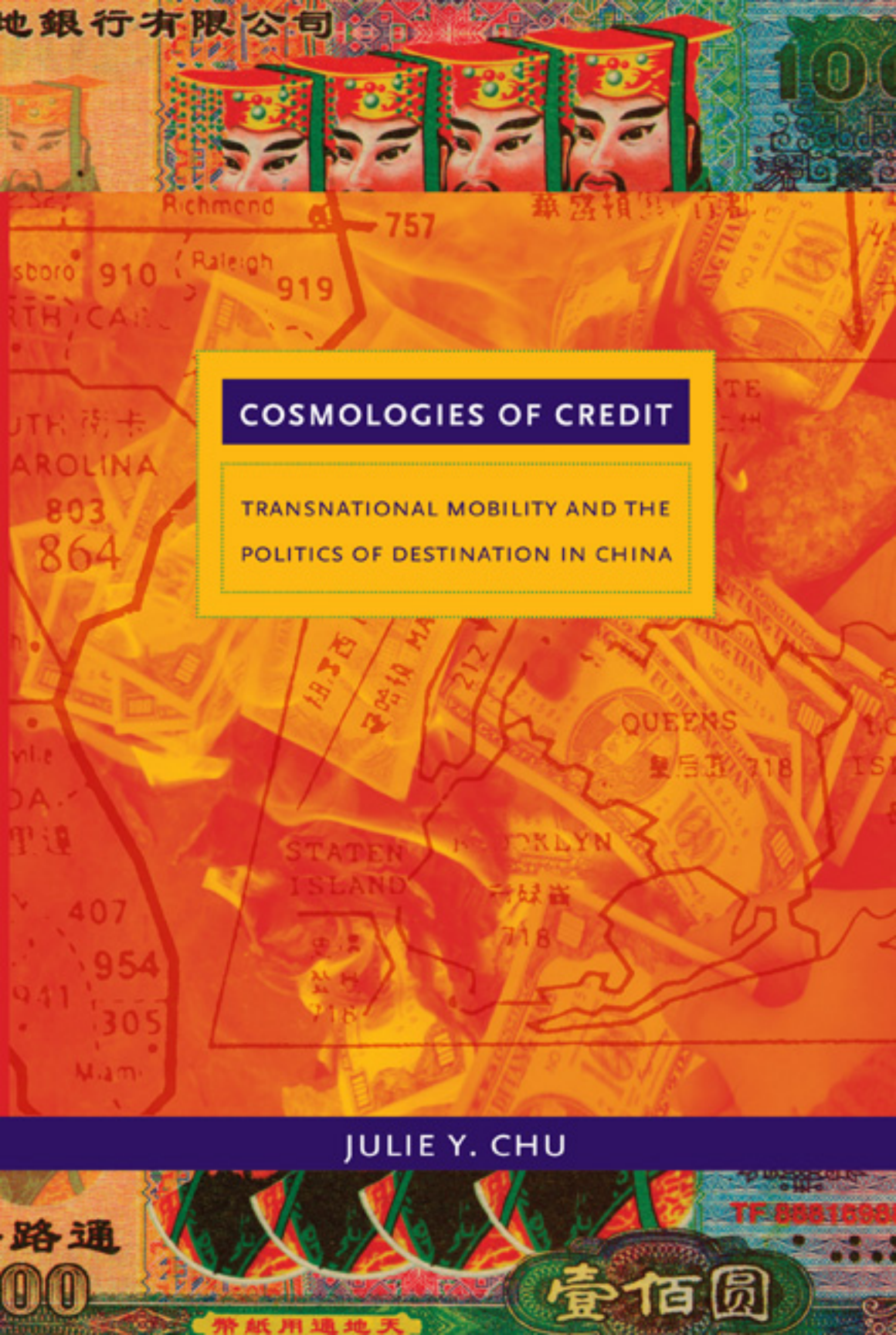


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COSMOLOGIES OF CREDIT

TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY AND THE
POLITICS OF DESTINATION IN CHINA

JULIE Y. CHU

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POLITICS OF DESTINATION IN CHINA

Julie Y. Chu

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS • *Durham and London* • 2010

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Printed in the United States
of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan
Typeset in Scala and Scala Sans
by Achorn International
Library of Congress Cataloging-
in-Publication Data appear on the
last printed page of this book.

*For my mother
and my siblings*

&

*For MSH
In recognition
of all the debts sustained
amid grand absences*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the kindness and generosity of the people I met in the field, many of whom appear in this book under pseudonyms. In particular I want to thank the family with whom I resided in “Longyan,” as well as the local middle school there for providing me with a secure institutional home. I owe a special debt to the more than two hundred students at the middle school, who always kept me on my toes and who led me to various, unexpected destinations throughout my fieldwork. In nearby Fuzhou City, I am extremely grateful to Lin Guoping and his wife and daughter for their unfailing support, both scholarly and otherwise. I also would not have gotten much done without my dearest friend and occasional research assistant, Zheng Xiaojuan. My Fuzhounese language teacher, Liang Yuzhang, was not only a true role model, but also another crucial anchor for me in China. Other friends, including Deng Qikai, Zhang Yan, Lan Weifang, and Liu Haiyan, made my time in Fuzhou infinitely more welcoming and enjoyable. I also thank Xie Bizhen and Cai Xiuling for their friendship and support. Finally, I am grateful to Fujian Normal University for providing me an academic base as a research fellow for 2001–2002 and for hosting me at the International College during the summer of 2000.

On the U.S. end of things, Faye Ginsburg and Eric Manheimer were instrumental in enabling me to develop my initial interests in Fuzhounese migration during the MA phase of my research. This book would also not have been possible without Angela Zito, whose timely arrival at New York University at the tail end of my MA gave me the necessary boost of confidence and intellectual inspiration to follow the Fuzhounese back to China for further PhD fieldwork. Once I turned my attention to China, I benefited tremendously from conversations with Ko-lin Chin and Michael Szonyi, both of whom were exceptionally generous in sharing knowledge and resources for getting research done in Fuzhou. Several other scholars also gave me valuable insights and advice about doing fieldwork in China,

including Kenneth Dean, Leo Douw, Lisa Rofel, Murray Rubenstein, Louisa Schein, Frank Pieke, and Li Minghua. My actual fieldwork was supported by fellowships from the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange and from the International Migration Program of the Social Science Research Council, with funds provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Various stages of writing were given institutional support by anthropology departments at New York University, the University of California at Santa Cruz, Wellesley College, and the University of Chicago, as well as the American Anthropology Association's Minority Dissertation Fellowship, the University of California's Presidential Postdoctoral Fellowship, and the Irmgard Coninx Foundation.

Many people helped see me through the writing and rewriting of this book. During the initial dissertation phase at NYU, my thanks go out to Jessica Cattelino, Omri Elisha, Faye Ginsburg, Sherine Hamdy, Adria Imada, Jong Bum Kwon, Emily Martin, Fred Myers, Ayse Parla, Ramona Perez, Lok Siu, Elizabeth Smith, Winifred Tate, and Angela Zito. I am especially grateful to Winifred and Sherine for allowing me to subject them to various half-baked drafts of chapters over the long haul from dissertation to final book manuscript. Lisa Rofel also provided invaluable support and feedback on the entire manuscript during the post-dissertation phase of writing. I thank her not only for her sharp insights, but also for generously circulating my work-in-progress among her graduate students at UC Santa Cruz, who gave me many additional ideas for revisions. Similarly, this book benefited from feedback from graduate courses taught by Angela Zito at NYU and Kesha Fikes at the University of Chicago. I also received much needed comments for revising individual chapters and discrete parts of the book from Amahl Bishara, Summerson Carr, Jessica Cattelino, Sealing Cheng, Sara Friedman, D. J. Hatfield, Eleana Kim, John Osberg, Gilberto Rosas, Greg Ruf, and Robin Shoaps, as well as from various colloquium and workshop audiences at UC Santa Cruz, UC San Diego, Brown, the University of Chicago, the University of Texas at Austin, the New School, Tufts, Brandeis, Johns Hopkins, and the Berlin Roundtables for Transnationality. I am also grateful to the two anonymous readers from Duke University Press for their careful readings and thoughtful suggestions for revisions, as well as to my editor, Ken Wissoker, for his Zen-like patience and support for seeing this book to publication. My thanks also go out to assistant managing editor Tim Elfenbein, copy editor Bojana

Ristich, and J. Naomi Linzer Indexing Services for helping me through the final stages.

Last but not least, two people have been my most stalwart supporters throughout the research and writing of this book. First, I want to thank my mother for putting her own doubts aside to travel to China with me when I first embarked on this project. We literally took the slow boat down the Yangtze on the way to Fuzhou, and as I describe in the introduction, this project would not have gone nearly as smoothly if I had not been my mother's daughter. Finally, I thank my partner, Matthew Harris, for providing all the little things that helped make the good days great and the bad days forgettable.

• • •

An earlier version of chapter 1 appeared in *Identities* 13, no. 3 (September 2006).

NOTES ON ORTHOGRAPHY AND NAMES

This book uses the pinyin system for romanizing both Mandarin (Standard Chinese) and Fuzhounese in the text. Fuzhounese words and phrases are only distinguished from Mandarin, with the notation “Fz,” when they appear in parenthetical format. While Fuzhounese has sometimes been transcribed according to the international phonetic alphabet, I have elected to use pinyin in keeping with the standardized format of the *Fuzhou Dialect Dictionary* (*Fuzhou fangyan cidian*), authored by my Fuzhounese teacher, Liang Yuzhang (Fuzhou: Fujian People’s Publishing, 1995). Though Teacher Liang also taught me Fuzhounese through the more precise international phonetic system, I trust she will forgive me for sacrificing precision for simplicity’s sake.

In order to protect the confidentiality of my subjects, I refer to my particular field site as well as all its members by pseudonyms. Except for known names of political figures like Mao Zedong and broad regional markers like “the rural outskirts of Fuzhou City” or Fujian Province, I have eliminated or disguised various identifying markers of my field site, to which I refer here as “Longyan.” This includes a modification of the published sources I cite that include the specific name of my field site in the title, as well as the authors of such sources. In using pseudonyms consistently throughout, I have assigned one unique name to each subject cited in this book so that the reader, if he or she chooses to do so, can follow particular characters through all the chapters with the assurance that “Deng Feiyan” in the introduction is the same “Deng Feiyan” in chapter 6.

INTRODUCTION

Deng Feiyan already had her bags packed when we first met in Fuzhou in the summer of 2000. In her barren living quarters, stripped of all signs of permanent residence, her bags—two bloated canvas and burlap bundles of indeterminate content—leaned against the wall between a makeshift tatami mattress and a miniscule pink plastic stool, where the sole phone, a bright red clanging unit, beckoned. The stage was already set: just one ring from her *shetou* (snakehead or human smuggler) and she was prepared to swoop from phone to bags to the door in a single choreographed move out of her house and out of China for good.

Our relationship grew out of an expectation of confluent departures: we were both bound for New York City before the first gusts of typhoon weather promised to hit the southeast coast of China at the seasonal turn of humid summer to tepid autumn. It was only a question of who would depart first: me on my open-ended return plane ticket via Guangzhou and Los Angeles to New York's John F. Kennedy Airport or Deng Feiyan on her anticipated smuggling venture via foreign ports yet unknown. If she left Fuzhou first, she promised to stay put in New York long enough to have a hearty meal with me in Chinatown. We both imagined this New York reunion was in our near future and often whiled away time on sticky summer afternoons sketching the possible scenarios of our converging itineraries and lives overseas.

Partly out of homesickness and partly out of naive optimism, I felt a deep affinity for Deng Feiyan's transient state and her sense of momentum toward a destination beyond China's borders. Like her, my bags were constantly in my purview that summer as a reminder of my temporary positioning in Fuzhou as a foreign researcher on a short, three-month stint of preliminary fieldwork. More important, I had come here precisely to figure out the imaginative trajectories that led back to New York City, the prime destination of massive migrant flows from Fuzhou's countryside

over the past two decades. It was only too easy to imagine, alongside Deng Feiyan, that all roads pointed toward a convergence of transnational destinations for us in a matter of weeks and months.

By mid-June, Deng Feiyan had nailed down a timeframe for departure. Twenty or so days from now, she expected to get the phone call from her *shetou* to grab her bags and go. She did not know exactly how her trip would shape up—which route, what transport, how long in transit—but one thing was for sure: “It looks like I will leave before you do,” she beamed. Two days after she firmed up her departure date, news of a smuggling disaster in Dover, England, began to circulate all through the city. Fifty-eight migrants from Fuzhou had slowly suffocated to death while hiding in the back of a sealed produce truck on a transcontinental ride from Belgium to Dover. This story made international headlines as the single worst case of smuggling deaths at the time and quickly filtered into our lives not more than a day later as we sat in Deng Feiyan’s kitchen with a friend of hers on a breezy June afternoon. Deng Feiyan was in the middle of one of her typical rosy musings of life overseas when her friend abruptly thrust a newspaper clipping in front of us. “Look here!” the friend interrupted. “See how fifty-eight people just died in smuggling? Ah, it’s really too terrifying!” But Deng Feiyan barely blinked at her friend’s comments or at the article leaping off the kitchen table with its bold, alarmist headline and ghostly image of crooked silhouettes entombed in the truck. As her friend began to retrace the sensational details of the case, Deng Feiyan simply pushed the article aside and casually excused herself from the kitchen. She did not seem concerned about the news at all. Instead, she took a quiet afternoon nap.

Later Deng Feiyan told me she had a vivid dream that day about how she had already made it to New York. There she was, far away from Fuzhou, sitting and chatting contentedly over a cup of tea with a good friend who had successfully departed for the United States many years ago. Deng Feiyan’s face lit up as she recalled this vision of herself already abroad in the long-lost comfort of good company. More than a dream, she was sure this was a divine prophecy of her upcoming trip overseas. The Dover case did not faze her, she told me, because she knew the gods would protect her. Even when her travel plans unraveled as the Chinese government initiated swift crackdowns on human smuggling amid international embarrassment over the Dover disaster, Deng Feiyan remained confident that her destiny lay overseas.

“Let me tell you, Little Sister,” she confided. “I know the only road for me leads to America because Mazu resides in me and she has told me so.” Mazu, the goddess of the sea and the guardian of all who braved its rough waters, not only had a devoted worshipper in Deng Feiyan, but it also turned out that Deng Feiyan served as a spirit medium for channeling the goddess’s divine knowledge and powers. Over the years with Mazu present inside her, Deng Feiyan had rooted out and healed the elusive pains and illnesses of those who sought her out precisely for these divine services. Now it was also Mazu’s voice from the depths of Deng Feiyan’s heart-and-mind (*xinli*) that soothed and assured her as her departure date slipped out of her reach and stretched indefinitely into late summer. Perhaps she would no longer reach New York before I did, she admitted. But with Mazu on her side, she was still certain that we would keep our Chinatown date some time that year.

Deng Feiyan never did manage to leave China, though she remained constantly on the cusp of departure over the years I knew her. When I returned to Fuzhou a year later, I found her dwelling in almost the same transient state, her house still sparsely filled with just a few pieces of disposable furniture—the makeshift bed, the plastic stools, the same two bags lingering near the clunky old phone. More than four years after we first met, Deng Feiyan continued to embody a forward momentum, constantly adjusting her designs for emigration whenever previous itineraries stalled or simply dissipated. Nothing seemed to diffuse the promise of her destiny overseas, neither the ever-increasing smuggling fee for successful travel (currently averaging \$60,000) nor her personal knowledge of the deadly risks in transit and exploitative labor conditions abroad. Long after she had turned from the bold headlines of the Dover disaster and taken her prophetic nap that June afternoon, the sense of imminent departure still enchanted her every move and overshadowed the mundane signs of her present and indeterminate immobility. Though her various travel plans repeatedly fell apart before she ever stepped foot out of China, Deng Feiyan remained unbowed about her fateful dream of arrival overseas, merely deferring it after each setback to a future just ever so slightly out of reach.

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This book examines the pervasive sense of momentum that has taken hold of Fuzhounese subjects like Deng Feiyan with transnational destinations

on their horizons. More specifically, it is an exploration of how mobility as a key trope in projects of capitalist development and modernity is currently lived in post-Mao China among a rural-coastal population situated on the mercurial edge between global flows and parochial closures. Since China initiated its policies for “economic reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang*) in 1979, much has been written about transformations in spatial-temporal orders from the caste-like rural/urban divide of the socialist planned economy to the new, market-liberalizing regime of coastal development and inland stasis with the latter often euphemized as “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The aspiring Fuzhounese migrants I discuss here reside at a most awkward intersection of these spatial-temporal processes. As state-classified peasants for four decades, they have long lingered in the stagnant, rural backwaters of a socialist vision of modernity. But as coastal subjects, they also now find themselves at the dynamic front of global exchange and capitalist circulation in the newly revised imaginary of post-Mao modernization.¹ This is less a linear account of the passage from rural backwardness to coastal cosmopolitanism than a heterogeneous retracing of the entangled, discordant, and contested trajectories of a double-edged figure: the coastal yet peasant, mobile but errant Fuzhounese transmigrant.

Fuzhounese migration came to international attention through several tragic disasters, including the 1993 *Golden Venture* boat drownings off the shores of Queens, New York, and the aforementioned 2000 truck suffocation deaths at Dover. Over the years, repeated news of Chinese stowaways washed up on Western shores, asphyxiated in shipping containers, and exploited in overseas sweatshops and restaurants has continued to highlight the unrelenting desire of the Fuzhounese to leave China, despite the ever-increasing physical dangers and uncertain economic payoff of traveling through transnational human smuggling networks.² Descriptions from home villages have often suggested that an inexplicable craze had swept through the Fuzhou countryside. As the *Sing Tao Daily* reported as early as 1996, “Everybody went crazy. The area was in a frenzy. Farmers put down their tools, students discarded their books, workers quit their jobs, and everybody was talking about nothing but going to America.”³ What fueled this “frenzy” of illicit migration from Fuzhou to the United States? What kept the likes of Deng Feiyan in the perpetual pursuit of departure? This desire—its conditions of possibility, its entailments as embodied value—forms the puzzle at the heart of my research.

Cosmologies of Credit is an ethnography of the entangled calculative logics and regimes of value propelling Fuzhounese desires for mobility in the post-Mao era.⁴ Specifically, I am interested in the particular cultural-historical moments when desire meets potentiality, that zone of indeterminacy where one must confront the hazards involved in translating desires into projects worth pursuing. In this sense, this book offers an exploration of the *pragmatics* of desire⁵—the cultural-historical configuration of its incitements, the social hazards of its translation into action, the political implications of its effects—among a particular group of Fuzhounese subjects situated in an emergent social field spanning China and the United States. One goal of this book is to move beyond utilitarian questions of risks and rewards, costs and benefits, to a consideration of the overflow of Fuzhounese aspirations—the productive frictions, the indeterminate remainders, and the unexpected effects entailed in the Fuzhounese pursuit of transnational mobility.⁶ I do this by attending not just to the movement of migrant bodies in the following chapters, but also to the paths and diversions of related things-in-motion: shipping containers and planes, luggage and immigration papers, money and cosmic debt, food and prayers, traveling gods and the unsettled dead. In doing so, my aim is to connect Fuzhounese migration to the broader social field of circulations and transactions that make it possible to recognize and assess the differential value of various people and things entangled in webs of increasing transnational exchange. In particular, this book offers a sketch of the various confluent and disjunctive movements propelled by exchange—of which migrant bodies constitute just one flow—that support what Nancy Munn (1986) has aptly described as the “spatial-temporal extension” of persons and collectivities.

• • •

This book joins recent anthropological works that have grappled with the enchantments of state power and capitalist modernity at the turn of the twenty-first century (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Coronil 1997; Dorfman 1996; Klima 2002; Meyer and Pels 2003; Mueggler 2001; Ong 1987; Taussig 1993, 1997). Like many of these works, my project traces the mutual constitution of enchantment and disenchantment among unabashedly modern(izing) subjects—of divine practice alongside profound state cynicisms, of cosmic credit amid insurmountable financial debt, of prophetic destinies in the face of crushing immobility. More than oppositional

resistance or ideological reflection, such enchantments, I argue, are integral to the production of modern imaginaries themselves. Far from forging a “third space” or exterior Other to capitalist modernity, ritual life among the Fuzhounese (re)constituted the grounds for the enactment of modern selves and relations; it offered yet another “staging of the modern” (Mitchell 2000). To their Fuzhounese followers, gods like Mazu, with powers to divine the future and instantaneously crisscross the oceans, were fundamentally forward-looking, cosmopolitan forces, exemplary incarnations of space-time compression, among other features, of late and post-modernity (cf. Harvey 1989). As I will show, this kind of “spirit,” embraced and embodied by aspiring migrants like Deng Feiyan, propelled them toward, rather than away from, dreams of mobile and cosmopolitan destinies.

The title of this book, with its old-fashioned nod to “cosmology”—that ethnographic juggernaut of “primitive,” enchanted worldviews—is an attempt to capture what Timothy Mitchell (1992) has described as the impossible unity and incomplete universal inherent in every staging of modernity. Framed here in the multiple as *Cosmologies of Credit*, this title speaks to oscillations between the one and the many of modernity, between its singularizing claims as ideology and its heterogeneous configurations as practice.⁷ This lived tension is the very generative source of modernity’s efficacy as a floating, master signifier of ontological difference, able to accrue value to particular people, places, practices, and things by conjuring the specter of excluded, oppositional, and inevitably vanishing others.⁸ That such boundaries between the modern and nonmodern are tenuous, shifting, and constantly being remade has been aptly demonstrated by a wide and rich range of scholarship.⁹ In keeping both the one and the many in my purview, however, my goal is neither to give another iteration of “alternative modernities” per se nor to displace the dominant fictional realities of capitalist modernity with the privileged Real of a “local” order of things.¹⁰ Instead, this book seeks to illuminate the *interpenetrations* of these various regimes of value in the (re)production of power asymmetries among differentiated persons and their differentiated worlds.

More than a decade ago, Marshall Sahlins (1994) forcefully argued for recognizing such entanglements of cosmologies in intercultural encounters and exchanges between the West and its Others. Partly inspired by the imperial imaginary of the Qing court in China, Sahlins showed how *The World System* (as we know it) could be made to serve, rather than

simply obliterate, alternative cultural logics and indigenous transactional orders. Sahlins entitled his article “Cosmologies of Capitalism” to emphasize the transposable and reciprocal nature of various non-Western schemas of value in both shaping and being shaped by capitalist encounters.¹¹ Additionally, he meant to highlight the cultural-historical specificity of capitalism as a “Western cosmology” in its own right, a cosmology that he would later trace to particular Judeo-Christian concepts of human finitude, a disenchanted nature, and the pleasure-pain principle (Sahlins 1996).

Partly by coincidence and partly by osmosis, I had been trafficking in uncannily similar conceptual terrain, circulating my own research project with the title “Cosmologies of Credit” for a good three years before Sahlins’s 1994 article came into my purview.¹² Clearly some retroactive debt is in order since this book shares the broad strokes of Sahlins’s analytic approach to questions of exchange and value. However, it is with a finer brush that I seek to sketch the conceptual contours of “cosmologies.”¹³ Specifically, this project departs from less solid conceptions of culture and locality, putting into question, rather than assuming, the durable unity of a “Chinese” order of things or, for that matter, an opposing “Western cosmology.” Highlighting “credit” rather than “capitalism” as a focal point of cosmologies is another way I hope to complicate the assumed foundation or domain for producing value among the Fuzhounese. As I hope to show, credit, with its multivalent implications—as confidence or approval of an action or another, as deferred payment and flip side of debt, as the positive balance of accounting—offers a richer conceptual touchstone for exploring the calculative horizons of value production than a notion like capitalism or capital. Even in the most diversified usage, à la Pierre Bourdieu’s social-cultural-economic schema, capital often retains an inherent economism of means-ends utility (Bourdieu 1977, 1986). By speaking of “cosmologies of credit” rather than “cosmologies of capitalism,” I aim to move beyond an examination of value production as accumulation, growth, or surplus to a broader inquiry into credit-able practices that include such activities as the personal assumption of loss and the collective generation of karmic debt and its repayment.¹⁴

A starting point for this work is the suspension of conventional analytic domains and their boundaries—of “the market,” “the state,” or “local culture”—in favor of the discursive and material *processes* for boundary and subject making. As Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako have argued

for the analysis of gender and kinship, “we should seek rather than assume knowledge of the socially significant domains of relations in any particular society and what constitutes them” (1987, 34). Rather than taking for granted “the existence of a gender system based on natural differences in sexual reproduction, a kinship system based on the genealogical grid, a polity based on force, or an economy based on the production and distribution of needed resources,” we should investigate what processes make certain “domains appear self-evident, and perhaps even ‘natural,’ as fields of activity in any society” (35).

In this book, I am interested in how such boundaries among “fields of activity” become stabilized as legible and “self-evident,” as well as how they are troubled and transgressed by Fuzhounese subjects situated in a particularly active and unsettling contact zone of translocal and transnational flows. Broadly speaking, I am concerned here with Fuzhounese efforts to remake and re-world their lives in a site where the very terms of dwelling and mobility—and, by extension, locality and scale—have shifted dramatically over the years. Part I of this book sketches these various boundary-making (and -breaking) projects by analyzing shifting Fuzhounese imaginaries of place and emplacement (chapter 1) and the cross-class tensions resulting from recent Fuzhounese attempts, particularly via mass emigration, for transcending the material and discursive limitations of peasant subjectification in China (chapter 2). By attending to practices for demarcating space and time, domains and histories, I aim to provide insights about everyday struggles and political contestations over the ordering of social transactions and entanglements, and of persons and things.¹⁵

The Politics of Destination

Boundary making, as I will show, is as much about temporality and historical consciousness as it is about spatiality and scale. In the contemporary context of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), ethnographers, like their subjects, have been faced with a dominant historical narrative of dramatic social change, “reversals and ironies” (Dirlik 1996), over China’s long twentieth century: from liberation to revolution to reform; from collectivization to decollectivization; from communism to market liberalization.¹⁶ Along the way, modernity has been a recurring and elusive figure,

marking each subsequent periodization (for example, “after liberation,” “after reform”) as the penultimate break between “backwardness” and “progress” in a perpetually revised linear narrative of China’s development. Lisa Rofel (1999) has aptly described these historicizations as a modernity continually deferred, a dominant narrative reflected as much in academic exegesis as in party-state discourse about China’s positioning in the world.

By chance, I arrived in Fuzhou for my year-long stint of fieldwork in 2001 during another momentous turn in the story of China’s imminent “rise” on the global stage. Between China’s winning bid for the 2008 Olympics in June and its entry into the World Trade Organization (wto) in November, I managed to land at Changle International Airport in Fuzhou on September 11, just in time for my Chinese friends to inform me of the terrible news that was being broadcast from New York City live via satellite on various Chinese television stations. No one knew what to make of the tragedies of 9/11 at the time. However, it was clear that along with China’s successful Olympics bid and expected entry into the wto, 9/11 compelled people in Fuzhou, particularly those aspiring to leave China, to fixate ever more on the future and particularly on how the things to come might alter their prospects at home and overseas. While the first decade or so of the post-Mao era was replete with accounts of Chinese subjects reflexively grappling with a past tinged with both recent political traumas (Jing 1996; Mueggler 2001) and nostalgic yearnings (Dorfman 1996; Rofel 1994, 1999), I seemed to find the Fuzhounese at a decidedly future-oriented, anticipatory moment when I embarked on my field research at the beginning of China’s third decade of experiments with market liberalization. To my surprise, in both interviews and casual conversations people were much more interested in discussing their possible trajectories from the present forward than in retracing the bygone fits and starts from their pre-reform past. This is not to say that the past no longer figured in personal narratives and native exegesis of social life. What struck me, however, were the ways people conjured the past not merely as a site to dwell upon or to give meaning to the present moment. Instead, making claims on the past was crucially about activating the vectors of one’s likely destiny and possible future; it both backformed and propelled the sense of momentum in people’s lives (see chapter 2). As I will show, contestations over the past were often struggles over the

legitimacy of Fuzhounese aspirations and prospects and particularly their claims to becoming mobile, cosmopolitan subjects.

The rural Fuzhounese, I argue, were precisely *not* the kinds of subjects authorized by the Chinese state (or for that matter, U.S. immigration agendas) to chart moral careers as Chinese cosmopolitans. In turn, what they revealed through their persistent yearnings and strategies for going overseas was not only the normativity of mobility per se in post-Mao China but also the power relations inherent in what Doreen Massey (1993) has called “differentiated mobility”—that is, the uneven and unequal positioning of different groups and persons in relation to various flows and movements (see chapters 3–4). It is no secret that since the Chinese central government began promoting a policy for “opening up” and “stepping out” (see chapter 2), the population has been redrawn along all sorts of newly mobile distinctions: the upward (a growing urban middle class) and the outward (the “new immigrants,” the “old” overseas Chinese); the stagnant (rural unemployed) and the uprooted (“floating population” or internal migrants). As Xin Liu has described, “Economic reforms have set the population on the run. Everywhere in China, people are trying to leave various kinds of home spaces in order to ‘get rich first.’ From the point of view of ordinary people, travel and its associated imaginings are becoming an important condition of everyday life” (1997, 110). In arguing for the emergence of a new kind of valorized subjectivity in late modernity—the “flexible citizen” or transnational Chinese—Aihwa Ong has similarly noted that “flexibility, migration, and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for rather than stability” (1999, 19). This change did not mean that coercion and resistance to mobility no longer took place. In fact, several ethnographies continued to show that these dynamics were alive and well in contemporary China (Kipnis 1997; Mueggler 2001; Zhang 2001b; Zhou 1996). However, what both Ong and Liu illuminated was the distinctive formation of a desiring Chinese subject hinged to mobility as the principle and modus operandi for value production.

This book elaborates on these observations of mobility as a “condition of everyday life” and as “practices to strive for” in post-Mao China. But while mainstream narratives of transnational and cosmopolitan Chinese often focus only on the elite movements of jet-setting entrepreneurs and intellectuals, I turn my attention to the formation of what James Clifford loosely termed “*discrepant* cosmopolitanisms” (1997, 36, my emphasis;

see also Nyers 2003; Ong 2005).¹⁷ In particular I draw on Clifford's notion here to highlight the disjunctures and tensions among various classed, gendered, and otherwise unequally positioned subjects with desires and claims to a cosmopolitan ideal in the post-Mao era (see chapters 2 and 6). Chinese scholars abroad, smuggled Fuzhounese migrants, and the internal "floating population" may all be mobile subjects, but certainly they do not share the same access to and mastery over their movements, not to mention over other circulatory flows such as those of money, transit, paperwork, or information. While scholarly emphasis on elite cosmopolitanism has tended to marginalize the still active forces of nation-states in constraining mobility across borders, I hope to illuminate how aspiring Fuzhounese migrants, even in their circumvention and defiance of state expectations for travel, were still profoundly entangled in the hegemonic project of Chinese modernity. As part II of this book shows, by forging unauthorized and unconventional roads to becoming mobile subjects, the Fuzhounese infused dissonant aspects of rural practice that were not valorized by the state into an existing ideal of the modern Chinese cosmopolitan, including a productive alliance with mobile, worldly gods. In this sense they complicated and even hybridized the state grounds for subject formation even if they did not dismantle the state categories of meaningful difference.

Ultimately, while mobility has typically been framed as a state of instability and dislocation, I argue that it was actually *immobility* that was experienced as the definitive form of displacement among my Fuzhounese subjects. This contention departs from much scholarship on migration and diaspora, which has led us to think of displacement as the result of a physical departure from a "home" and in turn to think of migrant articulations of belonging in terms of a "politics of return" (cf. M. Smith 1994). In contrast, this book highlights experiences of emplacement in a world where neither locality nor home could be assumed to be stable objects and points of anchorage. Drawing on Paul Gilroy's work (1991), Ien Ang has argued that "The experience of migration brings with it a shift in perspective: to paraphrase Gilroy, for the migrant it is no longer 'where you're from,' but 'where you're at' which forms the point of anchorage" (1994, 10). In the chapters that follow, I highlight yet another point of anchorage that had to do more with "where you're *going*" than either "where you're from" or "where you're at." The metric for im/mobility in this case did not just concern people's capacities for travel overseas. In fact, one did

not need to physically leave China to aspire for spatial-temporal extension as a subject emplaced within a larger global and transnational social field. Likewise, one could experience displacement while remaining at “home” simply because the boundaries of locality and one’s social world had shifted or come under contestation. Against normative and sometimes romanticized assumptions of the pleasures and comforts of home sites, this book highlights the dislocating effects of being stuck in place while others all around were moving to broaden their spatial-temporal horizons. As I will show, longing and belonging among the Fuzhounese were less about either place of origin or physical travel than about inhabiting the world in a particular cosmopolitan and future-oriented way—that is, as a valorized subject of a modernizing and globalizing China. Fuzhounese struggles and claims over such ways of being “modern” are what I describe in this book as “the politics of destination.”

By arguing for a politics of destination, my aim is not only to invert previous formulations of migrant identities and orientations hinged to nostalgia for home and the promise of return. Here I also offer a riff on Max Weber’s famous thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1992), where a politics of *pre-destination* became key to people’s understandings and enactments of value in their daily lives.¹⁸ As a play off Weber’s thesis on the spirit of capitalism, the politics of destination is also meant to highlight a cosmology of value and value transformation among the Fuzhounese, which, like the project of the Protestants, was anchored in religious imaginations of social life. Only in this case, the gods were no longer on the sidelines and simply watching from above as the predetermined blessed and damned sorted themselves out through a display of economic rationality and the ever-expanding accumulation of capital. Rather, in this politics of destination, there were still possibilities for negotiation with divine authorities (as well as human authorities) in altering one’s fate and fortune and channeling human energies (in their various material forms as labor power, capital, commodities, and so forth) beyond the hegemonic projects of the Chinese nation-state or larger global forces for capitalist development. As I will show in part III, there were other forms of credit at stake in Fuzhounese projects for mobility than the kind one gets from a credit card—for example, karmic relations of de/merit and social recognition of *renqing* (human feeling/bonds)—in a world where powerful absent presences, both human and nonhuman,

continually shaped everyday life and in turn were seen as integral to the calculus of prosperity.

Mobility as a Qualisign

To remain stationary in these times of change, when all the world is on the move, would be a crime.

—Thomas Cook, *Cook's Excursionist*

How was the self to move or live in the whirlwind?

—Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*

Global flows and transnational circulation, flexible citizens and traveling cultures, acceleration and space-time compression—all these characterizations of modernity or post-modernity converge on a normative sense of mobility at the heart of contemporary social imaginations and embodiments.¹⁹ A final aim of this book is to examine how this relationship of mobility to modernity is variously enacted and reworked through the daily encounters and transactions of heterogeneous social actors. Many scholars have turned to mobility as the key trope for thinking through the modern condition (Berman 1982; Urry 2007). Noting the critical mass of contemporary research focused on mobility across various disciplines, John Urry (2007) has even suggested that there has been a distinctive “mobility turn” recently in the social sciences and in turn has offered his own “new mobilities paradigm” for reorienting theory and empirical analysis to the centrality of movement at the turn of the twenty-first century.²⁰

Yet plenty of skeptics have questioned mobility’s novelty and distinction as an ontological marker of modern selves and relations. Old diasporic networks as well as imperial regimes have long revealed worlds of differentiated mobility and long-distance exchange well before such features came to be identified with modern and post-modern conditions (Abu-Lughod 1989; Ho 2006; Mintz 1998). Similarly, one could critique post-Mao claims to the newness of China’s “opening up” to mobile flows and global exchanges given, on the one hand, long-standing Maoist engagements with much of the non-Western world (for example, Africa, Latin America, Asia, the former Soviet bloc) and, on the other, the persistence of enclosures and immobilizations regarding the movement of certain

people, things, and information in the contemporary era.²¹ In fact, one could endlessly debate the question of mobility's novelty on such empirical grounds, pointing to various metrics of historical intensity and scale to argue for or against the inextricable linkages of mobility to modernity.

My intervention here is more modest, aimed not so much at settling these far-reaching historical questions as in refining analysis of the very relationality at stake. How exactly, I ask, does mobility come into recognition as a salient index of modern life? How is this relationship articulated and made iterable in practice? In particular, here I offer a query into mobility's everyday operations and efficacies as a key sign—or rather “qualisign”—among the contemporary Fuzhounese. A qualisign, as C. S. Peirce famously defined it, is a “quality which is a sign” and which in turn “cannot actually act as a sign until it is embodied” (1998, 291). Nancy Munn (1986) later drew from Peirce's notion to analyze certain qualities that become “value signifiers” when embodied by persons and things in Gawan exchanges and encounters in Papua New Guinea. Interjecting political questions of hierarchy, value transformation, and struggles over spatial-temporal extension into the mix, Munn importantly elaborated on qualisigns as “certain embodied qualities that are components of a given intersubjective spacetime . . . whose positive or negative value they signify” (16). Drawing on these insights of Peirce and Munn, I argue that mobility is a privileged qualisign of modern selves and relations among the people I encountered in contemporary China. To think of mobility in this way is to attend to both its ideological and performative dimensions as a much-touted feature of being “modern.” It necessarily recasts mobility's relationship to modernity as normative, as a claim on the world made “real” only through various social embodiments and transactions.

In the chapters that follow, I look at how mobility operates as a qualisign by analyzing the multiplicity of its materializations in various embodied forms alongside (and sometimes against) the singularity of its abstraction as an all-pervasive marker of the modern condition. As I will show, mobility is at once a worldly and world-ordering sign, legible only when it is both thoroughly enmeshed with the materiality of other things and in turn abstracted from these entanglements as a specific “component,” in Munn's words, of “a given intersubjective spacetime.” To put it another way, mobility can be described here as a “sensible concept” in an ever-shifting field of emergence (Massumi 2003).²² It is itself a kind of moving target, something never wholly captured by its models and instantiations

but that nonetheless leaves excessive traces and palpable reverberations in its passage through various interactions-in-the-making. For like other qualities that are also signs, mobility can do little on its own until it is materialized through people, objects, words, and other embodied forms.²³ Yet once actualized through a particular thing, it also inevitably becomes entangled with the other features of whatever material form it inhabits. When embodied by a passenger on a plane, for instance, mobility cannot help being bundled with other qualities like speed, lightness, or cosmopolitan privilege, just as it cannot avoid insinuations of inefficiency, danger, or deprivation when embodied by a stowaway traveling across the ocean in a shipping container. It is this very materiality of the sign, as Webb Keane (1997, 2003) has noted, that helps shape the conditions of its recognition and in turn underscores the everyday hazards of its translation in social encounters. My aim is to shed light on the inherent contingencies and unexpected effects that occur in the transactional moment when the various properties of persons and things converge to produce mobility as a qualisign. As aspiring migrants in Fuzhou well understood (see chapters 3–4), there were reciprocal effects in store when certain bodies, modes of transport, and paperwork (or lack thereof) came together in the act of travel. Meanings could drift or be displaced. New subjects and objects could be produced. Certain ontologies and relationalities could be reconfigured. In such moments of translation, things themselves were never just simple instruments or prostheses of the aspiring migrant. Rather, as I will show, by commingling their own semiotic and material properties with those of the person, such things as shipping containers, passports, luggage, and dollars all actively worked as agents to consolidate mobility as a discernible sign and ready index in the valuation of various people, their relations, and their worlds.

The Inappropriate/d Other

Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha, “No Master Territories”

Funny how we all want to go there and *you* from over there—somehow you want to come *here*?!

—Longyan resident

Aspiring migrants from the rural outskirts of coastal Fuzhou inhabited a particular volatile sense of difference. At once peripheral and well connected, peasant and cosmopolitan, they embodied distinctions that often seemed at cross-purposes within the dominant scheme of differentiation. Unlike recognized minority populations or agrarian peasant “subcultures” in the interior hinterlands of China, these Fuzhounese were not easily contained as an internal Other. Nor like cosmopolitan Beijing or Shanghai urbanites did they fit the clear profile of a privileged Same (see chapter 2). Instead, they often fell between all boundaries as what Trinh Minh-ha (1995) termed “the Inappropriate/d Other,” their alterity replete with grating excesses, deficiencies, and unaccounted for miscellany, their differentiation a fraught site and dense jumble of margins-within-centers and centers-within-margins (cf. Haraway 1992). As I came to appreciate, certain Fuzhounese articulations of difference did not easily fit into a pre-existing grid of the Same and the Other but rather “drift[ed] in and out,” tainted, and ultimately reworked the grid itself.

This attentiveness to what Trinh has called “the undetermined threshold” of difference emerged largely out of the liminal space I wound up forging with the people of Longyan, with whom I shared a mutual recognition as an Inappropriate/d Other: in this case, as both foreigner yet not foreign.²⁴ This was not just due to our overlapping yet distinctive positionings as Chinese Han co-ethnics. We also possessed divergent yet intersecting transnational trajectories, with them edging from rural Fuzhou toward the United States and me traversing from their cross-Straits neighbor Taiwan as a child to the United States and then around to Fuzhou for fieldwork with a promised final return back to the United States. As a first-generation Chinese American, I was probably not so different from what aspiring Longyan migrants imagined they might become once they crossed the South China Sea. There was in fact quite a bit of reverse anthropology during my time in Longyan, where I felt the returned gaze and scrutiny of those around me trying to discern the subtle or not-so-subtle differences of gait, dress, habit, and logic between us. My left-handedness, coffee drinking, and bad chopstick form were especially active catalysts for headnotes (if not field notes) collected by villagers bound for where I had come from. Some of these instances of reverse anthropology are interwoven into this book in order to highlight the reciprocal recognition of difference *within* sameness (and vice versa) that developed empirically as well as theoretically out of my relations in Longyan.

Clearly, no one mistook me for a “native” anthropologist in their midst. In addition to the fact that I grew up with English as my primary language in the United States, my original Chinese dialect—*minnan hua* or Taiwanese—was virtually unintelligible and useless to a Fuzhounese speaker. Nine months of intensive Fuzhounese lessons got me only so far in listening comprehension of the local chitchat in Longyan. Once I opened my mouth and needed to communicate predominantly in the national dialect of Mandarin (with a smattering of simple Fuzhounese), phenotype be damned—my foreignness was marked.

Yet I was also never an essential or oppositional Other to the residents of Longyan. In fact, my ability to do the kind of field research I did largely hinged on my capacity to occupy more subtle and pliable grounds of differentiation, again as what I have designated an Inappropriate/d Other. Being able to trace roots to the southeast coast of China as well as a pathway overseas to the United States made me more of a kindred spirit, if not kin, to Longyan villagers with similar coordinates and desired trajectories. Though never a perfect fit, I could be located among these U.S.-connected villagers in vernacular terms of distinction already developed for their own kind. I was a Miwo Nüüŋ (American), someone would say with familiarity in Fuzhounese, a bona fide *sidising* (U.S. citizen, transliterated) who was not unlike Longyan’s most fortunate members abroad. Whatever differences I embodied were often perceived to be more of gradation and privilege than exclusion and essence.

Over the course of my fieldwork, which comprised a three-month stint around Fuzhou (May–August 2000) followed by an eleven-month residence specifically in Longyan (September 2001–July 2002), a return visit in May 2005, and ongoing follow-up work with those arriving in the United States (2002–present), I benefited from being positioned as a not-quite-foreign foreigner. Although I had never set foot in mainland China before I started this project and initially spoke pretty rusty Mandarin, I was quickly embraced by people I met in Fuzhou as a *huaqiao* (Fz. *huagiu*, overseas Chinese) and a *taibao* (Fz. *taibau*, Taiwanese compatriot). Admittedly, some of this had to do with the social savvy and generosity of my mother, who traveled with me during the early days of my first stint in China and helped situate me in terms most familiar and nonthreatening to the strangers we met—as somebody’s daughter secured in a web of kin relations. Such a standing enabled people to locate me on vernacular cultural terrain and overlook some of the initially jarring and otherwise

awkward aspects of my foreignness as a first-time single female researcher unattached to and unfamiliar with any locals or their institutions. Kin positionality as somebody's daughter also gave me smooth entrée to becoming somebody's student. This happened mostly via the initial rapport between my mother and my local teacher/adviser, who discussed the transfer of my supervision from one elder to another, while, in proper hierarchical place, I sat mostly in silence and listened. Similarly, being positioned as somebody's student enabled me to later become somebody's guest in Longyan—once more through the helpful exchange of my teacher and my Longyan hosts, while again I mostly sat on the sidelines.

Ultimately with the help of all these relations, kin and non-kin, I was able to make a smooth transition to being somebody's teacher myself by serving as a volunteer English instructor at Longyan's middle school. There one day a week, I taught beginning English conversation to all the seventh graders and tutored the best of the eighth graders, as well as the worst of the ninth. In total, I got to know some two hundred students and, largely through them, a wide range of families in Longyan. Most villagers, whether young or old, student or not, close friend or distant acquaintance, came to call me by the singular name "Sinnang"—meaning literally "mister" in Fuzhounese but mainly denoting "teacher." The distinct group of middle-school teachers I got to know also offered important insights into the opportunity structure facing villagers, as well as the often fraught cross-class resentments among urbanites and rural dwellers, village elites and commoners (see chapter 2).

While the school gave me an institutional home in Longyan, my actual village residence was provided by a prominent family of cadre members who opened their home and hospitality to me during the year of my village residence. The household I joined was a small one, consisting of the elderly widow of a former Longyan village head (*cunzhang*) and her teenage granddaughter, whose parents had been in the United States since she was a small child but were currently in the process of finally sending for her from abroad. Though this household itself was small, it was part of a larger gated family compound consisting of other prominent kin in the village elite. Our living quarters sat on one side of a courtyard across from a middle-aged cousin whose two adult children were both in the United States and adjacent to the fifty-year-old younger brother of the former mayor who was himself a recognized leading cadre member as well

as an unofficial historian for the village. Like his surrounding kin, this cadre also had adult children overseas.

Living among village cadres turned out to provide a distinct set of benefits as well as drawbacks. On one hand, the brother of the former mayor, whom I called Shusha, or Uncle, became for me an important guide to village history as well as to other leading members of Longyan, including the village's two party secretaries and a prominent elderly village historian and retired cadre. On the other, the elite household in which I lived was singularly isolated from its commoner neighbors, most of whom seemed to not care for and even resent the privileged cadres of Longyan. Although I had hoped that my residence would provide an organic site for mingling with all sorts of villagers, what it actually offered was rich insight into the class tensions that existed between the peasants and non-peasant elites of Longyan (see chapter 2). Few people visited the family I lived with, and the ones who might have visited me personally ultimately preferred that I meet them elsewhere rather than set foot in this cadre residence. So I learned to do all my mingling with other folks outside of my living quarters.

Although most villagers with peasant status had little social intercourse with either the cadres or the teachers in Longyan, again I found that my positioning as an Inappropriate/d Other enabled me to move among these distinct groups without rousing the suspicion or rancor of any of them. In this case, it was not my shared affinities but rather my foreign distinction from all local constituencies that made people much more forgiving of my associations with those they disliked. My status as someone in but not of Longyan enabled commoners to separate me from the cadres with whom I lived as well as the teachers with whom I taught and in turn not associate their traditional class resentment toward these elites with me personally. Additionally, my gender and age (female in late twenties) also seemed to work to my benefit by undercutting the more potentially alienating and threatening aspects of my profile: my privileged education, ambitious local research agenda, and foreign status as a U.S. citizen.

While I circulated broadly through all corners of Longyan, even acquiring fictive kin (a godfather and sister) along the way, I also decided to concentrate my main efforts in one particular district of the village where I could get to know the dynamics among family, neighbors, and friends at a much more intimate level. With a population of five thousand and

thirteen hundred households, Longyan was no simple village that I could easily survey and map out all by myself. Luckily another organic unit divided Longyan residents into communities of a more manageable size: districts organized around local territorial god cults and temples. As I will show, Longyan happened to be divided into two temple districts—one north and one south of the Min River (see chapter 1). Each district had one defining territorial god (*ditou shen*) and an ad hoc committee of elderly and mostly male leaders from the district who oversaw community ritual events and the collection of donations for those activities, as well as for temple maintenance and renovation. Beyond these loosely structured committees, there was no institutionalized temple authority in these districts—no spiritual leader in residence who took charge. Instead, people largely organized their own religious practices and temple exchanges with the gods and with one another. What the temples did provide were particular communal spaces for people to mingle and forge collective identities along district lines.

By happenstance around the time of Lunar New Year festivities in 2002, I found myself spending an immense amount of time among families who lived along the north bank of the Min River leading to a cluster of three temples at the foot of Longyan's signature marble bridge, the Flying Dragon (Feilong Qiao). The oldest and most prominent of the three temples happened to belong to this district's territorial god—the famous divine trickster, the Monkey King (see chapters 1 and 5). Eventually, I put a good deal of my time and energy into this district—attending all the ritual events, mingling with the various households surrounding the three temples, and collecting oral histories among some of its elder members and their kin. I got to know a dozen multigenerational and extended families particularly well in this district and through them came to understand the texture and nuances of their everyday dynamics with other relatives, neighbors, and friends—including those currently abroad—whom I encountered by spending time in these households. A number of these families dotted the road on the northern bank of the Min, where I eventually became most integrated as a Longyan resident, a familiar face among others on the street. There were other key folks who shared insights and became good friends with me—other temple members, store owners, plucky housewives, U.S.-bound youths, a videographer—who happened to live across the river in the other temple district, not to mention the two dozen teachers and slew of cadre elites with whom I had daily interaction.

Many of these people also appear in this book, although they do not play as central a role in the district-level and neighborhood dynamics that I am able to sketch in my analysis.

Organization of the Book

The following chapters are divided into three parts and organized around the paths and diversions of various things-in-motion: a shifting built landscape (chapter 1), the contested trajectories of peasant subjects (chapter 2), the charting of paper and paperless routes overseas (chapters 3–4), the multicentric flows of spirit and market currencies (chapter 5), and the alienability of various sentimental substances and gendered bodies in transnational circulation (chapter 6). In following these different things-in-motion, my aim is to illuminate the centrality of mobility as a qualisign in contemporary projects for capitalist modernity in China, as well as to situate Fuzhounese migration amid other flows that shape the context for mobile, cosmopolitan desires. Part I focuses primarily on the tensions of emplacement resulting from recent Fuzhounese efforts to remake their social landscape and themselves through claims of overseas status and success. Part II examines the pragmatics of emigration out of China and particularly the different calculative agencies and technical competencies involved in charting successful departures vis-à-vis successful arrivals in the United States. Part III grapples with village aspirations for and anxieties over the flow of new money into Longyan from abroad. Specifically, it examines the ways money's circulation was regulated through various religious, gendered, and kin incitements of debt amid strong temptations for money's diversion into other things and relations. The conclusion attempts to draw together the central themes of this book by inviting the reader to ponder the various stakes and skills involved in one of the most common pastimes and models of fortune writ small in Longyan—the unpredictable and fast-paced game of mahjong.