The Beggar's Play: Poverty, Coercion, and Performance in Shenyang, China

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Abstract
This article examines begging in the northeastern Chinese city of Shenyang as a form of street theater rather than as simply a sign of poverty. Begging performances play upon key cultural scripts and anxieties to unsettle and disturb potential donors, thus increasing the size of the gift. Using the story of an encounter between a street beggar and a foreign English teacher, the article argues that for ordinary Chinese urban residents, begging is an uncomfortable reminder of the costs of development and modernization.
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> It is as if [the beggar] were saying, 'But it is obvious, there is no getting away from it, here I am begging from you and by this fact alone I have a claim on you. So what can you be thinking of? Why don't you do something about it?' (Lévi-Strauss 1974:136)

Beggars are a common sight on the urban streets of the northeastern Chinese city of Shenyang; they include people from all age groups and both genders. Old people, their hair left loose, tangled and white, their clothes and shoes muddied and full of holes, sit on the sidewalks in front of shopping centers and fast-food restaurants, with battered metal bowls in front of them. As a few odd coins are thrown in, they bow to passersby muttering "Thank you, thank you, save my life (*jiuming*)." Or deformed children, their limbs bent at crooked angles, hard flat pieces of rubber tied to their waists, drag their bodies across the pavement on their hands. Men doze on the streets, wrapped in old winter coats with their bowl laid out in front of them, while women tow dirty children behind them, pleading with pedestrians. As they amble or crawl through the crowds on the main streets, the flood of humanity parts and flows around them, and they are left as wounded and dirty islands in an otherwise endless stream of people.

The visceral reaction to the beggar's appearance leads me to focus, in this article, on how beggars (*qigai*) and begging (*qitao*) are understood and imagined by urban Chinese residents. As the historian Hanchao Lu (1999) points out in his study of begging in republican Shanghai, Chinese popular culture at the time attached multiple meanings to beggars: as pitiful wretches, as parasites who lived richly on the naïve generosity of almsgivers, and even as disguised deities or immortals who came to test the compassion of humans. In the contemporary post-Mao era, beggars have been recruited into wider social discourses about modernization and development, about the success or failure of China's capitalist economic experiment and reform efforts. It is, in the words of one group of Chinese scholars "a greatly disconcerting phenomenon" that should "attract the highest degree of attention from the Party and government" (Wang, Xu and Jiang 2003:13). Their greatest concerns are that begging will negatively influence China's "favorable international image" and affect international trade, tourism, and foreign relations. Key to these discourses is the idea that beggars are now more than a simple domestic issue; by attracting the attention of foreign others, they hold the potential to tarnish China's international presence. Chinese interpretations of the begging phenomenon, and of beg-

gars' stories, motivations, and morality, therefore implicate foreign viewpoints and ethics, drawing upon both the perceptions and presumed reactions of foreign visitors. As a result, I pay attention in this article to the involvement of foreigners in Chinese urban affairs, to the actions and interpretations by foreigners of the begging phenomenon, and to how Chinese people both accept and contest their interpretations.

However, I want to resist making beggars the hapless pawns around whom these particular internationalist dramas play out. Beggars are far more than passive recipients of alms; they are aware of these social discourses, of how their appearances and stories influence the emotions of others, and of the silent commentary their presence makes on China's modernist narrative. As I will argue in this article, beggars do not wait for coins, but attempt to create for Chinese urban residents a spectacle of poverty and flesh which both shocks and compels potential donors—constituting, as Lévi-Strauss writes at the beginning of this article, a "claim" on those who pass by. In an ironic twist, it is the prosperous urban residents of China, drawn reluctantly into the beggars' performances, who often find their own agency curtailed and themselves one coin poorer as a result. I argue here that this curious inversion prompts much of the popular ambivalence towards beggars as a whole. It is enabled, not simply by the act of claiming, but by the narrative tenor of the claim itself which, evoking new social and structural inequalities (rich versus poor, urban versus rural) reminds urban residents of their rural origins and of the contingency of their own relative affluence. The periodic encounters between pedestrians and beggars are not simply personal or one-to-one meetings on the streets, but evoke larger social formations and cultural scripts.[1] The poor rural beggar is a spectral and uncanny reminder of what the urban resident has ostensibly transcended and left behind: poverty, backwardness, reliance on the state and on others.[2] Begging, conceived here as a type of meaningful cultural performance, perhaps even a type of street theater, traps potential donors in an already prescribed role—as givers—and leaves them only one way out of the play: to perform that role or to disrupt the entire performance by, as it were, stomping off the stage. The discomfort felt in such an action is not shame in the traditional sense, but something more akin to what Geertz (1973:402) calls "stage fright" among the Balinese; a sense that, like the actor fumbling his or her lines, the person will become the object of conscious attention by those around.[3]

Therefore, begging in China is not simply an economic problem, although its presence is rooted in the structural inequality of urban pover-

ty. Rather, begging is a performative enactment of the relations of poverty, indexing its perceived causes, ethics, and solutions. Such ideas about begging are not fixed, but are culturally variable. In Shenyang, the methods of mendicancy display striking historical continuities to those practiced in the late imperial Qing and republican periods—roughly corresponding to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and this despite the near eradication of begging during the Maoist era after 1949, when the state both alleviated the worst effects of poverty and suppressed begging as a potential source of income (Lu 2005, Schak 1988). The continuity of practices cannot simply be ascribed to persistent economic relations or the stable transmission of cultural knowledge. Rather, the form of begging practices, and their stability, stem from the strategic exploitation of Chinese concepts and concerns such as face (*mianzi*) and filiality (*xiao*), as I will attempt to show in the examples below.

My aim is to place perceptions of begging within a larger context of contemporary Chinese notions of moral behavior. I argue that what might appear on the surface as callousness towards the plight of beggars is actually a response rooted in cultural assumptions about beggars as cheats and frauds, and the subsequent interpretation of their actions as a form of deception. I begin with a brief overview of the reforms in China which have made poverty an issue once again after the relative economic parity of the Maoist era, followed by an analysis of how foreign perceptions of begging have shaped Chinese responses and interpretations to it. I then turn to an episode which occurred during my fieldwork involving a beggar and a foreign English teacher, and examine the varying interpretations of Chinese and foreign participants in the encounter. Finally, I attempt to place both of these interpretations in context to understand how the same encounter generated wildly variant interpretations.

The Return of Beggars to the Urban Landscape

The very presence of beggars in China, let alone their conspicuous numbers, marks a radical departure from the Maoist era. While begging was a familiar presence in Chinese urban areas in both the imperial and republican eras—an accepted, if not highly valued, profession—after the founding of the communist state in 1949, beggars were largely integrated into the massive labor and agricultural reorganization initiated by the new government (Fernandez-Stembridge and Madsen 2002, Lu 1999).

Begging disappeared, at least as a viable livelihood, for many years and only began to surface again during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a time of massive social and political upheaval. As agricultural production faltered, famine-stricken peasants travelled to urban areas to beg, often with the tacit support of local political leaders (Fernandez-Stembridge and Madsen 2002:214). During the period of economic reforms in the 1980s, which saw the loosening of government control over the planned economy and the development of private enterprise, begging became once again both highly visible and socially problematic.

Although the reforms have been the catalyst for the massive growth that has propelled China to the status of a world economic power, they have been a mixed blessing for Shenyang and for many other peripheral regions. A sprawling city of nearly seven million people in China's north-eastern Manchurian region, Shenyang was once the capital of the Manchu dynasty which conquered China in the seventeenth century. Today it is a center for steel production and heavy industry. The economic reforms brought with them a shift from heavy to light industrial production which led to the closure of many factories in the area. Workers who have been laid off—called "step-down" (*xiagang*) workers—receive a small pension but have little opportunity for finding new employment (Hung and Chiu 2003). Government statistics show the official unemployment rate for the region rising from 2.2% in 1990, to 6.5% in 2004 (National Bureau of Statistics 2005:178) although, as Khan and Riskin (2001:153) point out, actual rates of unemployment in China are estimated to be far higher than government statistics might indicate.

It is difficult to determine exactly how many people engage in begging in modern Shenyang, or how much money they earn from these practices. In his study of a begging community in Taiwan, for instance, Schak (1988) notes that begging was not simply an individual pursuit, but involved the coordinated efforts of entire households to bring in money through a variety of practices. Begging was often combined with other forms of devalued labor, including peddling small items, manual labor, seasonal construction work and petty crime, and by providing services such as mourning or fortune telling. Begging also shaded into other types of activities, with monks seeking alms or public entertainers engaging in practices that are similar to begging. Analyzing the current situation in Shenyang, Chen (2006:134) enumerates four groups of people who are the source of the urban begging population: poor farmers, migrant laborers, the disabled, and criminals. The

wide array of groups involved and varying practices makes estimates of the number of beggars difficult to construct and verify.

As a product of the reform era, begging is linked to wider social and economic changes in China. Although government policies in the post-Mao era have greatly raised the standard of living in both urban and rural areas, bringing, according to the World Bank (1992:23), one hundred million people out of absolute poverty in the 1980s, inequality between urban and rural, coastal and interior, and industrial and agricultural areas has increased (Khan and Riskin 2001, 2005). Many beggars are migrants from rural areas who find that they can earn a significantly higher income begging in the city than farming in the countryside. In a study of a "begging village" in Gansu province, where 30% of the population had migrated to beg in the cities, Hongxu Liu (2008) found that a single individual could earn 6000 *yuan* (or $875) annually by begging, about twice the average income for a rural household. Once in the cities, however, rural migrants are severely limited in terms of their employment opportunities by the household registration (*hukou*) system, which restricts the provision of government services to those households which are registered in their area. As a result, rural migrants to urban areas have trouble finding housing, schooling for their children, and healthcare, lack legal protection and may face harassment from public security officials (Chan and Zhang 1999, Wang 2004, Zhang 2002). Beggars are mingled in with a larger "floating population" (*liudong renkou*) of other migrants who are all forced to seek out a living in the city without many of the benefits of household registration.

The Critique of Confucian Morality: Beggars and the Foreign Gaze

For European outsiders who traveled to or lived in China in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, begging was linked to an overall critique of Confucian morality. To their minds, little was done to either rescue beggars from their terrible fate or to alleviate poverty.[4] Many travel and missionary accounts from the pre-Maoist era evince a righteous level of disgust at how the Chinese state organized welfare and charity (Smith 2001, Gee 1925, Bennet 1931; see also Schak 1988 for an overview of the historical literature). Official practices largely served to incorporate beggars into the governing apparatus of the state (by organizing them into gangs whose leaders

answered to local magistrates) rather than to ameliorate the conditions under which they lived (Lu 2005:5-8; Schak 1988:20). Chinese citizens, in turn, while at times generous with beggars, were more often likely to step around, or even over, the beggar's prostrate form, reluctant to glance down or acknowledge the human suffering at their feet. These responses were the result, the foreigners posited, of a system of ethics which was relational in orientation rather than universal (Smith 2001:186-216).

From a Western liberal humanist perspective, begging thus often became the focus of an overall indictment of Confucian morality, exemplified by what we might term the lack of regard for beggars as strangers. Beggars were ignored, in this sense, not because they were pitiable or dirty *people*, but because they were pitiable or dirty *strangers*. An early missionary in Shenyang, while noting that Chinese were very generous with friends and relatives, also lamented the fact that most Chinese would ignore a stranger and not take the time to help a person they did not know:

> A man is taken suddenly ill when walking alone along a busy city street. He staggers and falls near the door of an evidently prosperous shop. What happens? Passers-by glance at him curiously and go on; a few stand and look at him, but no one touches him or meddles in any way; the shopkeeper keeps studiously out of sight. He is unconscious and a stranger, so no one can inform his friends, but after a time the shopkeeper gives notice to the *yamen* [magistrate's office] which has charge of city affairs, and he is removed. All this time no one has so much as brought him a cup of water, or tried to make him more comfortable. (Christie 1914:53)

These valuations of Chinese moral behavior have continued into the present, when foreigners in China—no longer just missionaries, but English teachers and business owners as well—frequently note the duality of Chinese ethics, a focus on members of kin and social networks accompanied by a lack of regard for those outside them. Compare the missionary account above with Peter Hessler's memoir of teaching English in Sichuan during the 1990s:

> The average citizen seemed to react to a person in trouble by thinking: That is not my brother, or my friend, or anybody I know, and it is interesting to watch him suffer. When there were serious car accidents, peo-

> ple would rush over, shouting eagerly as they ran, "*Sile meiyou? Sile meiyou?*"—Is anybody dead? Is anybody dead? (Hessler 2001:112)

Here, the logic of spectacle—of wanting to see the body of the accident victim—parallels the deliberate indifference towards the beggar: those to whom I am not related are but objects of my pity or amusement, not kin I am indebted to help. Hessler makes the argument that such actions stem from the collective nature of Chinese cultural norms, and that "collectivism was limited to small groups, to families and close friends and *danwei,* or work units, and these tight circles also acted as boundaries: they were exclusive as well as inclusive, and the average Fuling resident appeared to feel little identification with people outside his well-known groups". We might be tempted to think of this evaluation as simply the imposition of a foreigner's cultural bias on Chinese patterns of behavior, but it is also in many ways an element of the conventional Chinese orthodoxy of difference—we Chinese are socially cohesive, you foreigners are individualistic—and was an active construction of Hessler's students.

As I will show below, this presumption of difference informs the interpretation of begging in Shenyang—the idea that foreigners and Chinese react to beggars in fundamentally different ways because of their varying cultural backgrounds. As Tu Wei-ming has noted, the lack of a universalist morality which would, in theory, extend equal treatment by individuals to all others is often positioned in China as one of the most significant differences between Confucian and Christian doctrines. "Confucian salvation, as it were, takes the basic dyadic relationships in the family as its point of departure," while the universal application of ethical action is burdened by the possible devaluation of family relationships (Tu 1985:123). Tu outlines the thinking of Mencius, the most prominent ancient interpreter of Confucian philosophy, as follows:

> If we reduce the richness, including the fruitful ambiguities, of the father-son relationship to the one-dimensional encounters we normally have with people on the street, our good intention of caring for strangers as dearly as we care for our parents may result in treating our dear ones as indifferently as we treat strangers. The insistence that we begin our tasks of self-realization in the context of the immediate dyadic relationships in which we are inevitably circum-

> scribed is a basic principle underlying the father-son relationship in Confucian symbolism. (123-124)

Ignoring a beggar both recognizes and reinforces an ideology of difference, where Chinese can position themselves as distinctly and irreducibly Confucian in the face of the foreigner's gaze—a counterpoint to the foreigner's presumably universalist Kantian ethics.

The Encounter Between John and Xiaoping

This ideology of difference in regards to begging played out in the summer of 2005 in an encounter between John, a white South African English teacher, and an urban beggar named Xiaoping.[5] John was cycling on his way to work one afternoon at a private English language training center in Shenyang. His school was located in a busy downtown shopping district, with a great deal of foot traffic and more than a few beggars. One beggar, who had taken up a place outside his school's entrance, was Xiaoping, a 12 year-old girl with two club feet and open wounds on her arms and legs. According to a pamphlet published by the charity which later took up her case: "She sat on a skateboard-like device, her hands extended to passersby. And many did pass by her. But [John], as he drove past her, noticed that she had open wounds all over her feet, legs, hands and arms. They looked so raw and infected that he was touched with compassion for her and decided to help her to get cleaned up at a hospital" (SHIC 1996:3).

As John was talking to Xiaoping, a crowd of people began to gather, some of whom included his own English students who were arriving for class. Several tried to intervene. According to John "people were telling me, 'No, don't help her, it's not your business' and 'There's many people like this.'" John told me that he was disgusted by the "apathy" of the crowd, a quality he attributed to ordinary people in both Shenyang and around the world: "But it's not only Chinese people, it's Americans as well and South Africans and everybody…it's just apathy." As more and more people told him there was nothing he could do, he claimed to become even more certain that he should take some form of action.

John went into the school to ask someone to call the hospital, but the Chinese staff of the school refused to get involved and asked him to drop the matter. Meanwhile, his students who had followed him inside,

attempted to dissuade him from doing anything. I have excerpted several portions of our interview below:

> And the whole time, some of the students are telling me, 'It's not real, it's not real.' Some of the students say, 'These children, they are working for gangs.' What does it matter if these children are working for gangs, they're being exploited you know? And some of them are telling me it was dangerous, that gangs can do something to me and…I might save this girl, but I cannot save the other children that's working for the gang….
>
> Some of them, when we got in the street, tell me, '[John], it's fake blood. It's makeup.' And I grab them and I push them to the girl, I pushed them down, and I said, 'Look at that,' because…they only glanced. They glanced for a second. It's too horrible for them to look at, so they glance for a second and then they go with their preconceived ideas of this, like…of avoiding responsibility or something like that….
>
> And [then] I heard the crowd gasp, and I turned around and this girl had to take a leak. Now the skateboard was about this big [a foot wide] and had a big round hole in it, and she just pulls her pants down a little bit and she can pee through the hole. But she opens her back, her lower back and her buttocks to do that and she had a massive thirteen-centimeter bedsore…deep, deep, deep it was deep to the bone…and it was rotting. Rotting. It was black and rotting. She must have been smelling herself, you know? It was rotting away…. I turned around and the crowd gasped and then I realized, well fuck, I'd better get her to a hospital.

John persisted until the police arrived, and then through a translator (one of his students) he convinced them to take him and the girl to the hospital. He was reluctant to leave her alone because he suspected that the hospital staff would simply discharge her as soon as they could, or that the gang his students had mentioned would come and claim her again.

His concerns were not without merit. According to Xiaoping, several months before, an elderly Chinese woman had tried to get her treated by a doctor as well, but her "big brothers" (*dage*) arrived at the hospital at mid-

night and took her away. They beat her for leaving the street and letting the woman take her to the hospital (SHIC 2006:5). As more information became available, and some Chinese media outlets investigated the story, because of the spectacle of a foreigner helping a Chinese beggar, it became clear that Xiaoping's big brothers were actually members of a begging ring that used handicapped children from the countryside as beggars in the city, taking whatever money the children earned for themselves.[6] They had approached Xiaoping's foster father, a rural farmer from a neighboring province, with an offer that they would give his disabled foster daughter a job in a toy factory in the city. Once they brought her to Shenyang they put her to work as a beggar. "[Xiaoping] said those men put things in her wounds, like acid and other dirty things that made them even worse…They required her to make a certain amount of money each day by begging otherwise they would not give her food and they would treat her badly" (9).

John spent the night in the hospital and eventually managed to arrange for the treatment of her most serious wounds. Word spread quickly through the foreign English-teaching community, and John arranged for several of his friends to stay in shifts with Xiaoping at the hospital. He also tried to raise funds for Xiaoping's treatment by setting up a collection box at his English school, and organizing a fund-raising event at a local bar. In total, John and other foreign English teachers raised over 12,000 yuan (about $1500) for Xiaoping's continued treatment and care. A doctor at the hospital also suggested contacting SHIC (Serving Humanity in Crisis), a charitable organization which was able to provide more funds and took over the administration of Xiaoping's case. After two corrective surgeries and a course of physical therapy, Xiaoping's feet were straightened. She is now able to walk with only some difficulty and began elementary school in 2007.[7]

How does one attempt to interpret or evaluate the actions and viewpoints of various parties to this episode? We might, for instance, view John's interpretation of events (that he had to do something, that nobody else would do anything, that even when forced to look his Chinese students refused to admit the truth) within a long history of encounter between domestic and foreign ethical frameworks in China. Like the missionaries of old, he interpreted the actions and words of the crowd which opposed his efforts to do something as a moral indictment of the Chinese character, although John was also careful to frame this within a general moral shortcoming throughout the world. In our interview, though, he emphasized to me at one point, "This you have to put in, because this is

the favorite Chinese saying for avoiding responsibility: 'There's many people like this in our country.'"

Several of the students at the English school where John taught took a negative view of his actions. One woman in her early 20s was upset when John brought the collection box into the school, and laughed as she described how it sat empty at the reception desk because everyone at the school knew that none of the money would end up helping the girl but would instead go to the criminals who had organized the begging ring. At this point, her friend, another woman of the same age, broke into the conversation: "This pisses me off! This is a social problem, a complicated social problem. How does one person think he can solve it?" She later explained to me further (this time switching into English)[8] that what she meant was attacking the problem one beggar at a time would not lead to any long-lasting solution. "This is China's problem. Maybe foreigners, they want to be like heroes and save everyone. But really they save no one. They just, oh, give this person money, and it's okay?"

A Chinese man in his late 30s whom I regularly talked to about his English school knew some of the students who had witnessed the event. "It's not so good what this man did. I don't trust beggars. They always cheat people. Now that they know foreigners are like this, they will take advantage of them." In fact, the idea that beggars cheat, by either exaggerating their maladies and misfortunes, or by actually, as John noted, using fake blood and makeup, was a common concern.[9] Many people were convinced that the beggars with twisted limbs were actually trained acrobats who found that they could make more money begging. At the end of the day, I was told, they would straighten their arms and legs, walk back to their expensive BMW automobiles and drive home to their luxury apartments.

While, as was noted above, beggars are capable of earning a comfortable living, especially in comparison to life as a farmer, it seems unlikely that individual beggars would be able to earn enough to sustain the luxuries some people attributed to them. I prefer to think of this as a fantasy which undermines the ethical claim of the beggar to the urban resident's money. Imagining the beggar as secretly possessing all the markers of wealth and status in the new China justifies a moral disregard for the beggar's plight. This is a powerful narrative, which makes the beggar in the China the quintessential *persona non grata*, an unwelcome presence, and most of my Chinese informants encouraged me, when walking near beggars or when being approached by them, to look away, to ignore them,

and to keep walking as if they did not exist there, right in front of me, blocking my way. Uncontested, this narrative might easily convince urban residents to leave beggars to themselves. In the next section of this article, I examine in more detail the structure of the beggar's claim on the potential giver and the culturally specific form of Chinese begging. Beggars assert their own narratives about their practice through the stories they tell to donors, attempting to justify their actions through appeals to traditional Chinese values, which forms an interesting counterpoint to the idea of the beggar as an affluent cheat or hustler.

The Practice of Begging

Beggars in Shenyang stimulate the pity of givers through a host of related strategies that coalesce around exploiting facets of Chinese cultural experience. Certain begging practices "made sense" in Shenyang, both to the beggars and to potential donors; they appealed to compassion as informed by, and constructed through, dominant cultural ideologies. In the United States, a man holding a sign by the side of the road reading "Will work for food" appeals to an ideology of affluence and security through concerted and directed labor—the sense that my wealth was built by me and not by the alienated production of others, and the beggar is here reaffirming that ideology by merely asking for the same opportunity. Brackette Williams describes how some New York subway beggars "read us reading the U.S. American Creed: nothing for nothing and God helps those who help themselves" (1994:28). Their strategies draw upon this ethic by providing token compensation for donations, or by performing minor public services such as announcing subway stops. Such begging practices are deeply entwined with cultural biases and assumptions that determine the success or failure of particular strategies.

In a study of begging among Anandapuram lepers begging in Mumbai, James Staples (2003) elucidates what might be considered an Indian cultural logic of begging. "Their enactments evoked both a worshipper's conventionalized act of submission before the divine (touching the brow, for example), and the conventionalized postures appropriate to those displaying deference to the authority of elders and lordly superiors, as in the touching of the feet of actual or potential alms-givers" (302-303). The strategies he describes bear many resemblances to Chinese practices; for instance, the display of wounds and deformities, and the performance of obeisances. As

he notes, however, "the meaning and practical effects of deformities are often contextually defined" (301). Disfigured hands granted legitimacy and force to the Indian beggar's claims, while a deformity of the face was stigmatizing in so far as it suggested a moral or divine cause for the disfigurement. For all of a certain similarity of form, the meaning of begging practices is quite specific to the cultural context in which they are found.

The script and rules of play for begging thus vary cross-culturally, making certain strategies prominent and efficacious in China. The most common strategies I observed in Shenyang might be allocated to four categories: strategies that violate norms of face and public reserve, strategies that assert bonds of kinship with donors to override the lack of social ties and stimulate compassion, strategies that involve public humiliation of the donor, and strategies that play upon the significance of the rural peasant in the Chinese national imagination.

In terms of the first, many Chinese were awed by the lengths beggars would go to in soliciting the sympathy of donors, engaging in practices that they would themselves consider embarrassing, demeaning, and injurious to a sense of face and pride. Face (*mianzi*) is the social representation of a person's prestige and character, and as such is thought to be completely absent in beggars who demean themselves by the act of begging for money; therefore the idea that one would even engage in begging was considered by some as evidence enough of the beggar's desperation. While riding in a taxi with one of my informants, as we watched several old beggars knock on car windows at a busy intersection's stoplight, she told me (in English), "How do they do that? [If] I have no money, I would rather die than do this all day." I asked if it was because she thought the work was hard, or too dangerous (the cars sometimes coming perilously close to running down a tottering old beggar). "No! Just people see me like this, I want to die."

There were other means of defying the conventions of face as well. In a place where illness and bodily deformity are a source of profound discomfort (Kohrman 2005), beggars usually bring attention to their wounds and deformities by putting them on display. A clubbed foot or a paralyzed leg is left uncovered, even in the cold of winter. An amputated or missing limb is revealed, not by an empty sleeve or pant leg, but by the stump brought into the open, often wrapped in bloodied bandages to enhance the effect. The wounds on display both fascinate and repel. The beggar not only forces the donor to recognize the wound, but makes the wound visceral. Each pedestrian, walking past the beggar's form, feels a momen-

tary twinge of identification; they feel the pain as the beggar must feel it, establishing a connection between the two of them.

Bearing and locomotion add to the pathos and the visual representation of the beggars' obeisance, spatially configuring their relative status to the donor. They hunch themselves over and shuffle when they walk. Beggars must eschew whatever comfort their coins might buy for them, such as new shoes or clothing; even a bath has to appear to be beyond their means. If they were to use the gains of their begging in this way, it would undermine the continued flow of money into their bowl. A beggar has to appear to maintain a perpetual state of misery and poverty to be successful.

Words are rarely exchanged between beggars and donors, other than a brief thanks. When I tried to speak to beggars, words seemed meaningless. Language failed. They would wail to me, cry, strike their head or limbs against the ground, but in all ways eschew verbal communication. When I asked one old woman a question in Chinese, she simply began repeating again and again, "I do not understand what you are saying, I do not understand."

Yet despite the failure of communication, some beggars do indeed have stories. The second set of strategies I describe here rely on appeals to common values in order to arouse compassion. On one of Shenyang's main shopping streets, a group of four men would regularly set up a large information center, complete with full-color posters in front of them on boards. The posters explained that they are the parents of children sick in one of the city hospitals with leukemia, and described the symptoms of the disease to the public and the course of treatment. The posters also explained that the families of these children were from the countryside and could not afford treatment for their children, and so they were seeking donations. A large red wooden box was set in front of the line of fathers with a slot in the top for people to deposit money. Every time someone approached and dropped in a few coins or a bill, the line of men would intone, "Thank you for your kind heart" (*xiexie ni de aixin*) and bow as one. On another shopping street, a similar story was told, but with a slight bite of hatred. A man stood beside a portable stand he had set up with a large board featuring pictures of a young girl playing, dancing, and then shots of her in the hospital. On the ground in front of him his story was written in chalk: his daughter had been diagnosed with a liver problem, and he took her to the clinic near his village, but the doctor was a drunken incompetent and only injured her more seriously. He brought

her to the city hospital for an expensive treatment which he cannot afford. However, his sign stated that he was not only asking for money to help with the treatment, but for the government or the media to expose the problems in rural health care.

Another beggar I met, a man in his mid-30s, with long unkempt hair and a club foot extended on a spindly leg in front of him, would sit on the asphalt in front of a large market and write out a Buddhist prayer in chalk. It would extend in four character sets down the road for several feet, and when he had finished writing it, he would settle himself down with his battered metal bowl in front of him waiting for money. The poem, repeated every day, read:

Amitofu [the name of the Amitabha Buddha in Chinese]
Uncles, Aunts, Brothers and Sisters.
Have mercy and extend your loving hand.
Give a single penny to help a cripple.
Consideration and virtue gushing forth like a spring.
The kindness of decent people is never forgotten.
In life until death remembered in the heart.
May your entire family go in peace.
All things as you wish them, luck and good fortune.
Humanity everywhere possessing genuine feelings.
While walking on the street have a look.
Thank you blessed friends for your assistance.

All of these beggars appealed to donors through the logic of Confucian (and in the final case Buddhist) obligation.[10] The men with the poster could claim that they were not simply begging, but were doing what was expected of a parent who could not afford to care for a sick child. Some able-bodied beggars accompanied a blind or crippled parent as a means to solicit sympathy from donors at the hardships they endured as responsible children.[11] These beggars framed their needs in the language of filiality and kinship. Similarly, the beggar with the chalk poem addresses his audience as kin, and in doing so invokes their own obligations to care for him. The same language of obligation, for instance, informs criminal confessions broadcast on the local television station. The shackled and defeated criminals frequently cite the financial responsibilities they have to their families as the cause, if not precisely the justification, for their actions.

These begging strategies were intimately tied to appeals of conscience. By couching their claims within matters of circumstance, rather than choice, beggars forced people to consider the contingency of their own relative prosperity and the possibility that if some misfortune were to befall them—if they were to become lame, or need to care for a sick child—they too might be forced to beg. But there is a coercive element to this claim as well, in that beggars demand this recognition from their potential donors. In his ethnography of a Taiwanese begging community, Schak (1988:46) describes the concept of *kho-lian-iu:* or the "image of pitifulness," the means by which beggars inspire the charity of others. The image, meant to maximize the sympathy of others, was often carefully devised and, if necessary, faked. Women would borrow children from their neighbors so that they could beg as single mothers caring for a host of dependents. Beggars intentionally matted their hair, dirtied their faces and tried to demean themselves in front of potential givers in order to increase the potential size of donations.

Strategies in the third group are more overt and confrontational. Very rarely were these violent; instead, they relied on creating a sense of embarrassment or spectacle that maneuvered donors into the social equivalent of a checkmate. I once observed an encounter between a well-dressed middle-aged man and a young dirty street girl. The girl was about six years old, with stained and patched clothes, matted hair and a dirty face. As the man strode along the street in his sharp dress pants and new golf shirt, the girl skipped along with him, dogging his steps and keeping a battered tin bowl firmly centered in front of him. The man used his arm to brush her aside, and when she hopped back in front of him he shouted, "Out of the way!" (*gunkai*). When it became evident to her that he was not going to hand her any money, the girl suddenly knelt down and grabbed on to his leg. The man tried to shake her off, but she squeezed even harder, her face pressed into his trousers. She screamed. Other people stopped to watch. A crowd began to gather. No one attempted to intervene or help either of the parties, and as the man berated the child loudly and tried to wrench her fingers apart, tears began to streak down her face. He finally pulled a small bill from his pocket and put it in her hands. The girl let go and ran over to an equally dirty woman squatting nearby and handed the money to her. To become the center of such a spectacle is deeply uncomfortable to most Chinese because there are no face-saving ways out of the situation other than giving money. Hitting the child,

shouting, making a scene, or running away would all be sources of embarrassment—better simply to sacrifice some cash and leave with dignity.

Finally, beggars juxtapose their rural origins (even where those too might be faked) with the urban resident's cosmopolitan sophistication. Beggars' clothing is nearly always marked as rural and traditional: padded, layered, and bulky, even in summer. They typically wear traditional cloth shoes. If they speak, it is in the rural dialect and with a distinctly non-urban accent; if they have a story to tell, it almost invariably identifies them as migrants from rural areas. At bus and train stations, I frequently encountered young couples bundled in thick clothes, their hands and faces reddened and smudged with dirt. The mother would carry a sleeping toddler, his inert arms and legs dangling from her grasp, bundled against the wind or cold. The man would approach, holding his hands in front of him. "We are from the village, we came here just a few days ago. Our money was stolen, we can't afford a ticket back to the village. We have nowhere to stay, we are living on the street. I don't have any food for my child…" Many of my informants confirmed that they had been approached in similar ways, and this technique was even the subject of a news exposé on a local television station which used a hidden camera to film such beggars buying designer clothing.[12]

For beggars to cast themselves as rural migrants in this sort of urban drama, trapped in the city against their will or because of their infirmities, is not an anomaly of narrative geography. It is difficult to overstate the importance of the countryside in the Chinese national imagination. The Maoist state often staked its legitimacy on its identification with, and support from, the peasantry. Mao himself, as a consequence of his *Report on an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan* (1967), has often been credited with shifting the focus of communist struggle from factories to farm fields, and as a result, the communist revolution in China proceeded from rural to urban areas. It is no accident then that those who were associated with the capitalist exploitative classes after the communist victory in 1949—"the evil gentry and the lawless landlords" (25)—were often reformed through labor in the countryside. Even the greatest crisis of state legitimacy, the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, was addressed by shifting large numbers of urban youth to rural and agricultural workteams (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006). Very few people are more than a generation removed from the countryside; they are linked to it by way of origin or through extended periods of labor. Even today, schoolchildren are periodically sent to the countryside for "learn from the farmer" events.

But the dominant forces of Chinese modernity, deriving from the sources of capital rather than the essence of socialism, spring today from the cities. This shift in the geographic basis of social legitimacy has been accompanied by a new form of human classification defined through the metric of "quality" (*suzhi*) (Anagnost 2004, Kipnis 2006). *Suzhi* is a measure of manners, bearing and proper social behavior, and an index of origin, with rural migrants classed as "low" quality and urban residents as "high." Just as Bourdieu demonstrates, in the case of French art consumption, that the development of taste is a product of socialization, the discourse of *suzhi* in China fulfils "a social function of legitimating social differences" (1984:7) which automatically classes people by dress, speech, habit, and physical appearance. Possessing the lowest level of quality, an attribute marked by their vocation, their clothing, and their speech, the condition of beggars is self-fulfilling for the vast majority of urban residents, who can also assert that their own good fortune is a result of their own individual quality. Yet beggars appear to take on the burden of low quality willingly, to accept the denigration of their *suzhi* even as other, upwardly mobile migrants, strive to alter their dress and demeanor to suit urban tastes. By dressing and acting as rural peasants, beggars deliberately invoke the regional basis of authenticity of the socialist past and thus also reinforce the psychic anxiety that arises within the modern: the sense that, for the urban resident, the past has been successfully transcended, only to find its negation, in the form of the beggar, staring one in the face. Giving money in a sense stitches that fantasy back together and allows the pedestrian to continue on his or her way.

The coercive nature of begging, of being forced to identify and empathize with beggars and their plight, was greatly disturbing to many of my Chinese informants. By turning away and not looking, it was almost as if, by not seeing, the beggar's claim could be annulled. Beggars, in turn, used the strategies outlined above to make their presence known, to force the pedestrian to recognize them and the particular condition of their humanity. The performative aspect of begging is the conflict between these competing interpretations and their eventual resolution in either the giving of alms or in the pedestrian walking resolutely past.

Cheating and Deception

In China, the social discomfort of begging comes about through other sorts of public encounters as well, encounters which, once again, involve

the imposition of someone's agency over another. As I stated above, many people in Shenyang are concerned that beggars cheat, that they fake their wounds, conditions, and stories to provide a financially secure living for themselves, inconsistent with their terrifying appearance. But the feeling of deception was not simply an excuse not to give money to beggars; being cheated was a constant concern and threat to face, pride, and prosperity. During my time in Shenyang, I was continuously being warned by my informants about the ways I might be cheated, about how to protect myself from pickpockets, and other strategies meant to protect the guileless foreigner from being taken advantage of. A person who cheats another can be called a *pianzi* (cheater) or by some variation of the word *tuor*, which is a slang word for a scam artist or hustler. A pianzi is a regular cheat, someone who rigs a mahjong game or a deck of cards, someone who passes fake merchandise off as authentic, or someone who overcharges you for shoddy goods (see Blum 2007). A tuor is more of a trickster, and the act of deception requires more skill. The term describes anyone who, usually in cooperation with a business owner, acts as a customer or innocent to help sell that person's products. I was told to be careful if anyone approached me in a clothing store claiming that I was exactly the same size as her boyfriend, and requested that I try on some clothes. After modeling a few outfits for her, I was told, she would thank me for my help and leave with some of the clothes. The store owner would then approach me and ask me to pay for the clothes my "girlfriend" had just left with.

But tuor could also be more specialized and participate in any of a host of other common scams. For instance, there were marriage hustlers (*huntuor*) who worked with matchmaking agencies: beautiful men or women who would be set up as potential mates with customers who were considering using the agency's services. After the customer had paid his or her non-refundable fees, the huntuor would give an excuse for ending the relationship and the customer would have to choose among other legitimate, but perhaps less attractive, clients. A bar hustler (*batuor*), usually a beautiful woman, tries to attract men in public places and then suggest meeting for a drink in one of her favorite cafés. After ordering an assortment of drinks and snacks, her phone rings and to get better reception she goes outside; after which, of course, she simply leaves, and the poor man finds himself stuck with a sizable bill (the menu, of course, not printing the set of outrageous prices) and a well-muscled server waiting to be paid. The café then splits the proceeds with the batuor. None of these

scenarios actually happened to me, or to any of my informants, but were told with the heavy ring of truth as cautionary tales by multiple people. Despite displaying all the marks of urban legends (although some of the scenarios were derived from sensationalistic media reports) these tales were used as object lessons in informing me how not to be cheated.

Many Chinese lump beggars in with tuor and pianzi, arguing that all of them cheat people. This was especially the case with beggar children, whom I was told to avoid as they were actually thieves. One female informant told me that the moment she realized her cellphone had been stolen while she was outside shopping, she looked around for child beggars who might have taken it. This Dickensian stereotype of the child thief, which resonates with the common Chinese word for pickpocket, "little thief" (*xiaotou*), does carry some degree of truth. While lunching with an American, the loud and gregarious headmaster of a local English school, one afternoon at a Xinjiang restaurant (serving halal food from China's westernmost province) a gaggle of children rushed through the entrance giggling and teasing each other. He called out to them in English, "What'd you guys get today?" One of the children pulled some bills and a cellphone out of his pocket before he was herded into the back of the restaurant by the owner. The headmaster told me that the children were related to the restaurant's owner, and that he used to have problems with them because they would steal from customers outside his English school. He had managed to broker an agreement where they stayed away from his school, and now he ate at the restaurant quite regularly.

The notion that beggars cheat is compounded by a concern for the financial status of otherwise able-bodied beggars; people are irked by the idea that even a modest amount of money should enable beggars to become self-sufficient. "Why are they here everyday? Why do they have to beg? Even if they make ten yuan, they can take that and buy some bottles of water for one yuan each, and then sell them for two!" one of my informants said to me exasperated one day as he fended off a beggar. Bottled water can be purchased for one yuan a bottle in a market, or iced tea and soda for two (fifteen and thirty cents, respectively). The standard price at a newsstand or from a vendor though is two yuan for water and three for an iced tea or soda. One disabled man did operate a small stand at a bus stop near my home selling newspapers and, in summer, cold drinks, making enough money for a living. Many of Shenyang's poor also make money collecting empty plastic drink bottles and taking them to the

recycling station. For two empty bottles, a person can receive three *mao* (about four cents). Men and women too old to take a job as a laborer often wander through busy shopping districts dragging a large nylon sack behind them filled with crushed plastic bottles. They approach anyone with a drink and ask for the bottle, or sometimes stop and rummage through garbage receptacles. This willingness to operate at the extremes of poverty and yet not resort to begging leaves many people with a lack of respect for those who do decide to hold out their hands.

The popular television show *Ma Dashuai*[13] touched on these emotions and the question of falsity and deception in begging. In the show, the lead character Ma has also "just come from the village" and is, in truth this time, robbed of his money while riding the bus into the city. With no money in his pocket, and having also lost the address of his only relative in the city, Ma is forced to wander around during the day and sleep in the train station at night. While walking through the park one day, he sees a blind man playing an *erhu*—a Chinese stringed instrument—with a hat placed in front of him containing a collection of coins. Ma squats in front of him, smiling, staring at his frail body and thick dark glasses. The old blind man sits unaware, no expression on his face, his head cocked slightly to one side and staring blankly at nothing, his hand merely sliding the bow back and forth over the erhu. Ma shuffles forward a step and squats down again, this time reaching up his hand and waving it in the blind man's face. He gets no reaction. He moves forward another step, looks first over one shoulder, and then the other, and slowly reaches his hand down into the hat.

"Put it back."

Ma falls over backwards, and utters dumbfounded, "What? You're not really blind?" "Of course not…" The old man tells Ma to move on and let him work, but Ma strikes up a bargain. "I can play better than you…we can split the money." So Ma takes his place, fluttering his eyes closed and staring upwards while playing noticeably better. The old man then completes the con by publicly praising the blind performer to those walking nearby and boasting that for such a performance he will personally give ten yuan—"Who can do better?" The scam progresses well until the police show up and take Ma away for not having a license to perform (as his now sighted partner slips away into the crowd), while the crowd begins to complain that they have been taken in by a ruse.

The television audience both shares this sentiment—the disgust at the pretense taken to relieve them of their money—but are eventually won

over by the bumbling and honest Ma, and the lengths his character goes to in order to make enough money to find his relative, and then later to pay for his girlfriend's medical care. In fact, much of the series revolves around Ma's increasingly strange and sometimes desperate attempts to earn enough cash, including becoming a public wailer at funerals (which ends when he mistakes the address and winds up at a wedding instead), a willing target dummy for an aspiring boxer and his eccentric family, and acting as a slightly dim intellectual to entertain a retired official who thinks that nobody in the culture ministry thinks well of him anymore. Another group of characters in the series are a gang of young beggars and thieves whom Ma befriends and eventually adopts as his "godchildren." Their ability to go from a life of indigent crime and beggary to proper schoolchildren reinforces the criticism of the idle beggar, holding the donor hostage by falsifying the severity of his condition. For many people in Shenyang, it is the feeling that one is being tricked, cheated, and manipulated by beggars that evokes their feelings of frustration and anger, and leads them to hold onto their money rather than depositing it in the beggar's bowl.

Conclusion

So let me return now to the story of John and Xiaoping, their encounter on the street, and the varied reactions and interpretations of that encounter by John himself and the Chinese spectators who witnessed the event. It is tempting, as John originally did, to view the Chinese reactions as a form of apathy, just as the early missionary did in regards to a man taken suddenly ill on the street. To foreign critics, this evaluation of the crowd's lack of regard, and of John's students' later mirth and anger towards his actions to help Xiaoping, frames larger questions about the Chinese moral economy and the implicit prejudice of Confucian social categories. The dominant liberal humanist perspective argues that we should care, about beggars or anyone else who is in need, and that failing to do so demonstrates a certain deficiency of moral character.

I do not claim to have resolved here the ethical dilemma that lies within the Chinese experience of begging. I only hope that I have successfully accounted for some of the ambivalence of Chinese urban residents towards beggars. Beggars, by their very presence in Shenyang, are agentive insofar as they call into question the fantasies of modernity and development widely promulgated and expressed throughout China.[14]

They also draw upon and challenge dominant cultural ideologies of face, filiality, kinship, and citizenship (differentially based on urban or rural residence). As such, it is not so much the beggars themselves—though dirty and wounded—which both repulse and compel urban residents as it is the figure of the beggar, representing as it does the cracks within the taken-for-granted doxa of modernity itself.

John saw in Xiaoping a tragic figure, a child disfigured and alone, completely bereft of agency, quite literally living or dying at the whim of a group of cruel thugs. Some might argue that it was the fact of his foreignness alone which caused him to act, although I would disagree, conscious of the many foreigners in China who do pass beggars by without a second thought. Undoubtedly John's foreignness freed him from, or at least made him indifferent to, the responses of others which might have constrained the actions of most Chinese. But what seems more important was John's ability to see past Xiaoping as a representation of something else and to take her humanity at face value. Their encounter became an event (something that gathered a large crowd of people) simply because John, in taking an inordinate concern in the welfare of another, went decidedly off-script. His actions made the script itself an explicit object of discussion and negotiation, shocking the unspoken into very obvious presence. We can see a similar shock when I questioned the old woman begging in the street. She responded, "I do not understand." Looking back now, we might re-evaluate her intended meaning; not simply, "I do not understand your speech," but "I do not understand why you are speaking."

In contrast to John's reaction, his Chinese interlocutors—urging him not to be taken in by the beggar's deception (it is "not real" after all)—imputed a very powerful agency to Xiaoping. This was framed within a conception of begging as a kind of trick perpetrated by secretly affluent (and purportedly very flexible) individuals on unsuspecting and naïve others. Such notions speak to the deeply unsettling discomfort that the beggar provokes. They are also informed by an ideology of deception as one of the constants of human interaction, something to be guarded against in the case of the pianzi or tuor, or to be amused by in the case of the television show Ma Dashuai, but always and indelibly present.

At the beginning of this article, I called begging a form of street theater, with clearly defined roles which follow a script. There is an implicit contest involved in the encounter between the beggar and the donor, each strategically trying to stimulate or limit the breadth of the donor's

compassion, and thus the size of the gift. The beggar appears to say—to re-enact Levi-Strauss' opening monologue—"I am a beggar and you are a donor. You pity me because I represent both what you might have been and what you claim to have left behind. To comfort this guilt, I will accept your money and you can go along your way." The potential donor, in turn, approaches the encounter by weighing his or her options through a set of questions: "How moved am I with the image of this beggar? Is this beggar trying to cheat me, to make herself more pitiable than she actually is? What will be the cost to me, in terms of face or the guilt of recognition, of simply walking past?" The answers to these questions and the force by which they are spoken (by beggars and donors) determine the outcome of the encounter, whether urban pedestrians will be able to put the beggar out of sight, or whether they will become drawn into the play, trapped as it were by the force of the beggar's claim.

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ENDNOTES

[1]The notion of "cultural scripts" derives from social-psychological attempts to describe the patterning of human behavior, often taking the semantic constituents of language as core units of a type of worldview which informs social interaction (Wierzbicka 1996, 2003). Here, I employ the term less as a description of "rules" by which people act, and more as the abstraction of performance, the regularity which people use to identify a given event (what kind of performance is this?) and act within its framework (see for instance Bateson 2000, Goffman 1974, Turner 1974). In the case of China, Xin Liu (2002) takes this particular argument much further, describing how cultural scripts and roles (businessman, government official, and the mediating presence of the massage girl) define and shape the conduct of business exchanges in the southern Chinese city of Beihai.

[2]The figure of the beggar as an uncanny specter or ghost evokes both Marx's description of the impending global revolution—his famous opening to the Communist Manifesto claiming "A spectre is haunting Europe…" (Marx 1988:54)—and Freud's equally famous essay, *The Uncanny* (1960). Here, the beggar is both a traumatic reminder of the failed promise of Chinese socialism and a threat to current forms of economic accumulation and distribution. See also Royle (2003).

[3]My recourse to the language of performance here is not meant to affirm the racist descriptions of early analysts of the Chinese "character" which intimated that Chinese people were locked into empty dramatic forms. Smith (2001:16) writes: "Upon very slight provocation, any Chinese regards himself in the light of an actor in a drama. He throws himself into theatrical attitudes, performs the salaam, falls upon his knees, prostrates himself and strikes his head upon the earth, under circumstances which to an Occidental seem to make such actions seem superfluous, not to say ridiculous." Smith, of course, fails to consider in turn the Chinese viewpoint (an odd lapse considering his own assertion that the Chinese lacked sympathy) and regard the strange actions of the "Occidentals" in China as themselves likewise theatrically inspired.

[4]Many accounts from the republican era (1911-1949) were from celebrated European intellectuals who traveled to China during this relatively open period. See for instance Russell (1966).

[5]The following narrative is based upon my own interviews with several of the participants and a pamphlet (SHIC 2006) published by SHIC (Serving Humanity in Crisis) Inc. Asian Health Services Exchange, the charity which took up the girl's case. I have altered the names of participants to protect their identities. I should also be clear here that I chose not to interview Xiaoping herself, based on my own discretion and at the request of several of the participants in these events. We felt that since her story had already been well-documented, and because of the magnitude of the trauma she had suffered, it was best to let her focus on her future and leave this tragedy in her past.

[6]Chinese accounts of begging often mention a growing "professionalization" (*zhiyehua*) of begging, with beggars no longer working independently but operating as begging groups (*qitao qunti*). At the same time, however, any mention of a criminal element to these groups is usually avoided (Li and Han 2008; Liu 2008; Wang, Xu and Jiang 2003). An exception is Chen (2006) who identifies criminals as one source of beggars in Shenyang, noting that their presence has led to the "mafia-ization" (*heishehuihua*) of begging.

[7]Xiaoping's story is in many ways tragic simply because it is also representative of the stories that are not told; only rarely does a beggar's life turn out so well and one can only be horrified to think of how many other child beggars succumb, nameless, to disease, injury and environment the way Xiaoping almost did. Although newspapers reported that the police had arrested several men and broken up the begging ring which recruited Xiaoping, there were undoubtedly multiple others working within the city.

[8]Consistent with my overall project, which examines the construction and use of Chinese forms of English, I have not altered or corrected speech that I recorded in English from my Chinese informants in order to preserve its feeling and cadence. In the text, I have indicated where people spoke in English.

[8]Holcombe (1895:328-329) presents a case of this from premodern China: "Then, without hesitation or sign of shame, [a beggar] thrust his hands into his bosom and drew out a pair of socks padded with cotton in order to represent his feet as swollen and out of shape. They were made of canvas, and so accurately painted into the resemblance of feet with toenails dropping off and the flesh a mass of putrefaction, that they had deceived me in broad sunlight and on many occasions." I do not believe that any of the beggars I personally encountered were "faking" their wounds in this manner, although some may have been exaggerated through the use of bloodied bandages. But it was still a common belief among Chinese that many disabled beggars were actually frauds.

[9]There is a sense in which Confucian and Buddhist logics of obligation are contradictory, in so far as the Buddhist is prompted to give to the beggar in order to receive rewards in the next life, while the Confucian responds to the assertion of kinship or to the righteousness of others fulfilling their obligations to kin. In practice, however, most of my informants were unwilling or unable to make such fine theological distinc-

tions and saw these practices as merely manipulating their deeply held beliefs and emotions. I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

[10]For other examples, see Lu's (2005:173) description of "piggybacking the goddess of mercy" (meaning a beggar carrying an elderly woman, presumably his or her mother, to beg for alms) and Schak's (1988:88) discussion of beggars using their own children or borrowing the children of others. All of these were traditional practices which would have been familiar to Shenyang's modern urban residents.

[11]The performance of rural identity here does not conform to reality; it is, instead, a representation constructed by migrants for the benefit of urban residents, playing upon urban stereotypes of the migrants. The "image" of the rural is thus virtual in every sense, the product of a mutually constructed mirage of rural existence.

[12]Notar (2006) documents a similar feeling of suspicion (which she terms "authenticity anxiety') in a Dali marketplace in southern China. While this concern is linked to Dali ideas of objects as spiritually constituted objects (71), Notar's larger thesis (that authenticity becomes a concern where capitalism alienates production from particular places) applies equally well to concerns about the authenticity of beggars. The suspicion that beggars cheat is a product of them arriving from elsewhere, while concerns about cheating in general can be linked to a growing feeling of social and communal alienation.

[13]Ma Dashuai played for three seasons on China Central Television (CCTV) beginning in 2004, and dramatized the many tensions between urban and rural residents. Zhao Benshan, who both directs and plays the eponymous main character, was born in Tieling, one of Shenyang's satellite cities, and as such was a household name. The television show itself was widely watched and commented on by my informants, who identified with the main characters and the dilemmas they faced living in the postsocialist economy.

[14]Both Ivy (1995) and Willford (2006) use a similar analytic to talk about the problematic constitution of the modern, and the perceived threats to it from outside, in Japan and Malaysia respectively.

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