreat of the state from socialism, created surplus labourers in the countryside through de facto dispossession. In essence, reform created ‘freed labour’—a proletariat to provide the low-skilled labourers for the development of a labour-intensive urban economy (Murphy, 2002; Solinger, 1999).

These reforms and the revival of capitalist relations of production in agriculture have created a situation in which an estimated 100 million Chinese farmers have left their native villages to swell the ranks of a mobile
or, as it is called, ‘floating population’. This ‘urban bias’ in Chinese development strategy has come to be manifested not only in disparities in the terms of trade between agriculture and industry (agricultural commodities being under-priced relative to industrial commodities), but is also manifested in the fact that some urban inhabitants enjoy stable social welfare services such as medical treatment, housing and transportation that are unavailable in rural areas. We see then three forms of polarization occurring. First, as resources are directed to the coastal and urban economies so urban–rural polarization occurs with two results – lower living standards in the country relative to the city and work in industry yielding higher incomes than incomes gained through farm work. So the second form of polarization is income/wage differentiation. Third, a process of de-peasantization/urban proletarianization takes place: wages, rather than land as an asset, are the source of higher relative incomes (Zhang, 2003: 33). But it is a mistake to assume that a floating population is necessarily a proletarian population; these same forces have resulted in transforming some segments of the peasantry into petty commodity producers, as we shall see (Murphy, 2002).

From peasant to petty commodity producer

As peasants were transformed into petty commodity producers, they came to be increasingly reliant on the market for inputs to operate their farms and on the exploitation of the labour of family members to ensure their reproduction. Roseberry’s work on petty commodity production reminds us that increasing participation in commodity circuits and market exchange also galvanizes the logic of accumulation in this form of production. Migration, then, can be a strategy not only for gaining access to capital and resources for reproduction, but also serves as a means for capital accumulation. As Zhang (2001) illustrates, migrants to Beijing include the relatively well-off segments of the increasingly class-differentiated rural population who seek to become the *nouveaux riches* by accumulating capital through establishing multiple and deeper links to the market economy.

The logic of accumulation and the embeddedness of petty commodity production are not only supported by political and economic forces, they are buttressed by the cultural imperatives that are defined in the many campaigns initiated by the state to shape a new consciousness. The development of this new consciousness involves the transformation of people’s subjectivities to incorporate the liberal values of competition, progress and individualism. This development of a new consciousness is designed to reinforce the economic drives and the political imperatives of the Chinese state to build an economy based on modern capitalist industrial development and global integration.

The ways in which this new consciousness has been encouraged in China is through the mobilization of the idea of *suzhi*. *Suzhi* vaguely refers
to the physical, cultural and psychological qualities of the person as well as the quality of consciousness (Anagnost, 2002; Yan, 2003). While *suzhi* has permeated official as well as everyday speech throughout the decades of reform, the concept actually defies precise definition (Yan, 2003: 496). Nevertheless, there have been constant calls to improve the *suzhi* of the Chinese population in official rhetoric, the media and educational programmes in schools and universities. Peasants are particularly the targets of these mobilizations as they are generally considered to have the poorest *suzhi*. They are thought to adhere to a ‘feudal’ consciousness, in which traditional, pre-modern and therefore undesirable values are thought to prevail. These traditional values emphasize egalitarianism and the importance of the collective or the clan. They include an orientation towards simple reproduction as well as an avoidance of using surpluses for investment, thus impeding the development of a commodity economy. High *suzhi* particularly implies not only a consciousness of the development objectives in post-Mao China but also of conforming to them by migrating to the cities to work as wage labourers. Work as wage labourers allows peasants simultaneously to improve their *suzhi* and the conditions of farming while participating in China’s drive to join the global market. Thus, as well as structural and economic factors, there is a cultural impulse that drives both women and men to migrate in order to seek work in the industries of nearby townships or as assembly workers in the special economic zones in the coastal provinces to sustain the economic ‘miracles’. For example, the prefecture of Wenzhou in south-eastern Zhejiang province is one of the principal destinations for migrants from other parts of China.

Having been one of the first areas to achieve ‘miraculous’ growth rates through rapid privatization of industry and agriculture, Wenzhou has often been singled out as a model of entrepreneurial success in China. The wealth of the region’s many towns and municipalities rests on the rapid development of small-scale private enterprises which produce shoes, eyeglasses, locks, transformers, switches, sex toys, lighters, razors and suits for the national and international market. Migrants from other parts of China seek work in the factories and firms of Wenzhou, and those who are able to secure work are paid wages that often amount to less than $200 CAD a month (see Barber, 2004). While the economy of Wenzhou continues to grow, migration also continues to flow outwards from that region. As Pieke (2004: 45) notes, the miracle has produced millionaires but the population that lives outside the investment zones in the rural areas gains little from foreign investment. The rural population and those who live in small towns and municipalities in inland Wenzhou, much like their counterparts in the rural interior, are underemployed and seek access to employment opportunities not available locally. Moreover, many migrants arrive in Wenzhou’s industrialized zones to find that they have joined the ranks of a significant number of unemployed, which has increased over the years of the transition to a market economy.
then, has meant the formation of increasingly differentiated classes, not only within the rural economy but also within the industrial urban economy. For many who live in the shadow of the economic miracles, the conditions of social reproduction remain precarious and again migration, often beyond China’s borders, is seen as a means to secure additional resources and livelihoods. For many from Wenzhou, Europe is a principal destination.

Wenzhou has had a long-established history of transnational migration to Europe and the Wenzhouese have ventured outside China’s borders in an attempt ‘get rich quickly in Europe’. One of the ideas that circulates among the Wenzhouese living in Zhejiang is that wages earned serving in restaurants in Europe far surpass any wage that might be made in the most lucrative of forms of wage-work in China. So one can actually become quite wealthy working in a restaurant (Li, 1999). The search for suzhi, class polarization and regional disparities in income, combined with the circulation of such government slogans as ‘to get rich is glorious’, has impelled many members of Wenzhou households to migrate, not only as a strategy for survival to improve absolute incomes but also to improve their relative income under circumstances where average real incomes have increased since the 1980s (Massey et al., 1994). These forces have fostered the creation of a transnational mobile proletariat seeking wage-work and forms of livelihood in North America, Europe and elsewhere.

The creation of a transnational mobile proletariat

France has been one of the major centres in Europe of recent migration from Wenzhou and other coastal provinces in China, and there has been a growth in migrant economic activities such as the small businesses set up in European centres like Paris. The Chinese restaurant is a case in point. In Paris, the number of restaurant-caterers operated by the Chinese and Asians has grown from roughly under 200 in 1960 to well over 850 in 1992 and accounts for over 50 percent of Chinese economic activity (Live, 1998; Pairault, 1990). Restaurants and catering companies run by the Chinese are found throughout the city, but tend to be concentrated in the three Chinatowns of Paris. Resembling the classic economic enclave, the economies of the Chinatowns in Paris are sustained by businesses owned by Asians and rely, to a large extent, on Asian consumers and an Asian labour market made up of immigrants. For migrants from China in search of work in Paris, Chinatown is a major destination, where, through social networks, an individual can find work in one of the businesses run by relatives, friends and fellow countrymen and women.

A common feature in the work histories of many migrants is a trajectory that involves a period of making a living as a wage-worker and then, for many, eventually earning a livelihood in petty entrepreneurship as
migrants become established as owner-operators of small businesses. This trajectory is illustrated in the work history of Annie, the daughter of a worker in a small rural factory in Wenzhou, who migrated from China to Paris in 1989 at the age of 20. Annie worked first as an employee in a Chinese restaurant located in the smallest of the city’s Chinatowns, and eventually became the owner operator of the same small business.

Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

Annie: from proletariat to petty entrepreneur

Annie migrated from China to escape the relative poverty of the circumstances under which her family lived, and also to avoid a life that seemed to direct her towards menial work in a factory. Encouraged by her family, who subscribed to the idea of ‘getting rich quickly’ abroad, Annie migrated to France where relatives had already settled. She flew to Paris on a tourist visa and stayed on after her visa had expired to lead a rather furtive life beyond the purview of the state and its authorities as a *sans papiers* – an illegal immigrant.

By cultivating her ties in a social network consisting of friends, relatives, friends of friends and friends of relatives, or what she referred to as *guanxi*, Annie managed to find work in a small restaurant owned by a woman who had migrated from Wenzhou a decade or so earlier. ‘Guanxi’, she claimed, ‘is very important when you need help.’ As a *sans papiers*, Annie worked behind closed doors in the kitchen, helping with the cooking and the preparation of food. She also worked occasionally as a server. After working without papers for six years, Annie emerged from her clandestine world and became regularized after marrying Christian, a Laotian Chinese refugee who sponsored her for citizenship. In many of the ‘regionally mixed’ couples I interviewed, there was a great deal of joking that focused on cultural and regional stereotypes. In an unguarded moment, during one interview Christian remarked, to Annie’s great distress, that many Wenzhou women tended to seek out refugees from South East Asia to marry in order to acquire citizenship. After Annie’s protests that this was not the case, Christian joked that a marriage of the indolent South East Asian in exchange for the Wenzhou entrepreneurial spirit was a fair deal, particularly when a bond of marriage is also a business partnership.

Shortly after Annie and Christian married in 1992, they went into business together and bought the restaurant in which Annie worked. Annie’s former *patronne* (boss) sold the business and returned to Wenzhou to set up a small business in the booming China. Annie and Christian were able to buy the restaurant by securing loans through an informal rotating credit association of friends, compatriots, relatives and friends of friends. The Chinese in Paris refer to this as a *tontine*. Annie mentioned that she and her husband were able to organize the *tontine* through the social
relations of guanxi. Annie and Christian have now established themselves as owner-operators of a small business. They have changed their position in relation to the means of production from wage-worker to owner. As the means of production is a firm structured by capitalist relations and embedded in a capitalist economy, the drive towards accumulation is integral to its operation. Since taking over the restaurant, which they named Le Salon Impérial, Annie and Christian have indeed managed to expand it from an establishment that seats 20 to one that now seats 40. This expansion has taken place because of a structural logic which requires that increasing amounts of surplus value be extracted from those who are employed in the firm. Expansion is part of the logic of accumulation and, as Roseberry (1986) reminds us, the potential for accumulation is built into the structure of petty enterprise. That potential for accumulation has been realized by the way in which family labour is deployed. In the family firm, kin relations are coterminous with business relations, and so hierarchies based on gender and age in the family are conflated with hierarchies of power in work. The family business operates as a field of forces in which relations of power are exercised to ensure that the ideology of family and kinship values are mobilized to support domination, and thereby exploitation – hence accumulation.

The senior members of the family, Christian and his wife Annie, are called the patron and the patronne, reinforcing the authority and power structure in both the family and the business. As a restaurant business that is run primarily by using family labour, then, Christian and Annie employ Christian’s two younger sisters, Ginette and Lorie. Ginette is employed as the cook and Lorie, the youngest in the family, works as a server and general odd-job person in the restaurant. Lorie’s tasks are multiple and she does a little bit of everything, from working behind the counter to cooking in the kitchen when it is busy, to managing the restaurant when her brother and sister-in-law are absent, to washing down floors. Sam, an illegal immigrant from the province of Fujian, is the only non-family employee, and works as a sous-chef and dishwasher in the kitchen. By employing family labour, and also by employing illegal or undocumented labor, Annie and Christian have been able to expand their small business. Ginette receives the minimum wage. Ginette receives a higher wage relative to her younger sister because this reflects the value of her specialized work as a cook in the restaurant. Both Sam and Lorie are paid less than the minimum wage. Sam is paid the lowest wage and his employers are able to take advantage of his precarious status in France. Lorie is single and lives with Christian and Annie. To pay Lorie a living wage is seen by her family as unnecessary as long as she lives with and is partially dependent upon the family for her own subsistence. In this way, the family business has been able to exploit the labour of Lorie precisely because she is a member of the family and, indeed, the household. By this method of payment, and by relying on Lorie to work extremely long hours, the family business can sustain profits and
realize the potential for accumulation built into the structural logic of the enterprise.

The logic of accumulation, of which Roseberry was so mindful in his discussions of petty enterprise, is reflected in the subjective orientations of migrant entrepreneurs, who subscribe to an ideology of independent ownership and self-reliance. This ideology conforms to the communitarian values promoted in forms of citizenship encouraged under neoliberalism in Europe and elsewhere. The ‘cultural capital’ of entrepreneurship is transmitted between individuals to enable the participation of immigrant women and men in host economies, but it also supports participation in a ‘global network’ or ‘world-wide web’ of Chinese entrepreneurship and ideas of success in business. This is evident in the ways in which overseas Chinese have inserted themselves into China’s economy, society and culture. Economically this is done through the investments that are made by the overseas Chinese in the overall development of China, in businesses and in concrete emblems of wealth. In Wenzhou, for example, the spacious homes and large family tombs that dot the landscape are built with migrant remittances (Li, 1999). Socially, the logic of accumulation and the virtues of business success and growth through global migration are embodied in the expectations imposed on the returned migrant. Migrants who return to their areas of provenance either permanently or temporarily are expected to engage in overt material displays. They must flaunt their wealth by engaging in various forms of conspicuous consumption (for examples see Li, 1999; Zhang, 2003). Conspicuous display attests to the achievement of high suzhi – that the migrant has overcome the fetters of tradition and a feudal consciousness. Such displays testify to the fact that the returned migrant is better positioned both economically and also morally to take advantage of the Chinese miracle. By virtue of work as wage-workers in the international economy, involvement in small enterprises overseas or work in the areas where the Chinese miracles have taken place, migrants are participating in the miracle of commodity production for the world economy – a prized value in the globalizing China. As China itself has become engaged in a process of economic, social and cultural transformation or reform in order to participate and compete in the world economy of capitalism, the Chinese government has defined and imposed ‘the material and meaningful framework’ to which citizens and subjects both from within and from without must assimilate. The Chinese government and the agents of neoliberal transformation in global economies have defined the architecture of what Roseberry would call a new ‘hegemony’.

Conclusion

I conclude with a brief discussion of Roseberry’s conceptualization of hegemony. Roseberry proposed an understanding of hegemony not as it is
normally understood as process that implies consent. For Roseberry it is a concept that must be used to understand struggle. It is a concept for understanding the ways in which the cultural and social forms used by subordinate groups to understand and engage with their social worlds are shaped by the process of domination itself. These cultural and social forms are the words, images, symbols, forms, organizations, institutions and movements that are used to talk about and understand as well as to confront, accommodate or resist domination. For Roseberry, hegemony constructs a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about and acting upon social orders characterized by domination (1995: 360–1). In this article I have tried to outline forces within the various social fields of force that make up the material and meaningful framework though which Chinese migrants live the lives they live and do the things they do in the context of neoliberal transformation. I began with a brief discussion of the ways in which Roseberry broached the idea of class and class analysis in the study of agrarian questions. I make no claim to capture either the diversity and breadth of his work or the tensions and provocations that exist within a body of work that spans 25 years. Still, I wish to highlight what I see as a consistent objective in his work.

Roseberry, as a Marxist and a practitioner of critical scholarship, participated in an intellectual project that sought to understand the complexities of processes and forces of domination, and also how people contested those forces. Roseberry provides us with the analytical tools that will help to determine the distinctiveness of the contours of the material and meaningful framework within which subordinated populations of peasants, workers, migrants and women act. His interest in the agrarian question was initiated precisely to understand how ‘peasants engage with their political worlds in all its dimensions’. Early in his work, this commitment launched Roseberry on a path to problematize the nature of peasant discontent, unrest and agitation in the context of Latin America. One of the questions he posed, like Wolf before him, was how these actions can transform prevalent social and political orders. In this light, Roseberry’s assertion of the continued relevance of agrarian studies is prescient. In the context of China, in recent years, peasant unrest has again become a persistent feature of the reform era. Peasant unrest in China, of course, is not new, having been a significant force that toppled dynasties and begat new regimes throughout centuries of Chinese history. The political significance of the peasant protest in the current conjuncture in the overall scheme of history cannot yet fully be determined. I contend, however, that Roseberry’s scholarly legacy allows us at least to ask such questions. While Roseberry’s work focused particularly on agrarian societies that are mostly located in Latin America, my contribution has been to stress that his analytical insights and theoretical contributions extend beyond rural groups, and well beyond Latin America, to other ethnographic situations in different times and different places. I offered the case of Chinese migrants to suggest that
through his work, and through his discussions of class, differentiation, social relations, social fields of force and hegemony, our understanding of conflict and change within contemporary capitalism and through the age of globalization is significantly advanced. My purpose here has been to emphasize the ways in which Roseberry’s distinctive contributions both define a methodological and theoretical terrain for scholarly inquiry in the present and also sustain a critical anthropology for the future.

Notes

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1 Roseberry’s idea of a social field of force borrows and revises Thompson’s metaphor of a ‘field of force’ used in his 1978 essay ‘Eighteenth-century English Society: Class Struggle without Class’.

2 The most recent rendition of this idea is presented in Davis (2006).

3 In the reform era, GDP rates have consistently grown, income levels have risen and the number of people living below the poverty line has declined (*The Economist*, 25 March 2006; World Bank, 1997). Yet the levels of inequality have also risen. According to the Gini co-efficient, inequality rose from a score of 28 in 1981 to 40.3 in 2003 (100 is the most unequal) (Bulard, 2006).

4 For a discussion of pre-reform migration see Lary (1999)

5 *Hukou* registration is tied to a household registration system that was first implemented in rural areas in 1955 – and as state policy in 1958 – to ensure that the peasantry would stay tied to the land in the context of the restructuring of agriculture. Under this registration system, each household was allocated an occupational category – either agricultural or non-agricultural – and a place of residence or *hukou*. *Hukou* confers rights of residence and eligibility for certain jobs, particularly in urban areas, as well as subsidized welfare benefits. Changes in *hukou* must be approved by the official authorities (see Judd, 1994; Zhang, 2003).

6 The reform programme includes the institution of a ‘responsibility system’, in which collective resources are contracted to individuals, households or groups of households. The ‘responsibility system’ ensures that all farmers own the means of production or at least have usufruct rights to land. However, differential access to land and the creation of surplus labour, i.e. landless peasants, occurs through many different means. See Zhang (2003) for a discussion of mechanisms of dispossession in Shaanxi province. For more detailed discussion of the reforms in rural China see Judd (1994), Oi (1999) and Zhang (2003).

7 The ‘floating population’ refers to people who have not migrated officially. For a discussion of the implications of the term see Murphy (2002), Solinger (1999) and Zhang (2003).

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For example, while prices for certain agricultural crops are fixed by planning mechanisms, industrial commodities such as chemical pesticide, chemical fertilizers and others were sold at higher market prices (Zhang, 2003: 32).


In Wenzhou there has been a rise in the number of rural proletariat, as well as growing economic disparities between the country and the city, and peasants and workers. For a discussion of this see Bramall (1991).

Between 1998 and 2003, between 40 million and 60 million people became unemployed; Bulard (2006) observes that, out of a population of 1.3 billion, 900 million Chinese cannot hope to benefit from the ‘miracle’ of economic growth in China.

See Benton and Pieke (1998) for details of the history of Chinese migration to different countries in Europe, as well as the social, political and economic activities in which they are engaged.

Guanxi are the bonds of trust and social networks that operate among friends, relatives and associates. For a discussion of guanxi see Yang (1994) and Gold et al. (2002).

Many migrants from South East Asia were granted refugee status that granted them both a legal status in France and the acquisition of citizenship. ‘Economic’ migrants like Annie were granted no such status, and often entered the country illegally and worked clandestinely in the informal economy.

Tontines are an investment vehicle that is a mixture of group annuity, group life insurance and lottery, into which each investor pays a sum and receives dividends. Among the Chinese in Paris what is called a tontine resembles more a rotating credit society, in which investors each advance small loans to the borrower, who repays each investor with interest according to a pre-determined schedule. For a detailed discussion of the ways in which tontines are organized among Chinese immigrants in Paris see Pairault (1990).

Before marrying, Christian also worked in a series of low-skilled, low-paid jobs as a dishwasher, waiter, pizza delivery person and gas station attendant.

A fuller discussion of cases of Chinese migration and citizenship in France appears in Lem (forthcoming b).


This is a phrase that appears in the work of Stern (1987) and was often used by Roseberry in his own writings (see for example Roseberry, 1993).

Bernstein (2004) notes that different forms of peasant collective action have been taken up by peasants to resist the burden of taxes and fees imposed by the government. Also, peasant unrest has been stirred by the industrial expansion onto farm land, the high costs of inputs and, in general, the exploitation of the peasantry by the government and the market and their agents.

References


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