With her new book: “New Masters, New Servants. Migration, Development and Women Workers in China”, Yan Hairong puts previously published parts of her work on Anhui-born domestic workers in Beijing together with so far unpublished writing on the same topic. She analyses a vast amount of carefully collected ethnographic material as well as media representations and state policies. The result is a fuller and more solid base to arguments she has forcefully presented in her previous works. Her main themes are discussed in six chapters that combine ethnography with text and policy analysis. In between, she presents the reader with three ethnographic ‘intermezzi’ that allow an otherwise fairly dense text to be read at a more enjoyable pace.

The author opens her book by looking at how ‘the rural’ is constructed in the words of her own informants, as well as in public discourse. She poignantly argues that according to current mainstream representations, the Chinese countryside is a place of non-development that is hopelessly anchored to the failure of Maoism and of pre-Reform utopias of rural-based development.

In her second chapter, Yan Hairong analyses the complex relationships between the representations of domestic and intellectual work, and their interplay with wider discourses on Maoist and Reform womanhood and family. Further on, the author focuses on the figure of the ‘domestic worker’ (baomu), setting the social and historical background for the emergence of a high demand for domestic and childcare services in the city. Besides collecting ethnographic material from a large number of domestic workers at different stages of their lives, Yan Hairong questions employers, officials and entrepreneurs about their views and experiences of domestic work and workers.

After introducing the image of the employer as a civilising agent, the author goes on to discuss the concept of ‘human quality’ (suzhi) in her third chapter. Despite its vagueness, the idea of suzhi emerges as a hegemonic value of post-Mao urban society and as a powerful tool for the celebration of Reform China. This quasi-
eugenic discourse\textsuperscript{1} praises those sectors of society that have been thriving since the Reform and hence produces Maoism as a historical fiasco. After condemning China to a delayed development, this ‘fatal mistake’ is still present in today’s cities as it is embodied by migrant workers and by their lack of \textit{suzhi}.

In her fourth chapter, Yan Hairong follows the predicament of her informants in the ‘urban’ by looking at their own ambitions in terms of acquiring a higher \textit{suzhi} and becoming modern subjects. Domestic workers often change their consumption practices in an effort to become more ‘consumable’ on the labour market. In the fifth chapter, the author looks at young migrant women’s desire for self-development as a way to ‘accumulate \textit{suzhi}’ and turn into modern, urban subjects. These expectations can hardly be fulfilled, since dominant neoliberal policies and narratives define them as the opposite of the ideal consumer: the cheapest of the Chinese labour force whose exploitation is the bedrock of the mirage of conspicuous consumption.

Yan Hairong concludes by re-appropriating Turner’s\textsuperscript{2} theory of the rite of passage; she defines rural to urban migrants employed as domestic workers as ‘liminal subjects’ who belong neither to the rural nor to the urban. Domestic workers are suspended between a mirage of success and the harsh reality of exploitation, depleted by a life of hardships and excluded by the market for their failure to embody the ideal consumer.

Yan Hairong’s argument is clearly formulated and consistently supported throughout the book by a rich collage of qualitative research data collected among a wide range of informants in Beijing as well as other rural and urban locations. The author takes an eclectic approach to the use of different theories in order to consolidate her own analysis of post-Maoist urban society and her sharp critique of state-market collusion in the context of neo-liberal labour regimes.

This book represents an admirable attempt to unveil the large-scale exploitation masked behind the façade of conspicuous consumption in late capitalism. Those who share Yan Hairong’s political commitment as well as her interest in Marxist and post-structuralist social analysis will certainly find in her work a source of inspiration. For those interested in urban China and migration studies, the author’s

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ethnographic approach offers a refreshing alternative to research work of a quantitative nature.

The zeal the author puts into building and supporting her forceful argument against neoliberalism may be seen as her work’s main strength as well as its limitation, since her own narrative sometimes seems to be co-opted by discourses of modernity that are by no means unrelated to neoliberal capitalism. The author’s framing of her own ethnographic material and analysis in terms of success against failure sometimes prevents her from giving a nuanced picture of the lives of those she is writing about. While Yan Hairong brilliantly conveys the power of hegemonic discourse, at times she does not pay equal attention to heterodox definitions of conceptual categories, such as rural and urban, migrant and settled and central and peripheral. This should not diminish the value of this otherwise powerful work that remains, in my view, recommended reading for students of post-Maoist China and for all those interested in the ethnography of contemporary urban societies.

(Roberta Zavoretti, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)